OUT OF ELDRIDGE STREET

MEMOIRS



RABBI HAROLD FINKELSTEIN SWISS

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BY

RABBI HAROLD FINKELSTEIN SWISS

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2023

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ISBN 0-7392-0040-2
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Printed in the USA by



3212 East Highway 30 • Kearney, NE 68847 • 1-800-650-7888

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Acknowledgments and Gratitude

Roger Capozzi **Sharon Leppert**
Matthew Paris **Vivian Vican**
Lorraine Lee (sister) **Edna Junemann**
Kenneth Grabie, Esq.

In Memoriam: Mother, Harriet Swiss; Father, Jacob Finkelstein; grandparents, Ann and Abraham Finkelstein.

Special inspirations. (In the book) Rabbis Berman and Levine, Berele Berensky, Ezra, the Shamas, my friend Robinson.

This book would never have been written without the love and patience of my wife, Betty. I love you, Betty.

Oh, youth, quenched by implacable time with all its glories and confusions, shall we find a few moments in our struggles to reflect on the vital nature of our existence here on God's holy ground? Reading this book I hope will provide a fitting backdrop for our need to remember the time that passes on into its own seasons.

MAY GOD BLESS YOU

SHALOM ALEICHEM

CHAPTER I

I look at my life.

What is it?

A mist.

****

Dark clouds darkening my consciousness. Somewhere in the corner I sat. Everybody was eating ice cream. I was lying in bed crying. Why was I crying? I saw my mother. I saw her laughing and eating ice cream. But I was not there. I was in the dark, beneath the sheets. My stepfather was there. I wish I could say I knew my mother. She was shrouded in mystery.

I remember a house and a nameless sadness. I remember a stout woman, my Aunt Anna, and a cousin, Fagey. Who they were did not matter to me because of all the talk about what to do with me, where to send me, how to get rid of me. I heard of a home for bad boys and a place for boys my age. I remember I had two brothers—identical twins. Their names were Jason and Steven. They were adored, hugged and kissed, coddled and fondled. They were cute and adorable, kids to be loved and hugged. I remember my mother holding them both, one in each arm and cooing and murmuring while I was somewhere in the corner playing with makeshift toys. But time was vague, cloudy, hidden behind a mist. It was a wistful

melancholy like a vast silence creeping through the trees, like the scudding rain preventing the sun from radiating the sky.

One day, in the heat of the summer, my mother asked me to watch my brothers, Jason and Steven as they lay in their satin white carriage in the street. It had been such a long time since I saw my mother smile at me. All I saw were frozen lips, scowling at me.

But today she smiled at me. A thrill ran through my frail body. After all, I was allowed to be a part of my little family. I stood there in the streets and watched my baby brothers born from another father, a man by the name of Isadore Weisman, a man with a grisly, unshaven face. I saw my brothers lying there quietly in the carriage. How much alike they were. Each feature exactly the same. I wanted to see what they looked like in the sun. I removed the shade and let the sun shine on their chubby faces. Before long, their faces were hot and red. My mother came and grew frantic, slapping me in the face.

"What did you do? Why, I ought to send you away. See what you have done to my boys? Go! Get away from me! You disgust me!"

I cried inside of me and ran back into the house and hid in the corner. I sat in a dark corner of the room, with the tears scalding my face. I was unworthy. I shriveled into the very corner of the room, away from the sight of my mother. I will

never again be trusted. She will send me away. Where? I did not know.

Oh, how I wanted just one of those hugs, one of those kisses, even a kind smile.

Once I was playing with a toy fire engine and fell. Did I get a hug? Did I get a kiss. She screamed at me and sent me away from her. I wanted to clutch her skirt, but she walked away from me. The hugs, the kisses, the smiles never came. Loud voices. Screaming words.

Here was this Mr. Weisman. I was to call him "father", but he was not my father. He was a man, a stranger to me, a fake father, always drunk, stumbling and falling and growling, staggering toward my mother, cursing at me, coming home in the middle of the night, mumbling with a bottle of liquor in his mouth.

I ran from his presence. He frightened me.

One night he fell asleep in my bed. I had to sleep on the trunk. It was a night of weird dreams of witches and gnomes wearing funny suits, of howling and execrations, of beatings and blood, with bats flying and eating of raw flesh. I woke bathed in sweat.

Where was my real father? Everybody had a real father. Not a fake and false father—a stranger my mother wanted me to call "daddy". I knew nothing about a real father. Not his features, his voice, his looks. To me he had no face. I

did not know if he was dead or alive. His absence darkened my life with anxiety.

If I asked my unsmiling mother about my real father—no—not this drunken sot, this fake interloper, always sodden with liquor—where was my father, she would look away and pretend she did not hear me. She never told me. It was like watching the sun darkening the sky and the scars of deep resentment taking hold of my frail body. I wanted to run, to jump, to scream. Loneliness wrenched my poor little soul. I became timid and afraid. I trembled at the sound of a loud voice.

Where could I run? Perhaps in the streets, run and run until I could run no more.

Or I could lock myself in the closet, refuse to come out until my mother would tell me about my father. I remember the tears I shed as I saw my mother adoring my brothers. I choked with the pain of it like the writhing great dragon who came to crush my tender bones.

****

At school, I was poor in many subjects. But somehow I mastered words. I was hungry for the sound of the English language. My teachers were cruel. Their lips were thin and mean. I had no one to talk to. Who was I? All I knew was my name—Harold Finkelstein. But that was only a name my teacher called out.

All around me the boys and girls were so happy. They laughed so easily. They joked and played tricks and laughed out loud. They made fun of me, of my old and tattered knickers and dirty sneakers. When they saw me they broke out in mocking laughter, ridiculing the way I walked and talked, my thick lips they called "nigger lips".

I tried to make friends, but I, Harold Finkelstein, was the eternal laughing stock among the boys and girls of the school.

****

My young life was sad. I was drowned in so much confusion. My little world held nothing for me. I did not know what fun was. Nor did I have reason to laugh or play with others. I always stood on the side while I watched the antics of boys and girls my age skipping and running, their voices pitched with delight. All around me I heard loud and gleeful words but I was not part of the words they spoke. I felt a sense of betrayal, an anticipation of my eventual unnamed destiny.

It could happen at any time—in any place—any moment. My old and tattered coat would be thrown over my shoulders. I would be brought down into the streets to be pulled to a place where I shall have to surrender without my will of choice.

This I knew. It was inevitable. I could not hide from that threat.

****

I had such a hunger to read. My mother did not know that need. I wanted to read about Gulliver's travels, about Pinocchio, Charles Lamb's stories by Shakespeare I heard so much about. But there was no book to be found, no stories to be read, no fairy tales to frighten me. No one seemed to hear my thin and shallow voice crying out for a book, a paper—anything with words.

Oh, yes, my dear Uncle Moe. He knew my childish need, my struggle to be loved. He would sit down, take my hand, and tell me stories, praise me and say that one day, "You, Harold, will be an important person." I laughed when he cuddled me. I loved him. I felt so safe in his presence when he hugged me close to him and let me play with his watch fob. There was this desperate hope that one day I would be sent to live with my Uncle Moe.

****

The day came. They took me. My stout Aunt Anna and my mother, their faces stern and grim. They pulled me. I fought back. I did not want to go where they were taking me. Like a dog on a leash I refused to move. I stood dead in my tracks.

"No, no, I will not go. I will be good. I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I did not mean to hurt Jason and Steven."

My aunt held me. My mother slapped me and soon, out of sheer exhaustion, I was led to an elevated train. We rode on this train while I screamed at the top of my voice, "Don't take me. I'll be good. I'll never be bad no more."

The train lurched on while the passengers looked at me. Some of them smiled, but I was like a frantic animal led to slaughter.

The train stopped and we walked through grimy, filthy streets, up one flight of stairs, into the home of old folks, a man with a grisly beard who sat in a wheelchair and a woman who grabbed me and hugged me so tightly that I felt my bones crack.

Suddenly, this woman gave out a cry that pierced to the inner circle of my frail spirit, speaking words I did not understand. She spit at my mother, and I saw her and my Aunt Anna run out of the house shouting as they went down the steps into the street.

There I was alone with these strange people.

I felt detached from all I have ever known in my young life. A dark and relentless fate awaited me as I eyed these old people, glaring at me, seemingly as uncomfortable as I was.

I looked around. I saw a round table in the center of the room, and old grandfather clock which tolled its hourly

message of time and a trunk which this old man used for books and a place to write and read.

I could not take my eyes off the picture in an oval frame above the trunk. There was a man, tall and thin, with a faint smile on his face. He wore a tan suit. He was blond and rather handsome.

Then I heard the man in the wheelchair say:

"That man, Herry, is your father. His name was Jack."

"My father," I blurted out.

"Yes, your father. He died when you were six years old."

Looking up at the photo, I asked again:

"He is my father?"

"Yes, Herry," the man replied.

With that exchange, the silence of the room broke into strange sounds, sounds I have never heard before—wild and almost animal-like bellowing. This white-haired woman began to walk back and forth, pulling at her hair, smacking her fist against the wall. It was as though she had gone mad. Her blue eyes dilated with pain and anguish. She mourned with words I did not understand. I could see the terror on her face. Her chest heaved furiously and her heart pounded in her throat. I saw the veins protrude on her light skin.

"Oy, Yankele, Yankele," was all I heard. I could begin to perceive that this old woman was sobbing over the death of the man in the photo who was supposed to be my father.

"Yes, Herry," the old man repeated. "That man you are looking at was your father. He died from tuberculosis. I am your grandfather. My name is Abraham Finkelstein."

Pointing to the old woman, he said, "and this is your grandmother, Hannah Finkelstein. Your name is Harold Finkelstein, not Weisman, the name your mother gave you. We are the parents of your dead father."

My mind could not absorb all of this so quickly. A part of me was frightened, agitated. There were words I wanted to say, but my tongue could not utter them. I just sat there and stared at the yellowed picture of this handsome man glaring down at me. He was my father—my father. Why wasn't I told that my father had died? I was torn with anger and grief. I tried to speak but the words were thick with resentment and futile protest. I felt my body collapse and shrink. I felt the need to break out in my own bereavement. What was I doing here? In this old and smelly room, and with these old and decrepit people, this man—a cripple, his knees cut off—and this old, bawling woman? How would they take care of me?

The old man then wheeled his chair toward me, took my hand in his. I was terrified. I felt my body tremble. I wanted

to bolt down the stairs, find my mother, but I realized that I could not find her. I did not know where she was.

"Herry, listen to me. We are your grandparents, your father's father and mother. I know how you feel. I know you are afraid of us. We do not blame you. But, Herry, a new life is about to open to you. You will be living with us from now on. You will be going to the school across the street —PS20—and to Hebrew School on Rivington Street.

"You want to know about us? Yes, I was in the war and they shot my legs off. Your grandmother and I came to America in the beginning of this century. Here we lived since we came here. Don't be afraid, Herry. We will give you all your needs, your food, your clothing, and your education.

"You will feel strange in the beginning, but as you get to know us, and we will get to know you, you will see how much we will love you. You are our flesh and blood, Herry. You are the flesh of your father, who died at the age of 25. Being with us, you will see how happy you will be.

"Herry, I am a beggar. In the yard, downstairs, in a small shed that was built for me, is my wagon; and in that wagon is an organ, which I play in the streets every day. I go out every day and beg. I come home from what I make and that is how we live.

"Yes, I will expect you to go to a Hebrew school and to the synagogue. You will learn what it means to be a Jew."

"A Jew?"

"Do you know, Herry, what it means to be a Jew?"

"No."

"As you live with us, you will find out."

This talk baffled me.

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Somewhere in the recesses of my mind, I heard that word. Whenever I heard that word, I also remember a punch in the face. I fell to the ground and I felt the pummeling of some ugly boys kicking me. I heard about the terrible things that happened in Russia, how Jews were taken out of their houses, thrown in front of a firing squad, and slaughtered. I also remember one day on my way to school, some older boys stepping in front of me and preventing my passage. I heard someone cry out, "hey, Jew boy, got a few cents? I need some of that money you stole from Christians". The other boy stood there with an ugly leer on his lips and cried out, "Hey, Weisman, why didja kill Christ?"

I remained standing on the spot with my hands clenched in sweat. I began to cry.

"I didn't kill no Christ," I cried.

"Yes, you did. We is no liars, Weisman. You and all the other Jew boys, you killed our God, right?"

"I don't even know who Christ is."

I was frightened out of my wits because I knew they were not going to let me go without a beating for killing their Christ.

Then, I heard, "Okay, Curly, take him on."

With that signal, they pushed me into a vacant lot, pulled off my pants, examined my private parts.

"See what I mean, Curly, his dick was cut off. There you go, Weisman, your dick was cut off. You're a no-good Jew boy that killed our God."

They jumped all over me and pounded my body with their heavy blows. Their fists struck my face, my eyes, my nose. They left me lying on the granite ground with my pants down, my body aching and my spirits deflated. That was the first time I heard the name of my religion—a Jew. I knew I did not kill their God. But I did learn that it was a bad thing to be a Jew. It was some kind of a disease, and I wondered now, as I faced my grandfather, if this was a disease you died from. When he said I was a Jew, I shuddered because I hated to be a Jew. It meant I would be the victim of beatings, of hatred, of being isolated from the little world in which I lived. It meant that I would be continually ambushed, humiliated, robbed and molested by those ruffians who browbeat Jewish kids like myself.

But I saw now, with my grandfather sitting beside me, that I would have no choice. I saw now, living here in this new

home, that I would begin to be initiated into the Jewish faith. I felt as a Jew it would be unsafe to walk the streets.

****

Before I knew what was happening, I was brought to the Hebrew School on Rivington Street, and introduced to the Master Rabbi Schacter as Harold Finkelstein. He greeted me, patted me on the head, and told me to report to the Hebrew School every day except Friday and Saturday, to a Rabbi Simon.

Then I was brought to Public School 20 across the street where I was registered in the 2B class with a Miss Alice Watson.

It was no easy matter to become accustomed to this new regimen, particularly the Hebrew School. I was made to wear a skull cap and was given a book and told I will need to read and learn Hebrew.

I struggled with this demand. Why did I need to learn any of this? What did Hebrew have to do with my life?

****

In PS20, the first day with Miss Watson was one I will never forget. I looked at her with her mean lips, her hair combed back straight, and with eyes that were cold. I began to feel a strong urge to urinate. I raised my hand. She ignored my hand. I raised my hand again, shook it to tell her that this was urgent. She told me to stand up and stand by my seat, spread my legs. It was then that I could not control my urge any

longer and urinated on the floor. Miss Watson fumed at me while the students began to laugh. I had become the laughing stock of the class. I began to cry as I stood there in the puddle of my urine on the floor. I felt such shame and pain. I fell into my seat, feeling the clammy wetness of my pants. I felt that the world was so unkind, so cruel. Where were there decent people? Why did others laugh at your shame? Why, above all, did my mother leave me? For this? For this mockery of a childhood? The people I knew were out to hurt me, embarrass me, to inflict punishment on me for things I did not understand.

It was my face. I was a Jew. In order to be a good Jew, we had to suffer as a Jew. Now I saw it all. We were made to suffer because we killed their God. We were Christ killers and we would have to pay for this the rest of our lives.

****

In the Hebrew School, under the tutelage of Rabbi Avrom Simon, all I heard was his rasping voice. I saw his piercing eyes bulging through his massive white beard.

One day, he looked at me, smiled at me—not a kind smile—but a smile that terrified me.

"Finkelstein, Who was Moses?"

"I dunno."

"You don't know who Moses was?"

"No."

"Why don't you know?"

"I dunno."

"You did not read the book?"

"I did not get a book, Rabbi."

"Why not?"

"I dunno."

"Didn't I tell you, Finkelstein, to get a Book on Jewish history at the office?

"I forgot."

"In this Hebrew school, we don't forget. You hear me, Finkelstein? Come here at once!"

I did not know what he was going to do. His face was flushed. His eyes glared through the thick-rimmed glasses. He picked up a pointer and shouted at me.

"This will show you never to forget what we tell you here. Come up here at once!"

I felt extreme discomfort as I walked toward him. Here, again, I was to become the laughing stock in front of the other students. He told me to hold out my hand with my knuckles up. He struck my bare knuckles with such force that soon my knuckles bled.

"Sit down, Finkelstein! Tonight you see Rabbi Schacter and get a book and you study Chapter 7, the story of Moses, and come to class tomorrow knowing that chapter. Do you hear me?"

I did not reply. I was all choked up with tears running down my face.

"You did not answer me, Finkelstein. Did you hear me?"

I mumbled yes and sat down, drowned again in a horrible sense of shame and pain as my knuckles were bleeding all over my shirt.

Again, I asked the same recurring question all over again.

Why did my mother leave me? Why was I now entrapped? Will I ever escape? Why was I herded into this hellish persecution with no way out. What was I to do? My mother? My sweet and wonderful mother. I hardly knew her name. How would I find her if I needed her? And now, with my knuckles sore and bleeding, I walked those lonely Rivington Street blocks sobbing and heaving with such total unhappiness that I almost forgot where I lived. I turned the block on Rivington and Eldridge Streets. I saw the old neighborhood, strewn with garbage and derelicts rummaging through the ash cans and came upon the old and decrepit house which was to be my new home. I walked up a flight of rickety stairs. The fetid smells of stale fish sickened me. I did not quite understand why the toilets were in the hallway.

As I was about to open the door, an old man with a long gray beard passed me. He stopped me as I was about to enter.

"Oh, you must be Harold Finkelstein?"

I nodded.

"You just came from *Cheder*. I am glad to meet you. Your *zeyde* will make a good Jew out of you. He is a fine man. He will treat you well, like you were his lost son."

I began to feel the deep hurt of being punished and I started to cry. The tears rolled down my face without my willing them. I was ashamed of myself for crying before this stranger, but I could not help it.

"Why are you crying, son?" he asked.

I held up my two hands, still covered with blood and showed him what Rabbi Simon had done.

"My, who did this, the Rabbi?"

"Yes," I replied, my voice all choked up with emotion.

"Why did he do this?"

"I dunno."

"You don't know why he did this to you?"

"I did not know who Moses was."

Suddenly the door opened to my flat. My grandfather sat there in his wheelchair, looking down at my bleeding hands. He roared as he saw me standing there, sobbing.

He closed the door behind the old man, led me into the living room so he could see the damage to my hands in the light.

"Who did this to you?"

"The Rabbi."

"Rabbi, who?"

"Rabbi Simon."

He called out to my grandmother, "Hannah, go get Michael. Tell him I want him to take me to the *Cheder* in the Roumanian Synagogue on Rivington Street right now. I want to speak to this Rabbi who did this to my boy."

In the meantime, my grandmother gently washed the blood from my hands and planted a kiss on my forehead. She asked me to sit down while she handed me a glass of milk with cookies.

"Eat, Herry," she said, while she gazed at me with such tenderness that I have never felt before in my young life.

****

Soon, my grandfather, Michael and myself were walking down Rivington Street, headed toward the Hebrew School.

We entered the Office of the Principal Rabbi Schacter, who greeted my grandfather cordially.

"Mr. Finkelstein, it is good to see you. Oh, you have your boy *ainekel* (grandson) here."

Addressing me, he said, "Oh, so you are Harold. Welcome to our Hebrew School."

My grandfather, not being put off by this extreme cordiality, dismissed his words with a gruff wave of the hand. "I want to talk to Rabbi Simon," he roared.

"Why, is anything wrong?"

"Just let me talk to him," my grandfather insisted.

"Rabbi Schacter left the room while my grandfather and I sat in silence.

The door opened. Rabbis Schacter and Simon entered. My grandfather angrily wheeled his chair to me and said, "Herry, show the Rabbi your hands,"

I grew frightened. My heart beat so hard, I could hear it against my frail chest.

"Come, Herry," my grandfather continued, "show Rabbi Simon your hands."

I held out my hands as my grandfather commanded.

"Rabbi Simon, answer me. You did this? You hit my son over the hands and made it bleed! Tell me! Don't stand there! Just answer my question."

Rabbi Simon, straightening himself stiffly, said softly:

"Yes, I did that."

"You did?"

"Yes, I did it because your son did not study his lesson."

"And that's why you struck him over the knuckles and made him bleed?

"Yes, it's a rule—and you can ask Rabbi Schacter—it's a rule that our students must know their lessons."

"I see."

Turning to Rabbi Schacter, " and this you allow to be done to students who do not know their lessons?"

Looking at Rabbi Simon, and looking away, not facing my grandfather, he replied:

"Why, yes, Mr. Finkelstein, we want our students to learn.?

"And this is the way you teach?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Finkelstein."

"Now, you tell me, the both of you, what was it you wanted to teach my son?"

"His lesson," Rabbi Simon retorted.

Before Rabbi Simon was able to answer, my grandfather wheeled his chair over to Rabbi Simon, and looked defiantly into his bearded face.

"Yes, you taught him a lot. You taught him what it felt like during the Pogroms. You taught him fear. You taught him hate. You taught him to loathe you and this Hebrew School. You taught shame in front of the other students. You taught him to distrust you. You taught him that Judaism was a ritual of contempt for human life. You shed his blood, yes, you were very instructive, Rabbi Simon—and you, Rabbi Schacter, for allowing this despicable, so-called Rabbi to practice this miserable form of punishment—a punishment which is against the laws of God. You have taken the heart out of my son and caused him pain and shame."

"But, Mr. Finkelstein-"

"Now, you let me finish. Let me say to you, Rabbi Simon, if ever you do such a thing to my son again, I swear to all that is holy under God that I will come back here and kill you. You hear what I am saying to the both of you?

"I would like to know from what Talmudic tractate—from what Torah portion—you thought you had the right to do this. You do this again, Rabbi Simon, mark my words, and hear it clearly, and remember what I said, I will not say it again—You beat my son, and I will kill you! You hear?"

Silence fell upon the room. I could hear the changing of the classes, the chiming of the clock. Not a word was said. It was a silence that seemed heavy and ominous. Both Rabbis suddenly sat down and waited for my grandfather to leave.

Michael wheeled my grandfather toward the door.

Looking back as we were about to leave, my grandfather broke the silence, "My son will attend your next class, Rabbi Simon. He will learn respect for you when you teach him that you respect him. He will do his homework, but I hope that you heard me well—no more beatings!"

With those words we left the Hebrew school.

Nothing mattered at that time except those magical words. Those words were like the tolling of a bell on my shriveled soul.

"MY SON.....MY SON."

Those were the words which thrilled me.

"IF YOU EVER BEAT MY SON."

I was enraptured. I began to feel something joyous stirring in my veins. I looked down at my grandfather in his wheelchair. No longer was he the pitiful man I saw before. Now he was the champion of this wonderful moment. His face was lit up with high resolve. There was love in that anger toward the rabbis. I placed my hand on the wheelchair and helped Michael guide my grandfather back to 172 Eldridge Street.

CHAPTER II

The days, the weeks, and the months passed by. Living with my grandparents was an experience I slowly took in stride. It was June and the scent of roses filled the air. The school term was over. A great joy overcame me as we filed out of the doors of the school for the last time until September. I was free from the tensions which accompanied me from the gambits played upon me by Miss Watson. No more arithmetic drills, penmanship drills or assemblies. The streets were mine. I could do as I liked for the next ten weeks— except I would not be free from the Hebrew school. This new environment was full of affection and love. There was some discipline, yes, but there was much warmth, much joy, in knowing that I meant something here. My grandmother was always concerned that I had enough to eat, that my clothing was clean. My grandfather, whom I learned to call *zeyde*, would sit me down and tell me *Midrashic* stories, which fascinated me. He would ask me to observe the lima bean stalks and corn beginning to grow taller and taller in a window box. He taught me Hebrew, each day reviewing over tiresome drills. He would ask me to go to the library to select Yiddish books for him to read. While there, I could spend hours reading fairy tales and listening to the stories told by Miss Fairbanks, a lovely young woman who read stories with such feeling and meaning.

I had not heard from my mother since I came here. I wondered about her, what she was doing, how my brothers, Jason and Steven, were. I could see them in my mind's eye, growing up, playful, and always fighting. I wondered if they missed me. Now that I was here, I would never get to know them. I would not see them growing older. I would not see them play together, talking, or cavorting around the house with me. It would have been such fun to have brothers, to watch them grow, to walk with them, to giggle with, to tumble and rumble about, to laugh, to run and just to know that we belonged to the same family. I was older, and I knew if I were home, I could be there for them.

A part of me felt resentful toward my mother for separating me from the twins. Another part of me resented her for abandoning me and keeping them, not me.

I often thought of my old home. I asked myself why, when I was there, I never heard any laughter or saw or felt any joy. There was the arena of rebuke and loud voices blaming me for this or that. The question taunted me: why was I put aside, forgotten and made to appear to be in the way all the time while my brothers always had the center of attention?

But now that school was over, and I was free, the thoughts of my mother became more and more persistent. These thoughts were replete with anger— anger that I did not even know I had, but that was surely offset with the attention

I received here. Here I knew I was loved. Here I felt the warm arms of embrace comforting me. Here I did not experience what they call sibling rivalry. I was the center of the environment.

The summer was hot, but I enjoyed walking around with an open shirt, except that I was self-conscious of my skinny arms. I would visit every populated precinct of the streets: Delancey Street, with the New Delancey Street Movie House, the Adams Hat Store, the Florsheim Shoe Establishment, and the Gittelstein Delicatessen Store near Essex Street. I would stare into their windows and watch those luscious hot dogs and my mouth watered. They cost five cents. Oh, how I hungered for just one hot dog—just one!

Once I remembered I had a dime. I entered the Delicatessen and asked for two hot dogs. This experience was unbelievable—that any food could taste so good. At home, my grandmother prepared chicken soup and broiled meat that was flat and unappetizing, but here, before the steaming window and the pungent odors of the delicatessen, I was enraptured. It was heaven, indeed. I would bite into the hot dog and let the taste linger. With it, I would ask for a glass of celery tonic and this was too good to be true.

One day, as I sat by my grandfather's side, as he was engrossed in the Talmud, he looked at me and said:

"You know, Herry, I know you cannot understand what I am doing now. To you, all I am doing is just mumbling sounds, but what I am reading is the Talmud. As you grow older, you will begin to understand, not only the words I read, but the meaning behind those words.

"Now, look down. You recognize those letters as you read from right to left?"

I nodded my head, indicating that I knew the letter *bais* which was "B" and the letter *raish*, which was "R" and the vowels under those letters.

"Yes, Herry," he continued, "put the letters together with the vowels and you can begin to pronounce the words."

He showed me a word with the *Baw* and the *rooch.*

"What is that word?" I said.

"*Bawrooch*, which means 'blessed.'"

I looked at my *zeyde's* face. It was flushed with joy as I saw a soft tear poised at the corner of his eyes.

"Very good, Herry. You are learning how to be a good Jew."

"I am?"

"Yes, you are."

He looked at me quizzically, squinting his eyes with a smile on his face.

"So, now let us see what this word *'Bawrooch'* means to you. What does it mean, Herry?"

"It means the beginning of all the blessings in the *Siddur*."

"Which means, what, Herry?"

"It means to bless something or someone; to give thanks to God for His blessings."

The broad grin on my *zeyde's* face spoke the great joy he was experiencing. I was able to read a Hebrew word and give it meaning. My grandfather leaned forward, placed his hand over mine as a benign look crossed his bearded face.

"Herry, I want to teach you to be a good Jew. Will you be a good Jew when you grow up and get married and teach your children to be good Jews?'

"I dunno."

"A good answer. You do not know because you do not know what a good Jew is. Right?"

I nodded.

"A good Jew, Herry, is one who knows and practices the Torah. You know what the Torah is?"

"Yes, *Zeyde,* the first five books of Moses."

"Good. And by learning the Torah means to be a good Jew."

I was about to ask questions about many aspects of the Torah I did not understand when he interrupted me.

"Let me give you something to think about, Herry. All right? The Torah teaches truth and falsehood, sincerity and

flattery, love and hate, charity, war and peace. In those books there is a whole life. As you get older, Herry, you will begin to see the world as sometimes a terrible place to live and sometimes a wonderful place to live. Look at me. I am a cripple. No legs. I have to depend on others to carry me up and down the stairs. I cannot go to the synagogue as often as I would like to. I cannot walk the streets when I feel the urge. I am stuck in this wheelchair, and can only go where I am taken. There is much tragedy in our family. Jack, your father, he died at the age of 25. I know you never saw him, never had the joy of having a father—someone to hug you, love you, talk to you. But let me tell you something about your father. Herry, Jack—he was a poet, a musician, played the piano, the violin, the cello. He had a wonderful voice. His death left us alone. You see, Herry, we are lonely people—well, lonely until you came here. In all the things we saw in your dear father, we see in you. Your father was a scholar—just like you are going to be. He could recite long passages from the Torah, and he understood what he recited. He was a good man, kind, and gentle—and these qualities he learned from the Torah.

"And now that you are with us, you are going to read the Torah each week. What you read, we will sit and discuss. But, above all, Herry, you will learn kindness—the kindness of Moses.

"There is a story about Moses I want to tell you. When Moses was pasturing his flock in Median, a lamb deserted the herd. Moses ran after the lamb and caught it. He placed the lamb on his shoulders, brought it to a brook, so that it could quench his thirst. Then he brought it back to the flock. And God said to Moses 'you had such kindness, Moses, for this sheep. Therefore, you shall be the shepherd of my sheep of Israel.'"

My grandfather paused for a moment and smiled. My grandmother placed a plate of chicken soup before us, made sure that I did not forget that I had to be in Hebrew school at 4 o'clock.

At that moment, I knew for certain that I did not belong anywhere else. This was my home, and in it I felt a certain sense of security and love. A tear of joy coursed down my young face.

This was the feeling I needed. In the confusion of my young life, here, at last, was some form of hope for me. Here was all I really needed. Here was my *zeyde* offering me such love and joy, my grandmother fussing over me with her caring attentions. What more did I need?

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I was beginning to grasp the significance of my Jewish faith. I already saw, however, those areas of Jewish life, which were not consistent with what I had been taught. I saw it

everywhere. The word was the word and the word was not the action. Every day I attended the synagogue. There I met people who were proud to have a boy my age attend the service. They were very kind to me. They would pinch my cheeks, sit me down, speak with me, tell me stories of their own lives in the Pogroms of Eastern Europe, in Poland, and in Russia. The President of the Synagogue, himself a rabbi, Mr. Levine, was overjoyed that I came to the synagogue every day. He said he would take me under his wing and teach me the meaning of Judaism. Rabbi Berman would sit me down, serve me herring and talk to me about this or that. Mr. Lowenthal, the neighborhood grocer, would tell me how much he respected my grandfather. There were others, the haberdasher, Mr. Meyer—the undertaker, Mr. Unterman—they all gathered around me. I became their loving mascot. Oh, how much I enjoyed these new attentions. I began to sense that my presence had a positive effect on those who attended the synagogue every day. It was a feeling of joy that descended upon me. Each day, Mr. Gottlieb or Mr. Moskowitz would sit by my side. They would show me the prayer book and teach me how to pronounce the tropes in the reading of the Torah portions.

Before long, I was able to read Hebrew fluently and sing along with the leader of the prayer service. Rabbi Berman heard me sing. He embraced me and said that one day I would be a cantor. On the High Holy Days, when the synagogue hired

a cantor, I would be transfixed and emotionally enlightened to hear those tones he sang in the rendering of *AWVEENOO MALKAINOO*, and *YOOSAHNA TOKEV*. I would walk the streets on the empty lot at Forsyth Street and sing out loud. I was thrilled at the sound of my voice, singing as though no one was around me.

I played a game with myself. I pretended that there I was in the synagogue. The cantor got sick and could not attend the service. I could see the stress on the Rabbi's face. What should they do without a cantor? I tried to tell them to let me sing the service, but they would patronize me, thank me, but try to hide their smiles. Then, walking the streets, I would open my voice with the tremulous tones of *MEECHOMAWCHAW*. One of the members of the congregation would applaud me. "What a voice," he would say. "What tones. What feelings." The rabbi robed me in the garments of a cantor, and there I was—this little boy of eight singing as the cantor of the synagogue, leading all of these older men in their prayers. And the tones of my voice reached to the back of the synagogue walls. And when was this? On the High Holy Days! I saw the admiring eyes staring at me with disbelief. But I realized soon enough that this was a game anda fantasy. Only a game—only pretending that it was happening to me. No one heard me. No one knew about my voice.

One day, as I was seated watching my grandmother kneading dough for the *Shabbos Challah,* I began to sing *MEE CHOWMAWCHAW.* I sang it loud enough for my grandfather to hear me. I sang it with such feeling and emotion, but my grandfather did not hear me. I sang it again, louder, in my high alto voice.

I saw my grandfather turn his wheelchair toward me.

"Herry, was that you singing?"

"Yes, *Zeyde.*"

"Come here, Herry."

"Yes, *Zeyde.*"

I walked into the living room, sat by my grandfather's side. He looked at me for what seemed a long time.

"Where did you learn to sing like that, Herry?"

"I dunno."

"You don't know. You stand there and release such wonderful tomes and with such pure Hebrew diction, and you do not know. Herry, sing that *MEE CHOMAWCHAW* again."

Suddenly I grew afraid. My throat began to tighten. I forgot the Hebrew words. What if I should sing it improperly—or he may not like the way I sing it?

My grandfather sensed my anxiety. He placed his hand on my shoulder.

"Come, Herry. You do not have to be afraid of me. I will not make fun of you. I just heard you sing and you sounded just like your father when he was your age."

With those comforting words, I began to sing sweetly. I increased the volume of my voice as I felt more confident. When I finished, my grandfather's face was creased with pain, his eyes red with tears that were rolling down his beard. He gave me an embrace, called my grandmother in and asked me to sing for her, which I did.

Suddenly loud grief emanated from my grandmother's throat.

"Oi, Yankele, Yankele. Why, why did you take my son? Why didn't you take his wife? She is the evil one. She killed you, Yankele. Oi, Herry, you sound just like your father."

My grandfather waited for my grandmother's grief to subside. He turned to me, took my hand in his, planted a kiss on my forehead.

"Oi, Herry, you have a wonderful voice. Like your *bubba* said. Your father sang like that. Oi, Herry, God was so good to us, so kind to give you to us. Listen to me—you hear—tomorrow, first thing, I am going to bring you to Cantor Yosele Rosenblatt at the Roumanian Synagogue. I want him to hear you sing. Did you ever hear of Cantor Rosenblatt, Herry? When he hears you sing, he will hug you and kiss you the way I feel like doing right now."

Again fright froze me on the spot. To sing in the street—or even my grandparents—was one thing, but before a cantor, why, this was altogether different. At that very moment I could not sing. The melodies got stuck in my throat. I forgot the emotions of the liturgy. No! No! I did not want to sing. I did not want to fail. I could not take failure. It meant rejection. It meant carping criticism. It meant humiliation. I could not bear the thought of this cantor hearing me, walking away from me and laughing. In my lifetime I had had enough of this. I did not know how to accept any more. No, I will not do it.

"Don't make me do this, *Zeyde*," I cried. If I should find myself unable to sing, why, my grandparents would not love me any more. They would send me away. What would I do then? I was not ready for this trial.

But as the new day dawned, I saw my grandfather put on a nice shirt and tie. He asked me to get ready.

I felt the fear deep in the pits of my stomach.

***Zeyde*," I said, "I lost my voice. I do not have a voice anymore."**

I tried out my voice and no tones came out. I was lost. A heavy sense of panic gripped me—I knew I was going to fail. I tried again. Nothing but a hoarse sound came out. Oh, I did not want to make a fool of my dear *Zeyde*, to go there, to sing for the cantor and to hurt my grandfather.

***Zeyde*," I said, with desperation in my voice.**

"Yes, Herry?"

"I lost my voice."

"You lost your voice?"

"Yes, *Zeyde.* Maybe we should not go. Another time, but not today. I mean, if I should ever find it again."

My grandfather ignored my plea and asked that I get dressed and get ready to go to the Roumanian Synagogue.

"But, *Zeyde.*"

There was no reply—only the determined look on my grandfather's face.

This was the first time in my life that I opened the Prayer Book and uttered a prayer to God for his understanding.

CHAPTER III

Rabbi Schacter, of the Roumanian Synagogue Hebrew School greeted my grandfather and me as we entered his office. He seemed a bit nervous and edgy as he looked down at the sight of my grandfather. My grandfather, however, smiled at him, extended his hand and greeted Rabbi Schacter warmly. But Rabbi Schacter seemed ready for an encounter. He stiffened his body, hunched his shoulders.

"Yes, Mr. Finkelstein, is everything all right?"

"Yes, Rabbi, everything is fine," my grandfather assured him, "I would like to speak to Cantor Rosenblatt."

"Anything important?"

My grandfather laughed. "Would I want to see the Cantor if it wasn't important? Tell him that Mr. Abraham Finkelstein wants to see him."

"About what?"

"Just send him here and I will tell him."

"He is supposed to be on his way. You will have to wait."

My grandfather nodded.

We sat there in tense silence as we waited until the door opened. A man with a long, grey beard appeared at the doorway, removed his jacket, and engaged Rabbi Schacter in conversation:

"You know, Rabbi, I am getting sick and tired of you sending me to speak to those mothers and fathers who think their sons are opera stars. You should hear them sing—like sick wolves baying at the moon."

"Er, Mr. Rosenblatt—this is—er—Mr. Abraham Finkelstein, and his son, Harold. Harold is a student at this *cheder*. Mr. Finkelstein would like to speak to you."

"About what?"

"I don't know."

Mr. Rosenblatt looked at my grandfather and shook his hand.

"Glad to meet you. What can I do for you?"

"This is my son. He has a very fine voice. I would like you to hear him sing."

The cantor appraised the situation. His face grew darkly cynical.

"Oh, Mr. Finkelstein, didn't you just hear me explain to the Rabbi that I was just sick and tired of listening to all those who think their sons have talent, and they sing like sick cows?"

My grandfather shot back, unafraid:

"Mr. Rosenblatt, my son is not a sick cow."

"I know that. That's what you tell me. Last week alone I heard eight mothers. They say to me, 'Here is another Caruso.' I listen to them and, God bless them, not one of them, you hear, not one of them can sing one pure note."

Staring at me with piercing eyes and a highly critical manner, Mr. Rosenblatt extended his hand to me.

"So, Harold, you think you can sing?"

Before I could manage to reply, he asked me another question.

"And do you know the *Niggun*—the melodies of the prayers—and, above all, do you know Hebrew?"

"Yes," I replied.

I could feel my body trembling with a fear I have never known. It was at this moment when I would have liked to escape from this room. There was the door. All I had to do was to get up, throw the door open and run into the street and disappear. But my grandfather posted himself by the door. I was trapped. I could not move. There was no exit from this terrible predicament.

"All right, Harold, I will hear you. Maybe, at last, I will hear a voice I can use in my choir for *Rosh Hashana* and *Yom Kippur*."

I tried to engage my grandfather's eyes, but he was gazing into space. Mr. Rosenblatt brought me into another room with a grand piano, sat down, played a few random notes—and, at once, there arose in me a swarming feeling. No longer did I try to escape. Now I wanted to release those tones highlighting those prayerful themes before this man. He stared at me and smiled. That smile was all I needed.

"I will follow whatever you sing, Harold."

My grandfather volunteered, "He can sing *MEE CHOMAWCHAW*."

"All right, Harold, I will follow you."

With that, Mr. Rosenblatt played the first few notes. I tried to locate my key. I emitted a hoarse note. I could see Mr. Rosenblatt's face. It became grim and hard. He rose, stamped his feet, and walked away.

"You call that singing? I am sorry. I do not have the time to spend with you, Mr. Finkelstein—and Harold—he should not have done that to you. I am so grateful that you thought you could help me, but your Harold cannot sing. Let him grow up to be a 'Clarence Darrow', but not a cantor. He has no voice."

My grandfather's face grew darkly crimson. He moved his wheelchair in the direction of the cantor.

"Mr. Rosenblatt, you did not give my son a chance."

"Mr. Finkelstein, I gave your son the only chance I have time for. I am afraid your son cannot sing a pure note—and, again, I thank you for--"

At that time, without the piano, in the middle of the cantor's rejection of my singing, and without planning it or willing it, I found myself singing. I could not believe the purity of the notes I released. As I sang, within me, through me, there entered the spirit of God. The notes surrounded the room and

my heart was so full of warm emotion that I felt the tears warming my face. My voice ascended heights of a spirit that my young life had never known. When I finished, I sang more and no one interrupted me. There I was, me, Harold Finkelstein, singing before the renowned Cantor Yosele Rosenblatt! Gone was the stern gaze, critical face. Gently, Mr. Rosenblatt sat me down, wiped the tears from my eyes, took my head in his hands, looked me straight in the eyes and smiled softly. I knew that I had pleased him. I also knew that he experienced the depth of my liturgical prayers. My *zeyde* sat there and did not utter a sound. Rabbi Schacter looked at me in silence while we waited for first words of Cantor Rosenblatt.

"Harold, I am sorry for misjudging you. I just learned a valuable lesson. I did not give you a chance, and it was God who chastised me. You not only have a voice, but that feeling. That feeling! Where in the world did you get that feeling? How does a boy your age know about such sorrow? Such grief? Why, I have heard cantors sing and none of them were able to bring such emotional *Niggun* into their voices. Your voice, Harold, is a magnificent instrument. I want you to make me a promise. You will train it. It is going to change from the high alto into either a tenor or baritone—or even a bass. But get the best instructions, promise?"

"Yes, Mr. Rosenblatt."

"Mr. Finkelstein, I want to thank you over and over again for the delight you have given me today."

My grandfather smiled.

"Harold, you be here this Sunday at 12 noon, and I will find you a place to sing straight alto in the choir. All right?"

"Yes, Mr. Rosenblatt."

As Michael led my grandfather's wheelchair toward home, my grandfather and I did not exchange a word, for there was nothing to say—nothing to do except to feel the rewards of these moments of happiness that ran through our hearts and souls.

CHAPTER IV

My direction as a young man seemed to be headed toward a rabbinical and/or cantorial career. I had sat with rabbis and sung with cantors. My mind was always energized with countless aphorisms of Jewish life and ethics. I heard the rivalries of ideas pound in my brain night and day. I have seen grown men explode in anger in defense of an idea—a thought—a maxim. I heard the music. It was music which aroused me, made my pulse beat, which brought a trembling quiver to my body and a tear to my eye.

But I never believed, no, not even for a moment, that one day I would be the spiritual leader of a synagogue. I looked up to the rabbi. He was a man of peace. He was a man who never allowed himself to be ruled by hatred. He was a man who believed in justice and that justice was the first prerequisite of a religious life. For what was the reason of faith? What was the reason to believe in God, if it were not to live a life of peace and enjoy God's gifts of joy? What was the reason in life if it did not contain compassion and mercy?

The rabbi sat by his books, the Talmud, and sought answers to the questions that puzzled him. I found comfort in his warm presence. He was always ready to tell me a story about his life in Eastern Europe, about the Pogroms, about how he met his now dead wife.

The rabbis I knew were always steeped in learning, following the injunctions of Jewish law—to visit the sick—to comfort the mourners—to receive people of all faith with good cheer—to be hospitable to their neighbors.

When I was in the presence of a Rabbi, something deep stirred in me. It was the somber commitment to his inquiry into the meaning of life, when he showed compassion for my grandparents and me. Whenever we had a problem, such as the hard winters which tore at our windows like an unsacred ghost, he would come to visit us and bring food and coal so that we would not have to starve in the icy room. He would take the money out of the charity box and give us a few cents. His kindness was in his eyes and his soft talk about life.

Oh, how I remember Rabbi Berman, how he smiled at me, took my little hand in his, and said that one day I was going to be a fine rabbi. I remember how I laughed. I never saw any bitterness in him or any hatred. Even when he reprimanded me for some infraction, he was kind and gentle.

I remember one *Shabbos* evening, when we finished the *Havdalah* service, he began to chant at the table as a prelude to the discussion of the *Peah* portion of the *Mishnayas* where it prescribes the way we should distribute the wheat of the fields to the poor, the widow, the orphan and the stranger within our gates. One of the congregants burst out in an angry fit of anger:

"Why, Rabbi, do you insist on interpreting that part of the *Mishnayas* to mean that we should share our worldly goods with the *goyim*? We should give them nothing but our contempt! They have robbed us, stole from us, reduced us to the status of nothing. They have forced us out of our homes. We wandered the good earth, with our possessions, looking for a place where we would be welcome. We never had a home where we could be secure. They raped our women.

"They murdered our children, and shot us in the public squares of Eastern Europe. And you insist that we should share with them our food, which we need for ourselves. This is not the way I learned Judaism. This is capitulation to evil! This is like saying, 'no matter what you do to us, no matter how much pain and torture you visit upon us, we will say 'thank you.' With this, I cannot agree, Rabbi, and as much as I respect and love you for your wisdom and kindness, I must say that you speak a philosophy which is pure visionary. I sit here and listen to you, Rabbi, and I wonder how you can come to believe that your philosophy is the basis for our faith."

Now the eyes of the congregation sitting at the table were upon Rabbi Berman. The rabbi took a sip of tea, put it down, and said:

"What words can I say to you except that it is written into our Holy Torah and Talmud that the strangers within our gates were created by God. God not only created Jews. He

created human beings, made of flesh and blood and all of us were created in God's holy image.

"I must remind you that once we, too, were strangers in the land of Egypt. Yes, we were beaten, whipped by the cruel taskmasters, torn from our families, suffered hunger and thirst; but is it our answer that we should do to those who caused us this injury what they did to us?

"Haven't we wept great tears of sadness to see the Egyptians, our mortal enemies, drown in the Red Sea, while we escaped untouched? They, too, were created in God's holy image. God's laws rule us. It was these laws which gave to us our moral and ethical foundations. It is not what was and what shall be is what shall be.

"It was written by Rabbi Akiba, 'that which is hateful to us we shall not do to others.' This is our dedication. Upon this foundation we will rest our faith. No, we will not return evil for evil."

Thus spoke Rabbi Berman.

The men who sat at the table listened, nodded their heads, and the Rabbi went on reading from the *Mishnayas.* They sipped their tea, ate the crackers and *schmaltz* herring and the sing-song commentary by the rabbi drowsed in the heavy air of the Synagogue. The eyelids began to droop. The *Shammus*, Ezra, dangled his keys, signaling that it was getting late and time to lock up. Ezra closed the lights and they walked

into the darkness of the night. I was ravished with a new enthusiasm for my faith.

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That was the Rabbinate in those days. When one of the congregants got sick, it was a calamity shared by all the congregants. They created a committee to visit the sick person. Mama baked a cake and sent it to his home. It was a celebration at the synagogue when the sick person returned from the hospital.

These are some of the values I cherished and loved. With all their poverty and human wretchedness, they followed a way of life that lifted their souls to God. My young mind absorbed these values—yes, with my doubts, but with the certainty that I shall follow the laws of the Holy Torah.

CHAPTER V

I knew nothing about Judaism but that its laws were strict. All I learned about it was not what was permitted, but what was prohibited.

But I was overjoyed at the time of *Simchas Torah.* All of the sobriety and somberness of the High Holy Days were suddenly released like the air of a balloon. The song, the dance, the merriment that radiated the synagogue. Happiness was unbound. There was laughter and joy on the faces of the congregants as they inflated their chests with holy pride, marching down the synagogue with the holy Torahs. How could they help enjoy this uninhibited merriment on this festive holiday? Rabbi Berman would ask me to sing, but to sing the *zimrot* on this holiday was much happier than the prayers on the High Holy Days. My grandfather taught me the songs I should sing, but my poor grandmother—she could not partake in this revelry. She wailed and cried bitter tears for my dead father.

But for us *Simchas Torah* was a necessary dismissal of the pain and agony they suffered during the year, in the harsh winters, in the cruel heat of summer, in the few pennies they had to carry them through the days, one day at a time.

In the Hebrew School, even the irrepressible Rabbi Simon gave way to joy. He sang loudly and crudely, in a way

that seemed so uncharacteristic of him. It was though he was drunk, the way he careened on the floor, his eyes almost glassy. But I could never forget the cruelty he visited on me. To my perception he was still mean and cross, and my knuckles were clear proof of that.

He would say to me, "Hey, Finkelstein, why don't you sing for us?"

I just stood there and stared into his blotchy eyes. I knew that I would not be able to find the voice to sing for him. I feared him. When I was in his presence, my body tingled with dread.

But at the synagogue, and in the Eldridge Street tea room across the street, *Simchas Torah* was a time for great rejoicing.

I remember Mr. Jacobowitz, the portly owner of the tea room. I liked him. He was always so jolly, telling jokes from the old country.

Once he opened the cabinet where he hid the liquor. This was during the Prohibition days, but he made his own schnapps at home. He invited his customers to share in his stock of liquor. I watched them as glass after glass poured down their thirsty throats.

Before we knew it, the entire tea room was full of bawdy customers, dancing and singing in their loud voices. For that

moment, all of their fears, all of their pain, all of their struggle to earn a few miserly pennies were gone.

Gone was their struggle to survive each day. All year they went without food. All year, their wives and children lived on old crusts of bread and a glass of tea, but today and tonight, there was only time for happiness, for dancing and howling wolves and joining in a circle, holding hands and talk of how much they loved one another.

No, they had no wives, no starving children. Only this celebration.

And if someone were to ask them what they were celebrating, they would lift their voices in one chorus:

"Why, you fool, you dolt, don't you know it is *Simchas Torah*! Come dance with us."

Here I was, a young upstart of a boy in knickers, a sort of self-imposed mascot, sitting here with the revelers. There was something about their company which made me feel comfortable and secure. What right did I have to feel secure? Each day, a family was thrown out into the street for failure to pay the rent.

Mr. Louis Rosenthal, the owner of the house in which we lived, would walk across the street to the synagogue every morning in the deepest frosts and the heaviest snows, passing the mothers and fathers and children standing frozen at their places while he went to pray.

I saw all of this. I thought about justice. I thought about right and wrong. I asked myself what right Mr. Rosenthal had to pray when he did not own a modicum of compassion. But somehow I knew that this celebration was necessary. It was like a cry to God for help. They knew when their drunken stupor wore off they would return to their wives and children, but now they will extract every ounce of happiness. They will make fools of themselves. They will howl. But did they care? Should they have cared?

That night, the Rabbi read the last words in the Book of Deuteronomy, *Devarim*, and the first sentences of Genesis, *Beraishis.*

And what was, was no more. Maybe, perhaps, who knew, perchance, the new year would be different. Maybe this Governor Roosevelt from Hyde Park, maybe he will be our next president, and he will have mercy on our people. Maybe he will bring a new prosperity to our land.

This, then, would be our truest *Simchas Torah*, an end to the hopeless depravity of the soul and the reawakening of a wonderful time to celebrate the spirit of this joyous holiday.

CHAPTER VI

The times in which I lived with my grandparents were freighted with misery and abject poverty. It was a period of severe economic depression. The market had already failed, and investments collapsed. Millionaires became paupers overnight. Those who one day rode fancy limousines, took a ride on the nickel elevator trains, never having ridden these rackety trains before. Those who wore Robert Peet suits, the finest woven shirts, patent leather shoes and spats, were like ragamuffins the next day.

Every day we read about suicides of men with enormous wealth—jumping off the Woolworth Building to their deaths. Employment was extremely scarce. Factories were closed and the sound of the whistle was never heard. Captains of industry were now standing on breadlines, walking the dreary path on the employment agency path on Sixth Avenue, mingling with the scavengers of the earth, those with putrid smells and drunken behavior. Signs appeared on the face of factory gates stating:

NO JOBS TODAY.

It was not easy to survive on a day to day basis.

The political events I remember were the candidacy of Herbert Hoover, and Al Smith in 1928. What they had to talk about was who was to blame for the economic events with

Herbert Hoover stating if the rich were allowed to become richer by reducing their taxes, the wealth would trickle down to the poor. Even as a young man, I saw that this was ridiculous as a solution to the problems that existed.

This poverty was written over the landscape of the dirty streets. Visible was the filth and the smell of dead rats, of old men scouring the depths of the garbage cans, fighting off the hungry and mangy dogs for an old and decayed bone, rancid from the many days it lay moldering in the can. The winters were harsh. In our home, we had an flat-iron stove in the kitchen. I used to chop up wooden crates to feed the hungry fire that did little to prevent the icy gusts of wind that rattled our windows.

The Police Department scheduled "breadline days" once a week. I was sent to stand on line for a bag of food and a few pounds of coal.

Oh, how I remember only too well the days I would stand on line in the misery of the cold for hours only to receive from the scowling police officers a few tomatoes, a bottle of milk and several pounds of coal. Many were the times when, after waiting on line for hours, I was told that the food supply ran out and I was forced to return home with the sad news. I cried out loud. What was I to tell my grandparents? What would they say if we had to face yet another night without supper and in a flat without heat? Yes, sometimes nostalgia is not so sweet.

The memory is stark. It was bitter and sad to come home and to live in a society which cared to do so little to save human life.

Every day, when I was on my way to the synagogue across the street, I would have to pass the Rosenberg family standing there in the bitter blasts of cold, with their furniture by their side. Little Alex Rosenberg, his older brother, Marvin, Mr. and Mrs. Rosenberg would stand their, huddled next to a makeshift fire. They had been evicted from their three-room flat in our building. Before them there was a life of pain and oppression doled out in miserable measure. Here they stood, little Alex, barely five years old, in the eye of nature's cruelties, trembling and crying as his parents tried in vain to comfort him. Their destiny seemed to be forged here in the menacing furies of nature. Day and night, to watch the people walk by and pretend that they did not see them. Twilight brought with it a new terror—looking at their bed and the furniture, wondering where and how to sleep. Fright, terror were the scourge of their helpless souls. But would you think that the neighbors let them starve?

Mr. Antonio would make them spaghetti. My dear grandmother would invite them to some of delicious chicken soup. The grocer would send sandwiches and milk. But the police came— the wonders of the bankrupt Tammany political

machine, and they would gruffly chortle about their breaking the law:

"C'mon, move on. You're blocking the streets with your mess. You cannot park here."

I asked the question of my dear *zeyde*:

"Move on?"

Where could they go? Where was their pity? Where was love for human life? Did they not have their own mothers and fathers, wives and children? What would they do if their gallant Jimmy Walker, the Mayor of the City, was voted out of office and they lost their jobs and they would have to stand there with their furniture, the dismal object of community shame?

Shame? No. Not for the Rosenbergs, but the shame of the nation that would allow this pitiful scene of misery to besmirch the land of the free. It was the job of the police to torment these forsaken people?

My young mind did not understand it, refused to accept it as a way of life. Was this what freedom meant? Was this the nation to which we saluted its flag and sang songs of freedom in schools? Was this what this great nation was all about?

In the Synagogue, I asked the rabbi why this was permitted, and why there was no help for these poor people? I asked why these people were not invited to stay in the synagogue in these cold and bitter days? The old men

answered my questions with a tentative nod, shrugging their shoulders as to say "what can they do—a synagogue is not a place for residency". As a young boy, already established in the community choir at the Roumanian Synagogue on Rivington Street—as not only a mascot of these old people, I began to feel the stirring of conviction in my bones. I heard these ideas at the *Mishna* table every Saturday after the *Havdalah* service as Rabbi Berman expounded on the laws of Judaism. I never heard of a tractate which forbade decency and kindness to this family receiving some form of sanctuary and shelter from the frosts of winters. There was a time when the rabbi sneaked them into the synagogue, but he was very furtive in every move he made because some of the zealots would have bitterly complained that the synagogue was not a place for sleeping.

As I stood there warming my hands by the gas stove, I was out of harm's way. The gusts of wind did not penetrate my body. I did not resist asking questions about the decency we had to show and to have to be furtive for giving shelter to these poor, homeless people, and why this did not comport to Rabbi Berman's message every Saturday.

I asked the questions, but no one answered me. Nobody could tell me that this was wrong in the eyes of our faith. I saw little compassion among the men who came here every day. They did bring them food and lit the fire of the ash can for

them, but this was all at the behest of Rabbi Berman. But did they understand the values of compassion for human life?

As I write this memoir, this lack of compassion on the part of my elders remained a mote in the eye of my faith which pronounces the need to feel for those who needed help in such miserable and trying days and nights.

CHAPTER VII

Life for me on Eldridge Street was varied and sometimes very interesting. The time came for me to make friends, to get away from the Hebrew School, the Synagogue, and the choir. I had to make friends, which I did. They were boys my own age, Irving and Joe Goldstein. They lived on Forsyth Street facing the empty lot. We met in school. They were much brighter in school than I was and my grandfather insisted I make friends with them because of their higher grades. He always insisted that I try to make friends with boys who were brighter in school than I was.

One day they invited me to play punch ball with them in the park on Forsyth Street. I had, up to this time, never held a ball in my hands, never caught a thrown ball, or held a bat. If a ball was thrown at me I would duck and try to be out of the way. The boys laughed when they saw me try to sideswipe the ball, but they were patient with my awkwardness though they tried to instill in me a sense of competition. They taught me to stay in front of the ball when fielding, how to throw the ball to the appropriate base, and how to punch the ball with power.

One day, they invited me to participate in a game with the University Settlement Argonauts. They sent me out to left field. Oh, how clumsy I was. When the ball was hit to me, I would manage to retrieve it, but hold it in my hands until the

runners scored. Despite the hysterical shouting, "Throw the ball, Finkelstein," I held on to it, fixed in one place while the boys on the other team laughed at me. They were more than amused, but were grateful that I was selected for that position.

But when our side was up, and I was at bat, I copied what the other boys did, threw the ball in the air and punched it with all my ungainly power. I watched the ball ride in the air and it seemed to gather power as it rose. I heard the shouts, "run, Finkelstein, run!" I heard their frantic calls and soon learned that this was a home run, with the bases loaded. I heard cheers. I ran across the plate out of breath. They grabbed me, slapped me on the back. I heard one of the boys say that this was the very first time they had beaten the Grand Street All Stars! My mother should have seen me then. She should have seen me run those bases with the cheers behind me, the laughter and the noise which accompanied the home run. Here I was the champion of the environment. She should have seen my new friends and the high rocket I sent into the air into the furthest distance over the fence.

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The summer was heaven. I could do what I wanted to do—walk the streets, go to the movies. I loved the movies. I could sit in the movie house called the New Delancey on Eldridge and Delancey Streets for hours. It was magic, pure magic, how the horses would gallop, how men could swim seas,

climb mountains. I loved seeing the wide plains, the open spaces, and the men with the guns in their holsters. The intrigue and the bravery of these men. I hated the bad guys who rode on black horses and loved the good guys who rode on white horses. I was alive the moment I entered the darkness of the movie house, sat there, and ate my candy bar.

My grandfather knew how I felt but he expressed his skepticism about the existence of movies. To him it was "American *Goniff*". There was no such thing as people in the story. They stood behind the screen and all of us who were not so smart were taken in. To my grandmother, it was all a falsehood. She smiled when I talked about it, waved her hand with a deprecating gesture and said how easy it was to fool the American people.

"People stand on the stage and everybody thinks it was real. Don't they know that this was a fake?"

But I did not see it that way. I was entranced by it all. To see the heroism of Rin Tin Tin, the smart and brave dog, sent chills down my spine.

As much as I loved the movies, I rarely had the time—with the Hebrew school, the synagogue and the rehearsals with Cantor Rosenblatt. The only available time I had was the Sabbath. But on the Sabbath we were not permitted to handle, hold or transact any money. My dear grandfather told me this was so. He told me the 39 Talmudic

prohibitions and violations of the Sabbath. One of them was that it was not permissible to pay to enter a movie house. This was the Jewish law, he said. No man can change that law. He would see me sitting at the table, my face glum. He saw the sadness on my face. He saw how my head hung low, my eyes drooping with boredom and how I played with the frayed edges of the table cloth. He called me over to his side.

"Is anything wrong, Herry?"

"No," I answered him. Avoiding his eyes, trying to search for mine.

"You are very quiet."

"Yes, I am quiet."

"Thinking of your mother?"

"No."

"So, why are you so quiet?"

"I dunno."

"Herry, you know that today is the Sabbath. You know that?"

"Yes, *Zeyde.*"

"And on the Sabbath you have to rest, right?"

"Yes."

"And do you know what 'rest' means?"

"I dunno."

My grandfather moved his chair toward mine, looked me in the face, held my face in his hands.

"Herry, this is your *zeyde* speaking to you. Do not turn your face away from me. Now, you know what rest means on the Sabbath, right?"

"Yes."

"So, what does it mean?"

"It means that I can't do anything, that I have to sit here and look out the window and wait until night before I can do anything. That's what it means."

"And is it that which makes you so sad?"

"Yes."

"Would you want to go to the movies?"

I jumped up, looked at my *zeyde* with pleading eyes.

"Yes, *Zeyde*," I said as my eyes brightened.

"So, why don't you go to the movies?"

"I can't."

"Why can't you? Is it because of the Sabbath?"

"No, *Zeyde*."

"So, why not? Why can't you go to the movies?"

"I have no money."

"Oh, you have no money?"

"No, *Zeyde*. I have no money."

"How much does it cost to go to the movies?"

"Ten cents, *Zeyde*."

"Ten cents, Herry?"

"Just ten cents? That is all it cost?"

"Yes, *Zeyde.*"

"And this you haven't got?"

"No, I haven't got ten cents."

"And if you had ten cents, you would not care if it was the Sabbath or not? You would go to the movies?"

"Yes, *Zeyde.*"

Changing the subject, my *zeyde* looked at me, smiled and said:

"Herry, did you see my glasses?"

I started to laugh.

"Why are you laughing? Are you laughing at your poor *zeyde* because he is absent-minded, and forgets where he places his glasses? Is that the way I brought you up—that you should laugh at me in my struggle to remember?"

"*Zeyde*, you are wearing your glasses on the top of your head."

I watched my *zeyde* probe for his glasses.

"Ah, Herry, you are right. I was wearing them all the time, right, Herry? What does that mean, Herry?"

"I dunno."

"Come, now, Herry. It means that many of the things we search for are sometimes right before us. We see it, but we do not know we see it. Understand?"

"No."

"Sure you know. What is it that you want right now, this minute?"

"You mean I can be honest?"

"With your *Zeyde*, you should be dishonest?"

"Right now, I want to go to the movies."

"But, you need a dime?"

"Yes, *Zeyde*."

"You know, Herry, what we did not do yet?"

"No."

"We did not say the *kiddush*."

I was wondering what my grandfather was driving at. We were talking about the dime I needed, and now suddenly he switched to the need to say the prayer for the wine. I was frankly very much annoyed. I stared at my grandfather and then down at the floor.

Why did my loving *zeyde* tease me like that?

Why did he do that to me, make me suffer the way I did? I did not like what he did. I got up and started to bolt away from the table.

"Herry, come back to the table—right now," his expression and tone of his voice changing to a new sternness.

"Let us say the *Kiddush*, now."

"No," I retorted. I don't want to say *Kiddush*. You lied to me and you gave me the hope that I would be able to go to the movies, but it was not true. I do not like what you did."

I began to cry. My grandmother came to my side.

"Avrom, what did you do to hurt this poor child?"

"I just wanted him to join me in the *Kiddush*, to drink the wine with me."

"What kind of wine, Avrom? You have schnapps."

"Hannah, join us for the *Kiddush*. Come, now, Herry. Have you ever heard of miracles when you pray to God? Pick up that glass, you, *Bubba*, and myself—and you will say the *Kiddush*."

"All right, *Zeyde*."

I recited the *Kiddush*:

"Bawrooch ahtaw adonoi Ailohainoo Melech Ho-oh-laum Borai Pree Hagofen. Awmain."

I drank that portion of the schnapps which was, I was sure, a hundred-percent Scotch. I could not stand the taste of it as it burned its toxins down my throat. It burned my mouth and then warmed my stomach.

"*Zeyde*, this is awful."

"I know, Herry. So put it down if you cannot drink any more."

As I put the glass down, there, in front of my eyes, glistening. It was as if a door had opened to a ravishing enchantment, a silver coin lay there, a dime—ten cents.

I rose abruptly, took my grandfather in my arms. My grandmother laughed louder than I ever heard her laugh.

"Go to the movies, Herry—go, have a good time"

I had no time for tears. I had only time to take that precious coin in my hand, rush out the door and bolt down the rickety stairs.

I had never known such happiness—never!

CHAPTER VIII

I was growing up. My grandparents could no longer speak Yiddish in order to keep their little secrets from me. Now they had to speak Russian and I was beginning to understand that, too. 172 Eldridge Street was now my home. I belonged here. I was part of its matrix—its environment. I knew many people in the neighborhood. I was able to see through many of the problems that existed: Mrs. Bloom, the *Yenta*; Rabbi Berman from the synagogue across the street; President Levine, a man I dearly loved; Berele Berensky, a man I would sit and hear speak about the ills of our society.

My neighbors knew me as the "Finkelstein Boy." They referred to me as the "*gerlenter*", the learned one. When they saw me walking down or up the streets, it was always with my hands behind my back as though I was in perpetual prayer—like the old men who came to the synagogue.

I looked around me. Did I see happiness on these forsaken streets? Did I see lively faces animated with joy and hopeful expectations?

What I saw were people standing around, looking in no certain direction, stumbling through the wind—sometimes hurtling through space—sometimes gentle, but in the winter months, cruel and biting, making walking very difficult. The people walked these streets as though in a trance. I saw the old

men with their yellowed beards gathering in the synagogue. They never spoke—they shouted profanations of God's Holy Name, blaming God for all their woes. They had nothing in this life except to be out of their miserable homes. It was as though they were waiting for the clammy hand of death to take them to the World to Come.

What was there for them to do? What—to visit the New Delancey Movie House, which featured a Rin Tin Tin serial this week?

Or to listen to the oracles of Berele Berensky, the fanatic socialist, who promised a new world of peace and harmony—if only America would become a socialist nation? Who listened to him? He became an object of mocking laughter when they met in Mr. Jacobowitz's tea room. Why did they laugh at him? They laughed out of their despair. When Berele Berensky told them that capitalism was defunct, and that the only way they could live better lives would be if the wealth of the nation could more evenly distributed, there came cries of "traitor" or "Communist".

Most of the people in the Tea Room did not know what Berele was talking about, but did that stop their boisterous arguments? For what else was there to do on Eldridge Street? Every day was the same as the day before: the same pushcart peddlers, the same old man with a hunched back delivering ice or coal, the same President of the old synagogue standing on the

steps of the synagogue begging for a *minyan*, in the rain, in the snow, when the icy winds tore at his ravaged face and body. Or the same beggar they saw in the streets begging for a penny, a nickel or a dime, my grandfather, my dear *Zeyde* sitting in his old cart, begging, so that night we may be able to have food on the table. Nothing ever changed but the formation of the clouds.

Once in a while Berele would pass our house screaming at the top of his lungs, "I CASH CLOTHES". But that was all. Eldridge was a sleepy block, except for the time when someone was shot down by a gangster. Suddenly the street was alive. People came running out of their houses after they heard the pistol shot. They ran out in their bed clothes and competed to be there in front of the dead body. "Poor Whitey," someone said. For this view of a body riddled with bullets and the blood oozing through his shirt, the neighborhood awoke. They gaped down at the ravaged body when somebody cried out, "Give him air".

The police would rush to the scene, scattering the crowd by brandishing their billy clubs. When the whining siren of the police cars stopped, they continued to gape and mumble words of sympathy for the deceased.

The ambulance would come, the crew would pick up the dead body, hurl it into the ambulance, and Eldridge Street retreated into its slumbered silence.

The milkman delivered the milk, the postman delivered the mail, the iceman chopped up the ice, the coal was sent down the coal chutes, and my grandfather continued playing his organ and singing in the streets. The drunks continued staggering in the streets searching for an old bone on which to chew just to keep from utter starvation.

The doors of Jacobowitz's tea room opened. The men who witnessed this tragedy sat at the tables and chattered like animated magpies about why Whitey was killed in cold blood.

Soon someone changed the subject. Mr. Goldfarb asked why they had not seen Hymie Bloom for over a month.

"It's his wife," Sam Katz said. "She does not want him mixing with us any more."

"Some wife," someone else said. "She tells him to sit up like a dog and he sits up and begs."

It was strange, very strange, that I could sit among these men and nobody would ask why I was there. I did not belong among these men, encrusted with misery and despair, speaking a language which surely was not meant for my young years. I did not know what it was. Maybe something about my persona that made me a welcome part of their company. But nobody asked why I sat there, sharing the apple strudel with the men. Mr. Jacobowitz always welcomed me, asked me how my grandparents were, how I was doing with the Hebrew school, and the Rosenblatt choir.

Really, did it make sense, moral sense, that a boy my age should be sitting with these men and listening to their inane gossip about things my nine-year-old ears should not hear? But they ate their strudel, sipped their tea through the saucers and passed around the scuttlebutt about the lives of their neighbors.

Soon the Sabbath arrived; and soon, one by one, they left the tea room and entered the old synagogue as Mr. Jacobowitz dangled his keys and locked up for the night. It was time to go to the synagogue and home where they would eat their Sabbath meal, to sing *Sholom Aleichem* and then to lay their weary heads on the pillow and dream of great wealth in foreign countries, with palaces structured in white marble, with gold and silver girdling their resplendent bodies. They dreamt of food and women and fame and fortune, until they awoke and saw their wives, old and weary from the increasing poverty, shuffling around wearing their greasy house dresses.

There was something happening in the building. I could hear the shrill screams. It came from apartment 5, on the second floor. Mrs. Fanny Bloom was yelping like a mad dog at her whimpering husband, Hymie. At that moment, the voice was loud and clear. It rang through the walls of every flat.

"Hymie, I am sick and tired of living like this, a pauper. GO! Go out, find a job. I don't care what you do, but I am not going to sit here and wonder where my next meal is coming from. We have a son—well off—and rich, thanks God. Go to

him. Put on your hat and coat and go to him in Connecticut and tell him his mother and father needs help. Open your mouth. Don't be such a *luftmentsch*. You hear me, Hymie?

Poor Hymie. What could he do? If this is what Fanny has to do, let her do it. Could he stop her? He was born to suffer. If this was the way the God wanted him to suffer, so let it be. Let her shout. Let her clamor. If she berates him long enough, who knows, soon enough she will get tired and stop.

But did she ever stop? Did she ever get weary of her own voice? When it came, it was intolerable. He would then pick himself up and find refuge in the synagogue and get lost in the spiritual essence of prayer. There, in the synagogue, he could talk about a Talmudic tractate. This is where he could become a person, a *mentsch*. Here he was a somebody whom the men respected and admired. He was an expert on Talmudic law, and when he spoke, everybody listened. No one shouted at him here. What Hymie had to say about Jewish law was important to the men who came here and listened.

But to go to Connecticut? What would he do there? His son was just as insignificant in his home as Hymie was in his. The wife had control of the money, and to ask them for money would only result in a fight and loud voices, and he would go home feeling much worse than when he came.

Why do I include Hymie in these memoirs and not Mr. Garfinkel or Sam Schneider, or Berele Berensky? Because

Hymie was the object of my deep pity. He could not enjoy his friends or invite them to his home. His *yenta* wife would begin to pry into their affairs.

"So, you are looking for work—and your children—they cannot help you? You see, you sacrifice for them, send them to school, wash their clothes, and what do you get? Where is the 'thank you'? You raise them up and then they leave you. Do they send a penny to help you in this terrible poverty? They care? They care if we have to watch every penny and we are on the verge of being thrown out of our homes? Why do you—look at you—why did you teach my Hymie to gamble, play pinochle? With the money he has, he can afford the luxury to gamble? My Hymie is not a gambler. You want to gamble, you gamble, but you leave my Hymie alone. You hear? Leave him alone!"

Hymie's friends knew they were not wanted and left. Poor Hymie. Did he ever raise his voice in anger? Did he ever put his hand over her mouth and tell her to shut up? Did he ever stand up to Fanny and say that he had as much right to use their home for what he wanted as she did? Did he sit her down and punctuate his need for his friends. If he wanted to play some pinochle for a few pennies. Was this any of her business?

But he never protested. All he did was look out the window, give a forlorn sigh, and sit down and fall asleep.

Hymie was usually home by 5 o'clock every day, so he could hear his wife's barrage of complaints.

Mrs. Berman, the Rabbi's wife, insulted her.

She could not stand the noise of the drunken bums from the tea room downstairs.

The hunchback did not deliver any coal today.

She was shivering from the cold and she was sure that she was coming down with pneumonia.

Mrs. Altieri's boy tried to trip her on the stairs.

She had a terrible headache.

Her stomach hurt her.

She did not have a piece of meat to eat for weeks.

She was not an Italian that she ate spaghetti every day.

Her shoes were too tight.

The window in the living room had a crack.

Look at Mrs. Schneider's husband. He would have fixed it. He could fix anything. It must be so good to have a man in the house.

Their daughter, Molly, was going with an Italian boy. What was he—a doctor—a lawyer—an accountant? He is a bum, a nothing! His father was a no-good drunk and mother an angel of the night.

There was a leak in the kitchen.

Her friend, Sophie, found a man and now who sees her any more?

The grocer cheated her five cents.

The pearl necklace Hymie bought for her birthday was glass, not pearls.

The potatoes she bought were rotten.

The price of milk went up to 6 cents a quart.

She had holes in her stockings.

Her eyes hurt her. She was going blind and deaf.

Hymie was an animal when it came to sex.

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All these matters filled Hymie's ears. He listened, but never said a word.

I suppose you may be wondering why I bring Mrs. Bloom into this picture. I bring her up, because, at a time when the world was recovering from the war—when the markets were collapsing—when children were dying each day from diphtheria—when families were thrown into the streets with their furniture—and there had already appeared on the distant horizon a man, with a Charlie Chaplin moustache, threatening to exterminate the Jews—we had such a need to be less critical of even the most egregious examples of outrage.

Why was Mrs. Bloom so important?

Important?

Everybody was now talking about her. The guests in the tea room knew all there was to know about her. They had something to talk about, something to live for. Life had more

meaning when the tales would spread from person to person. My grandfather called her a vicious and mean woman.

But lest we condemn her, let it be known that Mrs. Bloom was the first one to spend a whole day, once a week, helping the sick at the hospital; or comforting the bereaved. Without Mrs. Bloom, Eldridge Street would be a desolate forest. There was a strange mixture of virtue and grossness in all her actions. She hurt you while she helped you. She smiled to your face and railed about you behind your back. She was the captain of the nagging clan, outspoken in a loud and coarse voice, tearing at the loins of all those who got in her way; but in the middle of this wretched poverty, she gave life and vitality to the neighborhood. She knew so much about every person. She knew how one of the neighbors, who moved far away to the Grand Concourse in the Bronx were living:

"They had a Stromberg-Carlson radio, and Kelvinator Frigidaire, fancy drapes, and, imagine—only for a moment—steam heat coming into their home through pipes, and dumbwaiters that transported the garbage from apartment to apartment into the cellar—and imagine still more—a nice man wearing a fancy uniform, letting you in and out of the building. He was called the doorman.

She knew what was happening in every bed, who lay there—that Jake, the butcher, was no longer capable of performing his sexual needs. She knew how many women were

in a family way, how many from their husbands and how many from their casual relationships with other men.

CHAPTER IX

One day, Mrs. Bloom visited my grandmother while my grandfather was out on his daily routine. My grandmother did not like her company. What could she do? Throw her out? She would have to listen to her.

"So, how are you, Mrs. Finkelstein?"

"What God gives, is what we take," my grandmother replied.

Mrs. Bloom kept her eyes on me and said, "so, this is your grandson. Doesn't look like his father. God bless you child. He should give you cause to be happy. Yes, Mrs. Finkelstein, you are right. God gives and we must take what He gives. Sometimes he gives us good, and sometimes, bad. Like what God did to your husband so he has to beg for a living. That was not good."

My grandmother began to cry.

"So, if you cry a little bit, you think God will hear you? But what else is left—so we cry?

"And your son—that was not good either—to have died so young. Only the good die young. He dies and Berele lives. He spits in God's face. And, by the way, you won't say a word—Mrs. Kramer's girl is about to have a baby. From her husband? Never! From this tramp, Berele. Take my word for it, Berele is the father. What does he care? What is he doing

now? He is in the tea room. Walks around like he knows everything. A Communist. If not for his uncle, who sends him ten dollars a month, he would starve to death. Yes, as I said..."

Interrupting herself, Mrs. Bloom took my hand in hers, stared at me with a wimpish smile on her face.

"So, this is your grandson. Handsome boy. His mother—see, Mrs. Finkelstein, how the mothers are today? They make the children and leave them."

With that, she gave me a pinch on the cheek. It hurt so much I had to draw away from her.

"Oh, Mrs. Finkelstein, before I go, I was wondering if you have some potatoes to lend me and I will give them back to you with the sugar I borrowed from you last week. And maybe you have some more sugar and some tea and a piece of chicory. I just ran out."

My poor grandmother went to the icebox and took out some potatoes and to the cupboard for tea, sugar and chicory, handed them to Mrs. Bloom.

"Oh, thank you, Mrs. Finkelstein, thank you a thousand times. My God, I am so ashamed, but, you see, Hymie—never send a man out to do your shopping—Well, guess what, I send him for tomatoes and he brings me home rotten tomatoes. And I need an onion for my soup. I wonder if you could lend me an onion and a tomato—no, I think I will need—I will need two tomatoes."

My dear and loving grandmother, her eyes looking so sad, but yet without a noticeable change in her expression, opened the icebox and gave Mrs. Bloom two onions and two tomatoes. I knew then that we would have to eat less that night because my grandmother could not say "no" to anybody.

As Mrs. Bloom was about to leave, my grandfather was carried through the door to his seat in the living room by the window. He was placed in his wheelchair by Michael Santos, while Mrs. Bloom watched, making faces of contrived sympathy for my grandfather's daily ordeal.

"Hello, Mr. Finkelstein. So, how are you? You had a good day? You know it is always the poor who are the most generous, and the rich—they hold on to their money. They are stingy and greedy, right, Mr. Finkelstein?"

My grandfather did not answer as Mrs. Bloom continued:

"It is a darn shame, like I was telling Mrs. Finkelstein, that you have to go out and do this for a living, a man like you, so intelligent. God is not always kind. Like I was telling Mrs. Abramowitz just yesterday—but who am I to tell tales out of school?"

My grandfather showed his annoyance. He knew that this dripping sympathy was too much for him to take. He looked at my grandmother with an exasperated expression as if to say, "why did you let this horrible person into our house"?

He looked at her and said, "Mrs. Bloom, I am going to tell you to return all the food Mrs. Finkelstein gave you. You have no right to receive our generosity. For years now, we have been giving you food and you never returned it. But that was then, but now is now—and now we have a responsibility and I am not going to deny my son the food he needs to give it to you."

With this remark, he turned his chair away from her.

"You have the nerve to say, Mr. Finkelstein, that I never return the food I borrow."

Turning to my grandmother, "is this true, Mrs. Finkelstein, that I never return the food I borrow?"

My grandmother sat there in silence looking abashed and nervous. It was her silence which was the answer.

"Mrs. Bloom," my grandfather continued, "you have the *chutzpah* to come here week after week and take the hard-earned food out of our mouths; and not only that—to gossip about the entire street—who is doing what—and who is having a baby—and this one lays with this one. You are a horrible woman, Mrs. Bloom, the way you treat your husband—such a sweet and wonderful man. You husband is afraid of you. You belittle him. You crush his will. You are a poison weed in the garden of roses. Everything you touch dies. You have studied the lives of the people in the synagogue—in the tea room. You have taken what you have found out and gossiped vicious lies."

Mrs. Bloom rose, put the bag of vegetables on the table—and all the rest that was given to her, and cried out in a throaty voice that was filled with counterfeit pain:

"Mr. Finkelstein, I was going to give all of this back. I do not take charity. I am not that kind of person. I do not beg, Mr. Finkelstein."

My grandfather grimaced. I grabbed my grandfather's hand, gave him a hug, as Mrs. Bloom left, banging the door behind her. My *zeyde* asked me to sing to him. I sang the Brahms Lullaby and watched my *zeyde* fall into a deep sleep.

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The synagogue lights had just been lit and soon it would be time for the *Mincha* and *Maariv* services. I looked out the window and saw Mrs. Bloom ascending the steps to the synagogue. I decided to follow her and see what she was up to. As I walked into the stuffy room, with the smell of gas heat lending warm comfort to the room, I saw Mrs. Bloom standing near the ark. She was standing there, with her arms akimbo, looking down with menacing eyes at the rabbi.

"Rabbi Berman, you better listen to me! Can I ask you a question? The rabbi looked up from the preliminary prayers, his face tense from the growing anger at this unsacred intrusion on his prayers to God. Gathering up all the nerve he could master, he said in a tremulous voice:

"Mrs. Bloom, you do not belong here. We are about to pray. If you will come to see me at another time, I would be happy to talk with you."

Mrs. Bloom, not to be set aside so soon, asserted:

"Answer me one question and I will leave."

"All right, what is your question?"

"Fine. I want to know what you are going to do about that filthy, rat-ridden and corrupt place—that tea room across the street? Don't think I do not know what goes on there. The drinking and plenty more I can say that goes on in the back rooms with Gussie, the *Koorvah* (prostitute)."

"Please, Mrs. Bloom, not now. We will talk later. We have services, and this is not the time or the place to talk about those things.

"No, you are not going to stop me, " she crackled, her voice becoming loud and shrill.

The rabbi's face fell. He was disturbed by the way her strident voice disrupted the spiritual environment in a house of God. He could not stop her vicious tongue lashing. He should have had her thrown out bodily—now. But he let her expire.

"Rabbi, we have to do something now!"

"Right now, this minute? Can't we pray first?"

"No, do not make a joke out of this. Look what this place does to our community. Men come here to sit and gamble

and drink and the wives have to stay at home and cook and take care of the children. They never see their husbands. Why? Because they are living in a house of evil. Yes, Rabbi, evil! You are against evil, right? You are a man of God, right? You preach against drunkenness and prostitution, right? You said, yourself, that gambling is against God's will, right? You said these things, right? Why don't you go there right now, this minute, no, not tomorrow, but now and threaten to close that defiled and unclean place that is smelling up our entire neighborhood."

Mrs. Bloom stood directly in front if the Rabbi, jabbing his chest with her forefinger to punctuate her anger.

She was right. He did say all of these things, but how could anyone who had a heart take away the only outpost of joy from these impoverished people who had no other place to find companionship? If they stayed home, they would have surely gone out of their minds watching their wives putting together a meal with bread crumbs.

Take Sammy Moskowitz. He had a pushcart on Orchard Street, and all day, from 6 o'clock in the morning to 7 o'clock at night—in the snow and in the rain—in the bitter cold and stifling heat—he stood there in front of his pushcart selling all sorts of sundries; combs, cheap jewelry, razor blades, shoe laces and shoe horns, and what did he make? A few

dollars a day from which he had to pay for the use of the space and the pushcart garage on Eldridge Street.

Where would he be without the tea room? At night, tired and worn out, he would come here to join his friends, Mr. Mendel, Joey Feinstein, Mr. Myer, the grocer, Paul Mendelson, the house painter. Why, where would he go? Here, in the tea room, they ordered strudel and a glass of tea. They sat and talked and argued. They could laugh and sing, complain about the Hoover Administration that drowned them in this crushing poverty. They could hear Berele raise the banners of world peace and prosperity, if only we would embark on a proletarian crusade against the corruption of capitalism. They could tell jokes, some off color, and hide behind their collective adversities.

Mr. George Tannenbaum, why he could forget he was once a millionaire and, one day, out of the economic whirlwind, came the upheavals of his investments and what was, was no more.

I would sometimes sit among these forlorn people and ask myself: Did they dream? Did they hope? Did they see the outer rim or the sun with a day that will bring them out of the pits of their despair? Would the Messiah come and lift them into a new land of milk and honey? No, not people wracked and stricken with endless pain and suffering of shuffling their mortal coil to certain death. No, not people whose bodies were

stricken with consuming hunger and whose souls yearning only to be free from want and misfortune.

Oh, to be people with purpose, to hear and see God's wonders, to eat the luscious fruits, to smell the golden flowers, to watch the bird in flight, to hear the majestic music and to touch the tender hand reaching out for theirs.

Until such a day came, they would sit in the tea room, their raw and gnarled hands grasping a glass of tea.

The women hardly ever visited the tea room, although Mr. Jacobowitz had a sign in the window, "ALL WOMEN INVITED".

But no women came and intruded on this masculine sanctuary.

Once in a while, Mr. Jacobowitz would disappear into the back room and return with a bottle of schnapps. Soon the tea room would regale itself in song. Once in a while, the police came, asked Mr. Jacobowitz some questions, and disappeared into the back of the room. When they came out, they were laughing.

But to Mrs. Bloom, the tea room was an utter disgrace.

Now, as she stood in the presence of the Rabbi, flailing her fleshy arms, strutting the floor in wild gestures, her face was a mask of creased contempt. She realized that the Rabbi had not heard one word she said.

Let us say, for argument's sake, that the Rabbi conceded to her demands and forced the powers that be to close the Tea Room. The congregants would then be forced to go to Grossman's Tea Room on Rivington Street. They would be closer to the Roumanian Synagogue and would pray there. Then, what would happen to our synagogue? It could be safely reasoned that if there were no tea room, then the synagogue would become an old building, a flaking facade, compacted with cement and mortar and wood.

Look at the comparison. Here at the Eldridge Street tea house, a glass of tea and a slice of strudel is ten cents; but at the Grossman Tea Room, on Rivington and Norfolk Streets, with the fancy lights and the Persian carpets and professional musicians and nightly entertainment— straight from Minsky's—here a glass of tea and slice of strudel was $1.25! How could these moneyless men afford this price? If this, God forbid, ever happened, they would have to close the synagogue, because no people would congregate on this block; and what would happen to the friendships that were formed here? Let Mrs. Bloom rant and rave, but the Eldridge Street tea room had a reason to stay alive.

One day, as Mrs. Bloom was passing the Tea Room, she decided to look in through the misty window. Berele was standing there on top of a table reciting "What a rogue and peasant slave am I" from Shakespeare's, HAMLET. Mr.

Horowitz's violin was playing a Hungarian air. A hot poker game was taking place in the corner. Mr. Abramowitz and Mr. Kaplan were shouting at each other, and there, in the center of the room—it could not be—she squinted her eyes, cleaned off some of the mist from the windows. Yes, it was. It was Hymie, her husband, singing at the top of his voice having the time of his life.

No, no, no, no, this was not Hymie! It was someone who looked like him. Hymie was upstairs, washing the floors. She decided to get a better view of the room by entering it. She walked in, and suddenly all sounds of the room stopped. The smoke from the cigarettes, the stale cigars, were intolerable. The first person to greet her was Berele.

"Mrs. Bloom, this is indeed an honor," he said, bowing with mocking reverence. "It is an honor which cannot be measured by my mere oracular power. How nice of you to come. Are you here on a holy mission to reform all of us? How nice of you to think of us. Want a glass of tea?"

The smoke in the room caused Mrs. Bloom to cough. The loud voices continued. Words were heard about the new governor in Hyde Park, about the little man in Austria, ranting and raving against Jews, and a raucous group of choristers singing RAMONA.

In a taunting voice, Berele teased Mrs. Bloom. "Why don't you sing for us?"

"You can go to hell! You are a foul and evil person!"

"Oh, ho," mocked Berele, "and I thought you were in love with me."

"Enough of that nonsense! Did you see my husband?"

"Your husband, my, Mrs. Bloom, what would your husband be doing in this denizen of iniquity—drowned in the spirits of the fleshpots surrounding us by day and by night? My, Mrs. Bloom, this abode is the place where Satan wields his iniquitous power over men. Why, Mrs. Bloom, isn't your husband now on his hands and knees, purifying your kitchen floor? With soap and detergent?"

There was Hymie. She was not mistaken. He was holding a sizeable glass of beer in his hands, singing out loud at the top of his throaty voice.

"Happy days are here again..."

Hymie was drunk, his head tilted to one side, his mouth twisted and frothing, his eyes glazed. His voice cracked as he attempted LET ME CALL YOU SWEETHEART, and his drunken companions joined him. When he saw Fanny, he bellowed:

"There she is, my lovi' ador'bl wife. I wash 'sposed to clean the floor. Well, sweedheart, my loving sparrow, lemme ast you a question. Did I make the floors dirty? So, if I dint make 'em dirty, why should I clean 'em? So, what , what we gotta do? Thashright. Good thinkin'. Should have been

Sherlock Holmes. Gotta find out who made the floors dirty. Hey, Freddie, did you make the floors dirty? No? Charlie, you? Or Maxie? Hey, lesh be fair. Did anybody here make the floors dirty? Seems nobody made the floors dirty, my dear butterfly. My dear tootsie wootsie, you go and find out who made the floors dirty, and whoever did this terrible thing, let him clean it."

Hymie rose, staggered over to his wife, "wifey, dearest, I am happy. You s'pposed to make me happy. I wanna get shentimental over you, honeychile."

Mrs. Bloom scowled. "Hymie, you come home right now."

"And leave my lovin' friends? You would not want me to do that, now would you, my nightengle? As he said this, Hymie fell to the floor in a dead faint.

Mrs. Bloom, her eyes blazing with anger, screamed out: "look at what you did to my husband. You will see about this. This place, hear Mr. Jacobowitz, this place is as good as closed. I will get in touch with the City Councilman, Mr. Antonio, and you will see what could be done to get rid of this place once and for all!"

Her voice drowned in a sea of laughter. The laughter increased, one by one. As Mrs. Bloom was able to see through the smoke, there, sitting with a beer in his hand, was Councilman Frank C. Antonio, with a foolish grin on his face.

A few of the men helped Hymie up from the floor and escorted him out the door as Mrs. Bloom grew silent.

Silence fell on Jacobowitz's tea room, and each person now headed for their homes, to surrender to their world where their dreams will transport them to lands of plenty and milk and honey.

CHAPTER X

Mrs. Bloom did not disappear from the community; and her railing against the existence of the tea room did not cease. But her intemperate actions began to decrease. She no longer enjoyed any control over her husband's more frequent visits to the sanctuary of the Jacobowitz tea room.

As for myself, I did miss my mother. Her name and face came to me in my dreams. There were times that I stopped in the middle of a prayer at the synagogue or during the singing in the choir or in school, and would see her standing there, her beautiful face, black eyes and hair, smiling at me with Jason and Steven standing beside her. I thought to myself, where did I belong in that grouping? Why were they together and why was I on the outside of her protective company? I often thought and wondered what she was doing, where she was, and how were my brothers, Jason and Steven. My busy activities with the choir, my ever-increasing spiritual interest in the music I was singing, were such that I only allowed fleeting moments of reflection about my mother and brothers.

Eldridge Street may have been tucked away among the forgotten streets of the East Side of New York, but, here on this block, was the University Settlement, Public School #20. But the events were uncertain each day. So many kids were beaten up by surly gangs. So many people were shot and would lay in

the middle of the streets for hours until the ambulance came to pick them up. I saw the face of death, even before I began to live.

There was much prostitution available. My grandparents would look out the window and see toothless Gussie smoking, her lips smeared obscenely with garish lipstick. I did not understand what was going on around me. My grandfather would call me over to the window and say:

"Herry, this is what you must not do. This is evil. Do not ever get involved with such women, you hear?"

At my age I could hardly imagine a reason for me to become involved with Gussie. I saw so much that I did not understand. I saw it next door to me where a man lived with his wife—Mr. and Mrs. Abramowitz. Mr. Abramowitz was a man I feared. He had eyes that pierced into the very soul staring at you with menace and anger, with a beard that he wore down to his neckline. His wife, Sophie, a meek and soft-spoken woman, would come to visit us and weep that her husband would starve her, beat her, speak to her with angry disrespect. I grew to hate this man. To avoid him, I would walk in another direction when I saw him coming. Since we had our toilets in the hall, I would often see him go into one of the toilets. I would hear him yelling and screeching as I would pass one of the toilets and peer into the knothole and see him squirming and gyrating in such a strange way. I did not know

that he was masturbating. I did not understand that, but watching him sitting there and screaming and moving in such strange ways, made me more afraid of him.

If they called Berele Berensky evil, what would they say about Mr. Abramowitz?

Oh, Mr. Abramowitz was not poor. He was a rich man—or so I was told. He wrote books about Judaic Law. With a printing press in his home, he would print his own books, bind them and try to sell them to the synagogue members. But so deep was the contempt for this man, that no one in the community bought his books.

I was obsessed with a need to hurt him in some way because I saw the injustices by which he lived. At the synagogue, he would never drop a few cents in the charity box. He spoke with a voice full of arrogance. He often insulted Rabbi Berman and President Sam Levine, calling them ignorant imbeciles. Every time I saw his wife, her eyes were blackened by the beatings he administered. His face was forbidding behind that long beard. He walked as though he owned the street—straight and tall. He was overweening in the dedication to his own opinions. But once I heard Rabbi Berman praise the books he wrote. His Talmudic insights were compelling, and his knowledge, vast. From what I heard about him, he was the consummate scholar. Even the rabbi could not, as I heard it, match the power of his scholarship.

But he lacked humility. He scorned those who would have the effrontery to challenge him. He was offensively positive that his philosophical assertions were never wrong.

One day, while his wife, Sophie, was visiting us, she related to my grandfather that they were going to visit their son in the Catskills, which was about 100 miles away. They planned to stay about two weeks.

I did not think much about it, but in my mind I could not imagine what his flat looked like. I was intrigued by its appearance. I wondered how a man like that—so highly respected—but hated— lived.

Without knowing why, I went to a locksmith and bought a variety of blank keys. Why I did this, and what prompted me to do such a horrible thing, I never knew; but once, when they were not at home, I tried each key in the lock until I found one that fit. It did not open the door, but it fit. That was all I wanted. Now I had to make it open the door. I had no plan. I bought a file and each day I sat on the synagogue steps and began filing keys. No one questioned what I was doing, as they passed me by.

One day on his way to the synagogue, Mr. Abramowitz saw me filing keys.

"What are you doing there, Herry," he asked.

Just to see him standing there frightened me, but I replied hastily, "playing a game."

"What kind of a game is filing keys?"

"It's a game you would not understand, Mr. Abramowitz."

"I should not understand? Young man, do you know who you are talking to? But go ahead and play your game."

He laughed as he walked up the steps to the synagogue.

The next day, Mr. Abramowitz passed me again, looked at me, asked to be shown the key I was filing, studied it, and said:

"This must be some game, eh, Finkelstein?"

I smiled.

"Well, Finkelstein, if this is your game, at least you are not a hoodlum, breaking windows, running around in gangs, smoking cigarettes."

He watched me for a while, pinched my cheeks and said, "you are such a fine boy."

He left me and entered the synagogue.

As I continued filing the keys, I heard loud and booming voices coming from the synagogue.

I walked into the synagogue and there he was, arguing with Rabbi Berman. His voice was nagging and nasal as he said:

"All I am asking you to do, Rabbi, is that you allow me to leave my books here. I want the congregants to read what I

have to say, and you stand there and say it cannot be done. Well, tell me , why not?"

"I cannot do it, Mr. Abramowitz, because I have to discuss it with the board. Mr. Abramowitz, I promise you that I will discuss it with the officers at their next meeting."

After this exchange, their tempers diminished and upon seeing me, Mr. Abramowitz called me to his side.

"Ah, Rabbi, take a look at a boy. Someday, Finkelstein, you will read my books and I can see from what I observed about you that, not only will you read them, but you will understand them. Finished already with the game?"

I nodded.

"Here is a boy—handsome, too—sings with the Rosenblatt choir, chops wood for the stove, stands in line for hours in the coldest weather to bring home food for his *zeyde* and *bubba*. And, Rabbi, I am a man who has pity on these poor, unfortunate people. I know people call me a miser behind my back; but, Rabbi, did these people work and slave the way I did for my money? Did they get up at 5 o'clock in the morning and come home 8 or 9 o'clock at night? So I made some money. Why, is it God's plan that we should starve to death, that we should not have a few dollars for our old age?

"See how this poor boy's *zeyde* lives? Every day, he is out grinding the organ. So what does a generous man like myself do? I gave Mrs. Finkelstein $2 last month—money to

buy some food. Last year, remember, Rabbi, I gave the synagogue $10, and for this generosity, I am called a miser. I am a benefactor, not a miser, Rabbi. As he was talking, he looked at me, handing me a dollar bill and said:

"Here, take this dollar and give it to your loving grandparents, so tonight, at least, I will know you will have supper.

"One more thing, Herry. Stay away from the tea room. Do you know what it means for a boy your age to be consorting with these unworthy people? Do not think that Mrs. Bloom was so wrong. But who would listen to her? This place should be locked up by the police, and, believe me, if we had the right mayor in City Hall instead of this happy and scatter-brained Jimmy Walker and his corrupt gang at Tammany Hall, it would be locked up."

As he spoke, other congregants walked in, the prayers were recited, and Ezra, the *Shammus*, locked up the synagogue.

The next day, I saw Mr. Abramowitz, his wife, Sophie, walking down the steps of the building carrying suitcases. I heard him mumbling about his son being late to pick them up. I looked out the window and watched him chat with the evicted family. Soon a car pulled up at the curb; they got into the rumble seat, and I watched them as they disappeared.

That afternoon, I tried three filed keys and—wonders, wonders—my first key opened the door to the Abramowitz' home.

I walked in slowly over piles of books. It was a musty apartment, filled with books on the shelves and on the floor. In the center of the room stood a black monster—a printing press. I was overwhelmed with the size of it. It was a huge as the living room. I opened some of the books and there lay before me a giant corpus of literary works of the ages: Shakespeare, Hawthorne, Keats and Shelly, Talmudic works, the works of Graetz, history of the Jews. Once, I recalled, how I yearned for reading matter. I asked my mother to bring me something to read, and she did not understand what I was talking about. She brought me a moving theater program. I read it over and over again, but I was far from satisfied.

I sat down, opened one of Graetz's volumes, THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS. I wish I had time to read his entire library.

But now that I was here, what do I do? I decided to take the sacks I saw on the floor, and pack the books Mr. Abramowitz wrote into the sacks. After I packed them, I hid them in the empty flat on the second floor—making certain that no one would catch me in what I was doing. The time came when the Abramowitzes came home, and I heard what I expected to hear. He gave out a loud cry, bellowing and frantic:

"All my work, all my work, gone... It was Berele Berensky," he gasped. "He stole my books."

Then I heard silence. And it was the silence which concerned me. Yes, I knew it. He figured out why I was playing this game, filing keys.

There was a loud knock on our door. I heard his graveled voice speaking in threatening undertones. I was already sleeping in the living room by the window. I looked up and tried to understand the words that were being said, but since they were not intended for my ears, I could not hear them. But the voices became louder and angrier. I heard Mr. Abramowitz speak, his voice full of sobs and anguish:

"Mr. Finkelstein, you tell me and I will be glad to listen to you. Why would your grandson—why would he sit on the steps of the synagogue and file keys? He called it a game. What kind of a game was this, Mr. Finkelstein? I am sorry to tell you, Mr. Finkelstein, that I am certain that your grandson entered my flat, took all my books and only God knows what happened to them. Now, let your grandson return these books and I will forget all that has happened."

At this remark, all thunder broke loose. It was as though a storm broke across the horizon. My grandmother came running out and screamed at Mr. Abramowitz; but Mr. Abramowitz won his point when he suggested that he speak to me about it.

I opened my eyes and sat up. I saw the fierce face staring at me and I turned away from him. My grandfather turned to me, held my hand in his, and he said:

"Herry, you heard what we spoke about. Someone stole Mr. Abramowitz's books. He wants to know if you knew anything about it. Do you, son?"

"Look, Herry," Mr. Abramowitz approached me, "if this was a prank of yours that you and your friends thought up, maybe it was fun for you, but now the fun is over. Those books are precious to me. Just have those books returned to me and I will forget all about it. Okay?"

I felt an artificial anger well up in me.

"Why do you pick on me? Why should I know anything about this? I am not an gangster or a burglar."

"Because, Herry, I saw you filing keys and now I know it was not a game. You were filing keys so you could come into my home. Tell the truth, Herry."

I knew I had to lie. I looked Mr. Abramowitz in the eye.

"No, Mr. Abramowitz, I did not enter your house. I don't know why I should do such a thing." Turning to my grandfather, "I hope you believe me *Zeyde.*"

My grandfather smiled.

"And now," my grandfather snorted, "get out of my house and please, for your sake, do not knock on our door again!"

Mr. Abramowitz did not say a word, just opened the door and closed it behind him.

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The episode was not, however, closed. I would see Mr. Abramowitz walking the streets, his hands behind his back, pouting and fulminating like a caged animal. I heard his ranting and cursing at night, his poor wife, Sophie, forbidden to enter our flat. Something stirred in me. It was more than pity. It was a sorrow, rather, a shame that permeated my soul. It was an emptiness that came in the form of guilt. It was much too heavy for me to carry this burden. I did a bad thing. I had indeed stolen his books. I had taken them from him, who labored to write them, print them, bind them. They were his books. I had done a dastardly thing. But I was also frightened. But to whom could I tell of this dastardly act? The rabbi? He would reproach me. If I told my dear *zeyde,* he would punish me. And I was beginning to punish myself. My conscience was tearing me apart. I remember the Rabbi speak of these things: "Thou shalt not Steal." These were God's words.

That night, I heard a resounding clap of thunder and the brazen lightning that emblazoned the sky. I walked the streets feeling deeply ashamed of myself. Why? You ask why? I could have restored those books to Mr. Abramowitz. I still had the key to his house. I could have waited until he was not home and then brought them back, and that would end it.

He would never know—and he would be so very grateful. No questions would be asked. But I could not return the books. I no longer had them. What did I do with them—and where were they?

The answer to these questions becomes a miracle.

One day, our synagogue invited a guest speaker from the Roumanian Synagogue, a famous Rabbi, Norman Schreiber.

That night—oh, how well I remember this—I entered the synagogue, my heart still heavy with guilt. I could look no one in the face. Mr. Abramowitz entered as he does every night. As I see him I sit in the corner of the room.

But I saw a strange thing. Mr. Abramowitz is usually a man who sat apart from everyone—never mixed with people—but not tonight. Tonight I saw people get out of their seats running to him, shaking his hands. In the center of this attention was Rabbi Schreiber. Everybody laughed, offering their *mazel tov.*

"You did it, you did it, Mr. Abramowitz!"

"I did what?"

"You mean you don't know?"

Rabbi Schreiber laughed out loud, his voice full of jubilation and frenzied joy.

"What is it that I should know? What? I committed a crime? I was unfaithful to my wife? What? Tell me."

"All right, I will tell you if you will listen."

"All right, I will listen."

Rabbi Schreiber, pointing to me and still laughing with choking glee, "come here, Finkelstein. Come here. Sit by my side. "

I looked up. Did they discover that I had stolen these books? Is that why they were laughing at me? I trembled inside of me.

"Finkelstein, come here," he urged again.

Slowly I approached the Rabbi sitting there in the center of the room, waiting to meet my doom, my shame, my humiliation.

"Mr. Abramowitz," Rabbi Schreiber said, continuing to laugh, "you are a genius!"

"Thank you, Rabbi Schreiber, but why—"

"Let me finish. You are a genius for two reasons:

"Reason number one is that, for years, you have tried to sell your books to the synagogues in this community, and nobody bought them. Hardly anybody ever wanted the few you gave away.

"But your genius, Mr. Abramowitz, was taking this young man, Herry Finkelstein, and giving him these books to sell for you. Not only did he sell our entire congregation your book for ten cents a copy, but in every congregation—on Eldridge Street—on Essex and Ludlow—Cherry

Street—wherever there is a synagogue—this young man sold your book.

"Reason number two—the genius was how clever you were asking this sweet and refined child to sell your books for you.

"What made you think of such a clever way to sell your books? Whatever it was, it was as though God put that idea into your head.

"Mr. Abramowitz, everybody is now reading your book. It has become the most compelling topic of discussion between the Rabbis and the Talmudic Scholars.

"Mr. Abramowitz, did you, at least, thank this child?"

"I should thank him?"

"I have to tell you the right thing to do? Go ahead and thank him. Not just thank him but offer him a gift and give his family a few dollars. You should pay homage to him.

"Homage, too?"

"And why not?

"This book you wrote has such a powerful and prophetic message. It contains such wisdom. My God! How foolish I was, how proud I was, and how blind I was not to see it, not to open my eyes and to read it. You will be pleased to know that I heard from Rabbi Kramer and Rabbi Lefkowitz from the Bais Hamikdash Hagodol in Jerusalem. They want thousands of copies."

I could not believe what I heard. It was all too sudden, all too miraculous. I began to cry with such a heaving of my chest that Mr. Abramowitz took me in his arms, wiped away my tears, and kissed me on the forehead.

When my *zeyde* heard the story, he slapped me across the face—but there was in his slap a recognition that God's will was contained in that miracle. My grandfather asked me to return the money I made selling the books to Mr. Abramowitz, but he refused to accept it.

CHAPTER XI

My grandfather did not welcome all of the accolades I received by the members of the synagogue. How they slapped me on the back, pinched my cheeks, and told me how smart I was in this episode. But my grandfather saw something much deeper in this than all the rest of them, the members, the community, who would stop me in the middle of the street to congratulate me. He saw something he did not like—I was fretful of the face he showed me, falling into hard and stern lines, avoiding my eyes.

But my dear *zeyde* had a problem. He did not know how to treat it. There were many times that he tried to speak to me, but his mouth quivered with confusion.

I understood his confusion. After all, I was a burglar. I lied to him. These were traits that he would not tolerate. He was troubled with my planned strategy calculated to steal the property of a neighbor. He would not tolerate, not only the burglary, but the attempt to take his property into my own and try to sell it and keep the money. This was a distinct violation of the Torah.

My grandmother saw all of this and she knew that she would not be able to countenance the awful division that existed between my grandfather and myself.

One day, before I was leaving to go to Hebrew school, she stopped me.

"Herry," she said, in a tone of voice that was at once strong and demanding and a voice I never heard her use before, "I want you to listen to what I have to say to you."

No, my *bubba* was not a woman of the world. I never heard her express an idea, a Torah thought, any news written up in the newspaper. In her stumbling ignorance there was an underlying wisdom. She never said much and left what there was to say to my grandfather, for whom she had the greatest respect.

But now her ruddy face, her hardened lips startled me.

I said, "*Bubba*, I will be late for Hebrew school."

"So, you will be late. What I have to talk with you about is more important than missing one day of Hebrew school.

"Sit down, Herry. We must talk."

"Talk about what, *bubba*?"

"You don't know what I am going to talk about?"

"No. Why, did I do anything wrong, *Bubba*?"

"You do not know?"

"No, *Bubba.*"

"Well, if you do not know then I must tell you."

At this time, I did not know what to expect. Her face was so forbidding, sitting across me in the kitchen, her blank

expression stiffening into an obstinacy that did not belong to her face, so usually soft and sad, but never this.

"Herry," she began.

"Yes, *Bubba*?"

"Why did you do such a terrible thing?"

"What terrible thing?"

Her face now changed ashen.

"Come, now, Herry, you know what terrible thing. You think it was right that you went into our neighbor's house, stole his books, and then went and sold them? Do you, Herry, do you? Look me in the face and tell me that this was the right thing to do.

"Now, you will listen to me. Herry, I am a quiet woman. Your *zeyde* always does all of the talking. He is a brilliant man. But your *zeyde*—he does not know what to say to you. He loves you so much. He is afraid he will lose you if he talks to you. So, I decided that I must talk to you. Your *zeyde* is very sad that you did this terrible thing. He is also so very sad that he thinks that you think that you did the right thing. No, Herry, you did not do the right thing, no matter what they tell you. It was stealing, and nothing more, and nothing less. You see your *zeyde*. He cannot talk to you because what you did was wrong. So, tell me, Herry, you must know there will be no peace in this house until you know what you did was not right."

I could see her face was torn in conflict, but lit with the fire of her decision, her voice dry and hands trembling.

"Herry, now I must hear it from you. Was this the right thing to do, stealing from your neighbor and using what you stole from him to make money? Was that right?"

I could no longer maintain a sense of comfort with her eyes searching for mine. I felt a choking sensation overtake me. I tried to hide my feelings, but the tears began to blur my vision. My hands were shaking. I tried to hold it back but the more I tried the more I felt my body shake. I could no longer hide behind the subtlety of words, of soft words that came easily from the lips. I was of the age where I could now talk myself out of any problem with glibness of speech. How easy I would find it to circumvent any question with a flood of words, empty of meaning, so that the person listening to me would be more attentive to the words I used than the meaning. I knew I could not do that here.

"*Nu*, Herry, I am waiting."

Hiding my head in her lap, I sobbed, "yes, *Bubba*, it was wrong. *Bubba*, please forgive me. I did not know what I was doing."

With these words spoken as I was sobbing, I thought that would end it. I fell into my dear grandmother's arms, feeling the warmth and softness of her breasts.

"It is all right, Herry. If you have to cry, I think you should. But I have to know more than what you are telling me. What you did was a plan, right, Herry?"

"Yes, *Bubba*, it was a plan."

"This was your plan alone, Herry?"

"Yes, *Bubba*. My plan."

"Nobody—none of your friends—helped you with this plan?"

"No. Nobody."

"Are you telling the truth? Not the Goldstein boys?

"No."

"So if this—what you say is true—this was your idea alone?"

"Yes. I already told you."

"I know, but I want to be sure."

"Yes, *Bubba*, it was my plan."

"Nobody knew that this was what you were going to do?"

"No."

"So, what was it that made you do this?"

"I dunno."

"Sure you know. Were you unhappy here, Herry, I mean with us?"

"Oh, no, *Bubba,*" I blurted out, snuggling deeper into her breast.

"You are unhappy with *zeyde* and me?

"Oh, no."

"So, why did you do this?"

"I dunno—well—maybe I was lonely and angry."

"Who were you angry with, *zeyde* and me?"

"Oh, no, I love you very much—the both of you—very much."

"But you are angry?"

"I guess so."

"*Nu*?"

"Oh, I don't know—"

"You are angry with your mother?"

"Yes."

"And in that anger you gave that anger to our neighbor?"

"Yes."

"Are you angry with anyone else?"

"Yes—my father. I am angry that I never met him, that he did not care about me and he never came to see me before he died."

My grandmother looked at me, and began to cry.

"Herry, you will never know how much your father loved you, how much he wanted to hug you and take you by the hand and play with you."

I remained silent, continued to lay in my *bubba's* arms. I felt safe like this. It was the first time in my life that I felt so good and so safe.

"But did you know, Herry, that your 'sweet' mother sent our son—your father—to a sanatorium to die and refused to let you see him while she was carrying on with this bum, this drunkard, Mr. Weisman? Did you know that?"

"No."

"I could tell you more, Herry, but your *zeyde* will not let me."

Suddenly I heard the voice of my grandfather from the living room. Now his chair was circling near the threshold, his face grim as though there was something that seized tyrannously upon his soul.

"Go, Hannah, go ahead and tell him. He will have to know everything. Tell him about his shameful mother, the whore, the prostitute!"

"Why do you call my mother those names, grandpa?"

"Because those names fit her."

"I think, Herry, that you should know all there is to know about your mother. Yes, Herry, you are angry with your mother, and you have every right to be. You should have contempt for her. You should spit in her face."

I began to feel a queasy sensation. I did not like the way my *zeyde* spoke about my mother, but when I sought out the

truth about her—the way she abandoned me—the way I did not see her at all—the way she ignored my existence—what else was my *zeyde* telling me but the truth.

My grandfather moved his wheelchair into the kitchen, looked at me sadly.

"You remember your brothers, Jason and Steven?"

"Yes, *zeyde.* They are now home with my mother and stepfather."

"You think so?"

"Yes, *zeyde.*"

"Supposing I tell you that she did the same to your brothers as she did to you."

"I don't understand."

"You will."

"What did she do?"

"You know where they are now? She and your drunken stepfather threw them out—just like you. You know where they are now? They are now in an institution, a place for boys in Pleasantville, New York. And why, Herry? Why did she get rid of them—for the same reason she got rid of you—because this bastard did not want them—so..."

"Stop, *zeyde*! Stop! My mother—she would do this?"

"Well, Herry, she did it to you."

"Yes, she did."

"And she did it to your brothers."

I remained quiet. I could not speak. I wanted to run out of the room, but a part of me wanted to hear more. I saw my grandfather's mouth dripping with his loathing, seething and trembling, turning his chair away from me, his eyes blazing with savage fire.

I grew frightened. I lifted my face from my grandmother's arms and saw both my grandparents seemingly exhausted from this confrontation.

"Herry, I have more. Do you want to hear more?"

I was in a state of shock, but really not ready to hear any more; but a wild curiosity overcame me. Yes, I wanted to know more. I was not ready for it, but now I was nine years of age, and I had to face the dark mysteries of my youth—see them—know them—and recognize what kind of person my mother was. I would always love her, I knew. But I wanted to know if she loved me.

Then I heard words which shattered me beyond anything I had ever known.

"Let me tell him, Avrom. Let me tell him about his 'loving' mother—who ran away from your father—you—and now, your brothers.

"When you were a little baby, still red from your being born, only about one month old, you were here, in this house. Your mother did not know what to do with you. I remember we had a fight and we said we would keep you, but she

screamed at your *zeyde* and said that if she had to kill you, she would not leave you with us.

"Listen, Herry—but this is what she did. She took your little red body, wrapped you in a blanket with one of your rattle toys and ran out of the house holding you in one hand. You were screaming so loud that the neighbors came out to look to see what was happening. It was in the middle of a terrible winter and she ran out into the street with you hanging on one arm. I ran after her. I tried to take you from her. She saw a garbage can and threw you into the garbage can with all of the garbage and ran away. There you were, Herry, lying there with the old garbage, screaming.

"I grabbed you and wiped you off—all the garbage from your body and face—and brought you back to the house.

"That is the truth, Herry."

At that moment, I saw nothing, felt nothing. Her words took time to penetrate my startled emotions. No, that was not true. That was a lie. A lie, do you hear? My mother—why many other things could be said about her—but no: NOT THAT SHE WOULD DEPOSIT ME IN A CAN OF GARBAGE AND RUN AWAY, TO LEAVE ME LYING THERE IN THE SCUM, IN THE FILTHY SWILL, THE RANCID DREGS OF WHAT PEOPLE THREW AWAY, THERE TO BE PICKED UP BY THE SANITATION MEN

AND THROWN INTO A HEAP OF DIRT AND OFFAL, TO DIE! TO DIE!

This is what my mother did?

There I was, lying there, wailing, while my grandmother picked me up and brought me into the warm house.

My grandmother went on to say that a crowd gathered to see the ugly event. Later, my mother came back and took me away from here, while I could not stop crying.

This story hung over my life—in me—with me—all over me, a part of the shredded tapestry that made up my self image. I felt unwanted. I felt that as I lay in my mother's arms, I was not welcome there.

Whenever I thought of this event, a sweat would break out all over me, and tears would begin to come to my eyes.

Contempt. That was my birthright. Hatred of my presence. I was the residue—that which was worthy to be thrown away—of no worth. My self-esteem suffered. I was ignored, the last to be heard from, begging for a moment where people did not care of what I had to say, but laying back, hesitant to express words of mine. The geography of my life was built on unsure plains, of swamps, of oozing sludge; and here I was wallowing in the quicksand, never on firm ground, always the butt of an ugly joke, always to be laughed at and not seen, invisible, and of no serious account.

This was the heritage this story left me.

It is a story I shall never forget. But I did not believe it—not my mother! Never! Never!

CHAPTER XII

I was a growing boy, but I had major difficulties adjusting to boyhood life. The days of my life were centered upon my choir work at the Roumanian Synagogue on Rivington and Norfolk Streets, and the synagogue across the street from where I lived. I was growing taller. My face was filling out, but I was still as thin as a beanstalk. My bones were very soft and I appeared as an easy prey to the strong in heart—to the gangs that roamed the streets. I learned terror, fright, fear. I learned it among the obscenities that were plaguing the neighborhood around the Public School #20 on Eldridge Street. Fear became my teacher—fear that ran my stomach to riot, that blanched my face and ravaged my soul. These fearful conditions made me walk with a timid step, suspecting each boy that passed me by to be my mortal enemy.

Yes, there was an organized reign of terror encircling the school. It was a miserable group of juvenile gangs lurching forward and seeking compliance with their demands upon the students of the school. This group had a leader. His name was Shorty.

Each Friday, Shorty would approach me, holding out his hand so that I would offer him a nickel for his protection against the bullies that roamed the streets. Just five cents assured me safe haven from the terrorist acts of these

swaggering ruffians. By offering Shorty five cents a week, I would be allowed to walk these streets unmolested. How could I give five cents a week when I did not have that kind of money? I was successful in postponing the date when this edict would begin to take effect, but the day of reckoning came, and I did not know what to do. This would surely mean that I would be beaten to a pulp, my eyes blackened, my lips bruised until I bled. It meant that I would be kicked in the groin and each member of this gang would take turns in mutilating my body.

I saw Shorty on that day when I could not meet his demands. "Well, Finkelstein, whatcha gonna do, uh? Da boys—day is gettn' funny feelins' aboudcha. I says to dem to leave that poor kid alone, but day don' wanna lissen. Know wah I mean? I don' know what to say to dem. And if you don' give that nickel by dis Friday, it outta my hands. Know what I mean, Finky, boy? I give you to Friday, Finky. Okay? Thas because I like you. I don' wan nuttin' to happen to you. You're my pal, my buddy, my chum."

I looked at his face as he was smoking a cigarette. It was a sly and cunning face, his lips curled, his hair wild, his look behind that swarthy face was mean. A faint tremor exuded the enjoyment he was getting from this warning.

I blurted out, "Okay, Shorty, I'll do my best."

"Oh, no, Finky, no nickel, no protection. Got it?"

"Yeah."

I went home crying. I did not know what to do. Today was Wednesday. If I did not have that money in his hand by Friday, I know that what happened to others will happen to me. This gang, they called themselves "THE MARAUDERS"—they will fall on me like savages and they would leave me in the street until a school official would pick me up and bring me to the office for the nurse to look at me. The official would urge me to identify the culprits, but I knew that this would be a foolish thing to do.

I went home, sat down to study, but my mind was on what would happen to me Friday, if I could not meet this terrifying deadline.

As I sat there, there was a knock on the door. A man with a long beard appeared. He carried with him a tin box. It was a charity box, I knew.

"*Sholom Aleichem*, he said. He spoke in Yiddish, which I understood.

"I see you have so many charity boxes, but I could put up another one for the orphans in Brooklyn in Borough Park."

My grandfather nodded. The man nailed the charity box on the wall and he left.

There it was—I was saved from harm. That night, when everyone was asleep, I gently opened a charity box, removed a nickel. On Friday, I gave Shorty the nickel. He looked at the

nickel and said, "Sorry, Finky. Next week it's gonna cost ya a dime."

"A dime?"

"Yeah, Finky, a dime. No questions asked. A dime."

I nodded, intending to ransack the charity boxes.

One day, another man appeared, removed all the coins and left the charity boxes empty.

The next day was Friday. I had no money to give to Shorty, not even a nickel. When he approached me that Friday, I shrugged my shoulders."

"Ya mean you ain't got no money, Finky?"

"No, Shorty," already trembling from the consequences.

"Too bad, too bad. You sure now?"

"I tried. I tried."

"Well, you dint try hard enough."

With that, I saw him dancing around me and suddenly I felt a swift jab in my face.

"Put up your dukes, Finky. C'mon, fight me. I'll givya a chance to beat me up—c'mon, Finky, try to beat me up."

Another jab injured my nose. I whirled about, stricken with fear, my pain overwhelming. I did not know how to fight back. He was dancing around me, lurching forward and jabbing my face.

"Please, Shorty," I cried. "I'll get it for you."

"Oh, no. No ya don't. C'mon, fight me. Hit me in the face."

He stuck out his jaw inviting me to hit him. I lifted my right arm and swung and missed. He only laughed at me, peppering his jabs to my already bruised lips. I saw how they swelled and felt the blood falling on my shirt. Then he stopped jabbing. He began to pound my stomach until I swooned and fell over. No, he was not through. He was having too good a time, and even if I would turn up with the money, he would not stop. He picked me up and continued his incessant pounding. I fell over. He stopped me from falling, holding me by the collar sneering at me.

"Okay, Finky, see how important it is to cooperate with a pal? If you don't have that dime next week, you may not live to Saturday."

He left me in the middle of the street, lying there demoralized, beaten, my head bent and my poor body sore with blood dripping from my lips. It took all my strength to get up and move slowly toward home.

My main concern now was what to tell my grandparents. I wanted to be dead. I began to think of my mother. Why did she leave me for this? Why was I not safe and secure in an apartment with my beautiful mother by my side. Irving and Joe Goldstein had parents. I had a father once who died. A lot he could care for me. And a mother who dumped me in a can

of garbage. Now I had to face these deadly atrocities. Who was here to defend me, to go to Shorty and threaten him? Who would take up my fight against this brick wall and hold him by the collar and wipe that leering sneer from the geography of his face?

I trudged home. I sobbed and cried bitterly. My pain was unbearable. What I had to face now was my grandparents, from the other kids at the school and the Hebrew school. This was the kind of humiliation I could not endure.

As I passed 174 Eldridge street, the Superintendent of the building stopped me.

"No, Mr. Robinson, I can't talk to you. I have to be home."

George Robinson was a man I always admired. He was a great athlete, the first one to swim a mile in six minutes. He was the pride of his family and his race. He would always greet me and ask me to teach him Hebrew. I always smiled. Why would a Negro do with Hebrew? I asked the rabbi and he said that if I taught Hebrew to a non-Jew, it would be against Jewish Law. I did not understand that. It made no sense to me, but if a rabbi gave me this advice, I thought I had to follow it.

But I was embarrassed to tell Mr. Robinson that I was not permitted to do this. I kept putting him off. He was such a fine man; he was married to a beautiful woman, Martha. I would always engage him in conversation. He would talk about

the plight of the Negro in America, how they were still slaves in the economic market, how they were depicted in the movies as stupid, lazy and shuffling, making them stupid hooligans. He told me how he had taken to read the Bible as a result of our discussions. He always had a bar of candy for me. He often treated me to a Charlotte Russe, a piece of cake topped with delicious cream. We had developed a warm relationship.

That day, as he saw me hobbling home, he stopped me. He looked at my face—my lips—and saw the scalding tears and my heavy breathing. He placed his hand on my shoulder and gave me a hug. This hug. This is what I needed. I fell into his strong arms and cried as he rocked me. It was a new joy, a new feeling of strength that overcame me. I looked into his eyes and I knew then that I loved this man.

"Harold," he said suddenly, "let us make a deal. You teach me Hebrew, and I will teach you how to box, so that no Shorty, or other bullies, can ever again do what was done to you today."

In my sobs I nodded yes. He kissed me on the forehead.

"We'll start tomorrow on my roof at 4 o'clock—okay?"

"But tomorrow is the Sabbath, Mr. Robinson."

I nodded yes.

"Mr. Robinson, yes."

Every Saturday, after the services, I met Mr. Robinson on the rooftop of his building. When he removed his shirt, his

body gleamed, his muscles rippled. I said to myself that this was the kind of body I would like to own one day. He showed me a pair of boxing gloves.

There I was, as can be imagined, wearing boxing gloves. I must have appeared skeletal to him. But through his patience and kindness, he taught me how to jab. He had me jab his face with my left hand and cross with a right hand. He taught me how to dance around my opponent, to ride with a punch, and how to feint. He then taught me how to hit the light punching bag and was amazed at the rhythm and the musical effect it had on me. When I tried it, the bag eluded me. But after several lessons, I was much more adept at punching the light bag.

I was learning how to box, to defend myself, how to throw a punch, to dance around my opponent and how to do all those things which were necessary to feel effective aggression against a bully. Most of all, Mr. Robinson taught me the effective use of my body, shifting it to the right and to the left and how to use its power against any opponent flailing his fists from all sides.

After several weeks of these instructions, I began to feel confident in what I could do to defend myself.

During that time, Mr. Robinson gave me the money to satisfy Shorty. I was free from the terror and the fear of molestation as I was able to provide Shorty with his weekly income.

However, the day came. It came sooner than I thought. I knew I was ready for any physical encounter that Shorty could provide. When I discovered I was ready, a great fear overcame me, but I was ready. How I knew this readiness was brought about when, on that Saturday, Mr. Robinson had me box with him. He was Shorty and I was Harold. I stood in the ring with him. He rushed me and I sidestepped him, threw a jab, and it landed on his face and I followed it with a devastating right cross, which jolted Mr. Robinson. He laughed.

We boxed with three-minute intervals for three rounds, and I thought I would have won the bout on points. With that confidence at my behest, I was ready for anything that Shorty could throw at me.

That Friday, Shorty approached me. I just stood there and did not say a word. My eyes met his but my eyes did not falter or look away. I just stood there without saying a word.

"Got the dime, Finky," he said, looking menacingly at me. But I stood in my spot as though I were a statue.

Then I said to him, "Shorty, you want the dime? It's in my pocket. Take it."

"Which pocket?"

I indicated the pocket.

He paused, smirked, hunched his shoulders, showed me his fist.

"Look, Finky, don't fuck around with me. Either you give that dime right this minute, or I'll have to take you on."

I smiled. He saw that I did not tremble or move away from him. He also saw that after a while I moved my body toward his. In that moment, bewilderment showed on his face. He pushed me back and I returned to that same spot.

He turned from me and walked away, and that was the last I ever heard of Shorty.

CHAPTER XIII

Eldridge Street was solemn and quiet in the early morning. It was a place where you rarely heard the sound of a bird or saw a tree. Once in a while, a beggar could be seen struggling through the streets digging his hands into the pyramids of rotted food—a chicken bone, or a wet and crumpled cigarette. The Great Depression left a deep and festering sore on the people I knew as a child. Coal was not scarce. Neither was food. But to people like ourselves, they were scarce because we had no money to buy the coal or the food.

Living in a cold-water flat was an intolerable condition in the wintertime. The cold penetrated to the very bone. Hunger was no stranger to us either.

But I guess we were more fortunate than others. My grandfather often smiled with a bittersweet mockery and said "Thank God I am a cripple. Otherwise, we would starve to death."

Every day, Michael would pick him up early in the morning, throw my grandfather on his huge shoulders, carry him down the one flight of stairs and place him in a huge carriage equipped with an organ. In the carriage there was a violin, which my grandfather told me my father used to play, and an accordion. My grandfather was an accomplished

musician. I often heard him play Bach, Mozart and Beethoven. People would stop to listen to the sounds he created and hand him a few pennies. I always asked him to play for me. I could listen to him playing Beethoven melodies for hours. His eyes shown with the pure fire of a great, creative purpose. His face lit up with radiant joy as he played for me. It was as though, at that moment, the winds could pierce his soul with its icy fangs, but he was only aware of the music which stirred the depths of his soul.

My *zeyde* taught me the liturgy of the Jewish faith. By the time I was ten years of age, he taught me the tropes in the reading of the Torah and to sing the various melodies in the Roumanian Synagogue.

I often asked if I could accompany him on his begging trips, but he scowled at the mere mention of it. But he did ask me to accompany him when he visited the cemetery, when we would visit my father's gravesite. I would stand there and look at the beaten stone and the shrubbery in disarray. I could not imagine in my young mind what it was just to lie there interred in the earth. I could not cope with the mystery of death, the cold entombment and what happens to the body—and what my father looked like lying there for so many years. Instead of just standing there and pondering the mystery of death, I ran around and caught grasshoppers and picked acorns.

All at once, my grandfather would call me over.

"Herry," he would say, taking my hand in his, "see that lady standing there by the grave?"

"Yes, *Zeyde.*"

"I want you to go over there and make her cry."

"Make her cry?"

"Yes, Herry. Sing *Av Hawvrachamim* and make her cry. You know how."

"Yes, *Zeyde.*"

I did as he told me, approached the woman standing by the open gravesite, and sang *Av Hawvrachamim.* All of a sudden, this woman began to screech, to hit her poor hands against the grave in a frenzy of grief, such as I had often seen my grandmother do. When she rose, she hurled herself against the stone, crying out loud, "Moishe, Moishe. Why did God take you and not your enemies?" By this time, her eyes were swollen and bleary. She handed me a 50-cent piece and thanked me for the soulful rendition of the prayer.

Each day, my *zeyde* would empty the wooden cigar box on the dining room table, and my grandmother would separate the pennies from the nickels and the dimes. My grandfather would then throw a coin in each of the charity boxes nailed to the wall. On a good day, my *zeyde* would come home with five or six dollars. That night we would eat well. But on the bad days, he would come home with less than 50 cents. Then I knew we would have a light meal and freeze almost to death all night.

My *zeyde* was strictly orthodox in following the Jewish faith. He observed the prayers for morning, afternoon, and night—that is *Shaachris, Mincha and Maariv.* He wore *T'phillin*, which frightened me the first time I saw them on his head and arm. I would see him bending and swaying in a spiritual ecstasy that made me curious as to whom these prayers were directed. He would certainly not condone the name of "Jesus" to be spoken in the household. Once I mentioned that since Jesus was Jewish, why do we forbid his name to be mentioned. For this question I was severely reprimanded.

But somehow each year, when *Chanukah* and Christmas arrived at the same time, I experienced the radiance of the Holidays reflected on his face. But my dear grandmother did not understand joy. Joy was tragedy to her. When it came time to celebrate, it was time for her to cry out to God, begging Him to explain to her why He took my father—her son—from her. Her soul was bitter, her heart full of sorrow. She would sometimes sit by the window and suddenly erupt in such paroxysms of lamentation, that I had to run out of the house. Her face would become creased with the pain her memories evoked. How often I would hear her cry out:"O, God, take me. Take me away and let me lay next to my son."

When Christmas came, the streets would light up at night, and I saw the glittering decorations in the windows. The

spirit of the Holiday would well up in me. It pervaded my soul in the same way that the Hebrew prayers would affect me on the High Holy Days.

Though my grandfather rejected it like the disgruntled Scrooge, he was happy to see the change in people's faces at this time of the year. They were more generous with their donations. My grandfather sometimes came home with as much as fifteen dollars.

Once, during one of his begging missions, some generous soul dropped a hundred-dollar bill in his box. That night we celebrated. My grandfather sang. It was cause for great joy and happiness. We brought great supplies of food for our neighbors, packed the charity boxes with quarters, made a generous donation to the synagogue across the street. This was the first time I heard my grandmother laugh. This was the season, indeed, that people smiled more easily, shook hands, greeted each other warmly. There was a feeling of generosity and friendship that we did not see all the year round.

At night, when all was quiet and the streets were lit up with the brilliance of the season, we could hear the carols sung from the neighboring apartments. Angelo, the community tenor, who lived upstairs, would send his tremulous voice through the building and into the streets. His lusty tones and meticulous diction would create a musical response from the neighbors. They would join him in singing O, HOLY NIGHT

and SILENT NIGHT. Once, when my grandfather was alone, I stood by the threshold, about to enter the house, when I heard him humming SILENT NIGHT.

My grandparents loved me. I knew it, saw it in everything they did for me. They pandered to my every need and desire. My grandmother would cry bitter tears if we had to skip a meal; but now, with a few dollars in the house— and the fact that I was getting older and my *Bar Mitzvah* drawing closer—it pained her to see me wearing "knickers". She knew I needed a pair of long pants, with a belt, so that I should begin to look like a man.

I remember one day we sat around the dining room table on a Sunday afternoon. My grandfather was unusually quiet. It was Christmas. The weather was fiercely cold. The house was warm. The cat was nestled behind the flat-iron stove. I felt good. Angelo's voice came through the walls. We sat and listened. It was truly beautiful music, I thought, to hear the sound of his voice reaching for the high notes for O SOL O MIO. I heard my grandfather say a few words to my grandmother in Russian. I did not understand what they were saying, but I knew that it was about me. Then my grandmother, her face turning grim and stern, said to me, "Herry, get dressed. We have some place to go."

My grandfather wheeled his chair around so that I could not see his emotion.

"Where are we going, *Bubba*?" I asked.

"Come with me and don't ask so many questions."

She bundled me up in a heavy coat, wrapped me up in two thick shawls, and we walked down the street together. As we walked, we turned the corner on Rivington Street. I looked at her face. It seemed more wrinkled that I had ever seen it, with deep straight lines coursing down the side of her mouth.

We continued walking until we reached Orchard Street. Here I was fascinated by the brilliant lights, the deep fragrances from the pine trees, an old man dressed in red with a white beard, bellowing "Merry Christmas". They called this man Santa Claus. I was intrigued by his fatherly presence, particularly when he called to me to ask if I had been a good boy. My eyes blazed and my heart pounded. Although I have passed on the way to the *cheder* I had never seen it like this.

My grandmother led me into a clothing store, and it was then that I knew my "knickers" days would soon be over.

"Mr. Moskowitz," my grandmother said in a voice I never heard her use before, "My boy—my son—he needs *hoison*(pants). I want wool, the best wool. It is not to be a cheap piece of goods. And I also want a nice leather belt, not made of paper, you hear, Mr. Moskowitz?"

Her face assumed a certain authority, but it was inspired by the love I saw on her face. I knew it. It was there. I felt it as the deep lines I saw on her face before seemed to have softened.

Mr. Moskowitz came out with a dark pair of pants and told me to try them on. He showed me the dressing room where I tried them on and walked out.

"They are too long," I said, timidly.

Mr. Moskowitz laughed and exchanged meaningful looks with my grandmother. He told me to mount a raised platform, to stand up straight while he made chalk lines on the pants. When he was finished and asked me to step down from the platform, I realized that this was the very first pair of pants I ever wore. I removed these pants and put on my knickers. My grandmother and I waited. She turned to me with the tenderest look I ever saw her give me, bent over and kissed me on the cheek. "Oi, Herry, you are growing up already too fast."

This was the very first time I ever saw her become so emotional over me. Her eyes became drenched with tears.

"Why are you crying?" I asked.

She did not answer me. She patted my head gently, wiped away her tears.

"Some day, Herry, you will know what it means to lose a son. But now, we wait for your first pair of pants, Herry."

All I could ever remember my grandmother expressing was her grief over my dead father, but now there was no grief. I saw no face creased with pain. I saw joy. A strange awakening had taken hold of me.

Mr. Moskowitz gave me a hug. As we were ready to leave with the box in my hands, he then said, "Merry Christmas, Mr. Finkelstein."

My grandmother shot an angry look at him.

"Mr. Moskowitz, for the Jews there is no Christmas. You should know that."

But in my young heart, I only knew a radiance—a warmth that swarmed over my entire body.

When we arrived home, my grandfather looked at my new pants. He ordered me to try them on. He nodded that they were a good fit; but when I grow out of them, he would go to the machine and make them fit me.

I was now a man wearing men's clothing.

That night, we had a full meal in a warm house with the cat, "Baby", snuggled against the warmth of the hot stove.

I wondered if my grandfather would have been upset if I sang SILENT NIGHT, without the words. After all, I mused, it was written by a Jew—Franz Gruber. But I canceled that notion.

My grandfather was looking out the window as Gussie, the community prostitute, was standing there puffing at a cigarette.

"It is time for *schul.*" he said, as he opened the Talmud and commenced to study in his sing-song manner.

"Yes, *zeyde*," I said, placing my *yarmulke* on my head, watching him as he began swaying back and forth in his studies.

It was a rare moment in my life.

CHAPTER XIV

I was now becoming more and more familiar with my surroundings. Thoughts about my mother and brothers were always with me—but fleeting. I knew the community now—its sights and its smells. Rivington Street and Delancey Street and Forsyth Street and Chrystie Street—where they had all those stores—where they made signs. I used to stand and watch how easily the man used the brush to make those beautiful letters.

I was now about ten years of age. My grandfather began to talk about my *bar mitzvah*. He suggested that I will soon begin to study for this sacred occasion, because I was to be *bar Mitzvahed* at the age of 12—not 13. He explained that it was the Jewish tradition that boys who had no father were to be *bar Mitzvahed* a year earlier. The reason for that, he explained, was that at the age of 12, where there is no man, I shall become a man.

At this stage, I was already familiar with Hebrew and could read fluently. Rabbi Herman would sit up with me making certain I knew how to read from the Torah, to know the musical tropes. It was difficult at first, but soon I grew accustomed to reading the portions of the Torah each Monday and Thursday.

Life was not exciting. My school was not a happy time of my life. I could not grasp mathematical problems. The

teacher was gruff and intolerant. He would call me "stupid" for my failure to grasp long division, and the more he applied that term, "stupid", the less I learned.

No matter how much he tried to explain a mathematical equation, the more it drew a blank in my head.

One day, Mrs. Fisher, the English teacher, announced that our homework was to write anything we cared to write about.

I decided to write "THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A PENCIL".

There I sat, dipped my nib into the inkwell and wrote:

"I am a pencil. I will do your work for you. I will make the marks on paper you want me to make. I do not care if you wear my lead down to wood. If you do, please use a pencil sharpener and give me back my point. I am proud of that point. My point to me is like the hair on your head. Without the point, I am bald.

"When you have returned my point, okay, use me. Do not press too hard, for if you do this, I will feel terrible pain if my point breaks. I know that you will use me when the teacher gives tests. This is not new to me. I know it is a test when I feel the sweat on your hands. Also, when you hold me tight. I do not mind that so much. That's why the Ticonderoga Pencil Company created me. That's why you adopted me to help you.

"I must ask you to do me a favor. I need you to understand how I feel. Be kind to me. What I mean is—well—don't bite me. Don't sharpen me so small that you cannot use me. If you can no longer use me, I an dead. But when I die, don't—please don't just throw me away. Don't give me up to the garbage pail that the school janitor takes away every night. Don't do that. I may be made of wood—good pine wood—and graphite. I may not mean so much to you when I can no longer be useful to you. But let me ask you this question, when you needed me, I was there for you. Isn't that right? When you wrote on paper, did I ever stop writing? Did I ever refuse to write for you? At the end of the day, when the school bells ring, and you are in a hurry to leave, take the time—only a moment—to place me in the pencil box with your other pencils. And, when I am no longer useful to you, put me aside gently. Do not ever leave me in the classroom alone, without my other friends in your pencil box. Take good care of me, Finkelstein, and I promise I will always offer you the best that I can do for you.

"When I am so small that you can no longer use me, when I am only a nib, please, as I said, don't throw me away without a thought of what I meant to you.

"Think of how much you learned when you wrote on paper with me. I know that I cannot help you pass tests. With me you failed tests. I know how upset you were when you failed tests,

but also remember that I only wrote what you used me for. So, don't—please don't—I beg you—don't break me in two. That is like breaking my heart. Remember, Finkelstein, that with me you also passed tests. Be gentle. Be kind.

"If you can do these things for me, how far we can go together in your learning.

"What do you say, Finkelstein?

"Signed, your faithful pencil."

I submitted this paper. I did not take it seriously. Actually, I was mocking the entire educational system, mocking the teachers, and having fun at their expense. I wrote it half out of some inborn instinct for mischief and, yet, there was something about this inanimate object that moved me. Whenever I saw a sycamore tree on Delancey Street, I would talk to it. I would watch it as it bore its blossoms. I would get angry when some ruffians started to abuse it. When they did, I chased them away and talked to the tree with such plaintive tones.

I know that I may have been considered rather odd or peculiar, but there lay in me a deep seated empathy for objects which others may consider lifeless. But in those lifeless objects I saw life.

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Below my flat, where I lived, there was a tea room and a tailor on the other side. The tailor shop was owned by a man

called "Sparky". I never saw him working, but the store was always filled with grown men—wise-cracking men—who used vulgar and loud words as they spoke. Their language was coarse. They looked like gangsters I saw in the films on the New Delancey movie house. I was afraid when I saw them, but they were nice to me. Sometimes a man called "Lippy" would hand me a dime if I shined his shoes. I would take the dime and rush down to the Gittelstein's Delicatessen and eat two luscious hot dogs.

One day, as I was coming down the steps, I heard Lippy talking in whispers in the hallway. I saw them place an object in the upper window. I just stood there, afraid to be seen or heard. What was it that they were placing in the window in the hallway? I had need to satisfy my curiosity. I ran back upstairs, grabbed a chair and brought it down. I raised myself to the level of the window and felt the corner where they placed the object. I felt it and brought it to my eyes. I could not believe this. It was a wad of 5-dollar bills, 10 in all. $50.00! My heart pulsed. I grew dizzy and afraid that someone may have seen me. In a blind fury of nervous energy, I ran upstairs, out of breath. I entered the hallway toilet, locked the door, removed the bills from my pocket, and counted it again. There it was. No mistake. $50.00. Was I happy I learned some arithmetic. Ten times five is fifty. That's what I had. I ran into the street. The tailor shop was empty. I began to run with

all of my energy. I could not stop running. I was possessed, driven. My God, what will I do with all that money? It was a fortune. My mind was spinning. I could eat a thousand hot dogs. I could build up my skinny arms. I would buy a punching bag and boxing gloves. I could be like Barney Ross, Tony Canzoneri—a prize fighter doing what my friend, Robinson, taught me. Jab, jab, jab—right cross—feint and jab—and then an uppercut—and my opponent would go down. I saw my stepfather, Mr. Weisman, in the ring with me, trying to fight me, but I jabbed him, smacked him around the ring until his face was red with blood. With this 50 bucks, I, Harold Finkelstein, will no longer be a patsy—the skinny kid on the block with a crippled grandfather who lived at 172 Eldridge Street.

I bought a pair of boxing gloves and some lifting equipment. I hung a clothespin on the ladder in the back yard and began punching it. In the meantime, I invited my friend, Irving Goldstein, to spar with me. I would dance around him, pepper him with soft jabs and gentle hooks. Once in a while he caught me with one of his own blows. They hurt me. It was then I became like a ferocious tiger, went after him with all of the anger I had in me, knocked him down, then picked him up and apologized.

He would never box with me again.

****

I visited my friend, Mr. Robinson. He was so glad to see me. He shook my hand and invited me to his home, where I met his wife and kids. His wife was so beautiful, that I could not take my eyes from her—the way she walked and talked. Her grace and charm left me with such a wonderful feeling. I sat there as she served me a glass of milk and chocolate cookies and wondered why there was such an animosity toward black people. Even among my own people, I was forewarned to avoid being familiar with them. I was told that they were savages—violent, brutal, not capable of being civilized—and here I was, sitting with them and enjoying their gracious company. After the refreshments, Mr. Robinson invited me back to the roof, where he taught me more about boxing: how to hold an opponent's onslaught, how to escape from danger, and how to use the uppercut.

I subscribed to RING MAGAZINE and read about the great fighters of the day: Jack Sharkey, Max Schmeling, Barney Ross, Benny Leonard. I would stand in front of the mirror and try to pose like a menacing figure.

My grandmother was much more shrewd that I thought. She began to see the house filling up with books and equipment. One day she said, "Herry, I see you are buying all of these new things. You are not stealing them, are you?"

"No, *Bubba.*"

"Sure?"

"Yes, *Bubba.*"

"So, if you are not stealing, where are you getting the money to buy all of these new things?"

I had to think fast. I did not want her to know that I had all that money I found. I wanted it for myself, to be able to eat as many hot dogs as I wanted, and to buy a new WestClox watch. I wanted to enjoy the freedom to choose the things I needed. I did not feel any remorse because I thought plenty had been taken from me already. Now I wanted something for myself.

Hurriedly, I said,"I have a job."

"A job? Where do you have this job?"

"Oh," I stammered, "at a book store on Rivington and Norfolk."

"You are telling the truth, Herry? You know your father never lied to me, so I don't want you to all of a sudden lie to me. Answer me, that is the truth?"

"Yes, *Bubba.*"

"Sure?"

"Yes."

"All right, Herry."

She looked into my face, my eyes and my entire demeanor, but I could tell that she was still skeptical. Doubt was written all over her face.

"When do you work?"

"Oh, twice a week."

"You still go to Hebrew school?"

"Yes, *Bubba.*" I work on Tuesday and Thursday. In the summer, Hebrew school is Monday and Wednesday and Sunday."

"Today is Thursday, are you going to work now, Herry?

"Yes, *Bubba.*"

With that, I left and went for a walk. I wanted to see what toys I could buy—mostly games that could challenge my skills. I walked toward Rivington Street. I was intending to walk through the maze of pushcarts on Orchard Street. I turned around, and there she was, my dear grandmother following me. What was I to do? I knew she was checking out my story to see if I was really working. I knew she did not believe my story. And, now, there she was, about 75 yards behind me. She will want to see with her own eyes that I was working. I began to feel a heavy sense of panic overtake me. I crossed over to Norfolk Street, passed the Roumanian Synagogue—and there was the book store.

It was a small store, stocked with those large volumes of Talmudic lore. I had to make a quick decision. I turned to gauge my grandmother's distance and progress. I had no more time. In an instant, I walked into the store. I looked around and saw those huge Talmudic volumes on the racks on the

highest level of the store. The proprietor asked me if I needed help.

"I want to see the portion of the Talmud on the *Eruvim.*"

He said, "Of course, climb the ladder and help yourself."

In a moment I was ascending the ladder. When I reached the top rung, I removed a book and opened it. At this very moment, my grandmother passed the store, walked past the threshold and saw me with an open book in my hands. I pretended I did not see her. She walked out and I knew that she was satisfied that I was telling her the truth about my "so-called" job at the Hebrew book store.

CHAPTER XV

Mr. Robinson, his wife and two boys became good friends. I would visit his home more often, sometimes skipping Hebrew school just to sit and listen to the stories he would tell his kids. His wife, Gloria, would always have goodies for me—candy, some nuts, and at times, my favorite raspberry ice cream. It was so good to have made Mr. Robinson's friendship.

I was teaching him Hebrew from a book published by the KTAV Publishing Company, called the *RAISHE DAAS*. He was learning how to read the consonances and, with the addition of vowels, he learned how to read various Hebrew prayers. Once I heard him sing the prayer for the wine and was enthralled by the sound of his rich bass voice and Hebrew diction.

We celebrated his triumphs and laughed together. There were times when we would sit and talk about his family. His face was sad as he confided in me the fact that his father was a Negro slave, and how his mother was sold to slave owners. He would visit her from time to time, but once he was chased from the house where his mother lived and threatened to be hanged in the public square. His parents died at an early age. His uncle Ben, who was a dentist in New York, adopted

Mr. Robinson and brought him to New York and taught him how to read and write the English language.

When his uncle Ben died, Mr. Robinson was 18 years of age. He could not find a job anywhere until one day a friend of his father, the landlord of the building at 174 Eldridge Street was in need of a superintendent who could read and write. He asked Mr. Robinson if he would take the job. Mr. Robinson accepted and Mr. Robinson and family now had a rent-free flat with an income of $35 a month. It was then that he married Gloria.

There were times when I would just sit back and look at Mr. Robinson"s face. There was much sadness in it. His eyes had a distant gaze looking into space. He would smile blandly as he caught me studying his face.

"You know, Mr. Robinson," I said once when I saw him in that distant look, "you are a wonderful person. You are really my friend."

"Finkelstein," he said suddenly, "you know, you never asked me why I wanted to study Hebrew. Is that right?"

"I dunno."

"Well, do you realize that?"

"I guess so."

"Well, why not?"

"I dunno."

"You must have thought about it at times. Is that so?"

"I think so."

"Well, didn't you think of it once in a while?"

"Yeah."

"What do you think?"

"I dunno."

"I think you know, but you are a little afraid to talk to me about it, right?

"Yes, Mr. Robinson."

"Why? Because I am black?"

"I guess so."

He placed his hand on my shoulder, looked at me for a moment, sat back and said:

"I am a black man, Finkelstein, a Negro, and some people call me "boy" or "nigger".

"Many people consider my race of people inferior, subhuman, part human and part monkey, or savage, violent, a person who is there only to do what is menial and dirty. Ever think that way, Finkelstein?"

"Why, no, no. Never thought that way. Never."

"I know, Finkelstein."

"I think of you as a smart man, a very kind man."

"Yes, Finkelstein, because only a kind person like yourself can see kindness in others.

I come from a race or people who have known grim and horrible slavery. We worked our backs off day and night,

subjected to every form of humiliation. We were beaten with thongs denied the right, not only to think for ourselves, but the right to procreate. That is to have our own families. We could not own our own property. Our children were taken from us and raised as slaves. Boys were made slaves and women were housed in a place where studs would come, inject them with their semen so that they could bear more children—and more slaves. Do you understand what I am saying, Finkelstein?"

I nodded, but his words like "stud" and "semen" escaped me. I acted as though I understood what he was saying, but I did not understand how all of this led to his need to learn Hebrew.

Mr. Robinson, looking away from me, but now holding my hand, continued,"I come from a people, dear Harold, who were indentured, which means that they were property, property like anything you may own. I see America with different eyes than yours. We were crushed. We shed our blood and nobody seemed to care about the shedding of our blood because our blood was the blood of the savage. We were silent in our painful drudgery. In the life we live today, our students in the schools read about Abraham Lincoln and the Emancipation Proclamation, but, yet, despite all of this, Finkelstein, what does all of that mean in the face of the terror we must face, in the fear of those who live in the South and are manacled to a tree, beaten, hanged? What do they mean to us

when we are segregated from life, shut off from every movement of society? What do they mean when, not only do our bodies bleed, but our souls are shredded, our hearts broken, our pride removed from us, our hopes, under God, desecrated? No, Finkelstein, we have tried to understand religion, but to those who persecute us, they find reasons why the black man has to be kept in chains.

"We cannot find the kind of work you find because the kind of work we can find is only to make us the beasts of burden: to clean toilets, to sweep the floor, to carry the heavy loads, to say 'yes, sir' when we mean 'no'. To swallow the little pride we know about in our race, and to grovel before our masters. Think about it.

"Would I, Mr. Robinson, your dear friend and his family live in this building 174 Eldridge Street as a nigger? Would we secure this apartment if we applied for it? The only way I can live here among the whites is when I clean and mop your hallways, remove your garbage, and do all the dirty and filthy work that needs to be done.

"Why do I want to learn Hebrew?

"I read the Bible, Finkelstein. I know about the 400 years that the Jewish people were slaves. I read about the taskmasters and the leather whips across the backs of your people. I know how your bodies and minds were possessed by the Pharaohs, the many tears you shed, the humiliation you

bore. I know about all of that—and, Finkelstein, because I know it, read, it, spoke about it and compared it to the ideals, the black people now are enduring, I see that we have the same problems and that there is so much room for understanding between us.

Finkelstein, I share your heritage. Our history was forged on the footstool of slavery. We know what it means. Our hearts were torn the same as yours. We lost our families the way you did. You see, we have so much in common. I read about your heritage and I want to share it, know it, understand it, to be inspired by it the way we would like you and your people to understand ours. I want to read Hebrew because I want to be one with you, to be a part of you. Understand?"

I felt a tear coursing down the corridors of my face. I tried to hide my face and stifle a choking sob. I looked up at Mr. Robinson. He sat there and I saw tears forming in the corner of his eyes. He took me in his arms and I knew it. I knew it well. I saw a new dimension of my own life open up. I even knew at that very moment what the contents of my *Bar Mitzvah* speech would be like.

I went back home, and my thoughts were swarming my mind, the words I heard, the joy of our friendship, the love of his life with his family, the pain that he had suffered and the agony of his history. Those words I heard from the ardent lips

of Mr. Robinson suffocated every other thought. I was on a new plateau. My life has now found a new dimension.

That evening at the synagogue service I asked President Levine if I may invite Mr. Robinson to the services. He looked at me with a face that could not believe what it heard. He could not find his tongue. Then he spoke,"Why, Finkelstein?"

"Because he is my friend."

"Your friend—a *Schvartze*? He is the janitor across the street and he is not only a *goy*, but he is a black *goy*."

He paused for a moment and then said, "Finkelstein, did you ever hear of the Amalikites?"

"Yes, I heard of them."

"Who were they?"

"They attacked the children of Israel when we were freed from slavery in Egypt."

"Good. But who were they?"

"They were from the tribe of Ishmael."

"Right again. And you listen to me. No, do not look away from me, Finkelstein. Look, look into my eyes as I am speaking to you. Finkelstein, they were the enemies of our people. They were the *goyim*. They were black like the *Schvartzes* you see today. God punished them for attacking us when we were on our way to the promised land. They have their society and we have ours. Understand?"

"No, Mr. Levine, I do not understand. I do not understand why a man like Mr. Robinson does not belong in a house of God."

"Because he is not one of us," he shouted. "Get that through your thick skull, Finkelstein, because he is not one of our people. He is a black *goy*."

I sat there quietly. I was terrified at the sound of his voice. But then I said quietly:

"You know, Mr. Levine, Rabbi Berman only a little while ago was teaching from the Book of Isaiah, the Prophet:

'MY HOUSE SHALL BE A HOUSE OF PRAYER FOR ALL NATIONS'

"Doesn't it say that, Mr. Levine?

I saw his face redden through his beard. He became visibly agitated and he walked away from me.

"Look, Finkelstein," he stammered, "you are too young to understand what I am saying. The world is not as pure as you would like it to be and what you read in the Torah has to be understood. But when you get older— when you have studied the Talmudic commentaries—then you will see why I will not let you invite the *Schvartze* to our synagogue for the services. Until then, become a scholar, and it will one day dawn on you that to invite Mr. Robinson is an insult to our faith."

It made no sense to me. It was beyond everything I read and heard the Rabbi say.

The Book of Ruth, which was read on *Shavuoth* rang in my ears.

"Your people shall be my people and your God, my God."

An instant rage disrupted my senses.

How could my people, its leaders, read prayers that state, "Love thy neighbor as thyself" and with these words they taught hatred for another human being and say that it was a desecration of our faith to invite him to join us in prayer?

This was a question that bewildered me.

As I sat in the synagogue and read the prayers, the *Shema Yisroel*, I wondered if anyone would come along in my lifetime who could make me understand why these words were said, but the action was not fulfilled.

I spoke to my *zeyde* about it. He frowned.

"Herry," he said, "there are questions we are not allowed to ask. *Meer toornit fragen.*"

I sat back and watched him as he turned his head from me and began to read the sacred books of the Torah. But within me I began to feel the seeds of doubt flower in my young heart.

CHAPTER XVI

Mr. Robinson left me with an everlasting impression and even as I write these words, his manner—deportment—philosophy of life—left me with greater understanding of the meaning of life than I heard in the synagogue. I began to think of the world of the Negro. I saw them as people isolated from life, a people who had no *defacto* rights to live in the community.

It began to occur to me whenever I went to school and my visits to the University Settlement. All I saw were white people. The only black person I saw and had known was Mr. Robinson or the porter who cleaned up after the school was emptied of its students. I never met a Negro student because the Negroes were separated from us.

I remember my grandparents admonishing me to stay away from kids with dark skins because they were easily inflamed to anger—because they would steal from me and lead me to do evil.

My mind reasoned that, of course, they were easily inflamed to anger. They lived in the basements of life, shunted away from society, portrayed as monsters, lazy, shiftless—deserving to perform only the menial tasks of life.

This is what I thought but the problem was that I could only share these thoughts with Mr. Robinson.

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One day, my grandmother asked me to take our cat, Baby, on the Third Avenue El, and as far as the train would take me and there to let her out. The pain of this task gripped me to my very heart and soul. I loved that cat. I did not know why I was asked to do such a disagreeable task. But I consented to do it. I will never forget it. I rode the elevator train as far as 125th Street, got off, fed the cat, kissed her head and began to cry, choking with great emotion. I could not do this—just could not do it, but there I was, in a place called Harlem, and dropped her off at a grocery store, reasoning that, perhaps, the proprietor would take her in, feed her and give her a home.

I was in Harlem for the first time in my life. It was a frightening experience. I was among the Negroes. I saw their poverty. I saw the beaten down hovels in which they lived. I saw the ragamuffin kids. I saw the booze hanging on the lips of those people walking with their women. I heard the wild curses and easy profanity. I saw the loose women strutting the streets with a cigarette dangling from their thickly painted lips, cajoling a passerby for an evening of crude ecstasy. I saw many of the storefront churches and the Father Divine Cathedral. I was curious about the Cathedral and decided to walk in.

I sat down in the balcony and watched the prayer service, which was so different from the synagogue.

The people there were so engrossed in wild and frenetic ecstasy, flailing their hands and emitting such animal sounds.

"O, Jesus, O, Jesus, come to me, O, Jesus. Let us feel your warmth."

Then I saw them rolling on the floor, screeching with such ecstasy that I wanted to run away, but my curiosity held me there.

"Yes, I need you, O, Jesus! I need you 'cause your arms, your breath is near me. Take me. Take me to the Mount of Olives, take me. Take me. Take me to your heart. You is not daid. You is risen—risen out of the grave. You is here!"

Father Divine, a portly man, began to join the untamed ferocity of emotions of his congregants.

"Yea, Jesus—you is right here, near me, in me, with me. Take our sins, O, Jesus, mortify our souls, put an end to our dissolute man or woman who tries to toss you away from us and who does not believe in your rising out of the grave to save us from sin. Yea, Jesus is alive. Don't you feel him? Is he not in your bones? Is he not in the pores of our skin? Celebrate his presence and our coming unto you. Hold him, Yea, hold him, feel his body against ours. Let us look into his eyes, touch the hem of his garments. Caress his face. Hold his hand. He is ours. Yea, embrace Jesus, for he is our deliverer, our savior.

He will loosen us from our sinful and evil ways. He will deliver us from the jaws of corruption and hell and save us from the heated environs of hell. Pray to him that he hear our poor words. He made you and his arms are open to take you with him. Come to him, you poor sinners. Come to him now! No! No! Not later, for later will be too late!

"Let us pray,"O, my God."

"O, O, my God."

"Save us from sin."

"Save us from sin."

"I detest all of my sins."

"I detest all of my sins."

"Take my life."

"Take my life."

"For it is yours."

"For it is yours."

"It is yours to keep, O Lord."

"It is yours to keep, O, Lord."

"Forever and ever."

"Forever and ever."

"Jesus," he cried, "do not abandon us! Do not renounce us!"

This riotous ritual continued for more than an hour, the congregants rolling as though in great pain on the floor. The

congregant who sat next to me pushed me, shoved me."Don't you feel him, son? Don't you feel him near you, in you?"

Out of defense of my body I nodded and said, "Yes, I feel him."

After the service, the assembly lined up for their free chicken meal. I joined them. I was ravenously hungry. I gave no thought to whether it was kosher or not. It was the most delicious chicken I ever ate. I spoke with the kids. We laughed together. I saw a happiness here that I had never before known.

I was welcomed by Father Divine. He was a man with a pleasant, cherubic face. He patted me on the back. He took a group of us into his room and began to read a Bible I had never seen before. It was called THE NEW TESTAMENT. I heard stories I never heard before. I learned an astonishing thing. Jesus was Jewish! How could that be that Jesus was Jewish. I thought all the while that he was Christian. If he was Jewish, why did my grandparents forbid me to mention his name or to walk on the same street where there was a church? Why, if by accident, I were near a church, why was I asked to spit on it? It all made no sense.

The open warmth of these people left a deep and wonderful impression on my young mind.

As I took the Third Avenue El back home, my mind was full of so many questions. Yet, I did not know who would

accept my questions without feeling that I was desecrating the Torah or I was not allowed ask them.

When I arrived home that night, I saw a huge crowd at 174 Eldridge Street. What could have happened? And what did happen came to me like a shock wave. My friend, my dear friend, Mr. Robinson, was dead!! This could not be true! It was a mistake, but the ambulance came and there, in a stretcher, I saw the body of my friend covered with a white sheet. I asked that they lift the cover—and yes, it was Mr. Robinson. A man I loved. There he was with his eyes open, but lying there, his black skin now grey, his hands open. Someone said he killed himself. I stood there stunned. My heart could not believe it. My sense of reality could not accept it, but, there it was, the finality of it. He was placed in the ambulance. As I watched it ride away with the fearful siren jangling my nerves, I could not believe that in one swift moment, this man, Mr. Robinson—my dear friend—was no more. Now I stood there in my statued grief screaming out loud."WHY DID THE LORD GOD TAKE MY DEAR FRIEND?"

I heard myself saying, "Jesus, why?"

That night at the synagogue, no one could look me in the eyes. Shame was written all over Mr. Levine and the Rabbi's movements. I forced them to turn their eyes away from mine. They knew what this special person meant to me. Mr. Levine

also knew that he violated a basic precept of our Jewish faith—to be kind and loving to strangers in our midst.

When the time came to recite the *Kaddish*, I heard the drone of the *Yisgadal, v'yiskadash, sh'mai ra Baw*, but my heart was so heavy, my soul so full of torment, that I ignored the recitation and sang out each word with a power of my alto voice. I sang each word with a power that drowned out the monotone prayers of the congregation. Soon they stopped. The only voice they heard was my own. When it was over, I wept unashamedly and could not speak my sorrow.

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That night, as I was preparing to go to bed, I heard the voice of a cat. I heard it again and again. I went to the door, opened it, and there she was, my beautiful cat, Baby. She had returned. I smiled. Then I laughed out loud. Then I began to recall the words I heard at the Father Divine Cathedral. Was it true that there was, after all, such a thing as resurrection?

I knew that my grandmother would never again try to dispose of the cat.

I will always remember this day.

All my life, I will remember this day.

CHAPTER XVII

The intensity of my studies stole from me those hours I could punch the clothespin hanging on the fire escape ladder in the yard. I saw my arms developing. I thought of Mr. Robinson looking down from his heavenly residence saying, "Hi, Harold, that's good. Keep it up. You will grow up and become the lightweight champion of the world. All who face you will feel that powerful jab and quick left hook and devastating uppercut. They will take your picture in your fighting pose with a frown on your face and eyes that would frighten your opponent foolish enough to challenge you."

That was such a welcome fantasy I wove in the midst of my *Bar Mitzvah* lessons. Day and night, Rabbi Berman would stand over me as I read the Torah words out of the Torah. My portion dealt with Jacob's ladder which, at that time, made no sense to me. I wondered why Jacob should gain any sympathy. He was an out and out crook. He stole Esau's birthright and heritage with deception and fraud. No matter how you wished to perceive it, it was stealing. It was wrong. His mother, Rebecca, encouraged him to steal, to rob, to take from his brother all the property he was destined to inherit upon the death of Isaac.

The questions began to accumulate. I did not understand why we prayed to Jacob as a great Patriarch. Why

should this story appear in the scrolls of the Torah as an inspiration?

But I knew that if I were to ask these questions, I would be scolded and the Rabbi's face would frown. I would be made to feel ashamed of myself for asking such questions.

But, I asked myself, why should I be ashamed of myself if I wanted to know? I wanted to learn. But everyone accepted this as an inspiration and I drew from it that it was all right to steal from someone else, regardless of the Ten Commandments.

I was told to accept this story as a mark of Jacob's greatness in the House of Patriarchs. I could not think or to analyze—only to know what they teach me, but never to think on my own. Never desecrate the Holy Name of the Lord by asking for it to be explained. This caused me much confusion. I had to repeat words, but did not understand what these words meant. It made me see this whole episode of my *Bar Mitzvah* as a torture of doubt. Words meant nothing to me. I wanted to ask questions but everyone I asked shrugged their shoulders and dismissed my need for answers as irreverent.

Everyone in the synagogue was a *chuchim*(a wise man). Everyone seemed to know more than the other. But I have seen these wise men act like they never learned what they say they studied. One evening, Mr. Lefkowitz and Mr. Katz started to read the *Kaddish*. In their recitation, I noticed that they were reciting it at such a speed that not one word was audible. When

they were finished, I heard Mr. Lefkowitz exclaim to Mr. Katz, "see I told you I would finish *Kaddish* before you." Mr. Katz then smiled and tossed a coin to Mr. Lefkowitz. Everybody laughed. I stood there with unbelieving eyes and could not understand how grown men would make such an incredible wager. These were men who considered themselves to be scholars engaging in such childish games. President Levine was appalled as was Rabbi Berman. Why, to take the *Kaddish*, the sanctification of God and wager who would finish first was an act of gross blasphemy. I frowned, but the rest of the congregation laughed out loud and thought this was one of the funniest events of the day.

I began to feel a restlessness growing in me. The rabbi taught me *Derekh eretz*(the way a man should behave) and here they were—these so-called scholars—making a mockery of the sanctification prayer.

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My grandfather was an expert tailor. He could sit at the sewing machine for hours and create dresses for my dear *bubba*, fix pants and suits for the neighbors. The way he was to exercise these tasks on the sewing machine was to use a stick, push it downward when he wanted to engage it. He became quite adept at this function. One day, I saw him working on the machine singing at the top of his beautiful voice. I asked him, "What are you making, *Zeyde*?"

"What am I making? I am making your suit for your *bar mitzvah.*"

"You mean, *zeyde*, I will have my own suit?"

"You do not mean to tell me that I would let my son go to the synagogue on his *bar mitzvah* looking like a *schlep*?"

It made me feel so good that here he was, my dear grandfather, sitting there for hours, cutting, sewing a suit for me. When he was finally done, I put it on and I was amazed. Not one adjustment had to be made. It fit me like I had posed for it for weeks. I looked in the mirror and there I stood wearing a shirt and tie, a suit, a coat and vest and a pair of pants—all mine.

The next day, with the few dollars I had left from the $50 I had found in the hallway, I went into the photography store and took a picture of myself standing with a book in my hand and posed for a *bar mitzvah* picture. When I received it, it made me feel so proud, so overjoyed, with a sense of rapture I could not describe. That was the very first picture I had ever taken of myself.

My *bar mitzvah* was approaching. I learned all my lessons well and could read from the Torah with accuracy of diction and the proper use of the tropes. Rabbi Berman told me not to be concerned about the speech because he would give me a speech he prepares for all *bar mitzvah* boys.

That puzzled me. He wrote one speech for all those who became *bar Mitzvahed.* I would be reading the same speech that my friend, Irving Goldstein, read. Why, I thought, that was nonsense. I asked the Rabbi to show me the speech. It read as follows:

"Mr. President, Rabbi Berman, members of my family, and friends. Sholom Aleichem. Today I am a Bar Mitzvah. As a Bar Mitzvah, I am son of the commandments. I am very proud to be entering this part of my life because now I will be a man among men. I will be a good Jew. A good Jew means a man who will always hold his head up high and be proud of his heritage. I will follow the Jewish laws as they are written in our holy Torah. I will honor and respect my elders. I will observe the Sabbath. I will not handle money on the Shabbos or do anything on that day but study the Torah. I will obey my grandparents. I will not be proud, but, before God, act with humility toward all who try to teach me. I will accept whatever is said to me and not question those who teach me, because that is a violation of Jewish law.

"To be bar Mitzvahed, I will now begin to remove myself from all ideas and concepts which are contrary to Jewish law. I will not make friends with anyone who is not Jewish, because they will corrupt the sanctity of Judaism. When I marry under the holy canopy, my bride will be Jewish, and I will bear children

and teach them to walk in the path of God by following the laws of the Torah.

"Thank you for coming to my Bar Mitzvah, and for the precious gift of this new period of my life which I will honor all the days of my life. God bless you, Mr. President, honored Rabbi, my dear grandparents, my mother, the soul of my dead father who brought me into this world. TODAH RABAH."

That was the speech I was to read on my *Bar Mitzvah*. I read it over and over again. The rabbi said that I was to memorize this speech and not to eliminate one word from it. He would teach me how to present it and what words and sentences I will need to emphasize.

When I was through reading the speech, the Rabbi said, "Finkelstein, you read the speech?"

"Yes, Rabbi."

"You understand it?"

"Yes, Rabbi."

"You are not to change one word I prepared for you. All right?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I don't know. I heard this speech before. My friend, Irving Goldstein, made this very same speech."

I saw the Rabbi's face grow crimson, and anger swelled up on his features.

"Finkelstein, it is not for you to tell me how to write a speech."

"But, Rabbi, I would like a speech that says what I think."

"What you think, you will have time for later." Pointing his finger in my face, "This is my last word! You want to be a man, you read that speech. Our discussion is over."

With that, the rabbi turned away quickly, and I was left in the middle of the room, with that paper in my hand, trembling with a fear which meant that I could not deliver this speech. Never! I said to myself. Never! This speech is not me talking. I should not make friends with boys who are not of my religion—why, that was—I did not know what it was, but I could not do that, and if I said I would do it I would not be telling the truth.

And to remove myself from all ideas and precepts that are foreign to the Jewish faith? To bless my mother? For what? For abandoning me, I should bless her?

As I walked out of the door of the synagogue, I felt a quiet resolve. It came upon me in waves. I began to feel that when the time came, I would not recite this speech. Why not? Because this was not what I had read and studied from the ETHICS OF THE FATHERS, where it said "do not separate thyself from the community."

And the words of Maimonides, who said we have free will. I had a right to think for myself, and I had a right to reject that which came to me as dictum or pure dogma. God gave me a mind to think and I was going to think, now that I was about to become a man. I was not a lap dog, who is so smart because he can follow commands. I am to be a man. A man thinks for himself, within the laws of our Jewish faith. Judaism was not dogma. I remember reading the struggle between Hillel and Shamai, how Shamai was so pedantic and exacting. He was intolerant of questions. A heathen asked Shamai to convert him to Judaism while he stood on one foot. Shamai became enraged and chased him away. Hillel smiled, told the man to be seated and picked up one foot and said, "what is hateful to you, do not do to a fellow man. This is the Torah. The rest is commentary."

I was guided by these words and I said to myself that I will not abdicate my personal obligations to do what I was told to do, because in my mind it was teaching dogma. I was not going to repeat words which are not my meaning. I would not be moved from this.

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The day finally arrived when I was to be *Bar Mitzvahed.* My Uncle Louie and Aunt Polly were there. My uncle gave me a silken *Tallis.* My grandfather gave me *t'phillin*, which I was to wear every day except *Shabbos* and the festivals. I was told

I would receive a prayer book and Jewish Bible from the synagogue. My Aunt Polly gave me the traditional fountain pen, which I loved because it was made of vulcanized rubber and had a golden nib.

I entered the synagogue with my *zeyde* who had to be carried down by Charlie. I was called up to sing the *Shaachris* service. My voice rang out with such purity and clarity. I recited the blessings over the Torah and read the portions of Genesis and the *Havtorah's* portion of the week.

I was brought up to the central ark and spoke. Now I was in complete control. No one could stop me. I knew that the proud smiles of my grandfather, the Rabbi, and President would soon turn to scowls. But I did not care. I only wished that my mother and brothers, Jason and Steven, were here to see me now. I felt a heaviness at that moment as I looked into the faces of the congregation anticipating my first words.

And I began,"*Sholom Aleichem*, Mr. President, my beloved Rabbi Berman, my dear grandparents, family and friends:

"Today I am to be *bar Mitzvahed.* I am very proud and honored by this synagogue, by my loving Rabbi Berman, and President Levine, by my loving grandparents and family, to be standing here, ready to be entered into the House of the Lord as the Son of the Commandments.

"I have learned that God's seal is truth. I have to know for myself that what is true and what is false. If that does not come from my lips and my mind, how can anything be true for me? What I learned is that I love the Torah because the Torah teaches 'keep ye justice and do what is right.' In the Book of *Habbakuk*, it reads, 'the righteous shall live by his faith.'

"It is written, also, that truth and justice are necessary to peace. So, if I say those words that were set down for me, would I be telling the truth? What is the truth for me? It is 'to love my neighbor as myself.' If my neighbor is not of my faith, am I told never to speak to him? If he should fall and needs my help, shall I first ask him if he is Jewish before I come to his aid? And who shall it be that will decide that this person who is not Jewish was not created by God?"

I looked around the room. I saw the Rabbi storming out of the room. The President scowled with his lips tightened in anger. My grandfather turned his wheelchair around so as not to face me. There was great tension in the room.

I continued, "I am being *bar Mitzvahed* with love in my heart for all the children of God, and my prayers and my education will be inspired by the Holy Torah. I will be devoted to God. I will walk in His ways. I will wear the *T'phillin.* I will always study the Talmud and Torah. I will observe the Sabbath. I will be a good Jew. I will be true to our Jewish heritage.

"I shall, however, exercise free will in choosing how to develop my life under God. I will not ever hate another human being because of his religion, or the color of his skin; because this is not walking humbly with God.

"I can only be true to myself and in truth I will follow in God's will. May God bless you."

I stood in the center of the ark in silence awaiting the reaction of the congregation. There was a scattering of applause. I smiled. However, I realized that I was about to be severely reprimanded, not only by the rabbi and the president, but also from my grandfather. As Michael assisted my grandfather out of the synagogue, I tried to look into his eyes and observe his face and search for a knowing look; but he turned away from me, his mouth grim and taut.

I scanned the room. All around me there were smiling faces, each person standing on line to congratulate me, wish me *Mazel tov.* My grandmother came down from the balcony, gave me a short kiss, "*Mazel tov,* Herry," she said, with tears running down the lines of her face. It was a Godsend that she did not understand the speech. To her, my words were a jumble or monosyllabic sounds. She could not understand why my *zeyde* was angry with me, and why the president and rabbi walked out and would not participate in the collation.

As far as the president and the rabbi were concerned, I committed an unpardonable sin. I wondered if I would

continue to be a welcome congregant. I violated a major precept. I was arrogant in their eyes.

But this you could not determine from the way I was greeted by the members of the congregation. Berkowitz shook my hand with such power that I had to pull it away. "That was some speech, Finkelstein. It is about time that a *Bar mitzvah* boy wrote his own speech."

From all sides I was pummeled, patted on the head. Someone said that when I grew older, I should become a rabbi.

But the dreaded time came. Slowly, the members left. My Uncle Louie shook my hand, and my Aunt Polly kissed me on the cheek.

And then I was alone with Ezra the *Shammus.*

"Some speech, Finkelstein. I know that the Rabbi did not write it. Come with me as I lock up." He pulled out his keys, shut the door and called for the porter to lock up. "Some day, mark my words, Finkelstein, you are going to be a very great rabbi of this synagogue. It is only too bad that I will never see that day. I am getting old, and how many more years will God allow me? Two or Three? I am already 89 years old, but you, Finkelstein—in your youth, your independence of thought and your willingness to challenge old and useless ideas—you, yes, you, Finkelstein, will bring something new to our world—something that Judaism and Jewish people have to hear. And if you ask me why I liked your speech, I will say it

seems to me with all of the learned scholars we have in this synagogue, your words really found the message of love in the Torah, the need for justice in the writings which we follow. God bless you, Finkelstein."

He bent over and kissed me on the cheek.

I was no longer afraid to face my grandfather. Yes, he will be angry. He will refuse to speak with me; but, maybe he, too, will see that I had a right to make my own speech. It was not overweening pride or arrogance that prompted my actions. It was, as the *Pirke Abot* said, "where there are no men, then you will rise up and be a man."

That is what I had tried to do. I did not intend to humiliate the rabbi, but I had to be true to myself. I opened the door to my flat slowly. My grandmother greeted me with her warm embrace and a vale of tears, suggesting her pride in what I did. She held on to me and said, "Herry, if your *tata*(father) were here to see you—go, your *zeyde* wants you."

Slowly and hesitantly, I walked into the living room while the grandfather clock chimed a new hour. The wind rattle the windows. It was beginning to snow. My grandfather stared out the window, watching the snowflakes fall gently on the box he used for the spring and summer garden.

I sat there in deep silence for what seemed to be an eternity. My grandfather turned to me, gazing at me grimly, challenging me to look him in the eye.

"Why did you do it, Herry?"

"What do you mean, *Zeyde*?"

"Come now, Herry, please—you know what I mean."

"All right, *Zeyde*."

"Didn't the rabbi write a speech for you?

"Yes, *Zeyde*."

"So, why didn't you say what the rabbi wrote for you?"

"I did not like what I was supposed to say."

"So, you know more than the rabbi?"

"No, *Zeyde*."

"Then why did you make your own speech and not use the one he gave you?"

"Because, *Zeyde*, the Rabbi's words were his words, not mine."

"And that means that you are better than the rabbi, right?"

"No, *Zeyde*."

I began to cry. My voice had begun to crack with my sobbing.

"No, no, *Zeyde*. I am so sorry if I offended you and the rabbi and the president."

With those words, my grandfather struck my face with such force that I felt an instant numbing sensation all over my body. Before I was able to react to his startling punishment, he grabbed me and hugged me.

"Oh, Herry, you are a man today. A real man."

The both of us just sat there in silence as the night began to fall upon the room and it was time for the *Havdalah* services.

CHAPTER XVIII

Time had in it its own miracles. What was once sad and hopeless now became full of promise. Yes, Rabbi Berman forgave me my need to express my independence. President Levine became friendly and warm to me. More than that, I detected a new feeling of respect for me, not only by the rabbi and president, but by the congregants in the synagogue. They did not speak to me with their voices taking on a higher pitch as if they were speaking with a child, but spoke to me as an adult. They spoke with a gentleness that I had never seen in their manner before. Now that I was a man, I was more than just a little boy. I was now part of a *minyan*, a quorum of worshipers required to participate in a public service. They could now count me to fill the *minyan* requirements.

But something occurred to me that I would need to be straightened out. I discovered that some of the congregants received a dollar a week to add to the *minyan*, so that those who said *Kaddish* would have the required number. Now that I was a part of the *minyan*, I thought the I, too, should receive one dollar a week. But I received nothing. I felt that was not right, so one day I approached the president.

"Mr. Levine," I said, "everybody is receiving a dollar a week to make up a *minyan*. Now that I am *bar Mitzvahed*, and I am counted among the *minyan*, will I receive something?"

He laughed, placed his hand on my shoulder. "You are some boy. But I can't argue with you. You are so right. Next week you will receive what you should be getting. Okay?"

"Thank you, Mr. Levine."

Suddenly he asked me to sit down. He said he would like to talk with me. I was expecting a lecture as to why I should not have written my own speech, but I did as he requested and waited to hear what he had to say.

"I wanted to talk with you about the *Bar Mitzvah*, Finkelstein. I have to admit to you that I was wrong. I was angry with you but I was wrong. The rabbi will not admit it, but he, too, was wrong."

He looked at me, awaiting my response, but I sat there and waited for him to continue.

"Finkelstein, I must say that I am proud of you. All the members of the synagogue are proud of you as well as the Rabbi. But most important of all, your *zeyde* is proud of you. You wrote your own speech, and when you read it, I must confess, Finkelstein, that I was ready to kill you. You did not listen. I thought you were trying to embarrass the Rabbi. But you wrote your own speech and that is the way it should be. It was your *Bar Mitzvah*, and, as such, the words that came out of your mouth had to be your words—your ideas—based on the Holy Torah. So, thank you, Finkelstein, thank you for the courage to demand from us old folks a part of who you are. If

you read the rabbi's speech, who would know that? Sometimes we are so used to what we are doing, we do not think that there must be another way. And you, you little *pitzilla*(small one), you come along and show us what we had to see and know that there was another way. It was your way. It was refreshing. It was enlightening. You showed us that if the *bar mitzvah* boy is not the Son of the Commandments, then that is what he is. You have reached manhood and in doing so, you were acting like a man. As they say, it is like old wine in new bottles. So, Finkelstein, can you forgive us for our anger at you?"

The tears began to make their way down my face. "Yes, Mr. Levine—I forgive you, but I can't understand—I mean..."

"You don't have to say any more, Finkelstein."

So it came to this—that I, a child no more—had some effect on my elders; that my resistance to the Rabbi's demand was right. It reminded me of the story of Abraham. When God instructed Abraham that he was about to destroy the city of Sodom because of the evil and the corruption that existed in that city, Abraham said to God, 'art thou who taught me justice, be unjust?' Abraham challenged God and said that it would be wrong to punish the good with the evil. And now, if it was right to challenge God, then why must my act against the Rabbi become a blasphemy?

I hugged Mr. Levine, smiled at him, and we parted good friends.

The next week after the Friday morning services, Mr. Levine called me over and handed me a 50-cent piece. All the others were receiving one dollar, but there I was—not quite a man—so I received 50 cents.

I reflected on it for a while and decided that here and now I learned a lesson in matters of justice—but without bitterness—with amusement.

CHAPTER XIX

Something strange was happening to me. I did not know from where it came. But it was there, and I did not even know what it was, but it was a strange feeling that possessed me. My body and mind became bewildered. I felt a new sensation creep upon me with delight in one moment, but with a sudden loss of who I was, in the next moment. I felt this mostly when I was lying in bed, ready to fall asleep. It interrupted my dreams. I wanted to think of my lesson with Cantor Rosenblatt, but these thoughts invaded me, pirated my inner feelings, and stole from me my rational understanding of life. These feelings came and they went. I had such need to surrender to the power these feelings brought me. It was an intoxication and, yet, it was a sadness—all in one. I sensed an inarticulate longing, a wanting. There were times when I woke up in the middle of the night wanting to grasp something, holding my pillow close to my body. This was a hunger I did not know how to satisfy or locate. I had lost my ability to concentrate. Maybe I was growing up too fast, thinking serious thoughts too early in my life. Where were my games? Where was my fun? I saw the kids on Forsyth Street swinging on the swings, and to this day, I had never even tried to take a seat in one of them and fly as high as I could fly. I saw boys flying kites and running the bases in a baseball game. I heard the boys cursing out loud and

laughing and making vulgar gestures at the girls that passed them by. Where was I in all of this life?

I began to play hooky from school and the *Cheder*. I sensed a soft sorrow, which later became a paroxysm of grief—but grief over what, I did not know. There seemed to be a need for my tongue to utter a sound, a sigh, but I could not locate the words that would quench my thirst for what my body and mind desired. My body ached to be close, close to anything, but remained only the ache, but not the reason, not the answer—only the inexpressible need.

Was it the need for my mother? I thought of my mother. I began to allow my mind to drift into a fantasy. She was lying in my arms, and I was whispering soft words into her ear and I got closer to her and I felt a power, a surge of passion that left me breathless. It was a passion that got stronger and stronger, and I began to kiss my mother on her beautiful lips. She soothed my hair, spoke softly as this passion subsided, and I woke up and I felt wet. It was a moistness that came from a sensual explosion I never experienced. There seemed to be an urgency which my body commanded and which I could only fulfill by my self-indulgences. This led me to experience a vague melancholy, a throng of delicious sensations all at once.

On the fourth floor of our building, there lived two girls—Bessie and Anna Siegel. They were about my age. Their father was a trolley car operator. I would often meet him on his

way to work. He always had a ready smile for me, a pat on the back and a piece of candy, sometimes a Charlotte Russe. One day he invited me to his flat for a glass of milk. His wife, Martha, a beautiful woman, smiled at me and watched me drink the milk and eat the honey cake she gave me.

"It's so nice to meet you, Harold," she said softly. Her eyes were full of interest in my presence. "We heard so much about you. Everyone is talking about how you wrote your own *bar mitzvah* speech, and we are very proud of you."

I did not reply, but sat there drinking the milk.

She continued, "Harold, let me tell you why we invited you. You see, I was so impressed with what you said, that I wondered if you could let me have a copy of that speech. My nephew is about to be *bar Mitzvahed*, no, not in your synagogue, but in a synagogue on Cherry Street. Could you give us a copy of your speech, Harold?"

"I hope he only uses that speech as something to help him to write his own," I said.

"Yes, Harold."

"Of, course," I said. "I will be happy to let you have a copy."

I was thrilled to hear such a request—thrilled that I had been able to write something that someone else wanted.

As I sat there, drinking the milk, the door broke open, and the two girls walked in, laughing at something that

happened at school. I always saw Annie playing potsie with her sister, Bessie, and my shyness prevented me from talking to them. And, now, as they stood there surveying my features, I began to feel a flush in my face and that strange feeling as Annie's face showed a pleasant bewilderment, her lips parting ever so slightly.

My mind echoed with feelings unspoken, my mouth quivering with a pleasure that I could not describe. My pulses leaped. My body was too frail for this experience. I stammered and suffered the agony of a new shyness, which left me unable to express a word that I would have liked to say.

I did not finish the milk, but just sat there, unable to decide what to do with my hands.

Mr. Siegel sensed the tension. "Hey, Harold, wanna hear a joke?"

I nodded although a part of me wanted to drink in the spell I was under.

"A man was married to a shrew who ordered him around every day. Once, when she had several woman friends call on her, she wanted to show them who the boss was in the house. So she called her husband.

'Shlep,' she cried. 'Get under the table now—right now!' Without a word, her husband got under the table.

'Now, shlep, come out,' she commanded.

'I won't. I won't,' he cried out loud. 'I will show you who's the boss in this house.'

"Get it, Harold?"

"No, I don't get it," I said.

"Well, maybe it's the way I told it."

No, it was not the way he told it. It was because I could not take my eyes off of Annie's face. Her soft brown eyes, her innocent face, her quivering smile, the way she looked into my eyes, her flowing hair, her exquisite simplicity gripped me with a sense of ecstatic panic. She extended her hand to me. And in that touch of the hand, I knew the hunger. I knew my longing. Is that what poets call the joys of love? I felt it. I knew it. It hovered over me with such a startling array of sensations.

Suddenly, Mr. Siegel's joke came to me. It was clarified because I felt within me, near me, the joy of being alive.

After that incident, I would meet Annie after school and take long walks with her. We would laugh and run. She would get on one swing and I on the other, and we would compete who could rise higher. I would play potsie with her and hear the kids make fun of us because it was considered to be a girl's game. We didn't care. We talked endlessly. She showed me how to take an axle from a baby carriage and nail it down to a wooden orange crate and make a wagon. She would push me and I would push her. We laughed just from the joy of being together. Her tender look, the warmth of spirit, her large

luminous eyes—all of this created a rapture that swarmed the deepest recognition of my emotions.

We would sit on the bench on Forsyth Street and just talk about anything that came to mind. Nothing planned. Nothing foreseen. Only to share in the presence of each other.

One day as we sat and mused, I sensed a sadness in her eyes. Her smile, once so radiant and wide, showing her beautiful white teeth, was now accompanied with a deep sigh. I tried to speak with her, but words came from a tongue that could not find the meaning. She tried to speak, but her voice trailed off vaguely. We sat there in deep silence.

Then I broke the silence."Annie, is something the matter?"

"Yes, Harold."

She reached for my hand. Again I felt the agony of those sensations which made my head spin.

"My mother is in the hospital. She had a heart attack and they don't expect her to live."

I just sat there with her hand in mine and did not know how to choose my words. Her mother, Martha, such a beautiful woman, so kind and so full of life when I saw her—now going to die? To say I was sorry—that was not enough. What can the mind know or the heart conceive as my eyes searched her face. Her face was now swollen with tears as she lay there in my arms. I felt the wind stir. I saw the clouds shifting into many

strange shapes. I saw a dragon. I saw a serpent. I saw a man with his hands stretched, begging for sympathy. It grew dark. We got up and walked when the rain came down in huge, angry pellets. We did not care. I took her hand in mine, stopped, turned her face to meet mine, and kissed her. It was the first time I had ever experienced such a moment. And the words came, came as they should, "I love you, Annie, dear."

"And I love you, Harold."

We walked slowly to the house and parted as I watched her walk up to her flat.

Love.

Love.

Love.

What is that feeling? I did not care how to describe it because that was the feeling which possessed me all these months—love.

Now I knew its features, its power, its enchantment. I wanted to bolt down the stairs and scream it in the streets, stop any passerby, and tell him, "I am in love! I am in love, you hear?"

A moment later Annie knocked on our door and stood there by the threshold.

"Oh, Harold, Harold, dear, oh, what am I going to do? Mama died this morning."

My grandparents tried to comfort her, sit her down, offer her food, but Annie could not control her tears. My grandmother led her to the bed and asked her to lie down. I walked into the bedroom and sat by her side until she fell asleep. I watched her as she slumbered, and a part of me desired that I lay beside her.

I attended the funeral, which was a large cortege of mourners—many from the synagogue—and others from the Transportation Department—some from a society to which she belonged.

One day I knocked on the door and found that the lock was removed. The Siegals' had moved. I never saw my dear Annie again. I had known love, and this opened up feelings which added new dimensions to my life. Once, love was only a word I heard used in the movies I saw, but it had no meaning to me. Now it was a song that bore sweet music which heightened my spirits and gave me feelings which swarmed all over my body—feelings I think I was too young to understand.

CHAPTER XX

I was heartbroken. Where was my Annie? In what part of this sprawling city was she now? What was she doing? Did she miss me as much as I missed her? Did her thoughts travel to me? I faced days of darkness. My youth was too fragile and frail to suffer with this emptiness I felt. I would take long walks over the Williamsburg Bridge, look down into the wine-dark river, hear the haunting music of the cantor and feel the strange spirit ravaging my soul over and over again. Solitude drowned my sensibilities so all I could see was Annie's face and feel those warm lips on mine, with her arms holding me.

I was restless. What did I care about anything? I watched the ships go by and wondered where they would take me if I jumped off the bridge. I read about some man by the name of Brody, who jumped this bridge; but I don't remember if he survived.

Yes, my life was over. Now I knew when I returned and heard my grandmother cry. I would cry with her.

I began visiting the New York Public Library on Rivington Street. A new world opened to me with all those thousands of books before me. Here was a new life. Oh, the wonder of books! My heart began to beat anew. Oh, to devour the earth, to drink from its vineyards, to slake my thirst from the divinity of heaven, to lurch forward and to grab a moment

of life. Oh, all of it, some of it, and now to delve into what others know and feel, to see the spirit that hovers over my soul. Looking upon the shelves of books, I realized that life had so much to offer. How long should I mourn? How long shall my heart feel this emptiness and longing, bursting with pain?

Somehow the hills were lying in the darkness of the valleys. Annie shall not come to me again. She was lost and swallowed up by the enormity of time and space. In the sigh of the wind was the grief I heard. How quickly the memory came to me as a ghost—and now before me, these books, lined up in their shelves, waiting for my hand to reach for them. I began to feel a stirring of this new life here in this library. The way it looked. The way it smelled. The soft silences. And the women waiting to help me select a book I wanted.

It was all here as I walked through the aisles. Here were life's miracles, the history, the glory, the fable, the narrative, the wars that brought freedom to our nation, the witches and the gnomes and the ghosts, the sick and the diseased, the very miracle of life, itself—all if it was here. And I shall begin to know it, to read it, to devour it, book by book, word for word, and sentence for sentence.

Here I shall experience the unraveling threads of time, the youth, the aged, the magic, the heroism and the cowardice or men, the love of God, and the garrulous overtones of the atheist. Here it was in every step I took.

As I walked in, a young lady greeted me with a smile. In that smile, my whole world spread far and wide. In that smile, I saw a world outside of the un-dusted books of the Talmud. It was all new to me. I greeted this novelty with open arms as I sat down at the round table and began to read a book by the name of CLEMATIS. I do not remember who wrote that book. It was a story of a young girl who was sent by her mother to live with her grandparents. Her life was empty and confused—as mine was. She was haunted as I was by the image of her mother's face. I took the book back to the desk, filled out a few papers, and now I was a member of the New York Public Library. I hurried home and devoured the book, sat up with it day and night. In each new chapter, I saw my mother's face. I saw her loneliness. I saw her walk. I loved her so much and wondered if she ever thought of me. I loved my mother as I saw the love Clematis had for her mother. The book ended with Clematis finally returning to her mother. I read of the kiss, the hug, the embrace and the tears of joy that they shared as they walked away and disappeared into the crowded streets.

From that time, I would visit the library every day and sit there for hours, and on Saturday, I would sit there while the librarian would read to a group of us about the tales of Jonathan Swift—GULLIVER'S TRAVELS—and fairy tales, which frightened me. I heard stories by Mark Twain, Charles Dickens, and heard the beautiful music of Humperdinck.

Why did I need to read? I don't know, but that need came to me when I thought of the words I would hear from the lips of Berele, who knew so much, who could quote the great poets in the tea room—Longfellow, Shakespeare, Dryden, Poe, Emerson. I remember sitting there, staring at him with such admiration for this accomplishment. Now I would be able to partake of those morsels of knowledge he would pronounce to us.

In the afternoons, I would go down to the yard and punch the clothespin. I did notice that my biceps were becoming harder and firm. My voice was becoming stronger. I also noticed that Cantor Rosenblatt was becoming fond of me. At the High Holy Days he had me sing the *Shema Kolainoo*, and the tones I discovered, the emotions I poured out were beyond description. I could not believe that the voice I heard come out of me was really mine. From those tomes I saw the face of Annie. I sang for her. It was as though she was there every time I released those cantorial tones.

One day, as I was about to enter the synagogue for the evening prayers, I heard loud talking. I heard the name of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Here was this man orating a philosophy that was mocked by Rabbi Berman. Here was Berele Berensky, the community Agnostic, pointing his finger exclaiming his point of view with such sudden emphasis that I drew closer to him to hear every word he spoke.

"It is easy for you, Rabbi, to pray the prayers every day and delude yourself that God, having heard your prayers, will now do what you ask Him to do. God will take your prayers and do what you ask Him to do when you rise up and do what needs to be done to translate them into action. Read the Talmud. I did not write the Talmud. It was written by men much wiser than us. Read it. Hillel and Shamai had a debate. Shamai said it was the word that was important in pursuing our goals. I stand here before you and ask you what did Hillel say to that. He said no, it is more than the word. It is the word, yes, but only if the word leads to action. So, Rabbi, it is the same with prayers. You can pray and pray and ask God to remove us from this grim poverty, to feed the hungry kids and bring us food into our homes, but if nothing is done to translate that into action, nothing will happen.

"Yes, you can pray all you want. You can pray that the hungry be fed and the unsheltered be housed, that those in despair find hope, that the lonely and destitute find meaning in life, that God will send down manna from heaven, but those prayers mean nothing unless, and until, you do something about it."

"Go, go, Berele," jeered the rabbi, "go away with your Communism. This is too sacred a place for you to spout your corrupt politics."

This is what Berele wanted. He wanted a confrontation. I could see it in his eyes and the way he stood straight up and began to flail his hands.

"You use the word 'corruption'? Is that what you call it? Would you say that if I tried to convince you to vote for Franklin Roosevelt for President, you would say that I was corrupting you?"

Berele, please," the rabbi interjected, "we have services in a few minutes. We have a President. Herbert Hoover is a fine man, and if people like you did not stir our hearts to rebellion, we would have a better world."

"A better world, Rabbi? With all due respect, Rabbi, I love you. You are a fine man, and I respect you greatly, but a better world, you say? A better world will only be found when people pray, yes, but also wake up and do what they have to do for their own salvation. Yes, Rabbi, while we are praying, millions of men, women and children are dying in the streets. Yes, we are praying—and that is good for the spirit and the soul. But, Rabbi, when are we going to wake up and read about that man in Germany who wrote a book while he was in jail called *MEIN KAMPF*—My Struggle. In that book he says that the German people have been humiliated enough by the Jews and he calls for their extermination.

"Yes, Rabbi, while we are praying, the farmers are dying. Industry is choking. The smokestacks have no smoke

because the factories are empty and men come to the tea room and sit there all day because they have no place to go. Tell me, rabbi, will our prayers reach God and will He intercept the evils of our society, or will He destroy the cities as he destroyed Sodom and save us from those people who rob us of the riches of God's holy earth and help us to strive for the better world you are talking about?

"You call me 'Communistic'. No, I am not offended. But hear me out. How do you explain the Deuteronomy, which says, 'Choose the blessing and not the curse.'

"The curse, dear Rabbi, is that the people are bewildered as to what will happen to them. Look at the history of our faith. Did Moses allow the Amalekites to destroy our faith or did he fight back? Did we allow Antiochus Epiphanes to destroy our faith or did the Maccabees fight back? All our lives we had our enemies, right, Rabbi? Yes, we prayed, but we also fought back and had to win our struggles against oppression—yes, as much as we have to do that today, in the oppression that is destroying our nation."

The rabbi smiled, muttered a few words I could not hear, looked at me and said, "Finkelstein, did you hear that Atheist?"

"Yes, Rabbi."

"What is your opinion? Do you agree with him?"

"I dunno."

"Why, Finkelstein, don't you know? Aren't you on God's side?"

"Yes, Rabbi," I stammered, looking into space, afraid to offend anyone if I said the wrong words.

"Answer me, Finkelstein. Are you on God's side?"

"Yes."

"So why don't you know?"

"I don't know because why would God allow us to suffer this way? Why would He not do what He did for the children of Israel? Give us manna and the food we need—er, Oh, I'm sorry."

"No, don't be sorry, Finkelstein," said Berele, as he tapped me affectionately on the shoulder.

"Finkelstein," the rabbi interrupted, "come to the next Talmud lesson and you will learn what you have just said is sinful, because you doubt God's love and His power to make what is wrong, right."

"Yes, Rabbi," I said, quietly.

The rabbi continued, now addressing Berele.

"Berele, you are a brilliant person and I do not deny what you say is somewhat correct, but , more important, Berele, than that, you are uttering sheer blasphemy to question God and the value of prayer."

Placing his *tallis* over his shoulders and reciting the appropriate prayers in whispered tones, Rabbi Berman smiled at Berele.

"We had enough blasphemy for one day, Berele. If you want to stay, you are welcome. Take your choice."

As the rabbi completed his invitation, Berele removed a *tallis* from his pocket—a beautiful *tallis*, embroidered in gold lettering—and joined in the evening prayer.

"Shema Yisroel adonoi Ailohainoo, adonoi echod."

CHAPTER XXI

With the horizon aflame with the morning sun, I could see, in the distance to the north, the erection of the Chrysler Building. It was a gleaming architectural wonder. Each day, as I walked on Rivington Street on my way to the Roumanian Synagogue *cheder*, I could see this sparkling architectural jewel in the sunlight. I was fascinated by the growth of this building. It made me aware of the vast sweep of distances somewhere besides the grimy streets on which we lived. I began to think about those distance and what was out there for me to behold.

Here on Eldridge Street, I was confined to these cramped quarters, from which there was no escape for me to envision. It was like a ship anchored to its pier, never moving away from its moorage. I wanted to know more of the world I read about in books. I wanted to go forward, away from here, away from all responsibilities, into other places. But at the present time I had to be content to visit a movie house. But I did not have the coin. How did I gain entrance without a dime?

There was a regulation conceived by the theater owners that no minor may enter the movie house with a parent or adult. I became aware of this when an adult person came up to the box office to purchase a ticket and scores of kids would rush up to him, "take me in, Mr., take me in."

Most adults were kind enough to do that. I began to figure that in such a devious way I can enter the movie house without a dime. All I had to do was to follow the adult. The ticket-taker never counted how many kids were entering—and there I was, seated and watching a movie.

When the Pathe News came on the screen, I began to realize the length and breadth of the world we were living in. There I saw this handsome man with a stature and smile I loved to watch. His voice rang out with such brilliant clarity. I was numbed by his presence, his warmth, his stirring speech and what he said. He used words that Berele used and he received thunderous applause, so he must have been right—and Berele had to be right.

He stood there, hatless and coatless in the March winds, his hair falling into his face. He stood up straight, his eyes blazing with the pure fire of a great purpose.

I was so highly impressed with this man, the Governor of the State of New York,, telling his audience that as President, the first thing he would do was to take action to correct the illness of the nation and do what was necessary to bring prosperity to the nation.

Pathe News then showed pictures of the "Hoovervilles", the farmers and their haggard faces and the scrawny kids. I saw the poverty in pictures of Kansas and Idaho, and right in the backyard of the Capitol Building in Washington, D. C. I

saw pictures of the flop houses on the Bowery, the sweat shops and the hobo jungles, the awful pain and torture of those being dispossessed of their farms, the men in their tattered coats stalking the streets, shivering in the cold outside the factories, seeking a day's pay. But the air remained cold and the locks on those factories were forbidding and final.

That was the world I saw. But I also saw that someone cared and that someone—stately, grim, purposeful—Franklin Delano Roosevelt—who gave us a new hope for our nation.

And as I heard this man speak, I remembered the words of Berele Berensky when he spoke to the rabbi and said that it was action that should accompany the prayers, that the action was the prayer. In that prayer, the free will, courage, the fearlessness to make the wrong right, to go out and forage the forests, to advance into the future, to help those who were ailing, to heal the sick. Here was prayer, I thought. The prayer must go beyond the words. The prayer leads up to fulfill God's commandment to pursue that which was just.

What, I thought, was all this righteousness about that we read in the *Siddur* and the *Torah*? What is prayer without *tzadekah* and kindness? Is it not written in the Bible, "justice, justice, we shall pursue?"

Is it not further written that our obligation is to protect the weak, the fatherless and motherless, the widow, the orphan and stranger within our gates?

My mind was blazing with new ideas. Someone on the screen quoted the New Testament and, as I heard it, I was highly impressed with the words from the Corinthians.

When I returned from the movie house, I sat on the steps of the old synagogue and searched for the quotation I heard. I could not find it. I decided to go to the library and I asked the librarian to help me. She told me I was looking in the wrong testament, that this quotation was in the New Testament.

"Ever hear of Jesus, Finkelstein?" she asked me.

"Yes," I said.

She smiled at me and the light in her face made me feel so happy.

She handed me the New Testament and asked me to read the Corinthians, "and there you will find the words you are looking for."

I felt like a thief. I was never allowed to open my mouth to speak about Jesus. I could see my grandfather's eyes glaring down at me with anger and the Rabbi waving his finger in my face.

I sat in the library until closing time, and I became absorbed in the writings of the life and ideals of Jesus.

Oh, no, dear reader, I had not decided to abandon Judaism. But as Jesus said, I was now more than ever ready to fulfill the commandments. Now my vision was broader.

Whenever I saw the Christian students in school, I saw beyond my prejudices. I saw that there were no differences really worth discussing. They, too, were guided by the laws of kindness and charity.

And it pained me that I saw anti-Semitism all around me. Never could I understand why a Christian could hate a Jew. I decided to read more.

The library was my continual source for books. Every day I would enter the literary Elysian fields where those wonderful books were lined up, row upon row, glaring at me for attention. I discovered a special happiness every time I entered these sanctified halls of learning. I would remove a book and then take it home. I would be found, day after day, sitting on the steps of the old synagogue. I read THE HISTORY OF THE JEWS, by Heinrich Graetz, the German historian and biblical scholar. I read about the Jews as Christ-killers, living in crowded and suffocating ghettoes, accused of pillaging land and drawing blood from Christian babies. I read about the vicious pogroms that swept through Eastern Europe. I read the biblical accounts of the Amalekites, the barbaric Philistines, the anti-Semitism of Antiochus Epiphanes IV, of Syria; Haman of Persia, the Marranos, who were Jews suspected of secret adherence to Judaism after they swore their renunciation of their faith. They were massacred in Spain. I read about the Spanish Inquisition in 1480, which began a

pitiless campaign—and led to their expulsion from Spain in 1492.

I was beginning to devour all the knowledge I could lay my hands on. Oh, I wanted so much to sit and talk to Berele Berensky, the community pariah. I knew he had so much to tell me that I wanted to know. I knew that he was *persona non grata* to the folks at the synagogue, but I wanted to hear more than dogma—information that was more ethnic than religious. I wanted my young mind to begin to enter the world of truth. I knew he was the one who could help me find my way to coherence and understanding.

To do this, I would have to enter the forbidden precincts of the tea house, a place where every God-loving creature would fear to tread, the Jacobowitz place, where every lost soul found some measure of escape from the miserable poverty that drained their purpose and hope for life.

One night I walked into the tea house. I picked a good time to go. It was early evening, and the guests were not yet assembled. They usually arrived at about 7 o'clock. I was alone. Mr. Jacobowitz, a man with a ruddy face and ready smile, greeted me.

"Hey, Finkelstein, does your grandpa know you are here?"

I smiled.

"No, he doesn't know, Mr. Jacobowitz, but suppose we keep it our little secret."

I was amazed to hear myself speak in such bold overtones.

"Hey, Finkelstein, tell me the truth, okay?"

"Truth about what?"

"I won't say nothing to nobody if you give me an honest answer."

"I'll try," I replied, trying to figure out what he was trying to say.

"No, don't try. Just tell me the truth. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I was speaking with Mr. Myers, you know, the haberdasher, the other day, and he tells me that your *zeyde* keeps a wine cellar in your house. Is that true?"

"A what?" I replied.

"A wine cellar. He has about five or six casks of wine that he made. Is that true?"

"I swear, Mr. Jacobowitz, I did not know this."

"Aw, c'mon—you didn't know that?"

"No, I did not know anything about it."

"Well, Finkelstein, that's what I heard. But don't worry. I won't say a word. I have fifteen casks of wine in my cellar. I tell you this because if your *zeyde* is interested, he could sell some of that wine before Roosevelt lifts the 21st

Amendment. There is this guy in the Senate trying to repeal prohibition. And your *zeyde* could get a few dollars—a good price for his stock. God knows you can use it, right, Finkelstein?"

He then handed me a piece of paper and said, "Here, give this to your *zeyde*. He could get as much as two dollars a bottle. I mean it. It could come to a lot of money."

As he spoke, Berele Berensky walked in. He saw me sitting at the table, and sat beside me. He ordered a glass of tea and strudel for the both of us. This was the first time I was close to him. He had a handsome face, wavy, grey hair, with eyes that seemed to see beyond his vision. He sat there, his hand supporting his chin, his eyes searching for my own. He was waiting for me to open the conversation.

"Good strudel," I said.

"Mr. Jacobowitz always makes the best strudel."

"Yeah, it's good."

"It looks to me, kid, that you want to talk to me. Right?"

I did not know how he knew this, but he was right.

"Yeah, I do want to talk to you, Mr. Berensky."

"So, talk."

"You know, well, you know, your reputation..."

"I know, it's not the best."

He smiled showing a full set of strong teeth. His eyes glowed when he smiled. There was so much intelligence in his manner, which, in a way, frightened me.

"I have great respect for you, Mr. Berensky."

"You do? Why?"

"Because you taught me never to stop questioning. You also taught me more about my faith than I have heard from the rabbi, the president, and even my beloved *zeyde.*

"I did," he said, feigning modesty. "How is that, Finkelstein?"

"Well, you taught me about being a Jew means that we are to care for people. When we preserve life, we are one with God's will."

"Very well said, son. Very well said."

"But, even more than that, Mr. Berensky, what does our Jewish faith say? It says that we must decide that when things are wrong, it is our job to try to make it right."

He started to laugh. He pat me on my head and gave me a brief hug.

"Those are a lot of words and ideas for a boy your age."

"Thanks."

"You are a very fine student. But do you know that you are talking to a man who does not know if he believes in God? They call that an Agnostic. That is why I have no reputation around here. I attend the synagogue, but it is because when I

pray I feel close to something greater than myself. I feel close to a power that goes beyond me. There are times during the prayer that I feel so close to God, but then, when I see the conditions of our streets, the crime, the misery, the rich getting richer and the poor getting poorer, I say that God wants us, not only to pray, but to do something about these horrible conditions."

I kept my gaze on Mr. Berensky for a long time. I was hearing things I never heard in the synagogue. I heard these values and began to wonder why these were not the values I should have heard. What I heard is that all of these conditions were *bar shairt*, the will of God. I did not believe that. It was so good to hear it from someone I respected.

"Yes," I said, studying his handsome face, "that is why I respect you and that is the way I see it."

"Finkelstein, this is the first time we spoke, is that right?"

"Yes."

"Well, I know we will talk some more. We have so much to talk about. How about some more strudel. Then the lights of the synagogue will be lit and you will have to go. Right, Finkelstein?"

"Right, Mr. Berensky."

There was a pregnant silence and in that silence I knew that I had found a friend. It felt so good to know this as I

observed that the synagogue *Menorah* was lit. That night, I prayed to God with a knowledge of a time when I shall one day trod on new sunlit heights of spiritual joy.

And from what source came such joy? From Berele Berensky, the hapless Agnostic.

CHAPTER XXII

The next day I thought of what Mr. Jacobowitz told me—about the five casks of wine in the cellar owned by my grandfather—of which I knew nothing. But I do remember that my grandfather would buy many pounds of grapes that I loved to eat as a fruit. I never questioned why he bought such a quantity, but later I found out they were wine grapes. I also remember that there were times when I came home from school, that the room was unusually warm and the smell of smoke was prevalent. I never questioned that either.

Now I knew that Mr. Jacobowitz was right. I handed the paper to my grandfather. He read it and laughed.

"Two dollars a bottle?"

"That's what he said, *Zeyde*,"

"So, how come he knows you, Herry? You have been to the tea room?"

He smiled at me, took me by the hand and merely said that I should never wander into that place. It was not for a boy of my age to be there.

He looked at the paper before him again.

"You know, son, if this is true, we could make 30 bottles. I could buy two new suits for you, *bubba* some new dresses, and you could buy some Talmudic books."

He astonished me with the following question. "Herry, I want you to tell me what to do. Should I sell the wine?"

I did not know how to answer this question. I thought of my poor *bubba* walking around in that old and tattered house dress every day. I thought that this kind of money could make it easier for us. We would not have to have to endure the starvation and lack of heat in our home. I could buy two new suits and some books on the Talmud.

Then I thought of violating the Jewish law. Who would these people be to whom he could sell this wine? Were they upright citizens or people respected by the community? Were they the people I read about, like "Legs Diamond", who would murder people outright for no reason at all?

"*Zeyde*," I broke out. "The answer is no!"

"No, what, Herry?"

"Don't sell the wine."

"Why not?"

"It is because it will be against the law and will make us friends of people who break the law. We may get two dollars a bottle, but in the end it is against God's law. We may have money, *Zeyde*, but we will have lost our pride, our respect for ourselves."

He looked at me, bent over and kissed me on the cheek and said, "Herry, I love you. I was hoping that would be your answer."

The next day I decided to punch my clothespin in the backyard. It occurred to me that I would like to see those casks of wine. I stopped and decided to walk into the cellar. I walked down the crickety steps—took out the key to the cellar and opened the door, walked into the dark and damp cellar. There I saw the wine casks line up with ABRAHAM FINKELSTEIN written on top of it. I opened the spout and the red liquid came down upon me. I placed my mouth under the spout and let the red wine enter my mouth. I drank until I could not drink any more. I closed the spout. I felt dizzy. I could hardly walk up the steps and lock the door. The backyard seemed to be turning in circles. I walked and fell, but finally was able to creep up the steps into the living room. My grandfather took one look at me and broke into a laughter so that it frightened the cat, who ran into the other room under the table.

I babbled some silly things about nothing at all.

"Herry, do you know that you are drunk?"

I laughed. "I know, *Zeyde.* You are wise. Your are the besh *zeyde* in the whole world. In the whole world there is no *zeyde* like you and no *bubba* like you. Thash right. Who can compare? Who? Tell me. I like to know. You are so sweet. *Bubba* is so sweet. The cat is so sweet. Rabbi Berman is so sweet. President Levine is so sweet, but sometimes not so sweet.

"I love you, *zeyde.* I love the cat. I love my mother—love, love, love fits me like a glove. Yesh, *Zeyde.* Ish

that right? Love you taught me. Berensky taught me love—ish that right, *Zeyde*?"

The room became quiet. What seemed so far away, I heard my grandmother cry. I lay down on the bed and fell into an instant sleep.

CHAPTER XXIII

Behind all of the experiences I had living with my dear grandparents on Eldridge Street, a subconscious rage swept over me. It had been a very long time since I had seen my mother. How many years I could not calculate. I would stop sometimes in the middle of a class and let my mind wander, asking questions as to where she was and what she was doing. There was within my young soul the feeling of the missing link.

My grandmother increased the rage that ran through me by reminding me how my mother betrayed me and how she killed my father. With that message she would spit out all of her hate and contempt for my mother. I would stand there watching her face corrugating into strange lines of abhorrence, calling her a *Koorvah*(whore). She would also remind me how my mother threw me in the garbage can. This was something I refused to believe, but this thought managed to stay with me. It was a slow and slithering worm of doubt that ran through my brain. It caused me many hours of pain and despair.

No, no, no, this could never be. It could never have happened.

I remembered my mother's face—a sweet face—with soft eyes and lovely smile and soft voice. But behind the remembrance of her beautiful soul, I saw her husband, Mr. Weisman, an inveterate drunk, stumbling through the rooms,

muttering monosyllabic insults at her, leaving the house as he banged the door behind him, and then returning home, sour, irascible, bitter with the heady liquor still on his putrid breath.

As much as I wanted to feel wanted by my mother and to visualize her as a warm and loving woman, I soon felt the same questions incessantly pounding my brain, questions of deep uncertainty.

One day I picked up the mail and there, right before my very eyes, was a letter from a Mrs. Henrietta Weisman addressed to MASTER HAROLD FINKELSTEIN, but with no return address. I hastily opened the letter. It was a letter from my mother which read:

"Dearest Harold,

I am so sorry that I did not come to see you in so many years. I had so many problems and I know you will forgive me. Please, Harold, dear, my son, do forgive me. Your stepfather, Mr. Weisman and I have separated. I am so poor. Your dear brothers, Jason and Steven, are now in a place in Pleasantville, New York. I could no longer afford to keep them. You have a baby brother, Evans. He is so loving and cute. I know you would like to meet him. You see, Harold, dear, I am coming to see you this Sunday, and I am bringing your brother, Evans. Tell your grandfather about this letter. I know your grandmother hates me, but, Harold, dear, I don't think she will stop me from seeing you and meeting your brother, Evans.

Dearest Harold, no matter what they say about me, always know that I love you very much. You are my first-born son from your father, who I loved very much.

Yes, Harold, always know I love you. I will see you on Sunday."

I read the letter over and over again. I began to experience a sprawling upheaval in my mind and heart. I felt this power churning in my stomach, making me feel like disgorging my food. My bowels got sick. I wanted to cry for joy, and, yet, I wanted to curse her—curse her, yes, how she deserted me. Left me for this swinish man, and now left her sons, Jason and Steven. Why? Why? Why did she have me—and now my brothers—why did she have them and me only to send us away to some strange places? Oh, I knew. She punished me for allowing my brothers to be burned in the sun. But why now Jason and Steven? Will it one day be Evans, too?

What was I supposed to do? Jump for ecstasy and joy?

Yes, if she were so poor, why did she banish me for him? Oh, how I wanted to see her, to touch her, to see her blue-black tufted hair sweeping her lovely face and see her jaunty and happy, walk and hear the sound of her dulcet voice.

I read the letter all over again and the words *I LOVE YOU* became an indelible and strange set of words to read. I have never seen those words written for me—and there they were :

"LOVE, MOTHER."

How much my sore eyes needed to see those words. How much I needed to see her soft, black eyes riveted on mine, her arms embracing me.

And she was coming! You hear? She was coming! My mother is coming. I wanted to run into the streets and shout it out to anyone who would listen to me. "My mother is coming." It was beyond belief. My soul was no longer ravaged with doubt, only loving and loving certainty. Oh, mother, I forgive you. I am no longer angry at you. I just want to hold you, feel the warmth of your flesh against mine. Let me see you looking at me. Let me open my heart to you. Let me tell you in my stumbling words what I have done, the books I have read, the singing voice I have found, the people I knew, what I have learned about defending myself, the people I knew in the synagogue. Let me show you, dear and sweet mother, I was no longer a child. Let me show you how I developed those bulging biceps on my arms. Come with me to meet Cantor Yosele Rosenblatt. Hear me sing in the choir and hear my solo *HASHKEEVAINOO*. You will see how much I have learned about Jewish life. Hear how I read English and Hebrew. Meet my friends in the Synagogue and let them tell you what they think of me. Let them tell you about my *bar mitzvah*, how I wrote my own speech. Let me show you my essay, THE

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A PENCIL, which was praised by the principal and all the teachers.

Oh, my dearest mother, my voice wants to speak the unutterable words of love for you. Oh, mother, I want to show you my *bar mitzvah* picture. You know how much we look alike. I want to take you through the streets and show you my school, the University Settlement, to Forsyth Street, where I hit a home run and won a ball game and to tell you how they cheered me when I ran the bases and touched home base.

No, no, no, mother. Don't worry. There is no more rage in me. You will see that in my face looking at yours.

When I ran back to the flat, I read the letter to my grandfather. He removed a One-Act cigarette, lit it, looked out the window. He then pounded on his wheelchair.

"Well, Herry, do you want to see her?"

Before I could answer his question, my grandmother came into the room, holding her head in her hands, her face looking lake the mask of death—greenish and pale—her eyes, hollows of madness, her white hair hanging loose over her face like tangled straw.

She screamed out, her voice sounding hoarse and throaty, "No, no. I don't want her here. I don't want to see her. Herry, she killed your father, you hear? I would rather be in my grave, next to your father, than to have this *Koorvah* in my house. Avrom! Tell Herry I don't want her."

Her voice broke off like mournful bells crying in the wind.

I knew my dear *bubba.* I knew that all this ventilation would soon wear off. Soon she asked me if I was hungry. I nodded. She brought me gefilte fish. And then she did the strangest thing. She came over to me, embraced and hugged me.

"Oi, Herry, your *zeyde* and me—we love you so much. Do you know how much you mean to us?"

I nodded. "Yes, *Bubba.*"

"Herry, please listen to me. Our hearts will break if you leave us. Promise, Herry, that you will never leave us."

"I promise, *Bubba*, I promise."

Yes, I meant those words. I loved my dear *zeyde* and *bubba.* That was a covenant that I knew I could not break—and I smiled with a new joy and happiness as I repeated those words:

"I promise, *Bubba*, I promise."

CHAPTER XXIV

That Sunday afternoon, I rose early and put on my *bar mitzvah* suit. I looked in the mirror and made sure my jet-black hair was combed straight back. I wore a *yarmulke*, which was tilted to the side. My pants were on straight, with all of the lint removed by my caring *bubba*. My shoes were shined. I went to the synagogue and prayed. I prayed so hard that morning. I prayed that I would not have to make a decision to leave my grandparents, for if I had to stand on these horns of dilemma, it would break my heart. No, I could not leave my grandparents. But, at the same time, how could I resist the compelling force that would give up everything just to be near my mother.

No, Harold, I told myself. Why would I want to go back with my mother and live in an atmosphere where I would have to beg for love and affection. I remembered it so well—how my mother would ignore me, reject my yearning to be in her arms, pay more attention to Jason and Steven. And now she would have Evans. Where would I be? My heart would surge with pain for only a sign—a look—a recognition of me. I would be exiled, alone, dallying in horrible and lonely regret and memory of what I received here with my grandparents. All of these thoughts were contained in my prayers.

Standing before the Holy Ark, my voice singing out loud, I asked myself why would I want to leave this synagogue, the Roumanian Synagogue, where I was needed and wanted? Why would I want to be without Berele, the tea room and the few friends I had, the cantorial music, the deep affection I found here?

Rabbi Berman approached me, taking a portion of the cloth of my suit in his hands. "You are going somewhere? You are so dressed up."

"My mother is coming to see me."

"Oh, your mother? You haven't seen her for a long time."

"I know, Rabbi. And she is bringing my new brother, Evans. I never met him. He is still a baby."

"Oh, and you have a brother you never met. You must be excited."

"Yes, Rabbi."

"And you are going back to live with her again, Finkelstein?"

I did not answer. The question pierced a nerve in my heart. I just stood there and glared at the rabbi, my tongue not being able to find the words I would have liked to say. I was afraid if I spoke I would experience an emotion with which I could not cope.

"You mean, Finkelstein, you would leave your *bubba* and *zeyde*?"

"No, Rabbi. No, never."

"That's a good boy, Finkelstein. You stay. You grow up here on these streets—near this synagogue—and when you are older, you will go to the *Yeshiva* and become a rabbi of this synagogue. Right here in this synagogue. Right, Finkelstein?"

"Yes, Rabbi," I said, smiling.

I left the Synagogue and waited in front of my building. It began to rain. I found shelter in the hallway. Then the doorway to the hall opened and I heard a voice say, "here we are."

There was a boy—a young boy—wearing a white sailor suit with reddish hair. And this woman I did not recognize at once. But soon I knew. Yes, I knew. It was my mother. She did not see me at first, but when she saw me, she ran to me.

I cried out, "MOTHER, MOTHER, MOTHER!"

The rest of the words were smothered in her arms. I cried out to her. I could not contain the power of this moment. All I did was cry out, but the words were lost in the folds of her coat. I looked into her eyes and was surprised that no tears found their way to her face. Then, pointing to the little boy standing huddled to her side, she said, "this is your brother, Evans."

I looked at him and smiled. He seemed very shy. As I spoke, he turned away from me and continued to cling to the hem of my mother's coat.

I led my mother and brother up to our apartment. My grandmother came out, nodded to her. My grandfather greeted her courteously and hugged my little brother. There was much tension in the air, but some of it was dispelled when my grandmother served us a chicken dinner and a plate of soup with matzoh balls.

I kept my eyes on my mother all during the meal. Her eyes glowed like blank coals. Oh, she was beautiful. My mother spoke about Mr. Weisman—that he left her and they would soon be divorced. She spoke about my brothers, Jason and Steven, now in a home for boys in Pleasantville, New York.

While she was speaking, I showed my new brother some of my toys which I made myself. We sat on the floor and played games.

My grandmother, in her broken English, tried to explain to my mother how happy I was. My grandfather was silent during this conversation, but when he heard my mother explain that she was penniless, that it would be very difficult to take care of her three sons, he seemed to become more jovial.

My mother rose. She handed me a 25-cent piece, took my brother with her, bent down and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I kissed Evans, but there was no embrace, no hug, no

tears. There was not even an address where she could be reached, except she said something about staying with my Aunt Anna in Coney Island.

That was the end of her visit. They walked out the door. I tried to follow her out the door, but they left so hurriedly it was too late. I looked out the window and saw them leave in a shiny car that was waiting for them. I heard the roar of the motor, and before I knew it, the car was gone.

My mother's visit left me in a state of quandary about her love for me. But, at this time, what was most important, I was grateful that it would now be much easier for me to keep my promise to my grandparents that I would never leave them.

CHAPTER XXV

My mother was poor? That question pounded in my sensed mercilessly. Then what was she doing entering that long and sleek car? That was poor? My mind could not forget that incident, but I was happy about the meeting of my new brother, Evans. We could have been friends. I liked the way he talked and sat and played with me sitting on the floor, laughing and giggling at the most ridiculous parts of the game we played. But now I was overcome by a strange fire of emotions. As I write these words, it is natural that nostalgia should send my mind to those events which were certain to shape my destiny. My mother was beautiful. But now she was gone, and I was back to the grim reality of my grandparents.

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But, in a larger sense, these years I was now living were happy. I was a young adult, growing into manhood. If now I should express this nostalgia, why is it wrong? I ask, what would we do without it?

What, after all, is nostalgia?

It is to remember the past with fond affection. It is memory sweetened by time.

Now I love to lapse into that memory. I love to remember that visit my mother paid me, though it was marred by her seeming indifference to me. I do remember that dear

little brother, his wavy, red hair, his cute, cherubic face, sitting with me. I remember his sweet laugh and his struggle to call me Harold. I remember how I kissed him and felt such a stirring thrill that he was my brother, no, not from the same father, but still my brother. He was my family and that was enough to be anchored in my memory—my enduring memory.

Yes, I remember Eldridge Street. What was there to remember? The streets of New York's Lower East Side were defiled with filth—the foul smells of decayed urine, mixed with rotten food. But, as I write these memoirs, I remember the first time I saw and heard a Vitaphone feature in the movies, the first time I saw Charlie Chaplin gallivanting hilariously on the screen, the first time I heard a Caruso record.

I remember the old cantor releasing tones with such a strange joy.

I was an ungainly boy. I was self-conscious. I was timid, but, yet, on this misshapen block, I found belonging. I had a place here. I had love here. I had relevance here. If I were not here, at this place, living with my grandparents, where else could I be? Yet there were times that loneliness would creep up on me. I remember the pushcart peddlers, their loud, chortling voices arguing with one another over a piece of fabric.

I remember the old man delivering ice and coal every day. I see his gaunt and unshaven face, the gap in his mouth

where teeth used to be. I remember his awful hunchback. I remember the injustice of his burdens and wondered why, at his advanced age, he had to walk three or four flights of stairs to deliver ice or coal for a few pennies—and sometimes find no one at home.

I remember when, one day, this old man died. It was revealed that thousands of dollars, all in dollar bills, was found in his flea-bitten mattress. Later, I learned this money was set aside so he could send his son to medical school.

Oh, how I remember. I cherish this memory.

Without it, as I look back, even in the meanest of times, even when poverty was austere, even when I did not have enough food to eat to nurture my bones, even in the face of developing rickets, which made my hands like rubber, where else could I be? What else would I do? I would be without identity, fleeced, and like a vagrant puppy, wandering and looking for someone to care for me. I would be like a cipher, living without a purpose. Who would love me? Who would protect me? Who would cover me with a blanket if I were cold?

Yes, Eldridge Street was tucked away on some dismal stretch of streets with buildings looking like red-brick caves—not too far from the sweat shops in the Garment Center, or from the vaulting structures of wealth on Wall Street, or from the vast reservoir of elegance on Park Avenue, where the denizens of splendor strolled to their palaces to hobnob with

their peers, parading their diamonds made more brilliant under the giant chandeliers. But here on Eldridge Street was life. Here people sang. They ruminated upon old times in the old country in Eastern Europe. They told jokes about the difficult times they had there, the pogroms, but they knew how to laugh.

Though I shared their despair, I knew that I could not live with my mother. Her life was dull. I remember when she was here to visit me, she did not smile once, or laugh once. There was nothing in her life that had room for me.

A part of me, I know was seeking to justify my living here, and though my mother's indifference to me was surely a source of my anguish, I knew that this was as it should be.

CHAPTER XXVI

These memoirs are about a little boy who had been denied natural love, but offered love from grandparents, who were steeped in poverty and who had nothing but love to give me.

I knew I was a great disappointment to them when each month I came home with a negative report card from public school. I wondered about these failures as opposed to my successes in Hebrew school. Rabbi Avrom Simon considered me to be the top student, involved in the most profound aspects of Judaism. I was able to recite all of the six orders of the *Mishna*: the *Zeraim*, seeds; *Moed*, seasons; *Nashim*, women; order, torts; *Kodashim*, sanctities; *Teharos*, purity. After school, we would sit and discuss many of these orders; and once, when we got involved in a discussion on *Nashim*—about women—he confided in me that his wife was killed in the Pogrom and, in his sight, she was dragged to the center of town with other "so-called" malcontents, and ruthlessly shot down.

But yet, despite my ability to discuss the Talmud with the rabbi, there was a weariness that disrupted the mastery of my studies. Flashes of my mother would come to haunt me. Though I was able to set those thoughts aside, they clouded all the fascination I had for my studies and discussions with the rabbi.

I heard people talk. They did not talk. They shouted. They stomped their feet and threw their arms about. They came to the tea room, sat down, buried their heads in their hands and then they strolled down the streets, their heads bent in shame that this despair happened to them.

Yes, they bellowed and they raved, but all of the extravagances of their emotions did not change a thing. They were still just as poor, just as penniless, and just as much the paupers as before they argued and shouted and stomped their feet.

So, what did they do? They became intellectuals. They read all of the editorials in the DAILY FORWARD, and the books and magazines circulated by the Socialists and the Communists. They became the apostles of a sweet Utopian vision. The world, they said, will soon inherit the spoils of a defunct Capitalist system.

Gold and silver will now begin to line the sidewalks. Under the Henry George system of economics, land will be free. Each of them will own their own land, grow their own crops, and become wealthy. Landlords will become tenants.

But as I heard my friend, Berele Berensky, say one day as I met him entering the tea house, "A theory is still a theory and no matter how passionate that theory is expounded, it is still a theory. It is not bread and butter. It is not a glass of milk."

While they were hailing the first hundred days of Roosevelt's administration, with the National Recovery Act and the works programs and the talk of a program to take care of the elderly with Social Security payments at the age of 65, they were still starving to death, lying all over the streets and praying to God that He would be so kind as to let them die without pain.

Some composer, awakened from some stupor, wrote a song, HAPPY DAYS ARE HERE AGAIN. Some happy. If this was happy, then poverty was a privilege. It was an honor to enrich the rich and impoverish the poor. Patriotism was interpreted to mean that when the rich become richer, the poor must sit back and say "thank God, we have no pogroms in this country".

And when you made the rich, richer, be certain that the surplus will trickle down to the poor. This was classic economics that balanced out the benefits to be derived by all.

Berele, placing his foot on a chair, munching on a piece of cake, stated, "If this was happy, why did the stomach growl? Why did our limbs tremble? Why did we stand outside of the Gittelstein's Delicatessen and feel our mouths water at the sight of those juicy frankfurters waiting only for the roll and succulent sauerkraut and tangy mustard? If this was happy, then our dear Eldridge Street was an asylum of ecstasy."

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Oh, I remember my Aunt Polly's daughter—my cousin—was getting married. It was to be a plush wedding held somewhere in Brooklyn. My grandmother was so excited. She bought me a new shirt and a black bow tie. How she fussed over me, looked lovingly at me when she saw my face beaming with happy expectation.

My grandfather chose not to go. He preferred to stay at home. After all, he would have to pay Michael to take him to, and back from, the wedding. I knew also that he would love to stay home and read.

I never saw my grandmother look so handsome. She had the face that reminded me of Benjamin Franklin. She wore a dress with brocaded sequins which brightened her handsome, ruddy face.

We walked toward the Williamsburg Bridge, took a trolley car over the bridge and got off at Hopkinson Avenue. When we entered the catering hall, there was my Uncle Louie, my unsmiling Aunt Polly. She bent over and gave me a kiss and asked me if I was a good boy. I met cousins I never knew I had.

I ate like I never ate before; lox and gefilte fish, all kinds of herring and chopped liver, chopped eggs. That was before the meal.

I could barely hear the ceremony. The rabbi had a cold.

A beautiful, young girl came over to me and smiled. She bent down and kissed me.

"You are Harold?"

I blushed.

"I heard so many nice things about you, Harold. I am Laura, your cousin."

I continued to blush and could not find the words to say that meant anything.

The band played on.

I met the bride and groom.

The groom was so busy collecting presents that I doubt he even remembered me.

I saw people doing things I never saw before. They called it "THE CHARLESTON". It was a crazy dance. This was the kind of music which was happy and joyful. Watching everyone bouncing around, laughing and screaming made me dizzy.

We sat down at a table with people who were supposed to be my cousins, aunts and uncles. As they served the food, I sat there looking around the vast room, wondering where all these people came from.

Tonight everyone was rich. Tonight, God came down with the manna from heaven.

A waiter placed a plate of hot noodle soup in front of me. My grandmother watched me as the meal began.

All of this was too much at once. I could not believe that so much food existed. It came and it never stopped. Food! Seltzer, wine, scotch, all kinds of hot bread and *challah*. My grandmother saw that I was not eating. She took a spoon and fed me the soup.

"Come, Herry, *ess. Siss cost gelt.*"(Come, Herry, eat. This costs money).

As the steak was served, she cut it up for me, and fed me portion after portion. I was embarrassed, yes, but never had I tasted food so delicious in my young life.

This evening was like God sending down quails to us in the desert. I saw nothing but joy all around me and heard the heady laughter, and the loud talk about Sam and George and about how well everyone was doing. Labele said he was doing well. He just bought a new house in Westchester. And Velvel has just hired new workers. No one was poor here. All around me I saw a blur of maniacal dancing and heard the howling, the squealing with joyous imitations of happiness.

Then came the drunkenness. At my table they pounded my back. "Why ya look so sad, Harold? Go 'head and dance." I did not respond. I saw the wild and lunatic whirling about the room. A man I never saw before came over to me and said, "hey, you. Are you Harold Finkelstein? I'm your Uncle Maxie. Hya? I heard boutcha. Good kid. Whya sittn' dair? Take a drink. Won't harm ya. A kid your age gotta be a man, right,

Bubba? C'mon, taste it. It's good for ya. Do it for your Uncle Maxie."

I saw his eyes dilate, as he turned to one side and fell over, his mouth dribbling, and, all at once, a crowd stood over him. Someone cried out "give him air".

An ambulance came and took him away. That night they drank the scotch and danced and collapsed in their fitful fevers until the musicians stopped playing. It was all over. All the wealth of food was not gorged, and—and some disgorged.

We returned to our desolate hovel on Eldridge Street. I wondered what all of this meant. Were they—all of them—really rich, or were they—all of them—playing a game, pretending that poverty skipped over them as the Angel of Death skipped over the doors of the Jews in the Exodus story.

CHAPTER XXVII

The summer passed. Eldridge Street was now approaching another severe winter. It was now early December. I saw the Christmas lights dazzling the streets and the sounds of Christmas carols sung by Angelo with his warm and lovely tenor voice.

But the reality of this season was also there. The days and nights were bitter cold. The winds screamed through the cracks of our window pane.

My poor grandfather would be out all day grinding the old organ in the bitter cold, coming home with a few pennies, which was of no help to us. Those nights we would have nothing to eat. It would take him hours to warm his lame body—sitting by the flat-iron stove.

But when there was no money for coal, I would spend hours chopping up some old crated to feed the hungry furnace.

In the early dawn, having slept without any supper the night before, I heard the hoarse voice of my grandmother, "Herry, *meer doff gain in sheel.*"(Herry, you have to go to the synagogue).

I remember the gnawing hunger and the pain I felt as I tried to dress in the cold room. I thought of Jason and Steven, wherever they may be. What did they know of suffering? They were never cold. They had regular meals, but, in all, did they

have what I had—warm and loving grandparents who loved me?

As usual, I walked across the street to the old synagogue, but I could not walk across the street without the sight of the most painful vision I could see. I had to pass the mother and the father and the children standing there, in front of the building, with their furniture on the sidewalk. The wind would unleash a merciless fury. The children would cry out loud—those sounds piercing the very sou.

The mother and father would stand there in their frozen places, praying, no, not that should live, but that they should die. God should take them to a world where there was no hunger, no pain, no tears, but a joyful place to be.

I would see it all the time. People would pass these forlorn victims and pretend they did not see them. Oh, no, not of cold indifference. But it was too agonizing to hear the children's voices, sobbing, to see the father and mother stomping their feet and their arms wrapped around their bodies to protect themselves from the wintry squalls. How could a feeling heart not experience the hollow uneasiness that clung to the heart and soul? Who knew the words to describe what could adequately define this hardship? What words existed in the lexicon of life that could speak the shame of the nation that would not give these folks homes, a full and wholesome meal, toys for the children to play with.

The city had their police, the dedicated constables of the law who hounded these God-forsaken people and warned them to move on. For this they had the police! They brandished their billy clubs—the symbols of their gruesome authority. They were idiots all. I tried to find an answer to this absurdity. "Move on" to where? I said to myself, "copper, look, look, see their faces! Look into their eyes, swollen with grief. Human decency would tell even a numbskull that these people had nowhere to "move to". And, yet, they stood there, these unsacred guardians of the law, waving their sticks in one hand, getting ready to remove their pistol with the other, striking the father across the legs. "C'mon, move on. Let's go and get the hell out of here. You're blocking the street".

Didn't these police have any wives and sons and daughters? Didn't they, even once, wince in their stupid assertion of their duty or feel the slightest twinge of pity, plain, human compassion?

Crossing the street to the synagogue, fear of looking into the policeman's eyes caused me to look away. But how could I pretend I did not see Izzy Moskowitz, my schoolmate, turning his head as I passed him by. I said, "Izzy, take your family to our house and my *bubba* will find something for you to eat. She still has some soup with *lukshun* left over from *Shabbos.*"

He looked at me and laughed. They came to our house and my grandmother beamed in such joy as she went to Rabbi Berman's house to borrow some soup to feed to them.

CHAPTER XXVIII

What was Eldridge Street? It was a mosaic of many nations and religious faiths. There were Italians, Poles, Russian and Irish. Catholics and Jews. All of us enjoyed our ethnic assimilation. We greeted each other when we passed on the street. All of us were poor. All of us had a credit account with the Feingold Grocery Store on Eldridge Street, where his ledger was inscribed on a crude paper bag. All of the families had children attending PS #20. But what was different was the food we ate. I could tell at once when the sultry aroma of Jewish cooking reached my nostrils. I could smell the chicken soup, the potato *latkes*, the smoked fish, the gefilte fish, the cholent that baked all night, the chopped herring and the sour pickles. Many of us did not have much to eat all week long, but for the *Shabbos* they managed. As the beloved Sholom Aleichem tells us:

"If we did not have bread, we borrowed from our neighbor and next week, our neighbor would borrow from us. If we did not have whitefish, we had herring. We did not calculate who borrowed from which neighbor."

But who could forget our neighbor, the community *schnorrer*, as they called him. Every week, he borrowed from another neighbor. In such a way it was hard to remember from whom he was borrowing. But do you think the neighbors let

him get away with it? On Eldridge Street you can be cunning and smart. You can finagle and cheat. You can outwit your neighbor for so long, but everybody was ready for Yosselle, the *schnorrer.* If the neighbor knew that you were poor, they would smile and pretend they were taken in.

But for Yoselle, the *schnorrer*, this they could not do. His poor wife hobbled with crippling rheumatism seemed only to be waiting for death to take her. She lived her poor and pitiful life, her daily needs of no concern to the *schnorrer.* She lived from hand to mouth. This old *goniff* starved his wife, disinherited his children, and amassed a fortune. I used to watch the mailman stuff the hallway where the mail was dropped, with letters from the Stock Exchange, with banks and trusts. Yes, with all his money, he lived in poverty, starved his wife, and never gave a pinched penny to the old synagogue.

He would lift his eyes and pretend that he was in spiritual ecstasy during the prayer service. But when confronted with the charity box—when the charity box was lifted to his face, he would dig into the very depths of his pockets and for what almost seemed like an eternity, drop a penny in the box.

He would cry to the Almighty, with tears in his eyes, that his son stole his money and, therefore, had to live each day from hand to mouth.

He would come weeping to Mrs. Kramer, who lived on the top floor, for some tomatoes for the Sabbath, which she gave. But this *schnorrer* had the gall to knock on her door and shout in a hoarse voice, "Mrs. Kramer, the tomatoes you gave me were rotten."

"So, give them back to me."

"Give them back to you? How can I give them back to you when I ate them," he growled.

"So, if you ate them, you liked them, no?"

"Why should I like rotten tomatoes, Mrs. Kramer?"

"But still you ate them."

"So, I ate them. A hungry man does not taste or smell. He eats, no?"

"Is that so?"

"Mrs. Kramer, do not expect me to give you back your tomatoes if you gave me rotten tomatoes."

As the story goes, Mrs. Kramer chose the wiser choice and closed the door gently on Yossele, the *schnorrer*, and let him stand there until she was sure that he could not come *schnorring* at her door again.

But was he through?

Did he give up?

Of course not!

Knocking on the door, he pleaded with my grandmother, "Mrs. Finkelstein, you are the only kind person in this house. Do you have maybe some food you could give me?"

My grandmother never refused to give, even if it was the very last.

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It happened, one day, that Yossele, the *schnorrer*, died.

The entire community from Eldridge Street to Houston, Stanton, Rivington, Orchard, Delancey, Grand Streets, the community under the Williamsburg Bridge, the boys and girls, the men and women, even some of the parishioners from the nearby Catholic church, followed the horse-drawn cortege and deeply mourned his death. They cried tearful lamentations. The cantor sang the *EL MOOLAH RACHAMIM* with such poignant emphasis. Rabbi Berman delivered a very moving eulogy. He said, "What would we do without this man who made us laugh, who gave us the best *schnorring*, we have ever seen in any part of the *Stetl*."

I heard the loud and sorrowful outcries and the wailing of "*Oi vais meer*", such as rarely heard on Eldridge Street.

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But of all my memories, it was the people who were evicted from their homes that made a lasting impression on my young mind. I remember how they would set up their furniture in the street, especially when the weather was warm. They

would sit down at the table, even if they did not partake in a full-course meal. It astonished me how much food was brought to them.

Where would all of this come from? Do you think the people from the neighborhood would let them starve? Do you think that the Cohens and the Farbsteins, the Kellys and the Martinos would let them sit there with a bare table and empty plates? In all of the barren and ugly poverty, we learned to care, to be seriously concerned with one another. No one wrote fancy and "high-falutin" philosophies, studded with words no one understood. They did not write books about what they should do. Nor did they attend the lectures at Cooper Union or the University Settlement to analyze what was proper to do. They did not talk about it, analyze it or dissect it—or question as to why they cared for each other. They did not plan or organize it. They just cared. That was all. They just cared. All of the neighborhood knew what giving meant, even if it deprived them all of a little less food. They knew this without lessons, without sermons. It was from the prayers they recited in the synagogue, from the Torah, from the church messages.

To look at these people sitting around the *Shabbos* table in the middle of the street, who would know they were poor and destitute? Didn't you hear them laugh, tell jokes? Didn't you hear them sing the blessings? Didn't you watch them as they got up and danced around the table? Didn't you hear Uncle

Joe tell a joke? He bought the *challah* so he would be allowed to sing the *MOITZE LECHEM MIN HO AWRETZ* with his cracked voice. He thought he was another Rosenblatt or a Caruso, and the family indulged him in his fantasy.

As the thunder rolled and lightning crackled, they would hurry to place a tablecloth over the table, cover the bread and the table. No, this was not a picnic. It was a harsh and meager way to live. But did they blame anybody? Did they curse their circumstances?

As a young man, these are some of the events I would see. These are the events that ate into my soul. I was already a young man trying to sprout a beard. I was already *bar mitzvahed*, and despite the fact that I was now called a man, I was really a child at heart. It could be asked why I was not on the sand lots on Forsyth Street, playing punch ball, running races. Why was I thinking such heavy thoughts, burying my head in the Talmud, singing in the Rosenblatt choir?

My young heart swelled with tender compassion when I saw men in rags shuffling the streets, rummaging through the garbage receptacles for a bone we would throw a dog. It was such scenes that made me think that there was a higher destiny that I had to fulfill.

CHAPTER XXIX

Before the *Succos* festival, I remember how my grandfather taught me how to wave the *lulav* and the *ezrog*. He told me the meaning of the festival. We had a *Succah* in the backyard. All our friends and neighbors would congregate in the *Succah*. Plenty of wine and scotch were on hand. We sang all night. I remember my Uncle Louie, my deceased father's brother. He was very strict with me. Whenever he visited us, he never addressed me directly. He always spoke about me, but never to me. He would say to my grandfather, "Is Herry going to school? Is he going to *Cheder*? Is he behaving himself? And the answer was always "yes". It was even "yes" when the answer was "no".

That *Succos* he came to visit us. My grandfather asked me to wave the *lulav* and *ezrog* for my Uncle Louie. I would wave them with all my might. My grandfather asked me to sing the *Hallel,* the prayer to the praise of God. I sang it and watched my Uncle Louie drinking the scotch, taking one gulp after another.

When his visit was all over, he started to cry such tears I never knew he had. I had never seen him this way before. I was frightened. He rose, came over to me and hugged me so hard I could hardly breathe. He had never before approached

me in such a manner that he would even address me. Now I felt uncomfortable with his sudden intimacy.

He told me about my father's talents. This was the first time that I ever heard any word about my deceased father. He said that my father was very talented. He was a violinist, a writer, a poet, an artist. He sang with such a gorgeous tenor voice. He knew Hebrew and would lead the services in the synagogue. I sat and listened. I never knew my father—never met him, was never hugged by him. Neither was I physically close to him.

To hear this story was very warming to me. All of this was now coming to me in sweet and fragrant cadences of love. My Uncle Louie then asked me to sing the *Chag Simchawsainoo*, about the harvest—the golden corn now ripe for picking; the ripened apple now dropping to the ground. As we sat in the *Succah* and looked up and saw the stars, my fear of my uncle dissolved. His voice was now so very soft, his hand was on mine and his face drenched with tears. That day, under the *Succah*, he was very much unlike the man I knew before today. He shed tears as he continued to reminisce about his brother's death at the age of 25. He told me many stories about my father. And I listened quietly. He had such a compelling need to talk to me. He told me that all his life he resented my father. My father, he said, was a tender soul, but his talents

were extraordinary. He could have been anything he wanted to be.

But, I asked my uncle, where was all that poetry he wrote—the manuscripts of his writing; his art work. He looked down at me, looked away and then got up and turned his back on me. I waited for an answer, but none came forth. Then, suddenly, he fell to the ground and emitted such a sob that it fairly shook the fragile *Succah.* His face was creased with anguish. His eyes were red. He heaved and choked with great pain. I did not say anything, but this was too much emotion for my young soul. His eyes met mine, his face bloated with tears slowly gathered on his face.

"Herry," he said, his voice low and deep, "I am ashamed, deeply ashamed, of myself. I was untrue and false. I was deceitful. I framed lies. I hope that you will have pity on a foolish and selfish man. I did not understand your father, Jack. To me he was a man of another world. Too deep, too much in himself. He was a day-dreamer. He built castles of fancy in the air. He did not see the world as I saw it. I saw the Depression. I saw the dirty and filthy streets. I saw the horror of war. I saw the poverty and disease. I saw the world as a hopeless place in which to live. I saw the Bowery and I saw the lost souls flopping around. I spit on their corrupted bodies. To me they were shameful vermin, not fit to live. I saw your

grandfather and my father's struggle useless and with no purpose.

"But your father, my brother, Jack, Herry, he did not see these things as I saw them. He saw the freshness of the morning air. He read books. He wrote poetry. He married your mother but could not support you or her. He was a gentle person. He looked upon life with deep gratitude. I knew that your *zeyde* preferred him over me. And I was angry. I was angry that he could be so happy in the middle of the struggle to survive. The more I thought about it, the angrier I got.

"One day I came home to visit your grandmother and asked her to show me where he kept all his work. She took me into the bedroom and showed me a large trunk. I pulled out the trunk and began to read his poetry. It was beautiful poetry, but I was too angry to appreciate it. I said to your grandmother that since it was cold in the house, I would make a fire in the flat-iron stove. You grandfather was out begging. When the stove was fully ablaze and the top of it red with intense heat, I took all his work—his poetry—his art work—his stories—all of his works, and threw them into the fire. There were hundreds of pages of his work. I watched the fire blazing before my eyes. The only half of a consolation, Herry, was that your dear and blessed father never knew what I had done. Your father had tuberculosis, Herry, and that week he was sent to a Denver Sanatorium. He died soon after, but my pain is seeing you and

knowing that you never knew your father; and, here at least, you would have had a chance to know something about him.

"I hope and pray, Herry, that you will inherit your father's talent, his tenderness, and his love for life and people. Now that he is dead, and you are here beside me, I am full of painful remorse at what I did. I hope you will forgive me, Herry. Go out into this world and be like your father."

He held my hand and looked into my eyes. It was though a great weight had been lifted from him. "Will you forgive me, Herry?"

I nodded my head and he hugged me.

As the night grew darker and I was able to see the stars through the branches of the *Succah*, I knew that I could forgive my uncle. But I wished I had more than a photo of my father's long and aquiline face, his blond hair and blue eyes staring down at me when I sat in the living room. I wish I could see those verses. I wish I could be invited to pierce the depths of his soul. I felt sorry for my Uncle Louie, but what I could never understand was that after all those words of regret and remorse, my Uncle Louie grew more and more distant tome. When he came to visit, he would avoid my eyes. He stopped inquiring as to how I was doing in school.

But this was a *Succos* that I shall remember all the years of my life. I thought I had found a friend in my Uncle Louie, but he turned away from me. It was as though I was not there.

But he gave me something I needed. He gave me the valuable insight into the life and character of my dear father, which neither my grandmother or grandfather ever spoke about.

The dark curtain that blackened my life was now lifting. The solemn gates of life were flung open. I could sense the fragrance of the sweet branches of the *Succah* and know that a part of my father's soul found residence in mine. A part of his poetry now lives in me and the music he played crept into my life and consciousness. When I wave the *lulav* and *ezrog* now, and smell the sweet and musty fragrance of the *Succah*, my Uncle's words clarify those nagging doubts that I had lost in the whirlwind of my youth growing into manhood.

CHAPTER XXX

My Uncle Louie and Aunt Polly rented a farmhouse in Monticello, New York. My grandmother asked them if they could take me for a few weeks. After a lot of hemming and hawing and "they will let her know", they finally consented to take me. The reason they made this decision was because my Uncle Louie wanted to know more about me. After all, I was the son of his brother. He wanted to understand me—his brother's son. I found him to be unsmiling and rigid, a person easily given to horrible temper tantrums. There was in his manner a disposition, which showed him to be mistrustful. His voice had an inquisitorial quality, accompanied with a harsh manner, which frightened me. I never felt comfortable in his presence. He was always asking me questions: What did I do? Where did I go? Why my marks in school were so bad? But my Aunt Polly was always affable and kind. She always spoke softly, taking my hand in hers, giving me a hug, patting my head and saying how important it was to my grandparents to have me.

When I was told that I was to join them for several weeks at their farm, I balked. I did not want to go. I cried. I stamped my feet. I took to such an eruption of anger, which I did not ever experience before. This was to be a major disruption of my life, my energies. I wanted to go to the

synagogue everyday. I did not want to be torn away from this home, to live with people who were strangers to me. I waged a campaign of unbridled ferocity, shouting at the top of my voice, trying every form of dissimulation, feigning illness, headaches. I tried creating a fever, which I learned from one of my friends who said if you put an orange peel under your arm, you would become feverish. It did not work. I cried all night—loud enough so that my grandparents would hear me. But they were firm. I walked the street, trying to envision this vast and unexplored land I was to enter. My mind was filled with a formless dread, afraid of the unknown, afraid I will be abandoned, never to see my grandparents again, never again to sing in the choir, never to linger at the synagogue, never to walk across the Williamsburg Bridge any more. I was afraid I would be isolated from all that I grew to love.

How could I love Uncle Louie? His angry face. His questioning nature. His lips pursed with contempt for his life. I would lose my freedom and tied down to a house I never saw. Yes, I heard that they were quite well off, that they lived in an apartment on Hopkinson Avenue in South Brooklyn. I remember they had a daughter. My cousin, Laura. I liked her. She was gentle and kind to me. She would teach me songs of the day and we sang them together. I was hoping that she would be there. I imagined the long walks we would take under the trees and the talks we would have about her and her

boyfriend. She took me into her confidence, and this made me feel so important, so very important that she would confide in me, a young upstart, so many of those things she would not relate to her mother and father.

I guess it was fear of being alone with these people that made me resistant to this idea of leaving. Maybe I would not like the scenery. Maybe I would be bored. No, I did not want to go, I decided.

But however much I resisted, and as much as I waged a war of independence, and as much as I screamed "I won't go, I won't go", I eventually had to relent and go. I was promised that I would return in two weeks. I was told that the sun and the air would be good for me.

That morning, in July, was very hot. I dressed up in my knickers, a top shirt, a cap and sneakers. For the first time in my life I was seated in a motor car. It was a 1931 Packard. When I saw the car I was to enter, a palpitating silence overcame me.

I was frightened.

I sat in the car, the motor began to roar, and the car moved away from Eldridge Street. The pressure of my mixed feelings overtook me. I waved to my grandparents, and, before I knew it, I was traveling beyond any streets with which I was familiar. Before long, we were traveling over the gracious George Washington Bridge into New Jersey. I could not believe

that we were in another state. I felt that I was in a new country. Everything was so different. There were no tall buildings. The car traveled over dirt roads and rattled on and on.

As much as I was frightened, there was in the ride a spirit of adventure that I enjoyed. We seemed to be traveling for hours until the sinking sun mellowed against a purple sky. As I sat in the rumble seat of the car, we passed farms and barns and rows and rows of vegetation. I saw cows being led from their pasturage. The air caressed my face with the scent of wild flowers. Then a blinding mist came down and I could see nothing but darkness. I looked up. I had never seen so many stars glittering in the sky. It was like a spell of a dream, this stillness, this serenity, the perfumed air and gentle and warm breeze. I could not take my eyes away from this vast cathedral of nature. No more the cramped buildings. No more the huddled ghetto, with the people living on top of one another. The open spaces on and on. Nothing but open spaces. That is all I saw surrounding me. This whole exquisite night was mine—to touch, to see, to feel, to know and to take. It was all mine! I was glad I was alone in this rumble seat, away from the talk in the front of the car between my Uncle Louie and Aunt Polly. Why, what more could they add to the beauty of this environment? I heard the rustle of the trees. I heard the syllables of an unknown tongue. Why, here was God, to whom I prayed. God was no longer in that musty room in the

synagogue. He was here in the wind, in the trees, in the balmy fragrance of this environment. Here was the Mount Sinai that Moses climbed. Here was my soul returning to myself. Books could not describe it. Music could not sound it. I was in the very presence of the universe of God, here and now, engulfed by its vastness. I forgot my anger. I was so happy I was here—right here, in God's world. This experience turned my spirit to a harmony of my soul which I wanted to embrace for the rest of my life.

At last the car stopped and we stepped out into the darkness into a musty room. I fell on a bed they prepared for me and fell into a deep sleep.

In the morning I heard a sound that came to me as a new experience. I heard the twittering of the birds, but, most uncommon to me was the crowing of the proud rooster. I got dressed and walked out by opening a rickety door. The air was touched with a lazy fragrance, full of an atmosphere, which was so different from that of Eldridge Street. I saw nothing but spacious land. The sky was covered with an indescribable hue, perfumed with the scent of magnolia, which I once inhaled at a flower show in school. All of this was too sudden. To be transported from the steady thunder of automobiles and streetcars and the bellowing street peddlers to the serenity of this country scene was so warming to my heart. No more strident discord of the Eldridge Street pandemonium. Now I

could see the blue of the sky, sense the freshness of the air and the sun moving softly over the huddled hills. I felt the tension of struggling tears as I watched the trees rustle in the breeze. The spell of a dream was upon me. I saw an old lady feeding the chickens. I walked over to her. She looked up and smiled at me.

"Hello, sonny boy. What's your name?"

"Harold."

"And your aunt is Aunt Polly?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"It's good havin' you here. Like the farm?"

"I dunno."

"Well, my name is Betsy. I take care of things while the family is away. You want me to show you around?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Will it be 'yes' or 'no'. You must speak up."

"Okay."

"Your aunt and me have been friends for years. I live here all year round. You see, my husband died a few years ago—got kicked by an angry bull and it killed him. Now I live here alone and take care of the farm.

"You will see, we grow tomatoes and corn, lettuce, asparagus, and all kinds of fruits and vegetables."

She smiled almost weirdly because she had no teeth and said, "You like chicken?"

"Yes."

"Well," she said, pointing to an old man with a beard down to his wrinkled vest. "That man is a *schocket.* You know what a *schocket* is, Harold?"

"No."

"Well, come along with me, and I'll show you."

We walked over to an open field by the side of the wood-frame house where she was greeted by the old man.

"This is my friend, Harold," she said, smiling again, showing her toothless mouth.

The old man had a sinister face and fierce eyes. He looked down at me scornfully. I watched as the old woman began to feed the chickens while they clustered all about her.

The old man grabbed one of the chickens by the throat, removed a razor from his pocket, and in an instant, cut the throat of one of the chickens. I saw that poor chicken struggling on the ground. My heart sunk. He grabbed another chicken. I could not watch any more. I ran under a tree some distance away so that I would not hear the pathetic cackling of the chicken with his throat cut.

My heart hurt me. I sat under that tree for hours. This stunning act was too much for me to see. When I returned to the house, the old lady was tearing the feathers off the dead chicken. I began to cry so loud that my Aunt Polly and Uncle

Louie and my cousin, Laura, came to me. My aunt and uncle began to laugh at me, mock me. It was only a chicken they said.

But Laura came over to me, took out a handkerchief and wiped away my tears.

"Harold, I know how you feel. They should not have done this to you. You are a very tender person, Harold, and I am so glad that you came."

She kissed me on my cheek, and, all at once, I felt as though the very heavens opened up. We walked together to the lake and watched the ducks gliding in the water, and all was well with me again.

When we returned, my Uncle Louie explained to me what a *schocket* was. He was a person who knew how to slaughter animals in accordance with the laws of Judaism. This made the chicken or the animal ritually suitable for eating. He further explained that the blade had to be so sharp that the animal would die instantly. It was the Jewish law because it is necessary that the animal does not suffer even a second.

I said a very combative thing. I sat there and looked at my uncle, and I defied his explanation.

"Uncle Louie, that chicken was not kosher."

"Of course it is kosher, Harold."

"No, it's not kosher, Uncle Louie. Didn't you see it struggling for its life?"

"Well, the chicken was dead, Harold, and it's kosher."

There was an irritation in his voice, but somehow that did not concern me because I was not convinced with his bland interpretation.

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I walked away, up a long winding path. I stood there and drank in the beauty of the hills across the valley, which gave me a sense of eternity. I read about such places in a book I once read, CLEMATIS. Down below I saw the silver lake glistening in the sunlight; the tall flowers standing near me like pensive worshipers, its colors sending a thrill down my spine.

The sun became hot and sweltering. I removed my shirt, shoes and socks. I sat by the side of the lake, my feet dangling in the cool water, my mind leaping gladly to meet this environment with a new happiness. I thought of what I said to my uncle and I wondered now if he will send me back home. I was insolent, I knew. But that was my truth. The chicken was alive.

As I sat by the lake, I saw my Uncle Louie at the pier with a fishing pole in his hands. I walked over to him. He saw me looking down at the pan of dead fish.

"I caught them today, Harold. We will have them for dinner."

I smiled. How I would have loved for my Uncle Louie to take me to his side, give me a hug—but this he could not do. He

was cold, and I could tell, mired in a marriage he did not want. I always heard Aunt Polly and him shouting at each other.

We walked back together, passing the cows in the meadow.

"These are cows," he said. "They give milk."

I approached the cows and looked into the eye of one of the cows. I never remembered seeing such eyes before. These eyes were hollows of softness—like that of a dove. The cows remained firm in their places, munching on the grass.

"The grass they eat, Harold, becomes milk we drink."

As we spoke, the old lady, with an old dog by her side she called "Pesky", smiled at me and sat down on a low stool and began to pull on the teats of the cow. And there was milk shooting out of the teats and emptying into a pail. She handed me a glass of milk. It was warm and creamy and delicious.

For a week now, I had seen the acreage of the farm, the old farm vehicles, which could not run; the skies of molten brilliance. A torrential rain poured down on the land and I ran for cover. It brought with it rumbling skies and stark and brilliant lightning. When the rain stopped, I saw the sun sneaking behind the cumulus clouds and the land of gold continued to hold me in its spell.

At night a friend arrived. His name was Mark. He played the guitar and sang old songs. I sang RAMONA and everyone was proud of my voice. But soon the eyelids began to

droop and I felt tired. My Aunt Polly led me to the bed, but sleep came haltingly. I was scared. I saw a witch, her sharp-beaked nose and face that frightened me. I began to moan and then to cry out loud. "No, no. Please don't come near me."

Soon, my Aunt Polly came to my bedside and explained that this was not a witch. It was just the twig of a tree silhouetted against the light of the moon.

I smiled and fell into a deep sleep.

I felt a sickness come over me. My heart yearned to be home. I wanted to be near my grandparents. I wanted to be near the synagogue again. I wanted to sit by the side of my grandfather, to have my dear grandmother praying over the *Shabbos* candles. I asked my Aunt Polly when we were going home. She shrugged her shoulders, saying she did not know. A great panic overtook me. All I knew was the two weeks were over. I had no friends here. I had no one to talk to, to play with. It was enough. I enjoyed myself, but I thought it was enough. It began to rain every day and I had nothing to do but sit in the house and watch the rain pattering on the rooftops. I tried to ask the same question about when we were going home. This time I made the mistake of asking this question in the presence of my Uncle Louie. Aunt Polly was about to answer me in her kind and gentle tones, because she perceived my state of panic and homesickness.

In a voice I never heard him use, his eyes glowing with a savage fire, his lips loosening with a venom I have often seen in mad dogs, Uncle Louie tore into me. "You, ingrate, you! You dare to ask such a question! Look, Harold, what we are doing for you. We didn't have to take you, you know. We didn't have to spend the money to feed you and house you. I always knew this about you, your sneaky eyes, the way you contradicted me. That's what you are, an ingrate! You know your Aunt Polly needs this vacation. She is a sick woman, Harold, and what do you care if she's sick. You wanna go home. You are like your Goddamn father. No good will come of you, never. You steal, you lie, and you have no respect for your elders. Just like your father. Do you think he was so great—a poet—sat and played on his violin and drove all of us nuts—and you, you are just like him. We want to do the decent thing and you have the colossal nerve to complain to us."

I sat there stunned. If the room would open up I would have liked to have fallen into the bottomless pit. My cousin, Laura, saw my face creased with pain. She walked over to me and embraced me.

"Pa, those were very mean things you said to my cousin."

"Mean or not, I will not tolerate ingratitude. Never, you hear?"

"But, Pa, he's only a kid."

"Some kid—a kid who steals from the charity boxes; who insults the Rabbi of the synagogue who was good enough to write his *Bar Mitzvah* speech. Some kid is growing here. You are wasting affection. My brother was a lousy man and he has a lousy kid. They should have listened to me. I told them, but they did not listen."

"What did you tell them, dad?"

"I told them to send him to a home—a home—you hear? Because this kid is evil through and through.!"

No tears could swell my face now. I had no desire to cry—only the desire to be taken home, to get out of here.

My Aunt Polly sat in her chair, stiffly. I knew she loved me, but she did not dare to challenge my uncle's temper tantrum and his wild frenzy of abuse he poured out at me. But she walked over to my uncle and said, "Louie, I want you to take him home right now, if that's how you feel about him. Take him home, Louie."

My uncle did not stir. His silence was difficult to interpret. Suddenly, he rose, went over to a drawer in the living room, removed some keys, and said, "You're right, Polly. I will take him home now."

Staring at me with a sneer on his lips, he murmured, "Let's get the hell outta here. Get your things together. You're getting the hell outta here right this minute!"

When we got into the car, there was dead silence. My young heart, never knowing the brutality of sheer silence, was now fixed with fear. I had never known this form of hostility. I waited for a word—any word—from my uncle as he drove the Packard homeward. I watched the passing towns and the villages; the many forms of plush homes. I turned to estimate my uncle's face, but he was sullen, his eyes looking straight ahead. He took some candy from his pocket, brought it to his mouth, but offered me nothing. Oh, I wish he could turn to me and smile and say, "Harold, I am sorry you felt that way, but I know how much you love your *zeyde* and *bubba.* Come, we'll stop in for a soda and some ice cream." But he said nothing—just looked ahead at the road with a solemn face.

Finally we came to the George Washington Bridge. Already I felt a difference in the air. It was sultry and stifling. The atmosphere was depressing. As we left the bridge, I began to see the sordid reality of the city—the shambling hulks of men stumbling through the streets—old men, their rags still hanging over their bodies. They found crusts of bread and some rancid shreds of meat in the garbage receptacles and cigarette butts on the ground. This was the horrid realism which faced me.

As I looked at these dregs of society, those words my uncle said to me began to echo in my mind: *"THIS KID IS EVIL, THROUGH AND THROUGH!"*

Those words haunted me. What if he were right—that I was evil. Why did he attack my father? Was that the right thing to do? I never met my father, and I always had such a wonderful vision of him, and now my uncle opened up an area which I found discomforting—to say the least. What if I were destined to be like those derelicts roaming the streets, with a shaggy and dirty beard, my hair filthy and unkempt, my eyes glazed, my stomach distended from hunger, digging into the receptacles for a shred of meat, old and rancid bones, stumbling blindly through the throngs of depravity, wandering and begging for a coin with which to live yet another hour or a day.

I wanted to cry, but I held back my tears.

When I arrived home, my grandparents were so happy to see me. They looked at my uncle, observing the severe lines on his face.

"Is everything all right, Louie," my grandfather asked.

"Yeah, take him. We don't want him."

"What do you mean," my grandfather asked.

"I mean we were good enough to take him, to pay for him. You know what it costs us to keep him? It cost $25 a week, and all we hear from him is, 'I wanna go home, I wanna go home'."

My grandfather studied my face. He called me to come over to him and sit by his side.

"Louie, be kind and try to understand that maybe my son..."

"He's not your son!" Louie growled. "He's your grandson—not your son! Your son is dead, and no matter what you say or do, he's not coming back."

Upon those words, my grandmother entered the living room.

"Louie, you are my son and Heschel is my son. "You are my son and Heschel is my son, now that his father is no longer living on this earth."

My grandfather took me by the hand and whirled his chair around.

"Sure, Herry is not my son. I do not need you to remind me of this, but how can you, Louie, in all decency, take from your mother and myself the only fantasy we have left in our lives. And, also, are you so dumb, are you so blind, and so deaf, that you cannot see that living away from us meant that again Herry was being sent away? In Herry's mind, he thought he was being sent to another home. Louie, you mean this you cannot see or understand?

"But, someday, you will see. Herry is a very bright boy. You will see that all the things you said about him are not true.

"For the first time in my life, I am ashamed of you—ashamed that your eyes could not see and your heart could not feel how Herry felt."

Louie sat still, played with his straw hat, and, in a moment, there was a chilled silence in the room. My Uncle Louie rose, left the flat, not saying a word. I heard his footfalls as he walked down the stairs. I broke out in an uncontrolled delirium of weeping, until I fell asleep in my grandmother's lap. My grandfather did not awaken me to go to the synagogue and I slept through the night.

I awoke in the morning in my own bed, with the throaty voice of my grandmother saying, "Herry, *meer doff gain in sheel.*"

I looked up, took my grandmother's face in my hands and kissed her, grateful to be home again.

CHAPTER XXXI

I cannot remember ever having spoken to my uncle again. When I knew he was coming to visit, I ran out into the street, took a walk or found some friends in the University Settlement.

Time passes. It is an inexorable movement that passes, even as we try to restrain it, to hold it back. The summer turns to winter. The ordeal of my routine—the synagogue, public school, *cheder*. What I enjoyed most was the choir at the Roumanian Synagogue, where I had a chance to lift my alto voice in liturgical music. I received such joy in the few hours a week spent singing with Cantor Rosenblatt.

But now I wanted only to roam about with no goal in sight. At this time I was supposed to be in Hebrew school, but I did not feel that this is what I wanted to do. I just wanted to feel free with no place to go except to walk anywhere. I walked and wandered into Orchard Street. I stopped and searched to see if I had enough money to buy a hot sweet potato and a nickel fell out of my pocket. I bought a hot sweet potato and ate it with relish.

I tried to find a place on Orchard Street where I could warm my hands by the fires built by the pushcarts crowding the street. But everywhere I went I was chased away.

"Get away, kid. Go to school or something. You're no good for business."

I was about to leave when I saw Benny Feldman, who sold odds and ends—such as combs, bobby pins, and old jewelry. He, too, wanted to chase me away, but he felt sorry for me as he saw me shivering in the cold. I began to talk but he turned away from me because he wanted to pay more attention to his business. Since there was no business, he turned to me and asked me what I was doing out of Hebrew school. He knew me and my *zeyde* since he was a member of the Roumanian Synagogue, where I sang in the choir. I decided to tell the truth, because I was tired of having to follow this routine, and I had need to speak the words which were on my mind. I told him that though I revered Judaism and was not disposed to consider myself an agnostic, I was interested in worldly things. I said that there was more in this world to consider than the Torah and the Talmud. I begun to read books written by Jonathan Swift and Mark Twain, and nowhere in these books is there any mention of the Torah or the Talmud. There was nothing about the imprisoning strictures of the *Shabbos.*

I said, "Mr. Feldman, there is more to life, and I do not want to miss it. I am reading magazines about boxing and sports and literature which intrigued me. I am reading books that the rabbi prohibited about different religions."

Mr. Feldman would stand there in amazement. That I , a young man so steeped in Jewish life, should be caused to wander away from it. Why, he said that there was so much expected of me, so much everybody wanted me to do in my later life, that I would be a rabbi or a cantor. But he smiled at me and revealed to me that he was a Talmudic student, that he led the *Mishna* services every *Shabbos* after the *Havdalah* services.

He said that he could not believe what was happening to me, that I would consider forsaking Judaism, the Torah, the Talmud, the study of the sages and our Jewish life.

"You know, Harold, what you are doing is not acceptable to the Jewish people, that you were brought up as a Jew, that you studied with the rabbi and now you sing the ancient prayers in the synagogue. That you should go away from it, abandon it, this is not good, Harold, not good at all."

"Why not?"

"Because you are now on your way toward becoming a man. And your grandfather and your teachers, who gave you such a wonderful Jewish upbringing, should now find out that you are departing from our ways. You should go back, go back, Harold, listen to me and study the *Taryag*(613 commandments of the Torah). You should be sitting up at night reading the *Parsha* and trying to find meaning in the portion of the week. For in doing this, only there will you find the wealth of God's world.

"You do not live in a *goyish* world. The world you are going into is not Jewish. You belong with the Jewish people, Harold, and to know the deepest meaning of our Jewish faith."

"But, Mr. Feldman, I know the Torah almost by heart. So why do I have to study that any more?"

"You know all of the Torah?"

"Oh, yes, almost word for word."

"And that you call 'knowing the Torah'—that you know it 'word for word'?"

"I think so, Mr. Feldman."

"You think so, or you know so?"

I hesitated to reply as a fierce blast of cold wind forced me to come closer to the fire.

"All right, Harold, since you say you know almost the entire Torah, tell me the meaning of Abraham. You know the meaning of Abraham?"

"I don't know what you are trying to say about—about the—what, Mr. Feldman?"

"Tell me—no you do not have to recite it. Just tell me what the story means."

"I do not know how to answer you."

"You said you know the story of Abraham—is that correct?"

"Yes."

"Sure?"

"Of course."

"So, if you are so sure, why can't you tell me the meaning of this portion of the Torah?"

I just stood there, placed my hands deeper in the fire.

"All right, you know that God revealed to Abraham that He was going to destroy the city of Sodom. Right?"

"Yes."

"Do you know why?"

"Because the land was full of evil people—people who did not obey God."

"Were all the people evil, Harold?"

"No."

"You mean that there were some people who were good people?"

"Yes, there were good people, too."

"So, Harold, not all of the people were evil?"

"No, only some of them."

"So, why would God kill the good with the evil?"

I looked into his eyes. I welcomed the time I had when my *yarmulke* was blown off my head, and some customers came by to buy some of the wares on his pushcart.

"Well, Harold, since you know that God said he would kill the good with the evil, do you think that was just? Even Abraham questioned His justice. Do you think that Abraham had the right to question God the way he did?"

"No."

"'No', what?"

"Abraham had no right to question God."

"So Abraham was wrong?"

"Oh, yes."

"Why was he wrong?"

"Because God is the ruler of the universe and He is a perfect God. God can give life, and so He can take it away."

"That's your answer?"

"Yes."

"But, Harold, Abraham did say that God was unjust."

"Yes."

"And as you say, Abraham was wrong?"

"Yes, he was wrong."

"But God wanted us to know justice. Is that right?"

"Yes."

"So if He wanted us to know justice, why can God be unjust and destroy the good with the evil? Why should the good die for the sins of the evil?"

I just stood there. I tried to create some form of an answer, but anything I could say would only come without any thought; only from the tongue and not from the mind or from the learning I have acquired from the synagogue and Hebrew school.

My religious training would have held that God was never wrong and He had the power for what He decided to do. He could create the mountains and the sun and the moon and the sky; the rains that fall, and He causes life and death, so how could Abraham be right when he questioned God's justice?

I looked at Mr. Feldman with a great deal of uneasiness. I had no words with which to reply to him.

"Well," he persisted, "you have not answered my question. Do you want me to repeat it? Why did Abraham say that God was unjust? Was he insolent? Was he, himself, evil? How can anyone who saw life as sacred, and who believed in God's Holy Name say that God was wrong? Now, what do you think of Abraham, Harold?"

"As I said before, he was wrong to question God."

"And why was he wrong?"

"Because God is always right."

"All right, if Abraham was wrong, why did God agree with him?"

I was stunned. Mr. Feldman was right. God did agree with Abraham. God said if he found 50, then 45, and then 40—down to 10 righteous people, He would not destroy the city. He would not destroy the city of Sodom.

"Well, answer me."

"I dunno."

"All right, now, Harold, think about this. And be honest. Let's say it is not God. Let us say it is your rabbi who said that the good must be destroyed with the evil. Would you agree with him?"

"No."

"You would not?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because he would be wrong."

"Ever disagree with your rabbi?"

"Yes, I did."

"But you still respect him?"

"Yes."

"So why would you say God was right when you do not agree with the rabbi for doing the same thing?"

"Because God is all-powerful."

"All right, Harold, God saw that Abraham questioned His justice. Right?"

"Yes."

"Well, why would God enter into a covenant with Abraham and why should He make Abraham the Father of all Nations? No, Harold, do not answer. Go back to your studies and see that we are created with a free will, and that in life we can make choices, and that we can question God, and that we can think for ourselves. In such respect, Harold, we have our

personal choices of good or evil. We call then the *Yasar Hare* and the *Yasar Hatov*. We have the choice to decide the content of our lives.

"No, God did not want to choose a person who would be a 'yes man', but a person like Abraham, who could think for himself and make his choices. This was God's way of testing Abraham."

I said nothing—just stood there. A fire was burning in my soul. As the night descended upon the day, I began to feel the bitter cold penetrate my bones as the fire in the receptacle died down. I shook Mr. Feldman's hand and he said words I will never forget. "Harold, remember one thing. It was Shakespeare who said, 'There are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' Do you know what that means?"

Before I could answer him, he continued, "Harold, learn Torah—not only by reading and reciting it like a statue—but by discussing it with the wise men of your synagogue. It is called *Pilpul.* Sit and listen as Rabbi Berman expounds on the meaning of the Torah. Listen to the discussion and do not be hasty in your judgments because you know how to recite every word of the Torah.

"And now I will have to go. Come again, and we will have more discussions."

It was a glorious day. I began to see deeper into the significance of my Jewish faith.

I returned home. My grandmother looked at me quizzically. Before I was ready to walk into the living room to greet my grandfather, she took me aside and said, "Herry, did you go to *cheder* today?"

"Yes," I lied.

She pointed her finger at me. "Don't you ever lie to me again, Herry. You did not go to *cheder.* Never—you hear—lie to your *bubba.* Take off your coat and wash your hands. Your coat and your hands smell of smoke and fire. If your *zeyde* smells it, he will kill you."

I smiled sheepishly. I took off my coat and washed my hands and entered the living room. I sat and watched my grandfather, now with a renewed sense of what my faith meant to me. He saw me and gave me a hug—and the world was a heavenly place.

CHAPTER XXXII

The days were short. Evening settled upon Eldridge Street in a gloom of darkness, which made me feel sad, particularly when there was no heat in the flat and we had to bundle up in tattered sweaters. We had no money to buy coal for our flat-iron stove. My body was numb; my tender heart, sore. I had a right to be angry with God. If God was so just and so merciful, why did we suffer from the cold? Why were our bodies so stiff and our teeth chattering? Why was the stomach growling from lack of food? Why were others warm and comfortable while we were so miserable?

I asked my grandfather, "*Zeyde*, why is it that we are so cold? I want to believe in God the way you tell me I should? Why would God—whom you say loves us and protects us—why would he want us to suffer so much? Were we evil people? Did we break any of his Commandments? God has given us fire, and fire warms us. So, if this is so, *Zeyde*, why are some people warm and some cold like us? Were they better people, kinder, more charitable? With the fire God gave us, all we have to do is light a match and we have fire. Fire is God's energy. So, *Zeyde,* if we can have fire, why do we have to sit here and freeze?"

My *zeyde* smiled at me and said, "Herry, to suffer is not easy. No one wants to suffer, but how else can we understand

the meaning of kindness? How can we struggle for a just world? But there is pain even greater than cold and hunger. It is the pain of loneliness. It is the pain when we are alone and there is nobody to talk to, nobody who cares enough if you are cold and hungry.

"You are right, Herry. The fire is in the match, but someone has to care enough to know why others cannot be comfortable and warm while the other people are suffering. Understand, Herry?"

I nodded as though I understood him, but I did not understand. Only my heart and soul understood the soft smile that showed through his beard. I thought of my brother, Evans, and my mother, even with my brothers, Jason and Steven— now in an institution. Did my mother know how much I was suffering? Did she care? There they are—Evans and mother—sitting in a warm room, eating hearty meals; laughing and playing games. Did my mother know, or even attempt to realize that her son—her son, born from her loins—was sitting here in this gloom of hunger and cold? My *zeyde* interrupted my vagrant thoughts. He called me over to where he was seated and said to me:

"Herry, I wish I could do what you can do. I envy you."

"Why, *Zeyde*?"

"You can read and write and I cannot even sign my name in English. I have to make a cross. Would you teach me to read and write English?"

As he spoke, his speech faltered, his voice thick with anxiety, "Herry, I think I should know how to read and write English. I don't want to make a cross again for my signature. That is not my religion—the cross. I am not allowed to make a cross. Maybe that is why we are suffering, Herry, because God is angry with me for making a cross for my signature.

I laughed, "no, *Zeyde*, that is not true."

"What is not true?"

"That you are causing us to starve and go hungry because you make a cross."

I took my grandfather's hands in mine. I felt so much love for him. I wanted to embrace him, to hug him as I saw tears coursing down his beard. He hugged me and gave me a kiss. If ever I was struggling to know the meaning of love, did I have to labor for a better definition. I said I would help him.

Oh, the glory of life, that I could look into his eyes, to see those molten tears, to know the joy I brought to him as he cried out, "Hannah, Hannah, come quick!"

My grandmother rushed into the living room.

"*Voos ist*," she screamed out. "What is, Avrom? Are you sick?"

"No, no, Hannah. You hear? Sit down!"

My grandmother obeyed and sat down.

"Hannah, Herry will teach me how to write and read English."

She smiled, walked over to me and gave me a hug and a kiss.

"Oi, Herry, if your father was alive to see what a wonderful son he had—but your mother—"

"Hannah. *Shoin geneeg.* Enough already."

Somehow the cold was not that cold and the poverty not so bleak when I sat by my *zeyde's* side. It was such moments that life carved out for me a destiny which meant so much to me.

****

In the early age of my life, my grandfather began to be my teacher. He introduced me to the studies of Socrates, Maimonides, Mendelssohn, Hillel and Rabbi Akiba—among others. He included me in our weekly discussions with our neighbors and friends, over my grandmother's protests, who wisely said that I should be outside with my friends, playing ball. I did not understand any of these discussions, but it was being there in the presence of my *zeyde's* life, holding his hand, looking into the depths of his eyes, which kept the words I heard alive in my mind until I was ready to understand them.

Now it was my turn to teach—to sit there, night after night—to bring books back from the New York Public Library. Now it was my turn to speak and he to listen to the letters of the alphabet, until those letters became words, and the words, sentences.

And though the winds came through the cracks of the old tenement and cut through my bones like a razor; though it shrieked around the corners of the house like some restless spirit, clamoring for release; though my body ached with pain at night and I would cover my body with a heavy, quilted blanket, the joy of being in this house was a form of happiness that must have been given to me by God, Himself.

One night I heard my grandfather by the window, moving about near the trunk, which he used as his prayer desk. I saw him light a candle. He removed a stubby pencil from the drawer. I watched him as he labored over a piece of paper before him. He called out with such glee that his voice did not sound the same.

"Herry, Herry, come here! Come here! I have to show you this! Herry, get up, now!

I got out of bed and looked down at the paper on which he had been writing as I saw what was written on that sheet of paper:

MR. ABRAHAM FINKELSTEIN

172 ELDRIDGE STREET

NEW YORK, NEW YORK

I sat down; did not say a word. I bent over and kissed my dear *zeyde*, went back to bed and fell into a sweet sleep.

CHAPTER XXXIII

In this whole, unwieldy compass of this earth, bounded by the narrow and crowded streets, crushed by the huddled masses of the people on Eldridge Street, my own experiences were limited by an appalling circle of despair and faith in God—that He would come down from the heavens and restore prosperity. He will bring with him the manna that he allowed the children of Israel on their way to the Promised Land.

That was Eldridge Street as I saw it and knew it.

On this day there was quiet—a hush; once in a while, an old automobile going by; the sound of a barking dog; or Berele Berensky strolling the gutters, crying out loud: "I cash clothes."

As the day wore on, I heard voices. The pushcarts from the stable opened. They began to roll to their stations along Orchard Street. President of the Synagogue, Sam Levine, was at his accustomed place, pleading to peddlers to set aside an hour for God.

To look at the president, Sam Levine, who could tell anything about him? He was short and thin, with a pointed grey beard and a pinched mouth that could be seen through the beard. He looked pathetic standing there, calling out to people with his high-trebled voice.

What we seemed to see when we took a prolonged look at this man was that he was a man of little substance, meek and

compliant to all who knew him. But that was the furthest from the truth. He was a man of boundless knowledge and intellectual energy. He had studied the Talmud under the great rabbis in Czarist Russia. His father was an eminent rabbi in the Ukraine, where the Pogroms destroyed his whole family.

One night, just before dawn, as he was lying in bed in the middle of a Russian winter storm, there came a loud knocking on the door. Since it was early in the morning, he and Sheitel, his wife, awoke, startled. The knock on the door had that awful sound of an implacable approach of doom—heavy, loud and demanding.

He opened the door and there stood three tall men in their polished and immaculate uniforms.

Sam stood by the side of his wife as the tallest of the men rasped, "Are you Sheitel?"

"Yes, she is Sheitel," Sam volunteered.

"I did not ask you," the man snarled. I am talking to your wife. Now, are you Sheitel?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"And were you standing in the breadlines in Minsk, yesterday?"

"Yes."

"And did you have occasion to experience an encounter with one of our Police Officers?"

"But—I didn't—"

"Just answer my question."

"Yes."

"And did you refuse to stand in the back of the line when you were ordered to do so?"

"Let me explain," Sam tried.

"You shut your filthy and dirty Jewish mouth. I want an answer from Sheitel. Well, did you?"

Sheitel began to cry. "Yes."

With a sudden move, Sheitel was torn from Sam's embrace and thrown to the floor. The officer kicked her in the stomach and said, "You will have to come with me."

Sam stood there, trembling.

"What are you going to do?"

"You really want to know? Come along with me and we will show you."

The three officers began to laugh, a loud and vulgar laugh. They took Sheitel, threw her into a horse-drawn carriage, stopped in the center of the town—in the public square—blindfolded her; and, in a moment—right in the presence of Sam—the discharge of a rifle shot her through her heart.

"Well, Petri, that was perfect—straight through the heart. Now you are improving."

Sam's protesting only gained him a kick in the groin and he was then sent on his way.

****

That story, Sam told us one day, as he was about to recite the *Yizkor* services on *Yom Kippur*.

Sam lived with a Jewish family on Forsyth Street as a boarder.

He was known for his knowledge and scholarship far and wide. Though many of them attended the wealthiest synagogues on Rivington Street, they came to hear him read and interpret the *Mishna* every Saturday evening after the *Havdalah* services. With a wave of his hand and a turn of his head, he would unfold the problems and the theology of the Talmud with a soft and easy grace. His sing-song voice trembled like the braided candles that were said to contain the fire of his simple inspiration.

He often told us how the Cossacks came in the middle of the night and set fire to his home after Sheitel's execution.

****

As a young man, now I would sit with the elders to hear the simple words of Sam Levine. I ate the herring and Uneeda soda crackers and sipped the *glaisala* tea with them and shook my frail body to the rhythm of the prayers.

What was I doing here among the old men—some of them so frail that they could hardly move? What was I doing

there listening to Mr. Stein, sitting in a wheelchair, mumbling monosyllabic ideas that made no sense. But I knew he needed me there. He would always move his chair over to me and ask, "So, *vee gait ist*, Herry?"(So, how goes it, Harold?)

He would look at me, take me by the hand and say he wished I could be his son. His sons, he said, never came to see him.

"Some day they will be sorry. They will see my coffin lowered into the ground and they will cry. Oi, Herry, Herry, don't have children. It does not pay.

"Herry, tell me the truth, would you leave your *zeyde* and *bubba*?" he would ask me.

I never gave any thought to that question, but I replied without thinking, "No, Never, Mr. Stein."

"Because you are a good boy and you will be a good man."

I should not have been exposed to such dismal speech. That was not for a young man my age—sitting there while he made me very sad. I should have been anywhere than where I was; but all I knew was that my young heart had a need to be there, to hear the words that Sam Levine spoke. Oh, I could not say that I understood what he said, but it may have been the rhythm and the tone of the words and the sound of the lilting tropes. It may have also been the warm glow of the room or the

mystical nature of this environment. My reasons may have defied definition.

Mr. Levine explained that he was a Rabbi in Kiev. His *Semica* (ordination document) was burned in the fire, and his old seminary had long been demolished by the Pogroms.

My grandfather was so happy to hear me tell him that I sat through an entire *Mishna* service. Now he had something he could tell Mr. Moskowitz. Mr. Moskowitz's son was a trouble-maker. How often have they found him in the backyard, smoking cigarettes and drinking the left-over wine from the *Kiddush* from Friday night. He could not control him. He ran around all night with all the gangsters on Chrystie Street.

But my *zeyde* was so overjoyed that I was learning Judaism. He would call me over and say, "*Nu*, Herry, what did you learn from the Rabbi today?"

"I learned *Peah*."

"*Peah*, Herry?"

"Yes, *Zeyde*. *Peah*."

"So, what is *Peah*?"

"*Peah*, *Zeyde*, is the sharing of the corners of the field—leaving a portion of it for the poor, for the widows and orphans and the stranger within our gates."

"What does that mean, Herry?"

"It means that no matter how poor we are, we should take some of the wheat we have and leave it for the poor—and for the stranger."

"Yes, Herry, that is right."

"But, *Zeyde*, I have a question.

"Yes, Herry?"

"Does it mean, *Zeyde*, that when we leave what we have to the poor, we leave it to any person—even if that person is not Jewish?"

"What kind of a question is that?"

"I do not know what it means when it says that we should give it to the 'stranger within our gates.'"

My grandfather stared at me for the longest time and began to stammer and then said, "*Meer toornisht fragen.*" (We are not allowed to ask.)

"But what does that mean," I insisted.

"It means, Herry—ask your rabbi. Right now I have things to do. Your *zeyde* has to learn more English.

With that he opened a book and pretended he was reading.

I understood. I smiled. But I was not happy about my understanding. The Talmud gave the answer, but my grandparents had seen such cruelties, so much oppression, that it was difficult to feel anything but contempt for those who brought such suffering to our people.

My grandfather sensed my confusion. He turned to me and said, "Oi, Herry, someday you will be a rabbi and you will find your answer."

"Yes, *Zeyde,"* I answered.

But in my own mind, that was the furthest thing on my mind—to become a rabbi. I wanted to be a prize fighter. I wanted to be like Barney Ross, to grow up big and strong and enter the ring against Tony Canzoneri. I wanted to fight off that hateful philosophy of anti-Semitism; to use my fists against injustice; to fight off those marauders who would try to terrorize us in the streets on the way to school and the synagogue. I was called "Finky, Dinky, Finkel, Finkel Little Star, how I wonder what you are—a Jew boy—that's what you are." Or they would call me "Stinkelstein" or Finkel bells".

CHAPTER XXXIV

In an environment of poverty, hatred and bigotry, the last thing I wanted to become was a rabbi.

Who knows how many years I would have to study under the tutelage of brutal taskmasters who would punish me if I did not know my lesson, or if I did not agree with them. Who knew the desolate streets I would have to walk in the rain and in the snow, with cardboard stuffed into my shoes? Or the hunger, which would gnaw at my stomach; the cold and mean people I would have to encounter who would taunt me—threaten me with bodily harm.

Already there loomed a man with a Charlie Chaplin mustache in Germany, who was arousing such terrible hatred against the Jews. He stood there in the public square before hundreds of thousands of people and fulminated his hatred for the Jewish people. And they cheered him and loved him and adored him.

And I should become a rabbi?

And I should lead a synagogue in prayer? For what?

I see Rabbi Berman struggling to earn a living. Respect, yes, they had for him. Honor, they gave plenty. But food to eat, and the rent to pay—no one had that. They barely had enough for themselves and their children. He lived in the depths of the utter poverty that stalked our miserable streets.

I should become a rabbi? What? To suffer? To see my wife and children starving and pleading for food and warmth?

I should be a rabbi? Why, I would eat better, dress better, or will I be like Rabbi Berman or Rabbi Levine, standing on the steps of the old synagogue, begging for some lonely wayfarer to come in and make up our *minyan*?

Sitting in the synagogue, I heard the discussion. Rabbi Levine said that in his pocket, at this moment, he had a few pennies, which were the sum total of his possessions. Did it matter that the grocery store that he once owned on Norfolk Street was now boarded up? Did it matter that the crackers and herring was all the food he had to eat today?

And I should be a rabbi?

For this?

This shall be my miserable destiny?

That I should have to grovel for slice of bread and some coal to feed my hungry oven?

There is the haberdasher, Mr. Meyer. It was rumored that he was a millionaire. For this rumor, the rabbi gave him special attention, called him every *Shabbos* for the blessings over the Torah. For this, he was treated with honors and every time they had something special, his name would be mentioned.

Some millionaire! If rumors could, somehow, be negotiated into cash, Mr. Meyer would be a millionaire a hundred times over!

If all of his accounts receivable could have been paid today, he would become an overnight American Rothschild.

Then, he would be a somebody, No?

Why, he could lock up his haberdashery store on Delancey Street and move to the Grand Concourse, and mingle with the prosperous people.

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Despite the misery that the people suffered, they had faith. Yet, they hoped. Yet, they looked up to the heavens and waited. They shook their heads, said their prayers, followed the laws of Judaism and waited for the Messiah. Oh, yes, He will come. Just you wait and see. He will come down upon this earth and wipe out this scourge of destitution. We will have a new Garden of Eden. The flowers will grow. The heavens will be radiant with His presence. Peace will exist. Brother will not fight brother. This is what the Messiah will bring. Yes, yes, believe me, He will come and remove us from the nameless diseases of the body and the soul, and drown out the long and dark nights with the glittering stars that only the Messiah can bring.

But my young mind asked what will these people do while they were waiting for the Messiah?

Why, of course, they would fill up the musty little tea room on Eldridge Street. Someone once called the tea room the "University of the Ghetto".

Mr. Chaim Jacobowitz, the proprietor, his face florid, would stand there and wait. No, not for the Messiah. He would wait for the synagogue across the street to finish their prayers. He would wait for them and present himself with old jokes and merry-making. He knew each one who attended. He knew their problem. And in his outward joviality, was able to make them forget their anxieties.

He was ready for them to come rushing in, take their places, eater to eat, to drink tea and to engage in lively discussion.

Discussion about what?

What else? About Trotsky. About Socialism and Communism. About Roosevelt and Hitler; Haille Selassie; about, of course, unemployment and the Depression.

Accordingly, as soon as the ark lights were extinguished by the rabbi, he opened the door to the tea room and they tumbled in and took their places. They started to laugh and sing and tell jokes and stories. Forgotten was their misery, their embittered wives, their children at home wondering when they will have their next meal placed before them.

Someone told an old joke. It was a joke told every night, but that did not matter. Why they laughed was hidden somewhere in the folds of the familiar. They needed to discover the certainties of their existence while they were safely

ensconced in this musty room, in the environment of warm friendship.

Now, Jacobowitz was ready to serve his customers. One would think that he was earning a fine living from his hectic social enterprise.

Some living.

Henry Berger owed money to the tea room for almost two months now. So, why didn't he pay what he owed? He was waiting for some money from his brother in California. Who was his brother? A decent man? A famous man? His brother was a thief! He manufactured cigarettes, packed them and sold them to outlets. But the tobacco was made of straw. Mr. Berber told Mr. Jacobowitz that the money was going to come in. He was now waiting for his customers to come through with a big bundle of money they owed him. "Don't worry, it won't be $5 or $10. It will be $300, or even more!"

Mr. Jacobowitz was patient. Think of all that money—$300, or more. Why, when all that money came in, he could buy Jennie, his wife, a new coat and a new suit for himself, dress up his kids to be the pride of the school, and, maybe—why maybe—he could buy a new Atwater-Kent radio!

From time to time, Mr. Jacobowitz would ask Mr. Berger, "*Nu*? Have you heard from your brother?"

"No, not yet."

"Um. Is that so?"

"That is so. Mr. Jacobowitz, don't you trust me?"

"I trust you. I trust you, but I wish my landlord trusted me the way I trust you—and the grocer—and the suppliers. Maybe I ought to ask them if they trust me the way you ask me how I trust you?"

"What has that got to do with you trusting me? Look, please, Mr. Jacobowitz, be so kind not to ask me every day if I heard a word from my brother. It will come. And when it comes, you won't be sorry. So enough, already, you hear? In the meantime—the usual—strudel and a *glaisala tai.*"

With that, Mr. Jacobowitz would lay a large slice of strudel on Mr. Berger's plate and a large glass of tea.

The noise that droned through the tea room would cause an observer to question the sensibility of the discussions that took place. But if that observer would listen intently, he would have heard an argument led by Moishe Goldblatt. Moishe was always declaiming in loud and guttural tones , waving his enormous body back and forth and clapping his hands when he thought he struck oratorical gold. He was a man who had a college education—a graduate from Columbia University with a Ph.D. He was a professor or Economics in Russia, but now, with all his education, he, too, like all of them—was out of work.

Oh, he had so many iron-clad theories. The Government, he said should take over all the means of production and the land would belong to all of us.

If he was asked a question which attacked his theories, he would raise his voice, bounce up and hurtle his body in the middle of the room and shout, "Who made the Depression? Does anybody know who made this Depression? You, Max, do you know? You are so learned. You are so—you know—bookish. You are always reading the papers, and every time I see you, you are reading *DAS KAPITAL*. Can you tell us who made the Depression?"

Max, his head buried in a book—a timid and retiring man—shrugged his shoulders as if to say that he did not wish to be bothered.

"Motel, do you know who made the Depression?

Motel laughed aloud.

"Who cares? Who made the Depression, he wants to know. Let's sing something. We should not be so serious."

A lone voice from the back of the room whispered: "HOOVER."

The room turned into a chorus of laughter.

"Who said 'Hoover?'"

Everyone turned to look and see who it was that mentioned that dreaded name. I blushed because I had said it. I said 'Hoover'.

"You mean, Finkelstein—he said it? Finkelstein, you said it?"

I nodded my head.

"You know, for a kid your age, Finkelstein, it's nice to know that at least you're thinking. But I'm very sorry to disagree with you. NO, NO, MY FRIENDS, HOOVER DID NOT MAKE THE DEPRESSION! Listen, and you will learn something. You are not talking to an ignoramus. I am an educated man, a Professor, with a Ph.D. And I know what I am talking about. You can talk all you want, but I taught economics in the St. Petersburg University; but you talk nonsense, and I talk from knowledge. You talk from ignorance. Oh, you read your books and the *Forvitz*, but all of you read words that mean nothing.

"Stop eating, already, and listen to me. Max, look at me. And if you look at me you will learn what makes this Depression. I can promise you a world where no one is rich and no one is poor. That is a Socialist world. Capitalism? Capitalism is defunct. Under Capitalism, the rich will always get richer and the poor will always get poorer."

As Moishe was about to defend his pet theories, Berele Berensky began to laugh. He laughed so hard that it infuriated Moshe, and caused everyone to join him.

Berele got up, a tall man—around 50 years of age—with a magnificent mane of wavy hair, and with a voice that echoed

as it sounded in the room, "A Socialist world, he says. You hear a professor has spoken. We should be quiet because the great professor has uttered a sound. Your idea is ridiculous. What's the matter, you are afraid to say the word, 'Communism'? You mean Communism, not Socialism. You want us to become Communists."

Who was Berele Berensky? He was a true intellectual, a Talmudic scholar, a writer, musician, a poet. A man of God, yes, but pagan unbeliever all at the same time. He was a ruthless logician. He never answered a question. To him, everything was relative. There are only few answers to the ponderous questions of our existence.

"You are an idiot, Moishe," Berele roared. The king, the acme, and the emperor of all the idiots. You know about Socialism like I know about pickled herring. Give us a Socialist world, he says.

"All of you, you want a golden land of opportunity? You came here from Europe. You came in rags. You came to Ellis Island and you smelled from the months you had not bathed. You came here and expected to see golden sidewalks. You came here in your huddled masses and what you found were sweatshops. You found the Triangle Shirtwaist Company fire that killed so many people. What you found was indifference. You saw the charred bodies, the endless pain; and girls, mothers, and sisters, friends—sitting at a machine for 12

to 15 hours a day and then burned alive. You hear? 146 of your women burned alive! You sit here and talk and eat and drink and keep this poor man, Mr. Jacobowitz, from his family, so you could sit here and allow your wives and children to starve. I would rather wash the floors with my tongue than to allow my wife and children to sit in their freezing flats while you sit around here and talk nonsense."

At this moment, everyone looked up—startled to see the President (and Rabbi) Sam Levine, stroll into the tea room. He sat down at an unoccupied table while Mr. Jacobowitz placed a glass of tea before him.

"Ah, Rabbi Levine, what brings you into the 'house of Satan', into the 'monarchy of hell?'" laughed Berele.

Sam Levine smiled while he sipped the tea.

Berele paused and continued, "You came just in time to hear what I was going to say. Rabbi, let me ask you a question. We were just involved in a question about the Depression and starvation. Rabbi, tell us what does the Talmud tell us about this condition which faces our nation? You sit with the Holy Books all day. You should know chapter and verse about what we need to know. How does God feel about why we are starving in the midst of plenty of food. Our families are wasting away, eating the crumbs that the rich drop to the ground. Can you help us?"

Sam Levine looked up, surveyed the men in the room waiting for his reply. The room was quiet and intense. They had respect for Sam Levine's rabbinical knowledge. After all, didn't he lead the *Mishna* service every Saturday night. And didn't he counsel people with their problems?

A faint smile broke through his bearded face.

"Starvation," he said, as he took a sip of tea, "is not intended to be one of the laws of God. God gave us dominion over this earth, but when only the few have dominion over this God's earth, this is directly contrary to the laws of God. It is clearly written that God meant for all of us to share the bounties of this world—and when there are those who have more than they will ever need—and those who have to scrape the trash cans for what the rich throw away—no, that is wrong."

Yossele stood in the center of the room, his hands on his hips, looking down upon the humble figure of Sam Levine. "What about work—you know—labor? Shouldn't a man have the right to have a job so he can support his family?"

Rabbi Levine was about to answer the question when suddenly Max opened his accordion and began to play and sing:

Hallelujah I'm a bum

Hallelujah, bum again.

Hallelujah, give us a handout to revive us again.

Why don't you work like other men do?
How can I work, when there's no work to do?
Hallelujah I'm a bum
Hallelujah, bum again
Hallelujah give us a handout to revive us again.

Everyone roared with laughter. Yossele sat down. Berele smiled. There was much talk around the tables. The atmosphere lightened. They sang, they told jokes and danced around the room as Max continued playing old Polish songs, while Mr. Jacobowitz opened his secret bin and poured the schnapps for everyone.

Joy in the face of poverty. Love in the presence of disaster. What did they care? The wives and children were home. How long will it take before many of them will become the custodians of their furniture in the streets? How long will it take when there will be no more credit at the grocery store—and before they will be standing in the streets in their tattered clothing, buffeted by the icy winds?

Now I looked at those people, dancing and cavorting around the room. Who would think about what the morrow can bring them? Could they know it in the songs they sang—or the loud and raucous laughter that rang out?

Oh, yes, Berele could reproach them, call them all kinds of names: cowards, parasites, idlers, *luftmentschen* (men of air),

but as I sat there and looked at them, my young heart felt their sorrow. I asked myself what else could they do? How could they survive yet another day? What would they do without Jacobowitz's place? Could they go home to the sad and throaty lamentations of their wives? It was so sad to sit in the flat and see their kids hungry. It was better to join company with the others and to indulge in the phantasy of a happiness that was only for now. Only the *Hashem* knew what would happen later.

Oh, I remember those days. The times were dark, but the lights were never fully extinguished. There was always hope that God would help them.

Yossele changed his seat to sit with Sam Levine.

"Jacobowitz," he roared, "whatsamatter, one of the finest rabbis in the face of this earth is not entitled to some strudel and another glass of tea?"

"I'm coming, I'm coming. How many hands do you think God gave me? You know I would never forget the rabbi. Strudel and tea coming up."

They all laughed. Everybody joined in singing all the songs they knew. I grew tired, my eyes drooping, and they were still singing.

I went upstairs and sunk deep into the bed with my heavy quilts over me. I could still hear them singing into the night.

One by one, I heard them leaving, their departures full of words of love and caring as they bid each other 'good night'.

There was a stillness in the air. An echo in the night. A car rattled by. I heard the whine of a cat. A dog barking. The sanitation truck. A door closed.

The dawn sang at the prelude of a new day on Eldridge Street.

CHAPTER XXXV

Darkness was, as I thought, a necessary condition for us to know the power of light. I lived in darkness, for I knew so little about light. There were times that my entire life was draped in darkness—not knowing what my life would bring me—never knowing my purposes in life as I was beginning to feel it unfold. For what would be darkness, my *zeyde* would explain to me, if this darkness did not instruct me to know the radiance of the sky?

What would we know about the meaning of the power of rest if we did not labor to survive? How could I, a growing young man, living with my grandparents, know that in the midst of the dark and unutterable sorrows, there was the dim foreshadow of light before me?

Oh, at my tender age, I remember yielding to sensations that quite overwhelmed me, making my head spin in circles. What I thought was ecstasy was darkened by immorality; yet, what did I know what to do with these feelings? There were nights that I would walk up to the roof of my building and view the dim lights of the sky—sometimes the moon—and surely on a clear night, the glittering stars.

In the daytime I would walk the streets and look into the faces of the people. How they struggled to manage to live. But I also heard the loud laughter of these men as they greeted one

another, embracing each other, speaking with such animated joy about what they were doing and how fortunate they felt only to live. How fortunate they were because they managed to amass a fortune? Of course not. Fortunate, yes, because they were able to bless God for even the little they had and owned.

How fortunate they were, yes, because they were friends, because they still managed to meet the challenges to escape the worst aspects of their poverty.

I, myself, felt this joy of living. I would sometimes sit for hours and muse over the fact that I was a Jew; that the Jewish faith had taught me about life, about people, about the struggle to endure another succession of pain and insecurity. But also to think that a year before, we were still impoverished and a year had passed and we were still alive and still struggling.

I could not, however, understand the hatred that poisoned the minds and hearts of men. I could not understand how people who held God as sacred and holy could weigh so heavily upon others who were not of our faith.

By the same token, I could never understand how people so dedicated to Christianity could use their faith to detest me; no, not because I was a detestable person, but merely because I was Jewish.

I remember distinctly, one day, while walking toward my *cheder*, I saw a crowd of people gathered in front of the Roumanian Synagogue. I rushed over to see what was wrong,

placed myself in front of the crowd and there, before me, I saw a twisted cross called a "swastika" painted on the window of the synagogue. I saw glass splattered all over the streets. I stood there in dumb amazement. Why would anyone do something like this—to smash a window of a holy house of God? As I stood there I heard a man laughing. I turned around to see who it was. I heard him shouting in guttural tones, "It's about time they went after the Jews. The world will be a better place when they are all exterminated. Hitler is right. Kill 'em all."

I could not believe what I heard. "Why do you hate the Jews so much," I asked.

"Why I hate 'em? Those sons of bitches—they killed our God. They own this world—the banks, the stock market. They is the ones that robs us all from making a livin'. See, kid, I'm givin' you an educashun. These is things that nobody knows. It is the Jew that's got alla jobs. That's why when Hitler takes over Europe, he'll get rid of these cockroaches and then we, all of us, will have a great world. Right, kid?"

I did not reply. I just stood there. The crowd just gaped there dumbly, watching and listening to this ranting. This man began to throw his invectives at the synagogue when the congregation, which was in the midst of the *Maariv* (evening) service continued to pray out loud on the steps.

"Look at those hypocrite bastards. Look at them shaking like they think they own God."

I did not let him finish. "Mister," I asked, my tone quiet and could hardly be heard, "are you a religious person?"

"Did you ast me if I was religious? Sure, I'm religious. I believe in Jesus. He is my God."

"Then, how do you do this?" I asked. "If you believed in Jesus, how can you hate so much?"

I don't think he liked the question. His eyes narrowed as he turned to me, waving his finger in my face.

"You're a Jew?"

"Yeah, I am a Jew."

"Oh, for Christ sakes, such a nice kid mixed up with these fuckin' bastards, those—"

"How can you hate Jews if Jesus was Jewish," I asked. "And, since he was Jewish, do you hate him, also?"

With that remark he began to laugh. It was a laugh that sent a trembling sensation down my spine.

"What the hell are you talking about—Jesus was—what?"

His face became grotesque, his lips curled in a most ferocious manner.

"I said Jesus was a Jew."

"Who told you those stinkin' lies? You know what the hell you are gassin' about?"

"Sure, I do. Read the New Testament. It's the Christian Bible."

"You don't gotta tell me what to read. That book you told me about, that was written by a Jew if it says that Jesus was a Jew."

"That's right, Mister. Matthew, Mark, Peter, and Luke—all of the disciples were Jewish."

"Gotta hand it to you, kid, how a smart kid like you can fall for all of that malarkey. Jesus was not a Jew. Jesus was a Christian—so how could he be Jewish?"

I stood there and remained silent while he began to flail his hands. He was not finished. He began to shout at the congregation standing in front of the synagogue in prayer. It was a scene which reminded me of pictures I had seen of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem.

"Yeah, you Jews, the day of reckonin' is comin'".

He bent over while his laughter became raucous, almost hysterical.

"Hey, kid, you like stones? You Jews used to like to throw stones—and now I will have my turn."

He reached down to a bag by his feet and removed a huge rock. He took that rock and hurled it at the men in prayer, but missed his target.

"Mister, what the hell are you doing?" I cried out loud.

The men continued their prayers. I jumped on him, but he was able to move me aside—in the meantime, reaching for another rock. Again I jumped on him as he threw me to the

ground, injuring my rib cage; but I was determined to stop him from throwing these rocks. I opened his bag hurriedly and reached for one of his rocks, and, holding it up menacingly, prepared to throw it at him. He grabbed the bag and ran away. I then joined the men at their prayer service.

But I wondered why not one man came to help me in my struggle.

Yes, it was this indifference to this violence which I experienced which made me wonder what will happen in Europe if this Nazi Party should rise and control the political destiny of that threatened continent.

I returned home. My rib cage hurt me, but more hurt was my heart and soul to have witnessed this savagery. I watched my *zeyde* murmuring his prayers with the *Siddur* in his hands. A slow thought crept like a worm through my brain. What was it all about anyway? Why all the prayers? Why all the gratitude to God? And for what shall be the reason for our gratitude? Why did He create man and give him the capacity to hate and to assault one another? Why do we read the psalms where we sing the praises of God?

"His praise shall continually be in my mouth at all times."

"Only in God is my soul at rest. From Him comes my salvation."

"O Lord, hear my prayer and let my cry come to you. Hide not your face from me."

I would never have the audacity to tell my dear grandfather that I read the New Testament. I read the New Testament with zeal, but not with conviction that this would change my faith. But in my young mind I had respect for its existence, and for many of its contents. I remember reading from the New Testament:

"Seek eagerly after love. But if I speak with human tongue but have no love, I am a noisy gong, a clanging cymbal. If I have the gift or prophesy and understand all the mysteries of the earth, if I have faith great enough to move mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give everything I have to feed the poor and hand over my body to be burned, but have not love, I gain nothing. Love is patient; love is kind. Love is not jealous. Love is never rude. It is not prone to anger. Neither does it brood over injuries. Love does not rejoice in what is wrong, but rejoices with the truth."

My questions mounted and I wondered how any person who declares their faith could use that faith to engage in any acts of hatred.

As I thought about this, I had begun to see that the world was judged by light and darkness. It shall be our purpose to know what we need to do to dissolve our hearts. I said to myself that I will now begin to take my faith from the

Torah—from the concept that says that I shall love my neighbor as I do myself. I also decided at this young age that I will do and think for what I believe is right—inspired by the words of God to Moses. I will never be moved by hatred because I shall then become like the enemy. If I hated in kind, I thought, I would allow hate to be carved out for me by the hater.

I was learning. I was thinking. I was touching the rim of my own future. I was a Jew. I was proud to be a Jew, but I resolved that I will be a Jew ripened by the soil of reason, understanding and compassion.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Eldridge Street was sullen and quiet, as though there was a murmur in the air. It had rained all night and now the pavements glistened. The fragrance of spring mixed with the Caruso's spaghetti, cooked with strong garlic. It clung to the nostrils as I opened my eyes to see that it was yet too early to go to the synagogue.

The sound of Berele Berensky, the street peddler, rose from the distance:

"I CASH CLOTHES. I CASH CLOTHES."

The steady rhythm of the horse's hooves on the wet pavement echoed from distant streets.

The synagogue on Eldridge Street stood quietly. I could see some people gathering from my window. It will soon be time to go to the Synagogue. Then I watched Ezra, the *Shammus,* light the *Menorah.*

I remember Rabbi/President Sam Levine almost in tears the other day when he was told that the synagogue could no longer afford to pay him his usual salary. He was still living on the few dollars he made from last year's High Holy Days. But that was now almost all gone. How could he expect credit from the grocery store if he had no way of paying them back? He was now plenty worried. He was concerned for his wife, Greta, and his two sons. What would happen to them if this landlord

would take all his furniture and throw him and family into the streets? The disgrace! The humiliation! The hurt! He would rather die than allow this to happen. He would dig ditches, wash dishes, clean the streets, go down into the sewers and sweat all day and night rather than to be allowed to be thrown into the streets with his family, his furniture and his Talmudic volumes.

No, that was not all. What about the *Bar Mitzvah* of his son, Yitzchak? He had to have a *kiddush* in the synagogue. He would have to provide the cake, the herring, chopped liver, and certainly some wine. Of course, how could you have a *kiddush* without wine. How could Sam Levine, as President of the synagogue, do less? It would be another shame and a disgrace if he did not have the finest *Bar Mitzvah* in the memory of the synagogue.

And what of his other son, Marcus? He was the younger, and he would have to be sent to Hebrew school to prepare him for his *Bar Mitzvah.* I felt sorry for Mr. Levine. How could he not do what any good father would do, to give his sons a good education? I heard him say many times that his sons will, one day, be married under the *Chuppah* and he would become a zeyde and Greta, a *bubba.*

Oh, no, they would not live on Eldridge Street. They would live in a luxurious apartment, with a uniformed guard to open the door in the comings and goings of the day. They

would have fancy Venetian blinds; with actual steam heat hissing up through pipes and a toilet in the apartment and a gleaming bathtub. Someone asked Mr. Levine why his sons should have all those luxuries and he looked up and said, "Well, why not? Why? Is being poor such a bargain? Isn't the toilet in the hall the consummation devoutly to be wished away?"

He often dreamed about the day that his son, Yitzchak, would be a famous doctor with a stethoscope hanging down from his white apron and Marcus would become a lawyer, " you should know," like Abraham Lincoln.

"Is it so bad to dream? What is a dream but a cobweb sometimes broken and shattered by fate. The wind comes along and the dream fades. But suppose the dream would become a reality? Is it wrong? Is it against God's laws? Is it such a crime for him to desire the best for his children?"

I would hear Mr. Levine laugh and watch him as he wrung his hand in glee of what could be, but was not.

"That would make me a 'somebody', no?"

And, besides, there was an election soon and Mr. Levine wanted to be re-elected as President of the synagogue. He enjoyed his role as president. It made him feel important.

But this year he was a little bit uncertain if he would be re-elected with Herman Schwartz declaring his interest in that post.

No, it was not as simple now to be re-elected after five years. But who could hold a candle to Sam Levine? He was such a wonderful scholar; he was loved by all people. His advice was sought, not only in this synagogue, but all over the community. What foolishness. Anyone even thinking of being president while he was serving with such understanding and love for his congregants? Truly absurd.

It was true that Sam Levine, besides being a rabbi, was also a magnificent cantor, who, when he sang sent shivers down your spine. I heard him sing the *SHEMA KOLAINOO* on the High Holy Days rehearsal. It was a voice that brought tears to your eyes. When he sang on Friday night's Sabbath service, and the Sabbath Service, the women in the balcony sobbed and the men downstairs wiped the tears from their eyes.

But Sam Levine was poor and Herman Schwartz owned a dry goods store on Rivington Street. I heard that he was a man of considerable means. He wasn't exactly timid either about his desire to oust Sam Levine from the presidency. I heard that he had invited congregants to his home, offered them a glass of tea and cookies and drummed into their heads how much better off the synagogue would be if he became president.

Herman Schwartz was a tall man with a young and lean face, fierce eyes and a booming speaking voice. Some of the congregants said they heard him sing; and, it was said, that he sang well but could not be compared to Sam Levine. Sam had

great style and could be compared to Yosele Rosenblatt. But it was Mr. Schwartz's compelling personality that made a person look up to him and respect him. Not only was it said that he spoke like a scholar about Judaic matters—and about the world—but he was not bashful to let you know about his inexhaustible fund of knowledge. He was always invited to be the speaker at the Educational Alliance, and the Henry Street Settlement. I would hear him speak at the Eldridge Street tea room. He would invariably engage in debates with Berele Berensky about the poverty in the nation. Berele blamed the Capitalist system for the poverty that stalked the land and why people didn't have enough to eat and were thrown out into the streets. Herman Schwartz blamed the laziness of the people to find jobs.

But, with all of Herman's prowess, who could hold a candle to Sam Levine, who conducted the *Mishna* studies after the *Havdalah* service every Saturday night?

But I saw the difference in these two men that should not be overlooked. Sam was modest, soft-spoken. He spoke in a sing-song undertone while Herman roared with his words with passionate and bombastic style. He intimidated his listeners, not only with the power of his speaking voice, but with his vast knowledge of every subject he spoke about. The congregants would listen with their mouths open, not daring to disagree with him for fear that he would put them to shame.

This is what convinced many congregants that this was the voice that was now needed in the synagogue. He was a man who would take charge and solve their problems. He would go forth, not take any nonsense from any of his detractors, and make decisions.

Besides, it was said that Herman Schwartz was wealthy and would make a considerable donation to the synagogue. After all, Mr. Meyer said that the synagogue needed a new Torah, a painting before the Holidays, some new phylacteries and *tallaisim*, and, of course, some new *Machzars* for the High Holy Days. The synagogue could use to have the windows cleaned and the ark redecorated.

"When you look at the yellow and brittle pages of the prayer book," Mr. Goldenstern said, "it is a shame and a disgrace to God that a synagogue should be so poor that it could not afford new prayer books. Sam Levine, God bless him—yes, he was a good man, kind and gentle, but how could he compare to Herman Schwartz? Herman was a man who stood straight and spoke with such round tones. He was forthright and so sure of himself. How could it hurt the synagogue to have a man like that standing up for the synagogue? When you think of the new books, a new Torah, glittering chandeliers, a new coat of paint, even a generous donation, doesn't it make sense that he should be the next leader of the synagogue?

Mr. Abrams spoke of that need. "If it will be said what will happen to Sam Levine, what could we say? Is there not birth and death? After all, what was permanent in life? So, it should not be a total loss, we could call Sam Levine an 'emeritus', no?"

This "emeritus" business. What did it mean? Some great genius dreamed this up and it became a way to escape from the gratitude that came from a congregation that wanted to carve out a new destiny. You give a man a name. Call him "emeritus"—and, *shoin*—you found an answer to the problem. To be an "emeritus" would mean that his name would appear on the bulletin board, but what did it mean in a larger sense. It meant that Sam Levine would be on the bulletin board and he would have no responsibilities.

Berele tried to help Sam to retain his position as the president of the synagogue, but to no avail.

How did all of this begin? How did the discontent with Sam come to the surface?

It began one morning at the *Shaachris* service. Hymie Aaronson was missing a page in the prayers. It was said that a man like him you could not ignore. He was the owner of the Aaronson Pickle Factory on Essex Street. His contributions amounted to $300 a year! When he spoke, everyone listened. He was provoked to fuming anger when he discovered that the prayer books were in such horrible shape. That day, after the

service, he exclaimed with his face suffused with his displeasure. He strode the floor of the synagogue, pointed his finger at Sam Levine.

"It is your fault, all your fault, that a synagogue should not have proper prayer books. You take the Roumanian Synagogue. They would not stand for such nonsense. Imagine a place of prayer and we have to read from *Siddurim* with pages torn out. The Roumanian Synagogue has books that are new because, under President Farbstein, they care about their congregants. What's more, you should see their new Torahs and their latest style chandeliers, and a rug that runs all the way down to the ark, a great cantor, Yosele Rosenblatt, and a magnificent choir."

He continued, "What do you have here? A shame, a disgrace. Old and yellow prayer books, which, if you touch them, they would fall apart in your hands."

He heard someone say, "sh! Sh!"

"What are you shushing me for? You mean I am not speaking the truth?"

I saw Sam's face as he looked up from his prayers. He rocked back and forth, closed his eyes as though he did not hear a single word that issued forth from the synagogue critics. He resented the interruption of his prayers, but he knew that what was said was true. Yes, the synagogue was poor. There was nothing the synagogue could do to improve it because of the

limited income from dues and contributions. His body swayed with the prayers, betokening the biblical passage that said that all of our bones should be mindful of God's presence. He sang the *Awlainoo.* He bent his knees and bowed his head as the words of the prayer tripped from his frightened tongue. He sang out loud, "*Awlainoo L'shabaic ach adone Hahcole.*"

He felt a tear poised at the corner of his eyes. He knew it now. He felt it. It came to him like an explosion in his brain, his heart, and his soul. It was in the heaviness of the air. There was no question about it. A new president is going to be elected. I saw his sagging face, the prayers read with heavy emphasis, his frame collapsing and shrinking. No longer would he be leading the *Mishna* services. They would probably take away his role as the cantor on the High Holy Days.

I thought about it. I am sure others did, too. Should he now begin to change his ways, become more aggressive, more outspoken? But I knew that he could not do this. That was Herman Schwartz, not Sam Levine. I saw the difference. Herman's face became florid when he spoke, his eyes and his cheeks puffed up with arrogance and self-righteousness, his eyes starting from his sockets, his hands flailing wildly, brushing off anyone who would dare to disagree with him. He was, indeed, a spell-binder. Sam Levine was not a spell-binder.

If anyone would have asked my opinion, I would have said, "What's the matter with those people? Didn't they know

that it was not leadership that Herman Schwartz was offering? Didn't they see that Herman Schwartz would rule the synagogue with the iron power of his personality? He would be a dogmatic leader. He would not care about what anyone would say. He would be the ruler, not the leader. He would create division and dissension. He would ruin the character of the synagogue. He would pose as the Messiah the same as did Sabbati Zvi. Why didn't the congregation see this Herman Schwartz for what he was. Couldn't they see how he strutted about, his face grim and his lips curled in a snarl, demanding his way."

This is what Sam Levine saw. Arnold Kransky, the vice-president, told Sam how bad he looked and that he needed a vacation and a long rest. After all, to be truthful, he was not getting any younger.

Ezra, the *Shammus* repeated what was on everybody's lips—that the synagogue needed money; and, if the synagogue had a benefactor, we could become a wealthy house of prayer.

He was asked why we needed a wealthy synagogue. He replied, "Why, shouldn't the Torah have a fine ark, no?"

It was further said that the synagogue will not be painted with Sam Levine's learning and his golden voice.

Sam Levine was now nervous and irritable. He snapped at his poor wife. His speeches were dull and when he spoke, nobody listened. They would go out of the synagogue and go

home. He sang loudly and carelessly those hymns he once sang with thrilling intensity. His voice was becoming rasping and throaty.

One Saturday night, after the *Havdalah* service, Sam Levine conducted the *Mishna* dialogues. The men gathered as usual for this Talmudic ritual. Tea and crackers and schmaltz herring were placed on the table. Sam took his place at the head of the table and began to comment on the *Peah* portion of the Talmud. Across the table at the other end sat Herman Schwartz, his eyes glaring at Sam. When Sam saw his eyes, his smirking face, his lips with open contempt, he tried to speak, but his words went limp. Suddenly a powerful and booming voice broke forth, "Mr. Levine, why don't you read from the portion of this week? Our portion is *Nashim*, divorce. We will begin to talk about divorce, not *Peah*. We covered *Peah* a long time ago."

Sam's face contorted with pain. He knew Herman was right, but in his confusion, he had forgotten. His limbs ran to marble. But how could he admit that Herman was right? That would be an impossible humiliation.

"Mr. Schwartz," he cried out, "I'll have you know you are wrong."

"I am wrong?"

"Yes, you are wrong. We are not up to *Nashim*. I will not tolerate any more interruptions. We will now continue with the *Peah* portion of the *Mishna*."

The words flew back and forth, while the congregants sucked their sugar, sipped the tea from their saucers, bit into the crackers with a slice of herring. But it all got out of hand when Sam pounded his fist on the table, spilling the hot tea into the laps of the congregants. Herman rose and fell on Sam and tried to choke him. Ezra, the *Shamus*, rose and stepped between them. "Please, Sam, and Herman, this is not a nice thing you are doing in the presence of the Torah. You are grown people and should not be at each other's throats. Please take your seats and let us continue with the lesson. Yes, Sam, Herman was right. We are at the *Nashim* portion of the *Mishna*. Remember, we were speaking of *Gitten* last week?"

But Sam would not listen to Ezra's sober words.

"No, Ezra, it is *Peah*."

"It is *Nashim*," Herman roared back.

Sam fell silent. He stared at Ezra, searched his eyes for understanding.

"It is *Nashim*, Ezra? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Sam."

I saw it on Sam's face. I felt so sorry for him. His face fell, his head in his hands. He rose and walked away. His throat constricted and he sobbed openly his voice breaking out,

"*AL CHAIT SHECHETAWNOO LIFAWNECHAW.*" (And for the sin that I have sinned.)

He returned to the table and offered his hand to Herman.

"I am sorry. I am a stubborn old man, I guess."

I saw it on the faces of the congregants. As surely as God created the Universe in six days, there was no purpose to continue this session tonight. One by one, as the shepherd counts his sheep, each congregant filed out of the synagogue, quietly kissing the *Mezuzah*, and walking down the flight of stony steps into the warm night.

The synagogue was draped in total darkness as Ezra bolted the door and disappeared into the damp and foggy night as the stars were hidden behind a veil of clouds.

CHAPTER XXXVII

It was late Friday afternoon. The sun was beginning to recede in the west, casting grim shadows along the pavements of Eldridge Street. There seemed to be a new energy felt on this street. The Orchard Street peddlers were rattling their pushcarts back to the stable until Sunday. Now it was *Erev Shabbos* and they had to prepare to go to the synagogue. But somehow many of them found themselves in the Eldridge Street tea house. It was a relaxing thing to do, to sip a glass of tea, look out the window and watch people scurrying through the streets—all of them in a hurry.

To sit here in the tea house was a sort of a respite away from their wives and children, away from the cold on Orchard Street. Now, what else was there to do, but to sit and allow the mind to wander, exchange a few words with some friends, to listen to the accordion player while people began to lift their voices singing RAMONA.

Soon the tea house became crowded. There was some talk about the Roosevelt Administration, about anti-Semitism, and the way the economy is shrinking so many people into the ground like the fruits and vegetables that were dumped because they could not be sold. A question was asked as to how there can exist, today, a society where the reason for the scarcity of food was because there was too much food.

Berele Berensky got up, looked around the room with a knowing smile on his face, tossing his long, wavy hair to the side. "You talk and you don't know what you are talking about, all of you. Hear me out. It is the Capitalist system."

He punctuated this observation by raising his glass over his head. "The Capitalist system that will paralyze the poor man and he will get poorer, while the rich live in the lap of luxury. And, furthermore, why is it so many millions of dollars are spent today to build the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building. This we need, these giant buildings reaching into the sky like the Tower of Babel, while, at the same time, many of us are losing their flats and being thrown out into the middle of the streets?"

Berele was proud of the point he made, looked around for some approval, but it seemed that no one listened. George Hornstein and Max Kramer were playing chess. Manny Friedman and Ralph Goldstein were playing checkers. Around the room I saw pinochle games. They indulged his tirades, but few of them listened, not because they did not care, but because they heard all of this before.

The political philosophy that motivated Berele was a self-confessed attraction to Communism. Not that he was a member of the Party, but he saw in that philosophy where the oppressed worker would finally mean something to the captains of industry today.

Other men were busy talking about the flights of fancy of Harry Zimmerman, whose wife died only a few short months ago—and the headstone was not yet unveiled—and he was seen consorting with other women in the neighborhood. What a shame and disgrace it was for him to be seen with not only women, but women who smoked. Imagine being seen walking the streets with a woman who smoked cigarettes! And some of them said that he would be seen in the Metropolitan Cafeteria eating unkosher food, like ham and bacon, and reading the DAILY WORKER. But my mind did not hesitate to ask how they knew that he frequented this cafeteria and ate unkosher food, if they, themselves, did not visit this forbidden place.

There was such excitement in this smoky den. There were voices to be heard, men arguing, others singing, but this was their home. This is what saved them from the deep anxieties that grated upon them day in and day out, living from hand to mouth.

But Berele could not be contained. His deep bass voice kept going, whether he was heard or not. It was his philosophy that even if they did not listen to him, a part of what he said had to make its way into their understanding.

So Berele kept talking, waving his huge hands in the air. "You should keep your eyes on this little man in Germany, this insignificant Austrian corporal, with his bellowing voice, shouting at people while they give him thunderous applause.

What was he saying? It is time that we began to listen to what this man is saying. I'm telling you—and remember what I have told you—that a shadow of horror will begin to darken the landscape of Europe. You may laugh at this Hitler. You see he looks like Charlie Chaplin, and who could take him seriously, but, he is not a joke. He is there for you to see and to hear. Hear what he says. He is telling us that he plans to exterminate the Jewish people! And we sit and play chess and checkers and pinochle. This Hitler is not an ordinary man. He will be worse—yes, worse—than the Czar. He is a menace to our Jewish lives. Are we so blind that we find comfort only in praying to God? And we sit back and watch those menacing clouds of danger darken the skies of our lives? Yes, you can pray. I say that prayer is not enough. Religion is the true opiate of the people. It lulls you to sleep and we expect that if we pray enough, everything we want will be given to us. NO, NO, NO, this is not true! Yes, prayer blinds us to our poverty and to the frightening events in Europe. Haven't we seen enough from the Pogroms? No! Poverty, hunger, tyranny and injustice will not leave us when we walk out of the synagogue satisfied that we have brought our troubles to God who will listen to those prayers.

"Oh, you can *'Shema Yisroel'* all you want. You can hear the finest cantor chant the prayers. And the tears will fall from your eyes and your body will tremble; but if the workers

of the world do not stand up and unite, we will be slaves again, as we once were in Egypt.

While Berele was speaking, it seemed that he was using round words, as though he was orating to a huge auditorium audience. He flailed his hands wildly, looking in all directions. But as he was speaking he saw Sam Levine appear at the doorway of the tea room.

He stopped short and cried out, "*Sholom Aleichem*, Sam. For a moment I thought I was in the presence of Elijah. Welcome to the sanctuary of Satan. Why aren't you in the synagogue preparing for tonight's services?"

Sam smiled weakly.

"You smile—but your eyes are sad."

Rising from his seat, Berele called to the proprietor to bring Sam a glass of tea and a slice of strudel. Berele took the strudel from Mr. Jacobowitz and placed it before Sam. "For you, Sam. You are the best and you deserve the best."

"Thanks, Berele. You are very kind. Aren't you afraid that some of my religious demeanor will wipe away that agnostic behavior?"

Berele looked into Sam's eyes with amusement. Why is an Agnostic and Socialist acting so kind to a man of God?"

"Because, Sam, you are a true man of God. It is in your face, your eyes. All right, now tell me, what brings you, a man

of God, into such an unsacred environment, particularly an hour before the Sabbath?"

Sam paused, took a sip of tea and bit into the strudel. "This is good."

"You didn't answer my question."

"You need an answer?"

"Why, Sam, am I being too forward?"

"You're right. You deserve and answer. Let me say that sometimes it is important to sit with friends who consort with the devil and to surround oneself with mavericks like you."

"Thanks for the compliment, Sam."

Sam took another bite of the strudel and sipped the tea. "Berele, I meant that as a compliment. Yes, a maverick is what you are. You see, Berele, the world needs mavericks like you. That you gave up on God is sad, Berele, but I know there will be a time that you will return to God."

"Why do you say that?"

"I say it because God already resides in you."

"God does?"

"Of course. Look at you. You are a man of kindness. You are a man of charity. You have established a code of morality which honors human life. There will be a time when you find peace with your soul and will join the world of religious mavericks."

Berele always loved to hear Sam speak. His soft, measured tones warmed him. His words were like the soft, magical resonance of peace, soothing his savage soul. They were like gossamer threads weaving a silken curtain before his eyes. Whether he agreed with Sam or not made no difference. He saw his eyes. He saw his face. He trusted him. He loved him. He could count on greater wisdom from Berele than he received from many of the congregants in the synagogue.

What impressed him most about Berele was his sheer honesty—not honesty that cut into the heart and soul—but honesty that was kind and loving, with no cruelty.

Sam continued, "Whatsamatter? Abraham—he was not a maverick? You know what he did in his father's shop, destroying all those unsacred idols.

"Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Jeremiah and David—they were, all of them, mavericks. Berele, you are a pigmy, a lilliputian. Look at how they changed the world. So, you see, I am not critical of mavericks or turn up my nose at them. I respect you—more than you think. And why do I respect you? I respect you because you do not speak emptiness. You are a man of substance, not shadows that can be seen and not touched.

"Many of us, we go to the synagogue and expect that when we pray to God that He will come down and take our problems in the palm of His hands, and the breadlines will

disappear, and the starving children standing out there in the streets will be fed and the homeless will be housed. And if they pray loudly enough, and express their lamentations with enough tears, the factories will reopen and everybody will be working. We know that this will not happen, Berele. We must stand for something—be somebody—not sit back and wait for God to take our problems into his care. We must not lie on our backs and allow the cruel tyrants to persecute us. It is not God's Holy Will that we sit in a house of prayer, constantly bent over in our devotions, while the landlords are throwing us into the streets. Our prayer is for our understanding, Berele. It is for our need to love. It is God's will that we rise—not only for the *SHEMA YISROEL*—but that we rise up against injustice, where some people eat more than they can consume, while others have to scrape the bottom of the trash can to find one bare chicken bone."

Now it was Berele's turn to smile. "They should hear you in the synagogue. I never heard you talk like that, Sam."

Berele turned to the others."Did you hear that, Meyer?"

Meyer looked up from his chess game.

"Never. A true Socialist with a *yarmulke* on his head."

Those within earshot of this dialogue laughed.

Same and Berele talked on and on, and then sang some Jewish songs. Berele showed that he was not entirely without a Jewish education. Together with Sam and a group that sat

beside them, they sang. Before long, the rest of the people in the tea house joined the singing. They sang *Chasidic* melodies. In a moment the tea room was pervaded with companionship and love. Gone was the gloom. Gone was the oppressive depression. Gone was the weariness of the spirit. Even the dim lights seemed brighter.

They even forgot that it was getting late, and the sun was beginning to recede in the west toward the river, creating shadows along the cobbled street, where the clopping of the horse's hooves could be heard. Sam was oblivious of the time. The synagogue service was no longer in his mind. He did not realize that the lights of the *menorah* were burning, and the men were gathering for the Friday evening services.

Suddenly Berele pointed to Sam and exclaimed. "Sam, please—*ELI, ELI.* Sing *ELI, ELI* for us."

The choristers stopped singing. All at once there was silence in the tea room. You could hear a pin drop.

"Now? You want me to sing that now?"

"Why not, now? Come, Sam, all of us want to hear it."

Sam looked around the room. He saw through the haze of smoke, those eager faces, waiting for him to sing.

He began. "*ELI, ELI, LAZMAN ALATAWNOO*---"

The room pulsed as Sam's voice rose to capture the mood of this anguished folk song.

The deadly pogroms; the torment of the Jews throughout their history; the long lines of the people dressed in rags—with charred and bony hands—reaching out for a crumb of bread; the burning Torah set afire by the twisted apostles of hate; these people as they saw their families smothered by fire and smoke, searching for a homeland, beaten and sore; children murdered before their eyes; the horror of war and alienation and abandonment; the dead flying in the air amidst the bombs. Oh, it was all there in this plaintive song.

Sam's voice was pure gold, burning with a molten passion. When he raised his voice with the *SHEMA YISROEL*, he saw tears in the eyes of his friends. The agnostic Berele was seated at the table, his back to Sam, ashamed to show his face, swollen with tears. All was silent around the room.

Berele rose, took Sam by the hand, hugged him and kissed him on the forehead.

My grandfather would often tell me, "Was it written that Jews should not cry?"

Suddenly everybody began to laugh. No one knew why they were laughing. But it felt good to release oneself from the prison of their sadness. Jacobowitz roared with laughter. It was not a shallow laughter. It was an unceasing, convulsive shaking of his corpulent body.

Henry Zimmerman approached Mr. Jacobowitz and smelled his breath. "Aha!! Mr. Jacobowitz, you are a

scoundrel, a law-breaker—a fake! Not only that, you have something we want. Right, everybody?"

Everyone shouted."Right, Henry."

"Mr. Jacobowitz, tell us where you are hiding the schnapps, or we will report you."

Mr. Jacobowitz's face blanched.

"Where is it? Tell us where it is , right now—or—"

"All right, all right!!"

Mr. Jacobowitz pointed to the cabinet where the sugar was stored. Berele was the first to lunge at the cabinet and remove the bottles of liquor.

Before anything could be said, the liquor was poured into glasses. Now, instead of drinking tea, the gathering was pouring those precious spirits down their parched throats. They drank one glass after another. A toast to Roosevelt. To Mayor Walker. A toast to Rabbi Sam Levine. To Berele. To Mrs. Fanny Bloom. And to the deposed Herbert Hoover. They circled Mr. Jacobowitz, who now had a silly grin on his face as they toasted him. They saw me sitting there and they toasted to Herry Finkelstein. They coaxed Sam to drink, but he shrugged his shoulders.

But after some persuasion, Sam, though he was not a drinking man, poured some of those spirits down his throat. Everyone cheered another toast to Rabbi Levine. He screwed up his face. The toasts continued. They toasted Rabbi Berman,

Ezra, the *Shammus*. Sam sat there as the warmth of the liquor caressed his body. He decided that this drink made him forget all of his concerns. He took another drink. They all cheered again. They danced and they sang and they laughed out loud.

There was none that could convince them that they had any problems. All they knew was their shared joy at this moment as they held hands and danced the *Horah*.

When Mr. Jacobowitz saw that this carousing was getting out of hand, he held up his fat palm and announced that it was getting late and he had to lock up.

Sam was, by this time, bleary-eyed. He tried to stand up, but his knees buckled beneath him. He spoke utter nonsense. "I am the only one they know. With me the synagogue will be rich and grow. I am the only one they know."

Mr. Jacobowitz put away the liquor. Everyone slowly left the tea room. Sam Levine and myself continued his ditties.

He looked at me, his eyes bloodshot. He was unable to walk. "Come, Finkelstein, I gotta go to the synagogue. I am already late."

He laughed in a drunken way. "I am late. Standing before repentance gate. I am late.
So all we do is wait—Wait for me at repentance gate."

Sam could not stand on his feet. He kept falling. Mr. Jacobowitz and I slowly picked him up and led him through the

door as he staggered. He cried out, "Whereeya takin' me? I wanna go to the shynagogue. They're waitin' for me."

Very cautiously, we led Sam across the street, up to the steps of the synagogue. This done, Mr. Jacobowitz left and there I was, holding Sam up by the threshold of the sanctuary. I opened the door and Sam peered in. What he saw was that the services had begun and the men were now standing for the *BAWROOCH HOO.* Sam opened his eyes, seemed to recognize where he was, and what he saw was the prayers being led by:

HERMAN SCHWARTZ!!!!!!

He struggled as he tried to remain standing. But he fell back on the altar in front of the ark, while Herman Schwartz concluded the *SHEMA YISROEL.*

CHAPTER XXXVIII

My direction as a young man of 13 years seemed to be headed toward the Rabbinate. Day and night I was engrossed in Torah and Talmud studies. I did not have much time for anything else. I had sat with rabbis and sang with cantors. My mind was full of countless aphorisms of Jewish life, history and ethics. I was exposed to the rivalry of ideas and concepts that were pounded in my head night and day. I saw the beautiful and the profane. I had witnessed grown men lift up their hands to one another, engage in fist fights, over a tractate of the Talmud—an idea or a maxim. I would shake my head in disbelief when I saw violence as an effort to settle an argument. I heard the music of my faith. I loved it. I loved to sing the music over and over again. It was music which spoke with such power of the soul in flight. It was the music of unforgotten years sounding in my brain.

The more I learned, the more I began to appreciate the wonders of God's universe. I began to feel that my tongue could not locate the utterance I needed to answer many questions I asked. I gave considerable thought to the rituals; but, more so, to the *Musar*, the ethics of our faith, such as the *Pirke Avos*. However, once in a while, I would put all of that intensity aside, put the book I was reading down, and think about my mother. The thought of my mother tore me apart,

rent my soul. When I thought about my mother, I would feel a tear roll down my face and a choking sensation overcome me.

How could I forget that I had a mother? How could I forget her sweet face, her graceful walk, her eyes that looked into mine with such love? But where was the love? How was she able to place that love in her eyes and not in her relationship with me? Was I not worthy of an embrace? Was I not worthy of words that would calm my anxiety? What was there in my boyhood that found it necessary to send me away, to cast me off—unwanted, dispossessed, forgotten—like an old shoe. Why was my brother, Evans—why was he the darling of the household? Was he of purer vintage than I? Was I ugly and so misshapen in my mother's eyes that she should be unwilling to have me at her side; to hold her hand; to give me a hug and tell me how much she loved me? I was told by my grandparents that the reason I was not living with my mother was because my stepfather would not marry her if I lived with her. Straining credulity, and not wanting this to be true, I rejected this notion. But as time went on, I began to believe it more and more.

These thoughts began to invade my consciousness and even my dreams at more frequent intervals. I saw my mother in my dreams wearing a pure white chiffon dress, unfurling its folds in the breeze, allowing me to see her body through the delicate fabric. I saw her walking toward me, her jet-black hair

flowing in the wind, her face lit up with the joy of seeing me, her eyes drinking in my presence. I would lie in bed and experience the sexual presence of her body surrounding me, the scent of it enclosing me in such feelings, which made me feel ashamed. There was, in that feeling, a need to have my mother hold me to her bosom, to lie there until gentle sleep engulfed me—and I felt a warm, liquid joy overcome me. Such feelings I had never felt before, except when I kissed Annie.

I wanted to devour the world in which I lived. I wanted to please Rabbi Berman. I wanted him to be aware of my intense devotion to my studies. The rabbi was a man of peace. He would sit close to his books, virtually surrounding himself with the giant books of the Talmud, shake his body as he drew learning from the books he read. He was a man who sought answers to life, a man of *Gamulit Chasidim*, of kindness. In his presence, I found comfort from that deep sense of disinheritance I felt.

The rabbi was a man who followed faithfully the tenets of Jewish law—to visit the sick, to comfort the mourners, to receive and honor people from all different faiths. When I was in his presence, something deep stirred within me. When I was in his presence, I felt the *shechina*, the God within me. It was the dedication of his mission, his profound concern for my grandparents and myself. He would come over to me and put his arm around me, ask me how I felt and if I needed to talk

with him. It was as if he knew the radical changes that were taking place in my body and my need to experience sexual ejaculation.

What I remember most about Rabbi Berman was his smile through his beard, how he took my little hand in his and said softly, "Someday, you are going to be a Rabbi."

I remember how I laughed. I thought, how could I be like him? How could I be like him? With all of the deep layers of anger that gripped me, how could I compare to him?

I remember one evening, after the *Havdalah* services on Saturday night, he spoke about the commandment in the Book of Leviticus."Hatred of one's fellow creatures is one of the three vices that puts a man out of this world."

He would go on, quoting the *Pirke Avos*. "Who is mighty? He who turns an enemy into a friend."

One of the congregants at the *Mishna* table burst out in a fit of anger, "Why, Rabbi, do you suggest that we should make friends. Never mind what it says. The people who wrote that did not know how it was to live in these days. Rabbi, do you make friends of the *goyim*, the non-Jews? Are you saying, while you are stroking your magnificent beard, that we should make friends of our sworn enemies?"

The Rabbi smiled. He looked at me. That was the part of the text that he made me study. The congregant continued, "We should make friends after they robbed us, cheated us,

reduced our people to shadows of life, ejected us from many countries, made us vagabonds—yes, they made us into wanderers. They starved us. They murdered our children, raped our wives. And you sit there, Rabbi, and speak words of sheer nonsense. You are telling us that we have to make friends of these *goyashim* monsters? This is not the meaning of this commandment, Rabbi, if you do not mind me saying so. This is surrender! Surrender, do you hear? This is like saying that no matter what you do to us, how much pain and torture you visit on us, we will smile and say, 'thank you'. With this I cannot agree, Rabbi. And, as much as I respect your great wisdom and as much as I love you, your philosophy is purely visionary."

The Rabbi looked across the table. The eyes of the congregants were upon him, waiting for his reply. He sipped some tea while he ate the lump of sugar. He put the saucer down gently. "What am I to say to you, except that it is written into our Torah that the strangers within our gates are created by God. It is written that if you have done your fellow man a little wrong, let it be in your eyes, great. If he has done you a little good, let it be in your eyes, great. If he has done you a great wrong, let it be in your eyes, little. Read it in the book of Leviticus, 'thou shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge.' It means that we do not retaliate insult for insult, but justice, we

will pursue. Rejoice, not when your enemy falls, and be not glad when he stumbles.

"Now, let us try to understand what we are saying. Are not Christians created in God's image? And, remember, we were once slaves in the land of Egypt. Yes, we were beaten, starved, whipped by the taskmasters, torn from our families, but shall it be our answer that we do those who caused us injury, that which they did to us? Haven't we wept tears of sadness to see the Egyptians drown at sea? They, too, were created by God. No, it is not what was, that is important any more. It is what *is.* And it is what shall be. Is it not written that hate is a poison which poisons our enemies and poisons the one who poisons?

"No, we shall not return evil for evil—for then we become evil, and we become like the enemies we despise. Is this not so?"

Thus spoke Rabbi Berman. The men who sat at the table listened, nodded their heads, drank their tea, nibbled at the schmaltz herring. The rabbi went on reading from the *Mishna*, while the rest bowed their heads. Someone asked where President Sam Levine was, because it was unusual for Rabbi Berman to conduct the *Mishna* service. Before the Rabbi could answer the question, Ezra, the *Shammus*, dangled his keys, signaling that it was time to lock up. The lights were

closed, and, one by one, they lined up to kiss the *Mezuzah* and walked into the darkness of night.

That was the Rabbinate in those years. When one of the congregants took ill, it was a major calamity shared by the entire synagogue. And it was such a happy celebration when the sick congregant returned from the hospital. They served the cake and the wine, the chopped liver and gefilte fish—you are right—they could not afford this, but to them it meant one more proof that God was good.

Yes, they argued with each other. They screamed and yelled insults at each other. They called each other names—idiot, *meshuganer*, "how could you be so stupid?" But this was done with no enmity— only to make a point that might have been lost in the arguments and only to increase their understanding of the Torah precepts they were discussing. Who, or what were the consequences of an insult? They still loved each other, no? They held the highest respect for one another, no? They would flail their hands, laugh out loud at one another, and in the end, sit down and play a friendly—and sometimes not-so-friendly—game of pinochle.

When one of them died, they would mourn over the death, yes, because of the loss of a friend and, also, that the congregation was now decreased by one.

These were the values I cherished. The respect, the love, the caring, with all of their poverty and their wretchedness.

They had a way of life that was the full spiritual measure of their hopes to be and become the architects of eternity.

CHAPTER XXXIX

The days and the weeks wore on. I continued my studies at the synagogue and the Hebrew school. I was an excellent student in Hebrew school, but in the regular school, I was a very poor student. I had fantasies that one day, when I would come home, there would be my mother greeting me with an open and warm smile to tell me she is now ready to take me home. I sensed the fragrance of the bountiful earth. Even on Eldridge Street, with its fathomless depths of suffering, fettered by the lack of food and heat in the winter and the waking possibility that one of these people would be the next victim and be thrown into the street. I was fascinated by life. I drank of the spirit of universal thought. I was freighted with strange longings. New dreams began to take wing upon my fancy, outweighing those years of sorrow and even bitterness that lodged somewhere in the chambers of my heart and will.

To live on Eldridge Street could not, by any means, make me forget these circumstances under which I lived. I could never forget Jason, Steven and Evans. They found constant residence in my dreams. Oh, how I would love to see them now, to talk with them, to laugh with them and play with them.

Here, on these streets, with children dying each day from diphtheria and scarlet fever, with all the daily funerals that I saw ambling down the street, I found joy in living.

Day in and day out, my poor grandfather would be placed on an iron carriage with his organ and he would be taken through the streets, begging for a penny and a nickel there—and God knows what miracles He can devise—sometimes a shiny dime or a brilliant quarter. This was the way we ate. My grandfather always liked to say that if he were not disabled we would starve to death. That, of course, had its own ironies. How would he survive if he were not disabled? Would we not be the sorry victims of the day-to-day treadmill, standing in the middle of the street with our furniture? If this would be the case, we would die. And my mother would be sorry. Oh, how she would cry over my dead body. The tears would flow like a river down her face. And I would feel that she deserved the pain of her grief. Her pain—her grief—why, she had all of this coming to her, and I would be lying there in the coffin, enjoying her suffering,

I made many friends here on Eldridge Street. I even knew the racketeers. They would come by sometimes and give me a dime. They always had toothpicks in their mouths and snappy suits. And they laughed a lot. When they saw me, they laughed at how a kid my age would be so devoted to the synagogue and they felt sorry for my poor grandfather.

Whenever my grandfather encountered them on his daily trips, he would come home with enough money to last us two weeks. In that event, my grandmother would drop in 25 cents to each charity box nailed to the wall. Because of Mickey, the Gun; Tommy, the Hood; Baby Face Charley; we would be able to enjoy a good meal. I would see these gangsters walk into the tailor shop at the side of our building—smiling and laughing and talking a language I did not understand. It was about women and how the women gave into their needs. Baby Face Charley had three women he could call on at any time.

I would walk past the tailor shop and see them standing there, talking in whispers. When the rabbi needed a *minyan*, he would ask them to attend the services. They never refused the rabbi, and sat in the back of the room pretending they were following the service, moving their lips as though prayers were coming from their mouths.

The rabbi always gave them a glass of wine and a piece of cake. I knew that they did not have a wholesome reputation, but there was something about their manners, their congenial ways, that always made me feel at home with them.

There was one man I always saw in the morning. He would pass our building at 172 Eldridge Street, remove the top of the garbage receptacle and pick through its contents. Sometimes he would find a chicken bone still moist from chewing, or a rotten tomato. He would stand in front of the

receptacle and devour the food he found as I watched him. He would growl if he found nothing to eat and move on to the next building. His eyes were haggard and wrinkled, sunken in hollows as dull and black as charcoal. They blazed with molten anger and had the expression of a man who had no hope in life except to await the clammy hand of death. He stood, bent over, grotesque in shape, and with one shoulder raised as if he were suffering from a severe condition of arthritis.

He wore an old and tattered coat, a shaggy beard mottled with old food he had eaten. His old shoes clung to his feet. He would pass my house every day, look through the garbage can and snarl. No one seemed to address him—even to look at him. Neither did anyone seem to be annoyed by his presence, his unsightly appearance, the odors that reeked from his unwashed body.

The kids danced around him, laughed at him, called him names: Grumpy, dumpty lushy, wino. Once they put skates in his path and he toppled over while they laughed. But he arose, wiped himself off and without even a hint of an expression of anger, walked on as though nothing had happened. He paid no attention to their guffaws. All he did was to dig his knotted fingers into the very bottom of the trash can and pull out a soggy chunk of bread. I saw him grab that bread with his gums for he had no teeth and devour it like a mad, hungry beast.

I felt a sense of sorrow for him. I wanted to talk to him, to sit with him and to let him tell me how he got this way. I had read stories from books I saw in the library where a man lost his mother and for the rest of his life he would allow himself to sink deeper and deeper into misery and depravity. I wanted to walk over to him—to smile at him , to engage him in conversation, but who could talk to a man with such a forbidding face—twisted and misshapen—hungry with sorrow. Having no teeth, his face looked more menacing. He reminded me of a horror movie I had seen in the New Delancey Theater. I saw him in as the old and mad professor, his eyes glittering with sinister intent, concocting a chemical formula for a man turning into a wild beast each lunar period.

I would love to use my free time walking over the Williamsburg Bridge and then back to Houston, where there were times that I heard my grandfather's organ music. There were times he would come home with three of four dollars; but, at other fortunate times, with seven or eight dollars.

Why, I thought, I could do that. I had a good voice. Why not sing in the yards. I could make a few dollars and give it to my grandparents to show how much I think of them, and to make their lives easier for them. I could pretend I was crippled, go into the back yards of those tenements on Second Avenue and sing in the yards.

I remember the first yard in which I sang. I had a very strong voice. I sang liturgical music, and, I could not believe my eyes, made 50 cents that day. I was so very proud of what I accomplished. I ran home with my fifty cents and gave it to my grandmother. I expected a nice word, a hug and some praise, but, instead, she brought the coins to my grandfather. He called me over, his eyes blazing with such a fire of anger I had never seen before.

"Herry," he raged. I never want you to do that again. You hear me? NEVER! NEVER! NEVER," his voice raising into screaming decibels "YOU ARE NOT A BEGGAR! YOU WILL NEVER BE A BEGGAR! AS LONG AS I AM LIVING I NEVER WANT YOU TO DO THIS AGAIN! YOU HEAR ME? ARE YOU LISTENING?

He turned his face from me. He was choking in a paroxysm of anger, and then I saw tears come from his eyes. "You hear me, Herry? It is enough that I have to be the beggar, but, you, come over here. Let me look into your face. I will kill you, you hear me? No son of mine is going to turn into a beggar. If you begin to beg now, all of your life, you will beg like Motel, the *schnorrer.* You see him picking up the food from the garbage every day? Is this what you want to be, Herry? ANSWER ME! Is this what you want to be—a *schnorrer* like Motel?

"No, Zeyde," I murmured.

"No, LOUDER—LOUDER! Is this what you want to become—another Motel?"

"NO, *ZEYDE!*

He took me in his arms and kissed me while my grandmother stood by, smiled and walked away.

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My daily odyssey was to walk around the neighborhood and stop by the different stores, look into the windows, and learn all there was that I could buy if I had the money. The toys I saw, fascinated me. But I could not have them simply because I could not afford them. I loved to look at their colorful boxes. I would love to open the erector set and build carousels. My friend, Irving Goldstein, has such a set and he was able to create buildings. Since I could not have those toys, I went next door to the bakery—to see the loaves of bread they were baking. Or to look into the windows of Gittelstein's Delicatessen on Delancey Street.

"*Oi, geshmack*--" I would hear my grandfather say those words when my grandmother prepared his special meal. "*Oi geshmack.*"

***Oi geshmack*, to see those frankfurters on the grill and the moist sauerkraut next to it. It made me realize how hungry I was. If I had a nickel in my pocket, I would rush in and order a frankfurter and watch Mr. Gittelstein, himself, place the frankfurter on the roll and then spread the sauerkraut on the**

roll. *Oi geshmack*, the joy and thrill of the first bite! Who could forget the first bite, my teeth sinking into that hot and delicious experience.

One day I happened to have ten cents—a brilliant and shiny 10-cent piece. What was I to do? I dreamt of it. I smelled. I was possessed by its sight. I could hardly wait for my legs to carry me over to the Delicatessen Store. Now I had the money. Now I could devour two frankfurters—not one.

As I was about to order a frankfurter, I saw Motel—the man in the tattered coat—his face reflected in the window standing behind me. He did not say a word—just watched me as I walked in and ordered the frankfurters. As he watched me, I began to dig my mouth into its succulence. I smiled at him, but his frown was so set on his face that I wondered if he knew how to smile.

I ate my first frankfurter hurriedly, but he kept staring at me. I couldn't bear to see that hungry look on his face. I was beyond the hunger stage, but I could have eaten three more frankfurters!

I thought about what my *zeyde* would say. When I grew older, would I be like Motel? Would I have to stand and watch while some other people ate? What will happen to me when my grandparents could no longer take care of me? When they died, would I die, too? Is that what God meant— to see us die when our loved ones died? Was I meant to die when my father

died? Or was I meant to be lonely, an orphan, no mother or father? Would I be like Motel, lying in the back alley with a putrid bottle of booze by my side.

All these thoughts were interrupted when I suddenly realized that it was getting late and I had to be at the synagogue.

I asked Mr. Gittelstein to make me another frankfurter, called Motel over and handed it to him. He never said a word—not a 'thank you'—not even a glance of recognition. I ran to the synagogue, climbed the steps and entered the room. The *Mincha* service was about to begin. I looked up—and THERE HE WAS—the man in the tattered coat! He was no longer sad. His face was lit up with a smile, his eyes glowing with a fire I could never hope to see. It was as though, like Moses, he had ascended Mount Sinai and returned, his face, the illumination of his eyes, his eagerness to pray. I could not believe this scene. I saw Rabbi Berman talking to him, and then I saw him rise, go up to the Ark, and begin to sing the evening prayers with a voice so sweet and compelling, that it brought tears to my eyes. If ever I needed a miracle defined, there it was in the very lexicon of life.

I could not believe what I heard. Just incredible. Only an hour ago, I sat in Gittelstein's Delicatessen Store, munching a frankfurter, and this forlorn soul, this wreck of a man, whose grubby hands dug into the wells of food buried in a garbage

can, eating the decayed food that was thrown away—and that he would be standing here in the synagogue, singing with such cantorial excellence. I heard the voice, but could not connect the voice with the man. My heart sang with him. When he finished, I saw Rabbi Berman walk over to Motel, embrace him, hand him a dollar bill. They walked out together.

I wondered who this Motel was. Did he have a family? Did anyone listen to his thoughts and his feeling? Or embrace him or look kindly into his eyes? I watched the Rabbi and Motel walk out. Together, they entered the tea room. I often pondered on the wonders of life. About miracles. It was as though my eyes had deceived me, or my ears sent me sounds that were not real—that did not really exist.

The next morning, THERE IT WAS!! There was Motel, the man in the tattered coat, digging into the garbage. I walked over to him as he stood there with a chicken bone in his hands. "My name is Harold Finkelstein. I heard you sing yesterday. You have a beautiful voice."

No answer.

"Are you a cantor?"

No answer.

I did not know what further to say. I tried again. "Are you hungry?"

This time, no only did he answer, but he became very animated. He began to jump up and down like a clown. His

eyes, which were dull, now became alive. "You are Harold Finkelstein?"

"Yes."

"Well, I want to thank you for that frankfurter you bought for me yesterday. I needed it."

"You're welcome."

"That was nice, very nice, that such a young boy your age should care about me."

"I am glad I was able to help you."

"Sure, kid. But yesterday was yesterday and today is today. And I am hungry now. I want you to go upstairs to your house, right now, and bring me something to eat."

"I can't do that," I replied. "We have no food in the house. We have to wait until my *zeyde* comes home. Then we will have supper. That is, if he brings home enough money.'

"Why, what does your *zeyde* do?"

"He's a beggar."

"A beggar?"

"Yes."

"You mean, he can't work?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"He has no legs."

"And you live with your grandparents?"

"Yes."

"Don't you have a father and mother?"

"My father died."

"And your mother?"

I paused. I stumbled over words I wanted to say. But, before I could feel the tears rolling down my face, I stuttered out, "She's dead, too."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

He stopped eating the chicken bone and threw it back into the receptacle. "I'm sorry. A kid like you—not to have parents. That should not be. I see you don't have it so good. Someday, when you grow up to be a man, you'll end up like me. That's for sure. And one day, you'll die—no, not here, not there—not in any place that you will plan, but someone will find you like they will find me—laid out in some alley—a burden to the world, even in death."

I could not bear to hear any more of his morose ranting. His words cut into my heart like a sharp blade. They staggered me. Those bleak syllables of dread and doom from a tongue who could no longer speak beauty, and a soul that could not envision beauty. Every move of my body seemed like a strained harp—ready to sound out new dissonances of horror. That I—that I should be found in an alleyway, dead!

Once again the black shapes of doubt began to torture me. He kept talking, but I no longer heard his words. His voice was hoarse and strident with a cruel sense of mockery in it. He

was doing to me what children did to him. It was as if he were placing roller skates beneath my feet and he was enjoying watching me stumble and fall and writhe in pain.

No, no, no! I will never grow up to be like him. Never! Never! Never! I will never be so poor that I would have to dig my hands into the entrails of a garbage can—the offal, the stink of decayed flesh. That I should be a scavenger like Motel, standing there, facing a can of rotted food—.

No, I will become a cantor or a rabbi, or both. I will be a credit to my grandparents. I will study the Torah. I will be a student and a scholar.

Why is this poor and bedraggled soul lowering me down to his level? And why am I allowing him to do this to me? Inside me, every bone in my body trembled. I saw a river or men marching like a tide toward me, my senses swimming in clouds of confusion. Empty shadows of ghosts looming over my head, smiling and vaporous ghosts—spectral forms of glee—watching as my body began to bend into the caverns of filth for want of a bone—a rotten cadaver of a chicken. And a witch appeared before me—there was this old and wretched witch pointing her bony finger in my face, convulsed with snickering laughter, telling me that I will one day be burned and scorched and I would be a useless cipher, an old beggar with a shaggy beard and a toothless mouth, begging for a

crumb of food. The people would pass me by and spit in my face.

Motel saw my face, placed his hand on my shoulder and laughed. "I must have hurt you."

He did hurt me, but above and beyond that, I began to see in this hapless soul a warmth that swarmed all over his face, that same warmth I saw as he sang the *Maariv* liturgy.

"Yes," he said, his voice now mellow and his eyes seeking my face. "Living today, in these times, is not so easy. I might say it reduces us to the prowling streets seeking an acre of survival here and there. We have to hunt, plunder, and, if necessary, to steal. Sure, kid. We have to steal or we will die. We have no destiny. Decency will kill us. For to be decent and kind, I will find myself lying in that alleyway, decent, but dead. Understand what I'm saying, kid?"

He then left me and hobbled across the street.

I remember Rabbi Berman's words. The rabbi said that whatever happens to us was set and preordained by God's will. If we got sick it was God's will. And, if we got better, this, too, was God's will. If we lost a loved one, this was also God's will.

I could not understand any of that. It made no sense to me. If God was so mighty and so kind and so merciful, what was His pleasure to see us suffer? Was this His source of joy? To place us here on this earth and expose us to hunger and disease? Why did people like my poor *zeyde* lose their legs.

And why did my mother abandon me and my father die at the age of 25? Was this God's will? And was it all preordained that life should be this way, that a man with the golden voice of Motel shall have to scrounge for a moldering morsel of food to survive? And if he did not steal and did not plunder, he would have to starve. Why did God give us the Ten Commandments, and then make it necessary for us to violate them?

The man in the tattered coat left me with these questions. But how could such a man sing like an angel one day, and be a miserable wretch the next day?

How could a kind and merciful God devise such a plan? And how could we include in our prayers the mercy of God's will?

No one know. No one asked. That was the way it was. But my young mind and heart said that Motel was an angel whom God sent down to remind us that the destiny of life was in our hands. That we needed to care for those who were destitute and poor. This was the measure of God's will. The words of Rabbi Berman echoed in my mind. "If you walk in my statutes and keep my commandments and do them, then I will give you rain in due season, and the land shall yield her increase and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. And you shall eat your bread to the full and dwell in your land safely. You shall lie down and none shall make you afraid. For I will multiply you and establish a covenant with you. I will

walk among you and will be your God and you shall be my people. I am the Lord your God who has brought you forth out of the land of Egypt that you not be bondsmen. And I have broken the bonds of your yoke and made you go upright."

Those words from the Torah (Lev.26) burned in my heart, and now I faced my growth into life unafraid.

CHAPTER XL

One person in my young years stands out as a most important person in my life. As a life-style and role model, many people would consider him an abject failure, a ne'er-do-well, a stumbling wastrel. But, in a larger sense, everyone listened to him when he spoke, for he was articulate and very persuasive when he began to orate about the conditions of society today. There was a compelling power of persuasion that moved people. He was a stubborn man, but never arrogant; a willful person, but never boorish; a contrary person, but always willing to listen to another point of view. No, not with indulgent tolerance, but with sincere interest.

He had ideas that I never heard expressed in any quarter—in the synagogue, or from others in the tea room.

Berele Berensky. He was married to a very kind and lovely woman named Molkele, and a son who lived somewhere in California. But he rarely spoke about them.

What did Berele do for a living? The best thing he knew how to do was to buy old clothing and sell it back to people who needed them. I often heard him say in the tea room, "you have old clothes, a torn jacket, some old shirts, an old dress, a worn-out hat, shoes, anything to wear? I give you a good price. I will not cheat you. Come to my flat at 172 Eldridge Street on the Fourth Floor, Apartment 4B. Bring your old *schmates*, and just

like this, you will walk away richer than you were before you came. With the money I give you, you can buy a quart of milk, a loaf of bread, a *Shabbos challah*, some strudel and—who knows?"

Berele Berensky was more than the intellectual and emotional consciousness of Eldridge Street. Here on Eldridge Street, between Delancey and Rivington, in the synagogue, in the tea room, at the University Settlement, in Ratner's Dairy Restaurant, Henry Street Settlement, in the offices of the Forvitz, Berele was also the heart that yearned for something more than the weary, stale and flat meaning of life. He was the very spirit of this narrow block, with the red-brick homes huddled together. It was here that he came with his lovely wife, Molkele, and son, Irving, right off the boat, the greenest of greenhorns. It is this ramshackle tenement where he lived, with the toilet in the hallway; with the stench of urine; the leaking ceilings; with the scurrying mice; the roaches scaling the walls—it was here that he found the *goldena medina*, the answer to his sense of a free life.

If you saw him in the street, you would see his grayish underwear flapping in the breeze. He used to talk with me. He would take me by the hand, kiss me on the forehead, and tell me how much he loved the synagogue—the liturgical chants, the sing-song commentaries of the *Mishna* by Rabbi Berman. He would sit and talk on endlessly and look up as he spoke.

How he hated the darkness of the brick buildings, the vaporous garbage, the leaden color of the sky which blackened the landscape of the streets—and there in the north, visible on Eldridge Street, the Chrysler Building glistening its shameful wealth upon the gross poverty of Eldridge Street.

When Berele spoke, he was usually critical of this broken and troubled life here on the streets.

He called himself an agnostic. He was wary about the existence of God. Yet he was a master of Talmud. Can he fathom the sea? Do we know about what is above the clouds? Or below the waters? That is like asking if we could estimate the genius of Berele Berensky.

There were times he would sit in the tea room before the evening crowd and muse about his life. When he was young, he would spend many endless hours sitting at a reading desk, swaying back and forth, over some Talmudic volume his dear grandfather had given him.

When Berele spoke, he would spin a magical spell before my eyes. My mind would go blank. His words were nonchalant with such a spirit of kindness and concern for human life. "For what else is there," he would say, "if we do not experience the joy of being born, and each other? What wealth do we need? Wealth is the dream of fools, a mad and hysterical passion to increase more and more wealth until we die. And then we will

be as poor as though we were reeking in poverty. And what is the World? A mere curl of smoke for the winds to scatter."

No, Berele was not an ordinary person. His father was a professor of Russian literature in Minsk, also a Talmudic student.

Berele would sometimes rise and bellow out, his voice precise as the notes of a bell striking the hour of the day. "Come, now, ask me some questions. Is it history you want to know or geography, philosophy, psychology—or Talmud? I will answer your questions. Yes, I cash clothes—but I should have been a college professor—like my father."

I would study his sturdy face, his unkempt hair around his head like a silver halo, a half-smile hovering around his lips, his eyes—bright, brown eyes—as clear as truth itself.

I loved this man, the way he spoke, his unerring confidence, his swaggering motions and sometimes—when he thought nobody was looking—the sadness that fell upon his face. That was when he remembered his father and how he was murdered outright by the Czarist Cossacks, right before his very eyes.

He would sit silently, murmuring beneath his breath as to how many times he heard of a Rabbi, or a neighbor, who would suddenly disappear out of sight.

They came, he said, always in the middle of the night, the coldest night of the year. They pounded on the door with

such animal force that the wooden framed building would shake. The door was flung open—and there they stood in their statued places. They did not ask questions, just stood there with ice in their eyes.

All of a sudden, the younger officer grabbed his father by the neck and threw him down a flight of stairs. Molkele began to scream. A sense of panic overtook his wife—and they stood—their eyes unbelieving what they saw.

The snow was falling in a storm that leaped at them out of the darkness. The wind cut through their bones like sharp razors. They grabbed their truncheons and beat his father mercilessly. They began to laugh a chortling and crackling laugh as they watched his father stumbling in the snow in a trail of his blood, coughing and hacking. His father fell to the ground and could not pick himself up as the laughter echoed in the cold air.

"My father died that night," Berele said, as tears coursed down his cheeks. "Why," he continued, "these Cossacks—didn't they have mothers and fathers and sweethearts? Didn't they snuggle in their mother's breasts and hear the cooing voice, prompting them to sleep?

"Suppose—just suppose—one of their mothers or fathers or sweethearts were sent to watch their loved ones stumbling naked in the freezing ice and snow, beaten with wicked whips across the groin and back?"

His face fell into his lap and could say no more. He looked into space and pretended that he fell asleep. He woke up, looking around the room. He began to laugh, take a sip of tea.

"You know the story I just told you? It was a lie. It was a magnificent lie. I made it up—all up—to interest you, to entertain you. It never happened."

I heard the story he told and I knew that it was the truth, but I never shared my thoughts with anybody.

Berele was always free to talk openly about his life, about the people he knew, about his radical philosophy—sometimes bordering on Communist principles.

Oh, yes, they had names for him. He was called an anarchist, a Communist, a traitor to his country, a man who should be deported, excommunicated from Judaism. How often Berele spoke about the open hypocrisy that existed by those who professed their religious devotions.

Berele told the story of Sam Aaronson, the manager of the shoe store on Delancey Street.

"He calls me into his house, this Sam Berger. He says he has suits he would like to sell me. All right. That's my business, and certainly I am willing to buy suits—even from members of the synagogue. A living is a living. So, I come to his house, you hear? I happened to come to his house when Sam was in the middle of his prayers. As he is praying, Sam

points to a suit on the table. I pick up the suit and examine it from top to bottom. I hold up two fingers indicating I will give him two dollars. His prayers become louder. He begins to fume. Right in the middle of the *Shema Yisroel*, he yells out, 'you are a crook and a swindler. You would steal the gold teeth from your mother's grave. How can you say two dollars for this fine, all-wool suit?

'*Adonoi Ailohainoo.*

'Ridiculous. Give me five dollars.

'*Adonoi Echod.*

"I look at him. 'I will give you three dollars and no more—not a penny more. You see, it is torn under the arm and the button holes are frayed.'

"He continued to fume, but took the three dollars as he was praying and cursing me at the same time. He denounced me as a fraud right in the middle of the '*Awlainoo.*'"

Berele was never without anything to say. He would take a seat in the tea room—soon to be joined by others, including myself. He would always speak with a smile in his face, sipping his tea and taking short bites of the strudel.

The others who sat around his table waited for him to speak, and Berele never failed them.

He spoke about a man he knew in Minsk, a Hymie Goldfarb. He called him one of the greatest intellects since Maimonides, or Rabbi Akiba. He came to this country and now

lived on Cherry Street. Sometimes he came to the tea room singing with his accordion.

Berele continued, "One day, he comes over to me and says he would like to meet me in Ratner's Dairy Restaurant on Delancey Street. I asked him if he could meet me in the tea room, and he says he wanted to see me privately. So, I says to him that is okay, but he will have to pay for the food. He agreed. The next day, after a grueling walk in the snow, I met Hymie Goldfarb in Ratner's. I took one look at him. His face was solemn as a grotesque mask. His eyes were hollows of madness, his hair matted and falling into his eyes.

"Finally, after a few moments—just sitting there in silence—he began to bawl. 'Berele, you know I have been married now for 12 years. We have no children, but my wife, Mildred, and I were very happy. I loved her and she loved me. I could kiss the ground she walks on, Berele. But, just the other day, you were walking down the street hollering that you cash clothes and she calls you up and she shows you three of my suits. You gave her four dollars for the three suits. You hear me?'

"I nodded. 'When I came home that evening she asks me if I could invite you to supper. I did not understand her sudden interest in you, but I said it was a good idea. And, before I knew it, I see her packing together a few of my good suits, no, Berele, not cheap suits, but fine looking Roger Peet

pure wool suits, that I wore to the synagogue and to weddings. I ask her what she was doing, and she says that you, Berele, will give us a good price for these suits. This was incredible. I asked her what she was doing and she looks at me with her blue and innocent eyes and says if we sold these suits to you, we would get about $15. It was then that I began to realize that my wife was in love with you.'"

Berele continued and said that the more he denied it, the more he believed that story. He continued, "'Tell me, Berele, you do not lie to Hymie. He was not born yesterday or the day before. Didn't you invite my Mildred to attend your lectures at the Cooper Union, the Educational Alliance, and the University Settlement? All of a sudden I see pamphlets with your name on them—and all day, all I hear is how smart you are—how talented you are. All day long, you hear, Berele? Berele, you are a scoundrel, a renegade, a thief. You have alienated my wife from me and I will speak your corrupt name wherever I go. Berele, why, oh, why, did you do such a thing? Molkele was not enough for you?'

"With that, Hymie got up from the table, called the waiter over for the check, throws it on the table. Before I could try to discuss his accusation, he stormed out of Ratner's. All of a sudden, I am denounced as a philanderer, but what made matters worse was that he left the check for three dollars for me

to pay. He left without paying the check as he promised he would."

Berele, a studious man, a voracious reader, would always be found sitting on a park bench in the spring and summer, reading a book, making notes on what he read. I often saw him reading books by Henri Bergson, Immanuel Kant, William James. One day I saw him reading a very huge book. I asked him what that book was and he said that it was a book written by Romain Rolland, JEAN CHRISTOPHE. He let me look at the book—and what I saw were words in that book which impressed me most. Those words had to do with his friendship with Olivier. I began to read it and each word that fell on one another had such meaning to me. I wanted more, but he said that the book did not belong to him and had to return it. I vowed that one day I will own this book and read it.

Oh, I have learned so very much from Berele. I remember him telling me that he was called a maverick, like an old cow who had to be branded to assert ownership. They called him "maverick" because he would not tolerate any of the ancient prejudices to which people choose to cling.

They came, he said, from the Old Country, and they had their religion mixed up with the hatreds that possessed them.

Once in a while, Louis Rosenthal, the owner of the building, would enter, flaunting his golden watch fob. He stood up straight and boasted how he amassed his fortune on real

estate. He explained that he owned a factory in the Garment Center and two apartment buildings on Rivington Street. He also published his own books. There were times he would sit down and engage Berele in discussion, casting aspersions on his character. "You want to be a success, Berele, you will have to work hard, and put your shoulder to the wheel. Nothing will come to you because you are Berele, the son of a college professor. Go, Berele, work hard. Go to the synagogue and pray. The children today—they have no religion—and what do you inspire? You inspire a new way of life—that the children should disrespect their parents."

Not to be undone, Berele stood up and walked around Mr. Rosenthal. "What are you talking about. What does religion mean to you if you throw men, women and children into the streets in the dead of winter? How can you do it? I mean—on your way to the synagogue each morning—why, you see them, see them standing there, frozen in their places—and you, on your way to the synagogue—you see them and then turn your face from this appearance. How can you do it, Mr. Rosenthal—how??? What kind of a message do your eyes send to your soul that you should see this every day—and remain silent?

"Mr. Rosenthal, how can you not feel an emotion, a stab of compassion? How can you look and pretend you just do not see?

"Do you see that boy?" Berele smiled and turned his face to me. "That boy, he is an orphan boy, the grandson of Abraham Finkelstein."

My face flushed with embarrassment. I tried to get up and walk away from this praise, but Berele sat me down. "No, Finkelstein, you should hear good things about yourself. Time will come when you need to hear a compliment, because in your young lifetime you will hear plenty of condemnation. You are the kind of boy who will begin to think for yourself, and the price you have to pay for this is the price I am paying and will always have to pay. So, if I am praising you now, remember it, because praises for you will be very few and far between."

He paused, smiled at me and returned to talk with Mr. Rosenthal. "So, you see this boy—not an ordinary boy. Here is this boy, studying with the great cantor Yosele Rosenblatt, and you look at him now and think you see what you see, but one day, you will see, he is going to be a great cantor or a rabbi. You ought to listen to him speak. For a boy his age, he has plenty to say."

Mr. Rosenthal listened to Berele, Seemingly unimpressed and walked away.

"I guess he does not want to hear what I have to say, but, Finkelstein, I meant what I said. I see you walking down the streets and you walk like an old man and you are trying to grow a beard. Finkelstein, I think you should stop imitating the old

men, because you are a young man. You know where you should be? You should be on Forsyth Street, playing punch ball, or stoop ball. You should have a bat in your hand hitting a ball a mile. You should dream of Babe Ruth and Mell Ott—not Rabbi Akiba or Moses Maimonides.

"You know, Harold, you are probably more of a maverick than I am when I was your age. When the rabbi gave me a speech to deliver, I did what he asked me to do. But, you, Harold, did the unthinkable. You did what you wanted to do—what you thought best to do. Tell me—why did you refuse to read the speech the Rabbi gave you?"

"I don't know. It just wasn't the kind of speech I wanted to say. I did not want to tell my friends who are not Jewish that they could not be my friends any more. I thought it was wrong—and I would not say it."

Berele laughed. His face brightened. He picked me up out of the chair and lifted me above his head and kissed me. "Always stay the way you are, Harold. How about a nice piece of apple strudel?"

"Of course," I laughed, feeling as though I was in possession of all that was good about my life—being in the presence of such a wonderful man.

CHAPTER XLI

I met Sam Chernovski one day at the tea room. He was an amazing man, but I did not like him. He spoke too fast and swallowed his words, and what he said made no sense. Every time I saw him, he spoke about money. He attracted the interest of many people in the synagogue and here in the tea room. Every time he spoke, he drew the attention of the entire tea room—the young and old—flocking around him, hanging on every word he spoke. He told them how he made his fortune, how he was able to invest his money and how it never failed—he became rich. Those who lost their fortunes on the Stock Market Crash in 1929 should—he said—take heed, for he had the formula for success.

The question was asked that if he was so rich and had amassed a fortune, why did he live on Rivington and Orchard Streets, in the midst of filth, the steady procession of pushcarts, the crying babies? How could he tolerate this awful neighborhood where the peddlers shouted their wares; with beggars whining at you on every block?

Why, if he were so rich, why didn't he live on the Grand Concourse. He could be driven in a brand new Packard, in leisure and style, by a uniformed chauffeur. He would be able to go to the best nightclubs instead of coming here in this dilapidated old tea room. Many of the people Sam met did not

believe his stories because they were just too good to be true—that he could make them rich. With his money, he could move to the Catskills and live in the fresh and beautiful air. Why did he need to look out the window and see Mr. Kramer's long underpants flapping in the wind? He did not have to smell the stale fish out of Mr. Ginsburg's Kosher Fish Market, or hear the *yentas* screaming through the window.

He explained that among the rich he is just another man, another person, a so-so in their well-bred society. But here he was a "somebody", a man of importance where every word he spoke meant something. He was the symbol of success and could lord it over the poor who would look up to him with bright and envious eyes. Here he was in power. When he spoke here, everyone stopped and listened. He would expand his chest and explain that the world was a vast cathedral—and he, himself, was the grand vizier—the great champion of justice for all the people.

He was asked how he became wealthy and he would smile as though he was the very incarnation of nobility—removing his derby hat. "Let me give you some advise," he said. "You do not have to be poor. You do not have to starve. You do not have to be in the hands of a greedy landlord. If you follow my advice—believe me, in a few months—I mean it—in a few months you could be rich people. How, you may ask? Simple. Very simple. Investment. You

have a few dollars? Invest it. This is the best time, when the price of a share is so very low. If you do as I advise you, you will never again have to beg or cajole a landlord to give you a few more weeks and not to throw you out into the street."

I listened to this man and was highly impressed. Imagine. My grandmother and grandfather—they would be able to move to another town and be so very happy there.

When I went home that day, I asked my grandfather about the man who came to the synagogue.

"You really believe him, Herry?"

"I dunno. Why would he lie?"

"Well, why do you think you believe him?"

"Well, *Zeyde*, all you have to do is see how he dresses and hear him talk."

"And this makes him all the things you say he is?"

"I guess so."

My grandfather began to laugh as I stood there nonplused. "Oh, Herry, you are so young yet. Soon you will be 14 years of age. You have so much to learn. Don't you see that this man is a fake?"

"No, *zeyde.*"

"Well, you have time—plenty of time. What worries me is how many people believe what he says who are much older than you are, Herry."

I nodded my head and sat there. My *zeyde*'s words did not convince me that Sam was a fraud.

That night I saw Sam at the tea room. A crowd of people began to cluster around him as he spoke as though he were Moses talking to the Children of Israel. "You see me—no—look up from tea and strudel—what do you see? Do you see a *schlep*? Of course not. You see a man who has confidence in life. Right? And why? Because I have all the money I will ever need. I could buy this whole Eldridge Street from Houston to Canal Streets. I can build homes—yes, tear this old and dilapidated building down and build a new apartment house. You will have bathrooms in your apartment, with carpets on the floor, with a new Frigidaire for every apartment. And every apartment with steam heat and hot water. You will have a guard downstairs opening and closing the door when you come and go. He would say to you, 'good morning, Rabbi Berman, you have mail.' And what else? Sure. Of course. I can make the synagogue across the street a palace.

"Oh, I know poverty—maybe better than any of you sitting here today. I know what it can do to you. I know the agonies of starvation. But no more! No more poverty for this Sam Chernovski. I am not a beggar. I am not a penniless wastrel, but a true and honest aristocrat. Yes, I am not an ordinary man. Your ex-President Herbert Hoover and I are best friends. President Roosevelt invites me to the White House

and Hyde Park at least once a year. So you can see that I am a man of substance."

I looked up at Berele as Mr. Chernovski continued speaking. Berele's face bore some amusement. I looked around the room. The men sitting in the center of the room were spellbound. They could not take their eyes off Sam. Here we had the Messiah, Himself, who came to redeem us from the reeking poverty that plagued our neighborhood. I listened with the same rapture and absorption as the rest of those sitting around the room closing in on Mr. Chernovski. I saw their trust on their faces. They needed this. It was as important to them as the bottle is to the newly-born baby.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes, I know what is happening. There is tuberculosis, scarlet fever and diphtheria, and people eating potato peels."

He paused, looking around the room, recording the uninterrupted interest in everyone's face. They needed to hear these words—even if nobody believed him. "Look at me. Are my eyes sincere? Do you see in me a person who will never lie to you? Of course, you see that, and the reason you can see that is because it is there. No, I will never lie to you. You are my neighbors, and when I was down and out, who came to my help. You did. Let me show you something. Just keep looking at me—and you will see the unbelievable."

Sam reached into his pocket and removed a coin. He held it up waving his hand in a circular movement and waited for him to continue. He looked at me and said, "Sonny, what is that I have in my hand?"

"A penny."

"That's right. A penny. This is a penny minted in 1929. Look at it, Sonny. Am I right?"

"Yes."

"Yes, that's what it is. This is a coin minted in the United States. Right, Sonny?"

"Yes, sir."

"Smart boy. You go to school?"

"Yes. Sure."

"I can see that.

"Now, we have established that I am holding a penny in my hands. Everybody comfortable? Now, do as I say. Reach into your pockets and pull out a penny. Place that penny on the table right here.

"Very good. Now, do you think you can trust me with a single penny? Place that penny on the table and we are going to be shocked to see that that penny is going to double and redouble.

"Now you will be watching a dime that you place on a table. You will not take your eyes off the table. Now that you have placed the dime on the table, I am making a statement that

one day you will wake up and you will be rich. It is that simple. Yes. Rich. Now, if you give me ten cents a week, you will see magic before your very eyes. How will I do it? Simple. I will invest it for you and in a few months—no more—the few pennies you gave me will now—not be ten cents—but ten dollars! Mind you. Think of the percentage. From one penny to ten dollars. Let those who suffered from the great crash learn how to make money. I know—and I want to share what I know with the fine people of Eldridge Street. But should we be satisfied with a mere ten dollars? Of course not. Not people with patience and understanding of the value of money and finances. I will invest that ten dollars and—lo and behold—that ten dollars becomes $100. And in a year—mind you—from one copper coin, this coin becomes $5,000! In two years, if you let it lay there, you will have over $7,000!

"Imagine. Then instead of giving me one penny, if each of you gave me one or two dollars—why then you can become millionaires in one single year!"

I could see the faces of the tea room guests, their mouths wide open, looking on Mr. Chernovski as if he were the *Moshiach*, Himself, who came to save all of us from the starvation that has plagued our nation. Yes. This man—why he will lead us into prosperity, lift us up and place us on Jacob's Ladder, and help us to meet with God's angels, who will take us from this earth into heaven, itself. I was impressed with this

man. He spoke with such finesse and articulation. He sounded sincere and willing to help us all out of our misery.

When one of the guests stood up and asked if there were any guarantees, Mr. Chernovski smiled, walked over the questioner, placed his hand on his back. "If you need a guarantee, I shall give you whatever you need. But, I ask you, why do you need a guarantee? Is life guaranteed? Does God give you a guarantee on how long you will live? Go. Go to the synagogue and ask God to give you a guarantee that the heart that He gave you will continue to beat. Go. Don't stand there! Just go. And you want me—a mere mortal—to give you a guarantee?

"Let me give you some advice. I think I am hearing too many questions and I am becoming concerned that you do not trust me. If that is the case, I do not have to stand here. I can go. People on Second Avenue are waiting for me."

After a few more simple questions, Sam saw that he had the crowd in the palm of his hands. But, standing by the door as if he were ready to leave, he said, "I understand your doubts. You should doubt—and the doubters are the kind of people I want to help. Because you are intelligent people. But as I stand here, in the midst of your doubts, I, too, must have my doubts if I want to help you. I will swear before the Holy Torah that every word I said is true. If you want to know more about me, well, I am the Chairman of the Independent

Investors Club, the ITCA, the Chairman of the Committee for Secure Investments, and, also, the President of my synagogue on Allen Street."

President Herman Schwartz, the new president of the synagogue across the street, rose, walked over to Mr. Chernovski, and thanked him for his presence and his program. But as I sat there, Mr. Aaronson's voice rang out, "I want to invest five dollars. With a sudden flurry from all sides, the bills were flying across the room—dollar bills—five-dollar bills—some ten-dollar and 20-dollar bills. It was estimated in excess of over $300 was thrown at Mr. Chernovski. Mr. Chernovski pocketed the money and was about to leave, when Mrs. Bloom rose and lifted her voice above the excitement of the room. "Your name is Mr. Sam Chernovski?"

"Yes."

"And you came to help our poor people?"

"Yes. You heard."

"I know what I heard. I think we should know something more than what you are telling us."

"Why? I already told you."

"I don't think so, Mr. Chernovski. Now you are being very modest."

"I am—what?"

"I said modest. Why don't you tell these good people of your great accomplishments?"

"Why?"

"Just do as I say."

"I have to leave."

"But, before you leave, tell these good people of your interest in art—and that you are a patron of the Arts. Isn't that right, Mr. Chernovski?"

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"There you go—being modest again. Well, I think I will have to help you. Did you ever mail a letter?"

"A letter—you mean—mailed? Of course. Don't we all, once in a while, put a two-cents stamp on an envelope and mail a letter? What is your name?"

"I am Mrs. Bloom."

"Mrs. Bloom, I regret to say that you are wasting my time."

"Again, I ask you, you do—once in a while—mail a letter?"

"What is your point?"

"Just be patient with me and extend your generosity to us just a little longer. Answer my question."

"Your question is if I mail a letter once in a while. Of course. When I write a letter I mail it."

"Good. You mail the letter in the mail box provided by the United States Post Office?"

"Yes."

"But, when you cannot find a mailbox, and you are next to a post office, do you mail the letter in the post office?"

"Of course. What are you getting at, Mrs. Bloom?"

"You'll see. You live on Allen Street, right, Mr. Chernovski?"

"Yes."

"But, when you have to mail a letter, and you are near a post office, you can go uptown or downtown to mail a letter?"

"Mrs. Bloom—"

"Yes, or no?"

"Yes."

"Now, Mr. Chernovski, did you ever mail a letter from the post office on 33rd Street and 8th Avenue—the main post office?"

"If I am in the neighborhood, yes."

"Isn't that a wonderful post office?"

"What do you mean."

"Well, did you ever see their art gallery—and you are an expert on art—a patron of the arts."

"I have to go."

"There you go again, Mr. Chernovski, being so modest. That is a nice part of your nature. Did anybody ever tell you

about that? Now. Please. Mr. Chernovski, everybody here wants to know about the art exhibit in that post office. Did you ever notice it?"

"I—I did not notice."

"That is a shame, because all over the post office, they have such wonderful pictures. And if you took the trouble, Mr. Chernovski—and you look carefully—you will see such a wonderful picture of you in that post office—from the front and from the side. Mr. Chernovski, you are a cheat, a swindler, fleecing our people out of their bitterly-earned money with your empty promises. You will either return every dollar you took tonight, or I shall call the police!"

Mr. Chernovski looked about the room and saw the eyes staring at him. He became flustered, removed the wad of bills he collected, and threw them on the table, and fled.

Berele Berensky began to laugh out loud.

No one stirred. They were stunned by this incident. Then Berele spoke: "Let us play a game. Come with me. Let us take startling leaps into the vast gulf of time. Let us join in the fantasy. It's fun to make believe. No more dirty streets. No more gangsters prowling the sidewalks and killing people. No more shots of bullets in the air. No more the sad-looking prostitute, trying to lure you into her corrupted nest. I cordially invite you to a castle in a nation where we will say *Sholom Aleichem* to each other on the Kee Tov River. There no

one will ever go hungry. I am your exalted king. You could petition "His Majesty" for food to eat. Look at you in your torn shoes. I will put new shoes on your sore feet. I am sitting here on the silk-tufted throne with my beautiful queen. Look at her face. Look at her soulful eyes, full of mercy and compassion. You come before me and I say, 'what can I do for you?' And you say you are hungry and cold and you have a wife and child at home and they will die if there is no food to eat. And I say that there is no need to shed tears. 'Her Majesty' and I know your plight. No, you will be hungry no longer, nor your wife or your child; and your house will be warm and cozy.

"The golden portals of our castle will open wide. I will beckon my servants to bring in all varieties of food you can eat on large, silver trays. What do you want? Boiled beef? Gefilte fish? Chopped liver? A steaming plate of Mama's chicken soup with soft, golden noodles, vegetables—potatoes and turnips, honeyed yams? Whatever you want is yours in large quantities. You will sit at the King's table and eat with the King. We will clothe you from top to bottom. We will fill your pushcart with food, nuts, chocolate, barley, flour, chicken, and choice kosher turkeys. Each of you will receive a large purse full of golden nuggets. We will provide you with a sumptuous home with heat that comes through the pipes, a bathroom in the house, new lace curtains, richly-colored drapes and a view of the finest garden full of riotous flowers.

"Do not be shy. Take what I give you. The world outside of your wealth is cruel. They will hate you, revile you, and degrade you. But as long as we play this game, discover the Messiah who will redeem you. Have no fear when you are in my castle, but do not dare to leave this game, for then you will have to return to who and where you are. You will be what you are now, but not what you were. You will be lost in this world—in this game—and that is all that it is—a game. The same game you were playing when Mr. Chernovski tempted you with his offers to make you rich from giving him a few dollars—and like Rumpelstiltskin, he will turn your little pennies into gold—only a game—only a fairy tale."

Berele finished. The men stood there, ashamed of being so easily duped. But, more than that, witnessing their greed.

I went back to my *zeyde* and told him the whole story. He laughed and I joined in his laughter—and, suddenly, I was so happy to be by his side. So happy.

CHAPTER XLII

Oh, yes, we had so very many unsavory characters on Eldridge Street—lost in their watery dreams, roaming the lonely, wind-swept streets in the winter and the hot and muggy streets in the summer.

The man in the tattered coat was, of course, a man who had so much talent to give. I could see him now in another role—all dressed up in a *kittel* and a cantor's hat—singing in the most influential synagogue on the East Side. Who would refuse to use him on the High Holy Days and on Festivals? Here was a man who chose to roam the streets, growl at all who passed him by. Who knew what it was in his life that caused him to cancel out all of the joys and happiness that could have awaited him? What it was that caused him to be a human wreckage, we could only have guessed.

How clearly I remember the *nebish.* He had a face that was so twisted and gnarled that it would be difficult to see any discernible features. His face reflected the long years trapped in the four shattered walls of his cellar apartment. On the one hand, why should I enter his chronicle in my memoirs? What value does it really have as survey the condition of the East Side, when I was a child? What value would it be to us today as we read this autobiography? Would it serve any purpose except, perhaps, to gain a laugh, a chuckle? I am just

wondering if my dear grandfather would approve of my description of this forlorn man, the *nebish*, whose name was Shlomo. I am wondering if my grandfather would allow me to be a messenger of the depravity that scolded our people the way it did.

Yes, the *nebish* is dead, today. But why should I allow his memory to vanish from the earth? No, I will not allow this memory to lay like a waste in my silent heart. I am to tell what I know, what I feel, what I think created the color and the environment of Eldridge Street—and this is what I shall do. My dear *zeyde* will forgive me. If not, he may slap me across the cheeks and hug me with the same movement.

After all, each of us, in some way is somewhat of a *nebish*—a ne'er-do-well—a person who greets a new tragedy every day. Yes, we think we are so very important. And we think we are the most intelligent, the most learned. But don't we spout and spit and spill out words without meaning? We fight and we raise our voices when we think we know all there is to know. We become arrogant when someone does not share our point of view and our anger makes us a *nebish*.

So, you ask: Who was the *nebish*?

He was a man who had no street, no country, no religion, no world to share—only a deep valley of oblivion. No one knew him. No one cared if they every saw him again. No one would walk on the same side of the street with him.

Yes, the *nebish's* dearest companion is calamity. If there is a misfortune, he will find it. He will find it even when he is not seeking it. It will be there, just waiting for him. In a crowd of thousands, disaster will seek him out. He would be the one to go to the synagogue to pray and not be counted as a *minyan*. He would forget his *tallis* and *t'phillin*. He would walk the streets in the rain and there would be a hole in his umbrella. He would throw out his lunch and take the garbage to work with him. He would slip on a banana peel that he dropped. He would find a pair of pants in a garbage heap, and after he was happy about it, would find that they had two large holes in the seat. He would step into a puddle of cement. He would win the Irish Sweepstakes and lose the ticket. He would win at a poker game and find out the money he won was counterfeit. He would go to a Rin-Tin-Tin movie and fall asleep at the most dramatic moment. He would pray the *Kaddish* instead of the *Kiddush*. Four pennies would be in his pocket when he needed another penny for the train fare. He would work three hours longer because his watch stopped. He would put his right shoe on the left foot and the left shoe on his right foot.

It was such a *nebish* who lived on Eldridge Street. I never knew his real name, but they called him Shlomo, the Humpback. In the delivery of coal and ice he developed a hunched back.

Like the *nebish* he was, in the morning he could be seen lunging forward with ice or coal on his back. Up the stairs. Down the stairs. Day in and day out. How many times did he labor up five flights of stairs with a heavy block of ice on his poor back—and find no one home? Down the steps he labored and when he reached the ground floor, he would hear Mrs. Kramer calling him, "Shlomo, come back. I need the ice right now."

Again, he carried the ice up the stairs. But by the time he reached the top of the stairs, half of the ice melted down his back. Mrs. Kramer then said to him, "For this you want ten cents? You should be ashamed of yourself, trying to give me water instead of ice. You *goniff*, you, trying to rob a poor and helpless woman like me. Here are five pennies."

Glad to get even that, the *nebish* took the five cents. No "thank you". No smile. Not even a glass of seltzer or a place to rest his weary body. Not even a glimpse of pity on him as the beads of sweat poured down the corridors of his face.

Even his beard and his hair became wet with the sweat that soaked his body. Now, down the steps he hobbled. But as it would only happen to a *nebish*, he had a hole in his pocket and the five penny coins scattered all over the steps. Some ruffian kids came by and they picked them up and ran down the steps, laughing loudly.

Oh, no, the *nebish* never complained. He would never cry out against his misfortune. What God willed was good enough for him. I would often hear him express his weary philosophy, mumbling through his shaggy beard, "what good would it be to cry out, to make a plea to God, to stamp the feet and to send my voice up to God to help me. Why should I cry? This is what God wants, no? Did not God test Abraham and Job the same way? Why should I, Shlomo, be any different? It wasn't as if my body was diseased with ugly sores. My condition is *bershert* that I should be a victim of a hard life. When the time comes for me to reach our Heavenly Host, I shall be greeted like a king—like a king!"

Yes, as a child of 13, I felt the great sympathy for this poor man. I saw him the butt of every joke, the laughing stock of the East Side. In my studies with the Rabbi, I learned that it was *Rebbe* Tarphon, who said that silent suffering was the fence surrounding the Torah. I heard the rabbi say that one day, Shlomo's suffering would be a blessing. Shlomo let the suffering plague him, but he gave it no hope that it would ever become a blessing in this world. I heard the Rabbi say that poverty was no disgrace. But a little voice within me answered him and said that it was not an honor, either.

Shlomo decided that he would let God decide what this suffering meant. He would hobble through the streets, pick up ten cents here and five cents there, and return to his dark,

damp cellar and live on bread and tea every day. This is what the neighbors told us. It was hard to believe these stories; but, who knew? How could he manage to survive on such a flimsy diet? We were also told that on Friday night, he would light two *Shabbos* candles the way his wife, Sadie, did twelve years ago, before she died.

Now what did Shlomo need? He needed fancy furniture and a Stromberg-Carlson radio, an Essex Motor Car, Persian carpets on the floor? How many more years would God let him suffer before he would join his wife, Sadie?

Yes, it would be good for him if he could have enough to stop delivering ice and coal, to be able to sit with the Rabbi and study the Talmud. But this was not to be.

Day and night, I would see him carrying the heavy burden of ice in the summer and coal in the winter. I would hear people shouting at him and trying to bring the price of coal and ice down a penny or two. What did he do? He stood there, his face sunken and worn, his eyes, vacant, waiting only to take his miserable coin and hobble away. Yes, oh, yes, who had a conscience? They stole from him, laughed and mocked him. They told stories at the tea room and compared how they were able to reduce the price of coal or ice. I heard their loud guffaws and wanted to cry.

I saw the *nebish* in his ragged clothing. But I began to imagine him dressed up in a new suit, white and glittering shirt,

a new pair of shoes, his beard shaven, his hair combed back, how handsome he would look. But all I saw was his tattered clothing that hung on his body. His face was a fearsome blotch of misery. He wore old and torn shoes; and, in the rain, was forced to walk on his heels because he had holes on the soles of his shoes. He rarely spoke with a normal voice, but growled like a hurt animal. He never laughed or cried. He stumbled on: up the stairs down the stairs; and each day, his back became more hideous.

Did anyone pity him? I tried to say a few words to him, but he just smiled at me. He made his deliveries, took the few miserable coins and again—up the stairs—down the stairs—he stumbled.

Who he was and what he was and where he came from, no one knew—and no one asked. He was a nobody. A *schlep.* A *schmendrick.* A *NEBISH*!

When the kids saw him limping down the streets, they threw stones and garbage at him. Did anyone ever tell them to stop? This was the way it was and the way it should be. He was not human. He was not even an animal. He was nothing—nothing at all. He was the funny man in the movies. He was the drunk who stumbled through life and deserved every calamity that came his way. The kids encircled him and would not allow him passage. They taunted him; called him vile names. But the *nebish* had extraordinary strength, and he

bludgeoned his way through the circle with awkward thrusts of his fists—and they cried out:

"Humpback, Humpback,

"Give us your ice and coal

"And go back—go back—go back

"To your miserable hole."

And that is where he sunk, into the "hole", the fetid, the stinking, putrid dungeon. Mr. Jacobowitz, the owner of the Tea Room, said he saw the cellar where he lived. And he said of the *nebish*, "He sleeps—sure he sleeps. He lays there with gallons of wine beside him and drinks."

And everybody laughed.

Once in a while, during the *Shaachris*(morning) services; and especially for the *Yahrzeit* for his beloved wife, Sadie, he would hobble up the steps of the old synagogue and take a seat in the back. He knew that no one wanted to sit near him. He would look at nobody. He would rise for the Eighteen Benedictions. The rabbi would approach him and offer him some cookies and a glass of tea. The *nebish* would accept the cookies and tea and look into space and tears began to coarse down his beard.

Strangely, the *nebish* began to speak as Rabbi Berman handed him a few coins out of the charity box. "You look at me and what do you see? You see the question that Job asked: 'Why was I born to have to live in such misery?' I am a relic of

history that no one knows except your dear rabbi. Can you believe that once I was a child. Once my mother adored me. Once I had aunts and uncles and cousins. Once I lived in Poland, near Warsaw. Once I was able to play the piano. I was able to play all of Beethoven's sonatas for piano—and all of his six piano concertos. I played with the Warsaw Philharmonic Orchestra. The conductor called me the 'musical enlightenment'. They knew my name all over Europe, the French Conservatory invited me each year to give a Beethoven concert. The London Philharmonic competed for my talent. But the Cossacks came to Poland. They tortured us—and look—here, see what I am holding up—four fingers on my left hand. They cut off my finger and I could play no more. Oh, they maimed us. They murdered our children."

Suddenly, the *nebish* showed his right hand and there he also had four fingers. "Look," he cried, plaintively, "look at what they have done. Do you know anything about suffering—you, who laugh at me, find jokes with which to taunt me? No, it is not the wreckage of my life. It is not the terrible hunger I face every day. It is not my weary loneliness. It is all in my head—Beethoven and Mozart and Chopin—all the music I hear in my head and my poor hands feel the rhythm of the music. Oh, how I wish I had that magic I once had. To sit by the piano and allow my fingers to fall on those black and white keys and to let the music I am playing feed my starved soul.

That is my pain. It is like the approach of doom. To hear the ponderous and majestic tones of the EMPEROR CONCERTO pounding in my ears. I never lost them in my mind; but, like a ship without its moorings, I am left stagnant and useless to those melodies which throb in my brain."

The *nebish* was out of breath as he suddenly grew silent. Soon he looked up at the *Shammus* and the Rabbi and said, "And now my heart hears no more of the music. There just is no more. There is no more."

The *nebish* fell at the feet of the Rabbi. This was the first time I saw him weep.

"Rabbi, tell God to take me away from this world. I am a dead man with no heavenly home."

"No, Shlomo, you are not a dead man. You are a learned man."

"So, I am a learned man. What does that mean?"

"It means you can talk. You can teach. You can learn. You can give. Do you see this boy, Herry Finkelstein?

"So?"

"Do you know his *zeyde*, Abraham Finkelstein?"

"You mean the cripple at 172 Eldridge, the beggar who plays the organ? Yes. Sure. I know him."

"How he would love to change places with you. You have two legs to walk. He sits by the window each and every day and he sees you delivering the ice and coal. You can walk.

He cannot walk. He has to stay. You can go. What he could do if he had your legs. And here you are—wasting your life."

"Rabbi, Rabbi, enough already. I came here to say *Kaddish* for my dear Sadie and not to hear a lecture. It is my life and that is how I choose to live it. All right?"

"And your son, Samuel, how is he?"

"He will be the finest doctor in this country. Now, please enough. I had enough."

The rabbi smiled, pat the *nebish* gently on the head. "If you ever need me, Shlomo, remember, I am here."

The *nebish* limped away, and we could see him returning to his cellar home.

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Once when the *nebish* was out delivering coal, some burglars tried to break into his house. They were successful in bolting open the door, but as they stepped in, their feet got caught in a giant rat trap. They were sent screaming in tormenting pain into the hallway and out into the streets. When the *nebish* returned home, he repaired the door and readjusted the rat trap and fell into a deep sleep.

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There he was, the misshapen, withered little man in his old tattered hat, chopping ice. Who could have thought that such a man could have ever been stirred by a single emotion. Or that a great passion once dominated his life.

During his rare visits to the tea room, all of the gaiety would suddenly subside. All eyes would be upon him as he selected a table and sat alone. Some tried to engage him in conversation—trying to mock and make sport of him.

"You did a good business today?"

No reply.

"You delivered a lot of ice and coal?"

No reply.

"Would you like me to buy some strudel?"

"I do not care."

The customer then called out, "Strudel here, for the Humpback. In fact, make it two pieces for the Humpback—and I will pay for it."

"Why do you call me 'Humpback'? When you do this, your kindness is no longer a kindness. But the insult is not mine to accept. It is an insult to yourself that you try to make sport of me in front of all these people. But I will eat your strudel."

The *nebish* began to devour the strudel like a hungry beast and sipped tea from the saucer. Oh, if this world was a place where we could be moved by this sad spectacle of a human being—alone, isolated, a wretched sojourner of life. How we would know that the Messiah did, indeed, descend from the heavenly skies to save us from our poverty and suffering. Oh, how cruel and unfeeling were the ways of

humankind not to see the pathos, the need for mercy, and to refrain from using the ugly and profane epithets of unkindness. Oh, if only to look back and to visit the scene where Shlomo would be playing the PATHETIQUE SONATA, by Beethoven; and to hear the acclaim for its brilliant artistry. How could they have demeaned his spirit? Why did they call him names? Why did they see his ugliness and not his beauty? For he had more beauty in his ugliness than all of them had in their pretensions.

The weeks passed. The weary soul of this strange man, Shlomo, amid the days drowned in dark and brooding anonymity became a mere shadow. Nobody had seen the *nebish* for many days. Ice and coal deliveries suddenly stopped. Rabbi Berman decided to visit the *nebish's* home to see why Shlomo had not been seen anywhere for days. The residents were waiting for deliveries and there were none. Quite a few people were worried about him. How easy it is to convert to a respect for life when the object of our scorn and mockery disappears. Now, we begin to feel the guilt avenge our cruelty and we are so concerned that we should not be overwhelmed with it. The *nebish* is gone! Where is he? What will we do without him to taunt and to punish and to call names? What will be the residue of our self respect if suddenly he should be gone and we are left with the vacancy of our souls?

With hammers and wrenches, they found no trouble in ripping the rotted door down. The giant rat trap sprung open, but missed the Rabbi's feet. As soon as the light was on, the room illuminated the dreariness of the room. Rats and roaches scurried around. The foul stench invaded the Rabbi's nostrils. There, in a cot, lay the *nebish's* body, with a soft smile frozen on his bearded face. The poor, old man had died in his sleep. Next to him were some legal papers.

When it was learned that the *nebish* had died, there came a wailing and sobbing. Why they wept as they followed the funeral cortege down narrow Eldridge Street, they did not know.

Who shall now become the butt of their cruel jokes? Who could they find to take his place? And from whom could they enhance their sorry and lamentable egos, now that they no longer had the broken back of the *nebish*?

Who shall now be so brave to say that their tears were shed for their belated repentance of what they could have done to bring love and friendship into the life of this lonely soul?

His son, Samuel, wept openly at the open grave. Oh, how much he could have done, taken as his responsibility to see to it that his father did not have to continue to be a beast of burden. He could have seen to it that his father had a decent place to live; that he had wholesome food to eat. How could he have stood silently by and allow his father to live in such abject

poverty—his poor and broken body to die a little each day on that rotted and putrid cot? What were the meaning of his tears? For whom did he cry? It could not have been for his father—for he knew how his father lived—and where were his tears, then? Why are we here now, at the opening gulf of the grave, with the coffin lowered into eternity? Were his tears not for himself, and from an emotion borne out of a guilt which choked his own self-identity?

What could he do for his father he did not do? When the *Al Hawvrachamim* was sung by the cantor, he had to walk away from the gravesite.

I looked at his son and wondered why he cried so openly, when, for a few dollars a month, his father could have lived like a human being—away from the wretchedness that he endured all his life. It was as if God were saying, "Samuel, for shame! For shame!"

When the mourners heard the awful thud upon the pine-box coffin, they knew that Shlomo—known as the *nebish* and the Humpback of Eldridge Street—would be exalted in the world to come.

Yes, exalted in the world to come.

No more mockery.

No more cruelty.

No more pain and suffering.

Now, a king. Now returning to the women he loved, Sadie—both sojourning the heavens in peace and love—love which could not exist on earth.

God bless you, Shlomo, I heard myself say as I wiped away a tear. God bless you.

CHAPTER XLIII

Destiny rolled on its inevitable way. It was quite inevitable that Sam Levine would be defeated in his bid to be re-elected as the president of the synagogue, but he was mercifully retained as the cantor and the leader of the *Mishna* services after the *Havdalah* on Saturday night.

Herman Schwartz had a proud and triumphant gleam in his eyes as he walked into the synagogue. After all, he defeated his hated rival, Sam Levine, and now he could make decisions affecting the destiny of the synagogue. He was proud of the way he manipulated the result of the election asking Mr. Jacobowitz to open up the liquor cabinet; and, in fact, seducing Mr. Levine to drink. Yes, Herman Schwartz was further proud of his crafty methods to oust Mr. Levine.

Herman Schwartz was fearless, outspoken, coarse in his demands. He was loud and forthright, and no one dared contradict any of his opinions for fear of falling into a torrent of words castigating them. His cunning was matched only by his brilliant intelligence.

It began to emerge that Herman Schwartz was to lead the officers of the synagogue into his direction—and none may oppose him—for he would formulate and carve out the goals of the synagogue.

Nothing changed, however. That Herman Schwartz was anointed with this power was nothing compared to the events of the community. Darkness settled over Eldridge Street earlier than in any of the other streets of the old neighborhood. All was the same now as when Sam was president. The only difference was that we heard more assertiveness, more loud talk about what had to be done to improve the conditions of the Synagogue. But, how? And on what? From where would the money come in order to provide new prayer books, more *tallaisim*, a spring painting? Poverty still hung over the dirty streets, and the daily ritual of the pushcart peddlers from the stable had not changed.

Sam Levine was still standing on the steps of the synagogue, waiting for the *minyan* needed for the *Shaachris* service. I asked the question as to why it was not Herman Schwartz who was standing on these steps and not Sam Levine? And why was it not Herman Schwartz pleading with the people passing by to enter the synagogue in the early hours of the cold, winter morning. No, that was not the way it was to be. Herman Schwartz was inside the synagogue standing in front of the gas heater, warming his hands, inhaling snuff and bellowing his opinions about why it was so difficult to provide a *minyan* for the synagogue on a daily basis.

Here I was, sharing the gas heater, a little boy, trying to act like a man. Every morning I rose out of the warm, quilted

blanket; dressed in the freezing flat. I would look across the street and see the lights of the ark lit. I saw Sam Levine stamping his feet, looking to either end of the block for any soul he might attract to come in. I felt so sorry for this poor old man—a decent and humble man—who wanted nothing but the best for the synagogue. I could see the lines of his face, now weather-beaten, hollow and hungry with his private sorrow. When I passed him as I entered the synagogue, I could see the effect of his loss written indelibly on his face. I dared not linger as I entered the synagogue, and rushed over to the gas heater.

There was Mr. Teitelbaum, the tailor, sitting in the corner, sniffing snuff, stuffing it deep into his nostrils and then causing a sneezing effect, which disturbed the silence of the musty room. He was reputed to be a magnificent tailor. I saw his jaw droop after each sneeze. He was a man who never smiled. He always seemed to be lost in his own thoughts. He never said "hello" or "goodbye", just sat there, sniffing snuff, sneezing and warming himself by the gas burner. When someone would talk with him, he would grunt a monosyllabic sound and look away. I always saw him sigh deeply from a kind of mental depletion as though it was very difficult for him to utter a sound. He did not want to be bothered. It was as though he was a victim of the most severe boredom. When he was through with the snuff, he began to smoke a moldy cigar. The Rabbi had urged him not to smoke in the synagogue; and

he would look at the Rabbi scornfully and walk away, taking another long puff of his cigar.

Mr. Teitelbaum always bragged about what a great tailor he was in the Old Country. He told numerous stories of how the nephew of the Czar had commissioned him to prepare his wardrobe for a grand ball at the palace. The few times that his face lit up was when he described how he danced with the great ladies of the Russian Empire. He told us how expert he was in being able to judge a person's tailoring needs at a moment's glance. All he had to do was to see a person once and he would sit down at the old Singer sewing machine and tailor a garment in no time at all.

Oh, how he would swagger, take a long puff of his cigar, which hung on his lips, and challenge anybody to be as clever as he was in tailoring. But I knew that no one could hold a candle to my grandfather when it came to tailoring. He knew how a suit was supposed to lay on a person, how it should fit if the person had sloping shoulders. What he would do was sew the shoulders of the garment on a bias to allow for the sloping shoulders.

Then there was Mr. Abramowitz, who came to say *Kaddish* for his wife, who died only a month ago. All the Rabbi had to ask him was how he was and he would break into a cry that sounded like the moaning of a winter wind, winding through the narrow streets.

Mr. Aaron Goldstein and his awkward son, Max, were sitting in front of the burner. Mr. Goldstein fashioned himself to be a scholar and there were many times when I heard loud voices challenging some of the sermons that the Rabbi gave. No, it was not Moses who saw the people surrounding the Golden Calf. It was God, and it was God's anger that caused Moses to smash the tablets. The Rabbi tried to explain—yes, it was true; but—no, there were no buts—no other way to see it. He would hold his hand over his ears when the Rabbi tried to lend perspective to the arguments. He would not listen. Only laugh and challenge the Rabbi to read the Torah.

Now there were eight persons for a *minyan*. But there was no *minyan*. What could they do? Not to pray would be an affront to those who came to say *Kaddish*. I had already donned my *t'phillin*, so that as soon as the *minyan* arrived, I would be ready to pray. I looked out the window. The sky was scudded with dark and ominous clouds. Swirls of snow had begun to fall on the sidewalks. I heard the winds sobbing as though they were pained by the presence of Sam Levine standing there in front of the synagogue like a soldier on guard duty.

"Meester," he called out to a passerby. "Come in. There is some tea, some crackers." But the people passed by. Some smiled, but quickly walked away.

I felt so sorry for him. But Mr. Levine was not easily discouraged. "Meester, please do God's work. Come in from the cold into our warm synagogue. Be a kind person."

Nobody listened.

Finally, when Sam Levine saw that it was useless to stand out there in the freezing weather, he returned to the synagogue. As he walked in, Rabbi Berman arrived.

Now there were nine people—and no *minyan*. The room was quiet. No one seemed eager to speak. It appeared that a terrible storm was on its way. They joined me looking out the window. I saw a strange curving of the clouds becoming darker and more menacing.

Suddenly I heard a powerful voice piercing the silence. It was Mr. Herman Schwartz who broke the silence. He walked over to me, took my face in his huge hands and said, "Finkelstein, you know what we need in this synagogue?"

"Yes, Mr. Schwartz."

"Well, tell us what we need. Get away from the window and tell us. We do not seem to know. Educate us. You be our teacher. What is it we need?"

"We need a *minyan*."

Almost mockingly, he laughed out loud. "Ah, how intelligent you are for a boy your age. Finkelstein says we need a *minyan*. Very good. Only a scholar—no, not just a scholar, but a Talmudic scholar can know that."

I felt a deep resentment rising in me. He was mocking me. Ever since I wrote my own *Bar Mitzvah* speech, he taunted me. But I just listened and offered no reply.

"But, Finkelstein, to know that we need a *minyan* is only half the solution to the problem. Right, Finkelstein?"

"Yes, Mr. Schwartz."

"Fine. Good. If we probe further, perhaps we will find the entire solution. Right, Finkelstein?"

"I hope so."

"No hope so. Just let us consider what we can do. Do you think we should do that?"

"Yes, Mr. Schwartz."

"Good. No more 'maybes'. No more doubts. We will find the solution. Now, Finkelstein, what does the Talmud say about the administration of justice? Do you know that, Finkelstein? Now we will see what kind of a scholar you are."

I paused. This man terrified me; made my bowels turn to water. I felt rooted in fear, my limbs trembling. He reminded me of Rabbi Simon at the *Cheder*, when he decided to hit my knuckles with a ruler. I saw the blood issuing from my knuckles.

"I am waiting for your answer, Finkelstein. You are so smart, so clever, that you would not listen to the Rabbi because you were smarter than him. Right? Am I right, Finkelstein?"

"I---"

"Come on, already. Answer my question. You sit with Mr. Levine every Saturday night and listen to the *Mishna*—and you know how wise Mr. Levine is. Right? Now, answer my question. Is Mr. Levine a wise man?"

"Yes."

"And you learned from him about the administration of justice?"

"Yes."

"Good. Well, come now, all of us are here, waiting to hear what you have learned."

I looked around the room. All the congregants were waiting for my reply. I turned away from the window, walked over to the gas burner. My heart was pounding against my chest. The Rabbi tried to save me from this humiliation. But I spoke. "It says that whenever a city or a town is governed by Jewish people, and the town shall have a gentile resident, that this gentile should be made a part of the governing body."

"Finkelstein, I must shake your hand. Those are the very words of what it says. But we have a problem now. Tell me if I am right. To know what it says is one thing. Right?"

"Yes, Mr. Schwartz."

"What, then, is the next thing we should do in such a case?"

"I dunno."

"You don't know? What a thing to say—'you don't know'. You go to a Hebrew school?"

"Yes."

"And in Hebrew school, you learn the Torah?"

"Yes."

"So, the answer is there—in the Torah?"

"I dunno."

"Let me help you. You say your are a scholar—wiser, yet, than the Rabbi. Right?"

"I never said that."

"Oh, I know you never said that, but a smart boy like you should know what it says in the Torah. Let me help you. When Jethro saw that Moses was burdened with too much work, what did Jethro say to Moses? Remember that lesson?"

"Yes."

"Well, tell us what he said. None of us here in this room know. But, Finkelstein, the masterful scholar—why, he knows. None of us here are as wise as you."

I was becoming annoyed and agitated with his cunning and mocking, patronizing ways. It felt that he was making me the butt of his cruel humor before the congregation. All eyes were upon me as I replied, "He told Moses to appoint from the Children of Israel, to do the work that was necessary to appoint higher and lower courts so that Moses would not have to make all of the decisions."

He stood there in the middle of the room and applauded me. "Yes," said Mr. Schwartz, his voice animated with mocking pride in my answer. "You said that like a great scholar, Finkelstein."

I know that Mr. Schwartz was not through with me. I was right. He continued, "Now that you answered that question, let us see if you know what I, as the president of this synagogue, is asking you to do. Then we will see what kind of scholar Finkelstein really is.

A cunning smile flitted across his face. He rubbed his hands over the gas burner. "Do you know what I am going to ask you to do?"

"No," I replied.

"All right. If you do not know, then we must find out. It is so written in the Talmud that that which we do not know we must take the trouble to discover. Now, you already have your *Tallis* and *t'phillin* on. Go straight up to the altar. No. Do not give me your look. Just do as I say, Finkelstein. I am ordering you to go up to the altar. Now. Do as I say and do not ask any questions."

I just stood there at the side of the altar, unable to move.

"Finkelstein, do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Who is the president of this synagogue?"

"You are."

"And as president, I am ordering you to do something. Do not stand there in your confusion. Do not ask any questions. Don't decide whether or not to listen to what I am asking. Just do it! Now. Walk up to the altar and sing *BAWROOCH HOO.*"

I did what Mr. Schwartz asked me to do. I walked up to the altar and began the prayer, "*Bawrooch es adonoi...*"

I stopped suddenly. I should not have been reciting this prayer. It was wrong. It was a sacrilege. This prayer could not be recited without a *minyan*—a quorum of ten men. What was this Schwartz trying to do? Was he asking me to desecrate the Talmudic precepts. I turned around and stared icily at him.

"Why do you stop, Finkelstein?"

"Mr. Schwartz, why did you ask me to do such a thing?"

"What thing?"

"You know that I cannot recite the *BAWROOCH HOO* without a *minyan*."

He began to clap his hands with an amused smile on his face.

"You really are a scholar, Finkelstein, and I am proud of you."

"Thank you, Mr. Schwartz."

"So. What do we do now?"

"I dunno."

"We must find an additional person before we can recite these *Shaachris* prayers. Right?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now we have spoken enough. Enough *Pilpul.* Enough analysis. Right, Finkelstein? Now, do you remember the advice Jethro gave to Moses?"

"Yes. We must do what Jethro told Moses. And that is to take the burden of this problem from you."

"Ah hah! Smart boy. But, how do we do this?"

"By finding a person to make up the *minyan*."

"And how are we going to do that?"

"I dunno."

"All right. Then let me tell you. Finkelstein, you will have to go to the Bowery and bring back one derelict. Just tell him that we will feed him—even give him some schnapps. Understand, Finkelstein?"

I did not answer him, but just stood there on the altar while Mr. Schwartz removed my *Tallis* and *t'phillin*, took me down and bundled me up in an old sack cloth and tied a heavy rope around my body. I left the synagogue and walked into the heavy winds. I had no idea of what was expected of me. The tyranny of the winds whipped my face. I lost my breath. I tried to walk against the wind, but almost fell to the ground. I started to cry in sheer fright as I tried, in vain, to walk ahead.

But I did not want to disappoint the congregants, Mr. Schwartz, or the rabbi. If there was ever a time to prove to the congregation that I was a man it was surely now. I asked the same question over and over again: what was I supposed to do when I got to the Bowery? Was I supposed to go over to one of these human wrecks, sleeping in his watery dreams, and say to him, "the synagogue needs you. We have some food for you, some scotch and a few crackers?" He would stare at me and say: "get lost, sonny boy. Don't bother me." So, what would I do then? Beg him? Appeal to him? He'd spit in my face. Moreover, my grandfather always warned me never to walk under the elevated structure on the Bowery. It was a bad place for a boy my age to be. The people here were the scavengers of the earth. They were drowned in cheap liquor—these corrupt and stinking masses—who could possibly harm me, me; maybe kill me, right there on the spot. I was supposed to go where I was not supposed to go and ready to do something I was not allowed to do.

But, on the other hand, I also saw this as a holy mission. There was Mr. Abramowitz, who was depending on me to bring back a *minyan.* I, Harold Finkelstein, was the holy bridge from man to God. I could not fail.

Finally I turned the corner to the Bowery. It was dark under the structure, with the rattling trains passing by. All around me I saw bodies. I felt a scent of pestilence in the air.

The bodies were flopping all over the sidewalk; in the putrid alleyways, soaked with dried urine; in the gutter; flung across cars that were parked. I saw these men with their haggard faces lined with bitterness; lying in pools of their urine and filth; moldering in various stages of decay. It did not seem that they were aware of the bitter cold. The Bowery was a repulsive sight to invite my senses to experience. My grandfather often spoke about the Bowery and said that the people here soaked their brains and bodies with alcohol. Now I had a chance to see this with my own eyes; to look into their swollen faces and witness jaundiced death creeping over their lives.

I walked over to one who was half-conscious, lying in the doorway of a claptrap hotel. I tried to speak, but I did not know what to say. When I saw beyond his glassy eyes and when I got over the shock of his gaping wound on his swollen lip, I felt such an overpowering emotion. I was possessed with feelings that went to the pit of my stomach. What I saw here was that there was no hope. Only ugly death, certain to overcome them as a stone crumbles into a stream and is no more. I was more than cold from the fierce winds. My eyes could not look upon this scene without a sickening nausea digging into my bowels. Here before me, in my youth, I saw the twilight of life. Here was a man whose eyes were open, but whose soul was dead. I could not control the emptiness that overtook me. I looked down at him. He smiled weakly at me.

I returned the smile. I was then able to manage my first word. "Hello."

"Hellow," he replied. "Got a shot of some booze for a thirsty ol' geezer?"

I thought to myself that a shot of booze was the last thing he needed. Here was a soul who could use a hot bath, a shave, and a good, solid meal—not another "shot of booze'.

I found the courage to address him with my problem. "Mister, how would you like to have a real good meal, hot and wholesome food, you know, some fried eggs, home-fried potatoes, bagels, coffee? I can get that for you—all you can eat."

He did not reply at once, but fell over into a trance, shaking his head to and fro and emitting a long and loud laugh. After a while, he extended his hand to mine as I helped him stand up on his unsteady legs. He was a huge man, his filthy clothing hanging on his body like tattered ribbons down to his shoes wrapped in old newspapers. "Didja say food, sonny boy?"

"Yes. You just follow me and I will take you to real food."

But as I spoke, I saw five or six derelicts rise from the cold ground, staring at me. There was a derelict with one arm. Another with a peg leg. Another with a greasy patch over his right eye. Another with an angry scar running down from his

cheekbone to his throat. Now I was beginning to see that I would not be bringing b ack one person, but five or six! I reasoned that Mr. Schwartz would not mind that, as long as I was able to bring back a *minyan*.

The one with the patch over his right eye walked over to me and growled, "Where's tha' food you was talkin' 'bout?"

I drew back. His voice frightened me. But I dared to look into the faces of these men; and I knew that each one of these men could tell a story of the pain and alienation that brought them here to these mean and filthy streets—cast aside—the forgotten pilgrims of death.

There I stood, fixed and planted on these stony pavements, encircled in confusion, and the high winds whistling through the streets. Another man stepped forward and shook my hand and pushed me back.

"Is you tellin' the troot about dat food?"

I trembled and replied, "yes, I am telling the truth."

"Ya better be, or---"

Another man, with a pleasant face and voice, walked over to me. "Don't mind him. He doesn't like anybody." He spoke with an English accent and pleasant phrasing.

They stood together, looking down at me with their faces seamed with distrust. They were waiting for me to lead them to where those eggs and potatoes were being prepared. There was no escape. There was no way that I could say to them that my

offer was only meant for the first man I spoke to. I began to wonder what Mr. Schwartz would say if he saw these five men. Would he ever forgive me when he saw these derelicts stumble into the synagogue? Would Mr. Teitelbaum thank me for engaging in this fearful mission? Again, I reasoned, why should a few people matter? At least I did what had to be done. But, on the other hand, knowing Mr. Schwartz's temper, I would probably be thrown into the street and longer welcome to sing the *Shaachris* service every Friday morning.

I could see it now. No one would talk to me in the synagogue. Would that be something, that I, though a young man—but still a child—should be the "Spinoza of Eldridge Street", condemned, excommunicated because I could not refuse to help these poor souls? I saw before me, Rabbi Berman glaring down his thick-rimmed eyeglasses and wagging his finger in my face. I would lose every friend I had in the synagogue. But what could I tell that awful pain in my heart? Could I tell my tears to stop coursing down my face? I scanned their faces. How could I tell them, "forget it. Go back to sleep in the cold and icy walks. Bundle up hungry in one of the old and filthy cartons. Die from hunger. No one cares if you live or die. No one wants you. You might as well die, because there is no reason to live".

The wind increased in its fury—a wind that cut into the bones—fierce and strong, sounding like a human wail. I was a

frozen block of ice. My hands were numb. I had to move around or I would freeze to death.

I heard a voice chortle, "Well?"

I heard a voice within me, the voice of Rabbi Berman, seated with our congregants at the *Mishna* table just last Saturday night, "We are each other's keeper. We shall feed the hungry and comfort the mourner; give water to the thirsty and visit the sick; and we shall give a portion of our wheat to the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger within thy gates."

And everybody at the table said: "Awmain."

Sam Levine said, "Awmain."

Herman Schwartz said, "Awmain."

Everybody in the room shook the rabbi's hand and thanked him for his wisdom and compassion. They went home that night, grateful to have in their synagogue such a fine, wise and noble rabbi.

My doubts now turned to certainty. I would lead these men to the synagogue. I was sure that when we arrived, the congregants would welcome them, offer them the best of food, and I would be praised and congratulated for my wise choice in bringing them here.

I pointed the way for them to follow me. Snow began to fall, swirling around my ankles like foam. The flakes fell first in lazy flakes and then in heavier eddies, now spreading a thin

blanket of ice on the ground. I walked while they followed. I could not see ahead of me. I was unsteady on my feet, for the sidewalks were now hazardous sheets of ice. But, slowly, we reached Delancey Street, coping with the high winds and the snow. Mercifully, Eldridge Street came into view. I looked back to see if these derelicts were following me.

I could not believe my eyes. There must have been at least 60 or 70 derelicts following me. I could not see past them as I looked back. Here they were, these poor souls marching behind me. I thought of the Pied Piper of Hamelin, but that was only a story—a fairy tale. This was not a fairy tale. This was real! In back of me there was a veritable army of souls who were expecting to be fed. I walked past my house and I saw my grandmother and grandfather in the window, holding their heads in their hands as if to say: "*Oi, Gevalt.*"

When we finally reached the synagogue steps, I hesitated. I did not know what to do or to think. I could hardly move my body. I could hear every beat of my heart pounding against my chest. I decided I would walk into the synagogue first, without the men to postpone as long as I could the drastic problems awaiting me. Not only that, I had to warm my poor body.

Mr. Schwartz and the congregants were seated around the gas burner, still waiting for a *minyan*. I walked into the

synagogue and ran to the gas burner to warm my frozen hands and feet. I saw everyone staring at me. I could not say a word.

Mr. Schwartz ran over to me. "*Nu*, Finkelstein? Did you find a *minyan*?"

"Yes, Mr. Schwartz. I found a *minyan*.

Mr. Schwartz smiled. After all, it was his idea to send me to the Bowery. I was now his protégé. I should fail him? He turned to the congregation, his hand on my shoulder and spoke in loud, strong tones. "You see this boy, this Finkelstein, the grandson of Avrom Finkelstein? Oh, no. He's not just an ordinary boy you find in the streets. He is a man. He knows how to get things done. As the *Pirke Avot* says, 'when there is no man, he can be counted on to be a man.' He was given something to do and he did it. So. Now, Finkelstein, bring in the *minyan*. Don't let him stand out there in the hall."

I was frozen to the spot.

"Bring him in," Mr. Schwartz bellowed, "and let us now finish our services."

All around me the room began to swirl. I felt faint. I would have liked to run to the toilet. My stomach was growling. I was plain sick. I opened the door to greet my charges and instruct them to enter the synagogue. As I left, I heard the compliments through the door; how well I turned out; how learned I was; my singing voice; the next Rosenblatt;

and I will grow up to be the pride of my grandparents and the Jewish people.

I beckoned the men to enter the synagogue. One by one they entered the room. The Englishman. The one with the peg leg. The one-armed man. The man with the bloody patch over his right eye. And the man with the scar across his face. And the rest of these bedraggled men. There was no end to the stream of people. An immediate, noisome smell permeated the room. It was like this during the pogroms on the steppes of Czarist Russia that I read about. In a few moments, the synagogue was crammed full of these poor and filthy souls—in all sizes and shapes—sprawled all over the benches; lying on the floor; surrounding the gas heater; in the women's sections; and on the holy altar.

I kept my head down, afraid to look up to watch the faces of the congregants, Mr. Levine, Mr. Schwartz, and our dear rabbi. There was not a sound to be heard as the derelicts continued to shuffle into the synagogue.

Finally, the one with the scar roared out, "Where's the food, boy. You promised us a full meal. So where the hell is it?"

There came a resounding applause from the rest of the men.

I stood there and stared into blank space, petrified as stone. The moment had to come for me to raise my eyes. I

looked up and saw the scowling, angry faces of the congregants. Fear gripped me. I wanted to bolt out the door and run—run anywhere—just escape from this awful predicament. But the man with the gaping scar stood by the door. He, too, scowled at me. "Where you goin' son?" he rasped, showing his decayed teeth.

Then I heard the inevitable thundering voice of Mr. Schwartz. "What is this, Finkelstein? Is this some sort of a joke? Is this the way you pay us for our kindness to you? We took you in as an orphan. We had you *Bar Mitzvahed.* We forgave you when you tricked the rabbi by writing your own speech. You made a mockery of us then. And, now, look at this. You think this is a laughing matter?"

He shouted, his powerful voice resounding in the air, "Answer me, Finkelstein!"

"But—Mr. Schwartz--"

"Don't 'but' me. You have degraded God and made a laughing stock of our dear rabbi. Why did you do this?"

His eyes were bulging from their sockets. He seized me with both his powerful hands and shook me until I thought he was going to kill me.

As I stood there against the wall, tears began to well up and slide down the crevices of my face. Soon I was sobbing in such a fit that my entire body quivered. I felt my limbs quiver and my body tremble.

"All right, Finkelstein," Mr. Schwartz's voice boomed, trying in vain to modulate his voice, "I'll listen. Tell us why you did such a thing—bringing in this derelict army and promising to feed them."

"I dunno."

"You hear an answer? He doesn't know. An answer like that you can give your friends, but not here. Not to us. You must have had a reason. You invite them here for a meal and you say you do not know why? I will not move from this spot until you give us a reason. Why, Finkelstein?"

I only wished that I could stop trembling. If I could only find the words to answer him. But I was ashamed and hurt—not only for myself—but for those scowling men standing and waiting for a meal—food to eat—something I was sure they have not had for a long time.

But something strange stirred in me. It came quietly, like the dawn steals softly on a new day. Without realizing it, a quiet courage grew in me and the words formed slowly from my trembling lips. "I invited them, Mr. Schwartz, because they were hungry."

"Hungry?"

"Yes, Mr. Schwartz. They were hungry."

"And are you going to feed them?"

"I dunno."

With these words, Mr. Schwartz pounded on the holy ark. The rabbi rose, ran over to Mr. Schwartz and softly urged him to control himself.

"Oh, no," Mr. Schwartz fulminated, "you don't stop me. This boy is a disgrace. You hear me? A disgrace!"

"Please, Mr. Schwartz," the rabbi said, "it is not such a disgrace at all. Now, as long as we have a *minyan*, let us complete the service. *Shema Yisroel adonoi Ailohainoo adonoi echod.*"

When the prayers were over, Rabbi Berman spoke gently and softly.

"Finkelstein, please come up to the ark."

Again, fear gripped me. But along with that fear was a renewed sense of certitude, which I felt when I stood next to the Rabbi. The Rabbi bent down, kissed me on the cheek

"Do not worry, Finkelstein," he said. Every person you have brought here today will be fed as you promised. It was a foolish promise because you should have found out first if it could have been fulfilled. But who could argue with the tenderness, the love, the caring soul, which compelled you to make that promise. In that promise was the *Shechina*, God's presence. Do not ever be ashamed of the feeling which prompts you toward kindness, for it is written: 'Who so honors the poor, shall, himself, receive compassion from the Holy One. For man is not the master of what he has, but only the guardian

to carry out the will of God, who has entrusted those things to his keeping.'

"It is further written: 'Water will quench a flaming fire and our giving those in need makes atonement for our sins. We shall not make the hungry eyes wait too long. Reject not the supplication of the afflicted. Be as a father to the fatherless and feed the hungry at the door.'"

The rabbi rose, climbed up to the ark, and turned to the congregation."So. Mr. Schwartz, you bring the bread. Mr. Baumgarten, you bring the milk. Mr. Abramowitz, you bring the eggs. I will bring eggs, also. Mr. Gittelstein, you will bring....."

Mr. Schwartz was quiet.

Mr. Levine walked up the few steps to the ark, took me in his arms and hugged me. The door opened and Ezra, the Shammus, apologized for being late for the *minyan.* Everybody laughed—even Mr. Schwartz. It was a festive occasion, sitting at the table, all of us eating breakfast. As we ate, the man with one arm rose and sang the *HATIKVAH.* Everybody joined in.

It was a time I will cherish for all the days of my life.

CHAPTER XLIV

Rabbi Berman was meditating quietly, sitting on one of the benches—his lips moving slowly—his eyes, closed. It was as if each word was the living embodiment of his soul. It was early Friday evening. Sam Levine, though deposed by Herman Schwartz as president of the synagogue; and the *Shammus*, Ezra, were planning the order of the Friday evening service, and the names to be recited for the *Kaddish.* That night, Rabbi Herschel Myerwitz was to deliver the guest sermon. I met the rabbi several times. To me, he did not look like a rabbi. His small eyes squinted, but he spoke with a forceful conviction, but so slowly that it was painful to wait until a word blossomed into a thought. His Hebrew was good, but, for a rabbi, it was far from masterful. The *Chevra* Society picked him to give the guest sermon this evening. I wondered how this little man, with the red beard and blinking eyes, could compare to Rabbi Berman. I was already wondering if this new president, Herman Schwartz was up to something. I hoped that my doubts about Mr. Myerwitz were unfounded. Perhaps, it was his way of replacing Rabbi Berman. I began to look at this little man with suspicion. I had made up my mind that I did not like him. He had ways which made me turn my face—like his coughing and hacking and the loathsome way he blew his nose; the way he inhaled the snuff and broke out into explosive

sneezing bouts; and the mucus always discharging from his nose. It seemed to me that he had begun to be a regular congregant of the synagogue. I would see him every day, walking in with Herman Schwartz. I would hear them laughing together and enjoying each other's company.

But my doubts were somewhat assuaged when I heard that this rabbi was to be the Baal Torah for the High Holy Days that were only a few months away. My whole life seemed to be insecure. I clung to the things that were and afraid of the things that were to be and become. I wanted the present to remain the present. I was afraid that something would happen. No, not today—or even tomorrow—that will take away what I had now. The ground under me was so precarious that when I saw Herman Schwartz conferring with strangers, I began to wonder what he was up to and whether it meant that new personalities were about to take over the old synagogue.

One day, President Schwartz approached me. He looked at me, measured my reaction to him, bade me to be seated, looked at me with his evasive eyes and that cunning, which I always saw in his half-opened mouth. His sly smile always seemed to mock me. But, as I sat down, I saw that he was nervous—walking up and down the aisle.

"Finkelstein, I do not think that our synagogue wants you to sing at the Roumanian Synagogue any more. We need you here every day, and now with the Holidays coming, I am

going to forbid you to go to the Roumanian Synagogue any more. So you go and tell your esteemed Cantor Rosenblatt that it will be necessary for him to get himself another boy to help him with his services. I spoke to your grandfather about it and he agreed that it was all right with him. Why are you looking away from me. You look at me and hear every word I say. No more Roumanian Synagogue. You hear?"

I did not believe him. My *zeyde* would never agree to such a plan. He knew how much I enjoyed the services with the esteemed cantor. He knew that I was to sing solo parts this year for the High Holy Days.

I looked at Mr. Schwartz. He was not smiling now. His face was set hard upon his demands.

"I am sorry, Mr. Schwartz. I cannot do as you ask."

"You can't, what, Finkelstein? I don't think I heard you. Say that again."

"I said I cannot do what you ask me to do."

"You mean to say that you—you pipsqueak—you, that you are going to disobey me—and not only me, but your *zeyde*?

"Mr. Schwartz, I studied for the choir and I am needed there."

"Who cares who needs you. Now, you listen to me, I am telling you that if you do not do as I demand, you will never set foot in this synagogue again. You hear that, Finkelstein?"

I began to cry. I looked at Mr. Schwartz, trying to measure the degree of his intent. His lips were pursed in a hard determination. I stood up, walked over to the window, turned to him. "Mr. Schwartz, I do not want to be disobedient or disrespectful. But do you remember that I was already *Bar Mitzvahed*?"

"So, what does that mean?"

"Well, it was on that very day when I became a man. I am now discussing what you want me to do as a man. No. Mr. Schwartz, I am no longer a child. As a man, I will make decisions about my life because we are now two men speaking to each other as men—not as adult to child."

"You dare to speak to me in that way?"

"Mr. Schwartz, I am only saying this because you are trying to take something from me that is precious—something I worked for—and no one is going to take that away from me. You have no right to do that."

"I don't believe you have the nerve to talk to me this way."

"Mr. Schwartz, you said you spoke to my grandfather and he said it was all right for me to leave the Roumanian Synagogue?"

"Do you dare to doubt my word?"

"I am just asking you what my *zeyde* said."

"Finkelstein, you shut your insolent mouth! I am the president of this synagogue, and I will decide what is best for it—not you—not anyone else!"

"But, did you say that my *zeyde* said that it was all right for me to leave the Roumanian Synagogue?"

With a rush of words—barely audible—he screamed at me, "Yes, he said it."

I saw his eyes and heard his word and knew that he was not telling the truth. He was lying to me. I walked over to Mr. Schwartz. I was no longer afraid of him. "I will go and ask him."

He hesitated for a moment, turned his back on me and did not reply. I ran out of the synagogue, out into the street, into our building, skipped two steps at a time, opened the door—all out of breath.

My grandmother stared at me for the longest time. There she was, standing there, and I had nothing else to say except, :"Where's *zeyde*?"

"*Nisht doo kine zeyde,*" she said quietly.

"Have to talk to him, *bubba.*"

"No, no, no more *zeyde,* Herry. No more."

"*Bubba*, I have to talk with *zeyde.* Where is he?"

"Your *zeyde* is *toit*, dead. Your *zeyde* died this morning. He died—he is *toit*, dead, Herry. No more *zeyde.*"

"What do you mean? Dead? *Toit*? What are you saying, *bubba*? *Zeyde* is NOT dead! I saw him this morning, putting on his *t'phillin.*"

I saw her eyes, soaked in tears. "Herry, hear me. Hear me. No. No. No. No more. No more. No more."

With that, she fell into the chair, clung to my body and cried such lamentations, that I knew that my *zeyde*, my loving *zeyde*, had died. I heard her choke, her breathing coming with great difficulty. "Herry, Herry, Herry. Your *zeyde* is *toit.* No more—no more—no more."

All was numb. All was silent, except for her quiet weeping. The room rotated before my eyes. I could not believe what she was saying. He was here this morning, beneath my dead father's picture. He was only this morning showing me the corn that he grew in that box outside the window, laughing that the corn was so very small. He even said that he was so proud that I would be singing solo at the Roumanian Synagogue, and that he would like to go to hear me sing.

And now, no, now I remember—Oh, my god—not *zeyde*! He could never die—my beloved, *zeyde.* What will I do without him?

I ran out of the house. It began to thunder. The sky was a black as my soul. The rains came, harder and stronger, in slanted drifts and high winds. That thunder I heard was the voice of my fate crying out to me as I ran across the

Williamsburg Bridge. The raindrops that poured over my body into my eyes—they were the tears.

How shall I live now? My father, dead, leaving me. My mother, leaving me. And now—and now, my dear *zeyde*—my precious *zeyde*! What shall those tears do for me now except to help me run farther into the darkness of the night.

CHAPTER XLV

When a member of the family dies in the Jewish faith, there is no waiting for the burial. It is almost immediate. The very next day, the body is buried in a plain pine box. It was the same with my grandfather, but I remembered very little of the funeral. I haven't the slightest recollection of the cortege— the line of mourners that followed the hearse from the synagogue, or what Rabbi Berman said in the eulogy.

All I remember is the clamor the wailing, bawling outcries from my grandmother. I felt so much of her pain. Her grief was beyond any control. She would look at me blankly and erupt in her lamentations. "Herry, Herry, why did God take my Avrom now? Why? Why? Why? Do you know, Herry? Does the Rabbi know? *Oi Got*, my *Got*, why did you do this to me?"

She would pace the floor in a blind frenzy, her eyes distended and wild, her hair falling over her face. She could not stand in one place. When some men came from the hospital to deliver his wheelchair, it was placed beneath my father's picture. There my dear, dead father would smile upon the empty chair as if to say that he was happy to be reunited with his father.

Again, the renewed stream of tears caused her to labor with her frenzy. I was worried that the heaving of her chest

would make her sick, but, slowly, the heaving became softer murmurs. I also remember that the coffin was opened by my Uncle Louie. He wanted me to see the corpse of my grandfather. I remember looking away. I was numb. Nothing seemed to have gained a seat in my memory. I do not remember the burial in the Mt. Zion Cemetery, next to my father. I remember it only in short segments of my recall. But I will never forget my grandmother at the gravesite, pounding the rocks with her fists until they became bloodied. I remember my Uncle Louie grabbing her and pulling her away like a tattered effigy in a cornfield. She looked like a rag doll as they carried her away at the end of the service. She screamed and tore at those who tried to comfort her, to take her away. She had amazing strength. I could not bear to hear these sounds—these convulsions of sorrow—for they brought on flashes of panic and unreasoning disorder to my mind.

I think it was Rabbi Berman who called out, "Herry, you will say your *zeyde's Kaddish.*" He placed his hand on my shoulder, but I could not stay with him. I ran away from him. I ran off into the distance, caught grasshoppers until the aggrieved assembly began to disperse. I did not want to remain here with my grandmother. I was frightened. It left me feeling miserable. It also denied me of my need to grieve for my grandfather's death. I was absorbed in the bawling and

whining sounds of my grandmother. She was the only sound I heard.

Yes, there was great anger in me. There was great sorrow I had need to express, but my grandmother stole that away from me. I wanted to scream out to her, "*Bubba, Bubba*, I have grief, also, but your screaming takes all of that away from me." No grief could find access to my soul while these ministrations of wild and hysterical outcries arrested the burial of my *zeyde.*

At the sight of the stones around me, some smaller and some higher, I began to realize that life had no meaning; and that some day, some people would gather around my gravesite. Some will say kind words which may, or may not, be true—that Harold Finkelstein was truly a fine person—life's nobleman—and on top of my coffin they would throw some earth. Some gruff and broad-shouldered men would cover me and hence my invitation to oblivion.

I looked around the cemetery. So many people have died. The green grass, the manicured lawns, the scent of sweet magnolia in the air, all of this became the fragrance of death. My heart broke forth, and the tears came; but, strangely, those tears were not for my fallen grandfather. They were for me. I cried openly, sobbed heavily and fell to the ground. I could not understand death. And now my mind and heart were engulfed into the vast mysteries of death. I saw before me all those

gravesites where all these people lay. These people were, all of them, alive like my *zeyde* was only yesterday, and now, just lying there beneath the earth. I walked the cemetery and read the epigrams written on the tombstones. I had in my pocket a glass jar full of live grasshoppers. I looked into the jar and watched them kick and try to exit themselves. I loved their muscular legs. They were almost human looking, with open eyes and green bodies. I put them back into my pocket as a car brought us all back to Eldridge Street. We sat on cardboard boxes, lit a candle, and there were people all around us, offering us food. We talked about the virtues of *zeyde.* I rebelled at the sound of their voices. How did they know my *zeyde*? How did Herman Schwartz know my *zeyde* that he should talk so kindly about him? Only I knew him. Only I was close to him. No one knew him—not even my *bubba.* Who knew about his learning, his love for nature, his love for me, his love for life, the way he spoke hardly ever above a whisper. Who knew about his vast knowledge, his grasp of the Torah learnings, his soft and kind ways? That they should talk about him while I remained silent made me sick. I wanted no more. No more! Do you hear? Please go, leave and let me weep in my own silence, for what once was and now is no more.

Now I had to be in the synagogue morning, noon and night to say *Kaddish.*

I remember that Herman Schwartz ignored me, turned his head away from me as he passed me by. He never even offered his condolences. I do remember very clearly that my grandmother took me for a walk. We strolled along Rivington Street. She was looking for a certain store. I did not know what she was trying to find. Finally, she stopped in a dry-goods store, walked in, and bought a spool of thread.

When we left the store, I asked her why she needed the thread. She spat on the spool and threw it away. "Why did you do that, *Bubba*, I asked." She replied that she bought this spool of thread from a Christian store so that all of *zeyde's* sins should be brought to the owner of the store, who was Christian, a *goy*. I did not understand that ritual, but when I expressed why this was necessary, she said it was written in the Torah.

I knew that this was not so, that there was no such commandment, but my dear *bubba*, she was the victim of ancient hatreds of the Christians. This was her way of assuring herself that all of my *zeyde's* sins would leave him and settle themselves somewhere in the heart of a non-Jew. This gave her strange comfort. I did not try to change her mind, but smiled at the ritual, which seemed to console her.

When the carpenters came and broke down the shack built for my grandfather's organ and chair he used to beg with; and when someone came and handed my grandmother money, I broke out in tears. When my Uncle Louie came over to speak

to my grandmother—to ask what was to become of me—they spoke in Yiddish, but I understood Yiddish even better than my Uncle Louie. My heart throbbed furiously.

Every day I would sit by the trunk under my father's picture. I heard my *zeyde's* voice. Every day the thoughts of my *zeyde* became sweeter and his face was like a veiled ghost on the winds of the past in various shapes half-seen. These memories were, to me, the same as the quivering image of a landscape. His bearded face was constantly reflected before me. He was not dead, could never be dead. His image had endowed my faculties with enchantment. The *Shlosim* (30-day mourning period) became a memory where every curve of my *zeyde's* bristling features showed me the hand of my destiny. It is true. It was a good question my Uncle Louie asked. What will become of me? I mused over my destiny. I stared in the face of my grandmother. There was something so blank, so empty, so alien in her face, her tongue, her eyes, her voice. She seemed to be floating in the scudding and turbulent clouds of tragedy. She was freighted with pain, her movements slow and labored.

Now I was all she had. I knew how much she loved me, but, really, I thought, why was I the object of her love? I could not know this and I would not dare to question it, but there was a layer of my consciousness that questioned it. There were times when I would study my grandmother's movements. I

would watch how she would stand by the window and look out to the street for hours at a time. I tried to talk to her about my life. But she never listened to my words because she was so thoroughly absorbed in her own grief. I was never really involved in her life—except that she knew I liked the way she made French-fried potatoes. She made them for me sometimes for lunch and dinner. But she never smiled. She never laughed. She never said an encouraging word. She insisted that I go to the synagogue to say *Kaddish* for my grandfather, but, otherwise, I was free to do what I wanted—to roam the streets; to come home whenever I wanted to. Her blank gaze was stiff with a constant state of displeasure. She often prayed that God would take her to join her son and husband. She never spoke a word of gratitude that she had me. I was being recognized by the congregation who loved the way I sang the prayers. I told her about it, but she walked away without one word that it was nice to hear that news. I could see her face fall a little each day, the sagging skin, which became drooping pockets of her age.

What was life now? Now that we lived on a reduced income, life was very difficult. We did receive $4 a week from Home Relief. Fortunately they paid the rent of $12 a month—for which we were grateful—but we lived from hand to mouth, some days going without food and, in the winter, without heat. I was grateful that in school they served

chocolate graham crackers with milk for a mid-morning break. The school also served lunch whenever the budget could cover it. If not, I would come home each day for lunch and my grandmother gave me French-fried potatoes.

Entangled with my thoughts, I would try to dismiss the future from my concerns. I would take long walks and see the red-brick caves in which people lived. I would watch the kids running around. I would see old men fighting the buffeting wind, crying out loud from the pain of the cold. I would see cats scurrying for a corner where they could stave off the bitter cold. I would see men in tattered clothes scouring the garbage cans, picking up a piece of old bread or a bone that still had some meat on it. I would see the ruffians running around looking for ways to steal. I sometimes heard the report of a gun go off and a scream and a crowd looking down at a body. I would see the old men of the synagogue walking with no place to go. I saw the decay of the streets and the old buildings, the prostitutes standing and waiting for a pick-up.

I asked myself, what was beyond that decay? What were the streets beyond mine? Yes, Forsyth Street, Chrystie Street, Houston Street, and all the way uptown and to the end. What was the end? A river. A river that flowed to somewhere. That somewhere I did not know. I took walks to the East River, stood beyond the barriers and just watched it flow, sweeping onward, and vanishing into the distance. Where did the river

go? To the North, it went, and became a tributary to the ocean. Where did the ocean go? To places I read about—to Europe—to Asia—Africa—to a world that my poor mind could not even imagine.

I wanted to know more than I knew. I learned Talmud, yes, but there was a world out there that went beyond the Talmud. I heard about Maimonides, who lived in Spain. Where was Spain and what did it look like? Who were the Sephardic people, and why was I prohibited from attending their Sabbath services? I asked questions. And the questions I asked became signs of rebellion. I was to listen and believe what I heard.

Yes, I loved the rabbi and Sam Levine. Once in a while I loved to play punch ball, and potsie with the girls, but the question came to me over and over again: What will become of me? What will I do with those sensations I get every night that lead me to see the shapely contours of a female body. I would feel the rushes of passion overtake me. I found myself playing with my penis until it hardened. Then I would rub it and reach a rapture that I never understood. Was this wrong that I should feel this? Was I sick? Was it something I could talk about with my teachers or my grandmother?

There were times when a strange man offered me a quarter to join him in the toilet in the hallway, so that he could use my body by rubbing his penis against me. I ran away from

him because he was the devil, himself. I saw horns on their heads. One of them would accost me, his toothless face ogling me, tapping my behind, saying how much he would like to have me alone in his flat. He would pay me 50 cents and promised to bring me to the height of passion that I would never forget. He frightened the wits out of me, and I escaped his forceful persuasions. But at night, when I slept, I began to see fantasies swirling around me. There were naked women seeking my attention, undressing and caressing my body. There were boys like me in play and helping each other to reach this wonderful climax where the body thrilled and the lips trembled and then my bed became moist with that feeling I could not understand. I was now evil. That moisture that issued from me was my sickness, but with whom could I discuss this? If I did, no one would want to talk to me. They would shun me. They would say that I was overtaken by Satan, himself.

Once I was sitting on the steps of the synagogue, reading the Torah. A group of hoodlums approached me. These were boys in my class, always getting into trouble—you know—smart alecks—who did not want to learn, but came there only to be near the girls, to torment them and laugh at them.

"Hey, Finky, mm watcha readin'?"

"The Bible."

"What for?"

"Because I want to."

"What's in it? Sumpin' we should know?"

"Hm, mm."

They all laughed. "Watcha readin' 'bout, Huh?"

"About Abraham and Isaac."

They all laughed again. "Whose dis Abraham?"

"The father of Isaac."

"Oh, I see. Tha's good to know. The fodder, right?"

"Hm, mm."

They all laughed again. "Well, tell us 'cause we gotta know, how did this Isaac become the son of Abraham?"

"What do you mean?"

They all laughed again. "Well, Finky, you'se is such a smart boy. Did Abraham have a wife?"

"Sure, he did."

"Now tell us what did Abraham do to his wife to have dis kid Isaac."

"What do you mean, what did he do?"

"Well, he must've done sumptin. Udderwise Isaac would never be born. Right?"

"I dunno."

Chewing on a toothpick, the boy added, "They just didn't wake up one mornin' and dair was dis kid Isaac. Right?"

No reply.

"See fellahs, this Finky is not as smart as he says he is. He doesn't know his Bible like he makes out he does. Well, Finky, let's take you. How was you born? No, no, no. Don't answer me. Lemme tell ya. You was born, Finky, because your mudder and fodder did it."

"Did what?"

"You mean you don't know what your mudder and fodder did?"

The laughter became louder and more prolonged. "Hey, Finky, I didn' think you was so stupid. Your fodder and mudder—they went to bed and he stuck his cock into her, into her vagina. He shot his load into her and thas' how you was born, Finky. Your mudder got laid by your fodder. Right, fellahs?"

They all laughed uproariously.

"No, no, no! My mother would never do such a thing. You are wrong. You are all evil—all of you. My mother is a pure woman. A wonderful, pure woman."

They began to walk away while I was shouting after them. "Not my mother. Not my mother. Not my dear and fine mother. She was not that kind of person. Maybe other mothers, but not mine. You lie. You lie. You lie."

With that, I closed the Bible and began to cry. Rabbi Berman saw me crying, took my hand in his, "Herry, yes, your mother is a pure person."

"And it's not true? She did not lay with my father like they said. Right, Rabbi?"

"Oh, Herry, it is so refreshing to see your youth. But before you there is so much for you to know. Come, let me take you for some ice cream."

I saw that soft smile on his face and I knew that beyond the farthest edge of my experience there lay an immense length of time, of years and months and days, when all things—true and false—would come to me.

I ate the ice cream cone ravenously. We sat on the steps of the synagogue in complete silence. And for the first time since my *zeyde's* death, I experienced a wholeness.

"All of your life, Herry," the Rabbi continued, "all of life will open to you as a bud opens to be a radiant rose."

I heard his words, but the meaning was presently lost by the delicious ice cream trickling down my throat.

CHAPTER XLVI

Oh, the lapse of time! The days and months unwind and run into one another. How the raging storms of winter give way to early spring, filling the streets with a new color. Forsyth Street began to sprout a new refreshing image of God's eternal presence. Now we saw the daffodil, the apple blossoms, the forsythia spreading its golden foliage over the darkened streets. The fragrance of this new earth spread into the alleyways of Eldridge Street. We knew the new season had come. The winter was cruel. There was an accented heaviness in my heart all winter long. I had lost my zeal and enthusiasm for life. Every day I would rise and try to dress in the freezing room. Why should I get up, I asked myself. I had nowhere to go except to stay in the same room where my *zeyde* studied, looking at the old trunk sitting there, vacant. I had to hear my grandmothers' long silences. Though the winds tore into the streets, I now saw the signs of spring and a new joy began to leap to my heart.

I thought of the future. I wanted now to see beyond the sweeping distance, to hear new sounds, to smell new fragrances, to see new sights. To be awake again to the meaning of my life.

I began to see myself as an adult. I saw myself as a young man seeking a bride, of working in the field of commerce, with new friends. I thought about it all the time, but

it was not very clear to me. It was like a curtain draped over the stage that would not open. The play was preformed behind the proscenium. I heard the voices beckoning me to come forward but I did not know how to proceed.

I decided one day, when I was weary of the desolation of my home, to speak to Rabbi Berman. Strangely enough, it was the rabbi who desired to speak with me.

One evening after the *Maariv* services, the good Rabbi approached me. "Herry," he said as he opened a soft smile beneath his beard. "I want you to stop all you are doing. I think we have to talk."

Afraid and timid, and even a bit shy, I grew protective of the armor that I had built around me. "Why? What is there to talk about?"

"You," came his terse answer.

"Me?"

"Yes, Herry. You do not see yourself the way I see you."

"I don't understand."

"Herry," he said, lifting his voice another decibel, reaching out to take my hand in his, "you stop that right now. You don't understand. That is a falsehood and a lie. It is bad enough when you lie to me, but to lie to yourself, that is the greatest sin. You do not trust God any more. You have lost your faith. Tell me the truth, Herry, is what I said true?"

"I dunno."

"Sure, you know. Let me quote psalm One: '*Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord and in the law doth he meditate day and night. And he shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of the water that bringeth forth fruit in his season. His leaf shall not wither and whatsoever he doeth shall prosper...*'

"Herry, do not look away from me. We must see your life clearly and plainly. How many nights have you lain in bed and felt your anguish? How many, Herry?"

I did not reply. Just gave silence. I was stung by his words and somewhat offended by his intrusion of my life, but the mental agitation, the unflagging questions that plagued me, the morbidity of my home; and, with all of that, my need to reach out to my loving grandmother and say, "Oh, dear *bubba,* I love you so very much. Everything will be fine. I will stay with you. I will never leave you. I will be at your side. I will watch over you and support you. Please, *bubba*, do not cry any more. The time for tears is gone and with me you will find happier times."

But I could not say that. My heart should have been full. The spring was here. I should have been overjoyed with my life, but I wasn't. I smelled the new coat of paint in the hallways. Before Passover was the time to paint, but I had no

zeyde to discuss the meaning of the Passover. Rabbi Berman was right. I did cry myself to sleep every night. I felt a tear poise itself at the corner of my eyes.

"Herry," he said, giving me a hug, "I am a rabbi. Oh, not such a great rabbi, but with what I have I do the best that I can do. It is said in Leviticus 26: '*if you walk in my statutes and keep my commandments and DO them, then I will give you the rains in their season and the land shall yield her produce and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit, and ye shall lie down and none shall make you afraid...*'

"Know what that means, Herry?"

I knew what he meant. But I wanted him to continue to speak. His voice and words were so reassuring that I could have sat there all night and heard him.

"What I am saying, Herry, is that I have watched you. Your prayers are careless, hasty and shoddy. Your words are wooden and meaningless. You pray with the movement of your lips with no truth, no yearning, no inspiration, no *kavannah*. Herry, your prayer is not prayer to God. That is a sin. You are losing that feeling. I hear it in your voice. I see it in the grudging way you stand for the *SHEMA YISROEL*. That is why I find it necessary to talk to you. All right?"

I nodded.

"Herry, please, listen to me. Please do not think I do not know, or do not understand. I know your *bubba*. She is a plain

and fine woman. She cannot speak English well. She is from peasant stock. Your father and grandfather were all she had. When you came along, her life was reborn, but she never forgave God for taking your father. I know what it is for you to be home now and to watch the sadness and sorrow every day." He paused here, looked deeply into my eyes. "I know, yes, I know how much you would like to be with your mother."

That was a strong statement that gripped me so that I felt it in every bone in my body. "How did you know, Rabbi?"

"I know. You have not seen her for years. Right?"

"Yes, Rabbi."

"Your grandmother hates her. Right?"

"Yes. And she should hate her."

"Why, Herry, why do you say that. Why, Herry? Your mother was good to your father. He became ill and she followed him to Denver, Colorado. She loved him. Did you know that?"

"No."

"Because you were never told. Your *bubba* thought herself as God's scapegoat. She could not hate God for what God had done to her, so she hated your mother."

My mind was in total disorder. Looking into the Rabbi's eyes I saw his challenge to me. Now, before me, he had begun to strip away all my pretensions. He was tearing away

all of the shafts of martyrdom by which my grandmother lived and slowly—without even being aware of it—I began to feel resentful. "Rabbi, I love my *bubba.*"

"I know you do. And you ought to love her. She is good and kind to you. She gave you all she knew how to give. But the truth is, Herry, that she is denying your mother to you. She will not let her in your house. She refuses to let her see you. Don't you see that, Herry?"

"No, no."

"You think I am lying to you?"

Silence overcame me. It was difficult to understand that. But in the deepest part of me, I knew he was right. As I began to think about what the rabbi said, tears began to fall down my face and blind my sight. I fell into the rabbi's arms and sobbed, while he held me tightly. I felt his love for me as well as the truth of his words. "What do I do now, Rabbi?"

"I think you should find your mother. Do you know where she is now?"

"I don't know."

"She never wrote to you?"

"No."

"Can you find out?"

"I dunno."

"In all if the discussions you overheard, you never heard about the Bronx or Brooklyn or Manhattan spoken about?"

"I heard about the Bronx."

"Who lives there?"

"I dunno."

As I spoke, I suddenly remembered—yes, I remembered—something that was once said about my Aunt Anna, who lived in Coney Island. But I dismissed it. The Rabbi saw me begin to say the words, "Coney Is..."

"You were saying?"

"Nothing."

"What do you mean, 'nothing'?"

"I was going to say, Coney Island, but my mother does not live there."

"Anybody you know—I mean your aunt or cousins?"

"I remember a Solly and Paisey and Cousin Leo, but I don't know where they are."

"You mean—maybe they live somewhere in Coney Island?"

"I don't know. I really don't know, Rabbi."

"Now, listen to me, Herry. Are you listening?"

"Yes, Rabbi."

He paused, took my face in his hands, stared me straight in the eye and spoke softly. "The day will come when you find your mother. And when you do, it is then that you will begin to find yourself. In the meantime, Herry, be good to your *bubba.* Let her know how much you love her. She needs this now more

than at any other time of her life. But above all things, you should not feel that you were, in any way, responsible for the death of your *zeyde*. You were good to him and he to you. As far as your mother is concerned, one day you will find her. And I ask you not to bear any guilt for having a need for her. You are from her loins. You are her child. You need to see her because it is our Holy One, our *Hashem*, that brought you into this world from her love to your father of blessed memory."

I nodded. I didn't know what to say. I just sat there in silence. The rabbi rose, put out the lights and brought me to the door of my house, kissed me gently on the cheek and walked away.

I knew that I had much to think about—much to ponder. When I entered my house, there was my *bubba*, sitting in the dining room, preparing gefilte fish for Passover. I walked over to her, took her by the hand and kissed her on the forehead. I smiled at her and said, "*Ich hub deech lieb, bubba.*" (I love you, grandma.)

She forced a smile and my heart grew brighter. I knew this would be the first night in many months that I would fall into a deep and untroubled sleep.

CHAPTER XLVII

I dreamed of vague shadows. Like echoes they sounded distant, but near, becoming light and then dark. I saw the clouds sweeping over the mellow distances of time. I saw a grisly-bearded man with bleary eyes. He wore an old suit, fitting tightly on his body. He bent over as he walked. The color of his face was like old white wax, shielding his identity. He was standing by my mother's side. My mother laughed out loud. It was a laugh that seemed to echo a tone of mockery. I heard voices—accusing, shallow voices—straining to be heard. The man stood in the center of the room, an enigmatic smile on his face. My mother, dressed in white, seemed to be pushing him away until a vaporous shadow of him remained.

There was my mother. Her face was tilted to one side, her hair glistening in the room. She stepped toward me and hugged me. I felt a sensation running through my body that swarmed over me. My breath was heavy and shallow. It was as though, in that experience, the world had stopped turning. The sun had stopped shining.

I awoke in the morning, having realized that this experience was as though I had a sexual release. I lay there for a long while. I thought about that dream. It was a very vivid encounter. Then I thought about what the Rabbi had told me. I must find my mother! I will never be the same until I do. She

is the necessary link to the rest of my life. Without her, I will be nothing. I will be worthless—without an anchor.

I felt my body respond to those vagrant thoughts and knew that I had to find her. But how? I did not know, but I had to begin to plan something—anything. New York was a sprawling city with millions of people. How, in this sprawling acreage could I find my mother.

That man I saw—that man with the red hair and the beard—that man—why he was

Isadore Weisman! He could have taken my mother to any place—even out of New York! He was not a good person, this Mr. Weisman. He used to beat me, lock me up in the closet for hours. He hated me. I was not his son. Evans and Steven and Jason—they were his sons. But even they were sent away to homes. But now they must be back with him. Who knew?

But he would in no way be interested in me. I would be treated with neglect. I would be in the way. He would scowl at me—lock me in the closet again—beat me—and my mother would have no choice but to obey what he said.

Regardless of these thoughts, I had to find my mother. But I knew it was like searching for a raindrop in an ocean.

But my dream. There this man was. He was standing in the midst of the wild and chaotic voices denouncing him.

I rose out of bed. My grandmother was sitting by the window, watching the peddlers pushing their carts toward Orchard Street to sell their wares.

Suddenly, I broke out, "Grandma, do any of our relations live in Coney Island?"

"No, Herry."

"In Brooklyn?"

"Uncle Louie, *Tanta* Polly."

"But not in Coney Island?"

I saw her face. Her body stiffened. She seemed to be terrified with that question.

She changed the subject. "Go, go, Herry, go to *schul* and say *Kaddish* for your *zeyde.*"

"All right, *Bubba,*" I said.

There was something about this conversation that told me something—that gave me an idea that somewhere between Eldridge Street and Coney Island, I could find something I had to know about my mother. Nothing was said that made this certain, but it was there—something in the air—in my *bubba's* face. The flush of her cheek bones—the way she stiffened her body—that gave me a clue that there was something I had to know about Coney Island.

A plan began to emerge. No, nothing definite. But something indefinable, that could not be touched or said. I knew when school closed for the summer, I would think about

taking the necessary actions to find my mother. It was now May. The Passover Holidays were over. *Shevuos* was coming and soon we would be smelling the fragrance of roses in the air. My heart was full of excitement. I knew that I would do something to change the course of my life.

In the meantime, I was developing my body and watching my biceps grow hard and firm. I shadow-boxed, ran across the Williamsburg Bridge, attached pillows to the iron ladder in the yard and punched them.

I began to follow the boxing careers of Barney Ross, Tony Canzoneri, Jack Sharkey, and Primo Carnera. I bought RING MAGAZINE. I read every page of these books and imagined that I was a successful boxer—the lightweight fighting in Madison Square Garden for the title. I heard the cheers and raised my hands to acknowledge the praise I was getting.

I heard the ring announcer call out:

'LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE NEW LIGHTWEIGHT CHAMPION OF THE WORLD, HAROLD FINKELSTEIN."

The crowd would storm the ring, slapping my back. The girls would hug and kiss me. There would be my dear mother, so proud of me, and the tears of joy running down her beautiful face.

Oh, sure. Now she was sorry. She was ashamed of herself, abandoning me all those years, while I was wallowing

in confusion about my need for her. And now, there she was—I'll show her—I'll show her—.

On one of those days, one of my classmates, Jack Schacter, a boy with a curled lip and blotchy face full of boils, called me over to him. "Hey, Finky, I hears you wanna be a fighter. Right?"

"Yeah."

"Aren't you a little skinny for that?"

He began to laugh. "You're not even a pintweight."

"Well, maybe so," I said. "I may be skinny, but I got speed. I'm fast with my legs. I fight a lot like Barney Ross."

"Ever been in a fight?"

"I fought kids you don't know."

"Won any of dose fights?'

"All of 'em."

"Any knockouts?"

"Sure."

"How many?"

"Five."

"Five knockouts?"

"Yeah."

"Boy, you must have some punch."

"That's what they say."

"Who says?"

"The guys I knocked out."

"Boy, that's sumtin."

"I'm a natural. See my arm?" I held up my bulging biceps.

"Boy, that's some arm you got there."

"Go ahead and feel it."

He felt my arm, looked at me and said, "Wow. Like a rock."

"Hey, Finky, the Univoisity Settlement is gonna be holdin' boxing matches in a few weeks. They are gonna have these bouts in a regular ring with boxing gloves. Would you like to join and get a free two weeks in the Catskills? Interested?"

"Sure."

"Okay. You come with me tomorrow and I'll sign you up."

I was excited. I started to dance around Jack, feigning to punch him with my dangerous jab and lethal left hook. He laughed as we danced around each other.

"You look great, Finky. Some day we'll hear good things about you."

"You bet."

The next day, Jack and I went to the University Settlement and stood in a long line. When they came to me and asked me about my weight, I said I was 125 pounds. I heard a laugh. "Hey, kid, you are no 125 pounds. I bet you don't make

90 pounds. You are gonna have to fight junior flyweights. Your first bout will be June 1st. Your opponent will be Jack Schacter."

"Jack Schacter?"

"Yep."

"Okay."

"If you want, you can come here every day after school and train. You can use the punching bags and the gloves. You can spar if you can find a partner. Can we depend on you, Finkelstein?"

"Oh, sure."

For all my bravado, I felt a sense of fear taking charge of me. I was never in the ring before. I tried punching the light bag, but it eluded me. But I was amazed to see how much energy I had. There was power in my little hands, letting go a barrage in such rhythm of anger that it puzzled me. The bag was no longer a bag. The bag was my stepfather, Mr. Weisman. I was punishing him for his brutality, for taking my mother away from me. And now the bag became my mother. But try as I may, I could not erase my mother's face from the heavy bag as my punches flailed away with such animal force.

The day came. June 1st. I was nervous all day. I wasn't sure about the outcome of the fight with Jack Schacter, but I looked at him. He was skinnier than me. He walked with a slight limp. He did not seem to have any energy. I could see

myself. With a left jab, a right cross, a few punches to the body, and the fight will end. I did not tell my grandmother about the fight. But Sam, the son of the president of the synagogue, Herman Schwartz, was in the contest. The rabbi also knew about the fight and that I was in it. He tried to tell me a few things I did not know—how to dance around my opponent, feint—that is to move to the right and to the left—shoot the jab out with the left and follow it with a right cross.

I walked down the aisle into a corded ring. I noticed a stool with my name on it and sat down. Mr. Stern, the coordinator was sitting by my side, rubbing my shoulders, as the crowd gathered. My heart pulsed with excitement. I saw Jack enter with his friends as he sat down at the opposite corner of the ring.

Mr. Stern helped me to put on the boxing gloves, which seemed so big and clumsy. I waited. A portly man, with a deep voice, rose, went to the center of the ring:

"L A D I E S AND G E N T L E M E N, tonight we open our annual boxing contests. All of the proceeds will be contributed to the Jewish National Fund. This Fund helps kids to go to summer camp, with their education in Hebrew school, and to maintain our ties with the land of Israel.

"Tonight we have eight contests in each weight division. The winners will go to summer camp this year for two weeks in

the Catskills. We will begin with our Junior Flyweight. In this corner, we have to my right:

HAROLD FINKELSTEIN."

There was a scattering of applause.

"And to my left—yes, ladies and gentlemen—Jack Schacter is back. For two years now, he won the title by one-round knockouts. I am so happy to have him come back. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you J A C K S C H A C T E R."

The crowd exploded in a long and tumultuous ovation as Jack Schacter, dressed in an ornate robe, stood up and sat down.

He lied to me. He never told me about his boxing skills and record. Now I was his opponent. It was certain that he was going to try to knock me out in the first of the three rounds as he did to the others. But I was determined. I was going to win this fight. Yes, my left jab, my dancing, the right cross and uppercut. That would do the trick.

The bell rang. We met in the center of the ring. The referee said a few words I did not hear. We returned to our corners. We came out fighting. I started to dance around him, stroking my left jab in the air and crossing with my right. But both punches missed. Then from nowhere, Jack was all over me, peppering my face with powerful jabs—a left and a right to my stomach. My head began to whirl. I felt myself falling, falling, falling, and I heard numbers—7-8-9-10—. The referee

helped me up. Jack came over and embraced me and turned to the crowd, waved his hands in victory.

I stood there, numb, left with only one consolation. And that was that my mother was not here to see me in my disgrace.

I looked around and saw my classmates standing around in clusters. I felt ashamed that I could not have at least lasted a few rounds. But they were kind to me. "Next time, Finky. You didn't know Jack fought before and was the champ."

My friends comforted me. It felt good to experience this camaraderie. I watched them as they disappeared in the crowd.

I felt my bones to see if any of them had been broken. I looked in the mirror and saw that my face was none the worse for it. There was a small mark on my forehead. I began to feel exhilarated about myself. I wasn't afraid. I did not run away from this experience.

When I walked into the house, my grandmother was kneading dough for the *Shabbos challah*. "Herry, you have to go to *schul*."

"I know, *bubba*."

The summer was fast approaching. The weather was getting warmer. School would be out soon, and I would be faced with an important decision. I looked into my grandmother's face. Her eyes were sunken into a gloomy reverie. I wished that I could sit her down and speak to her. But I would have to do this at the risk of sudden salvos of

lamentations—her screeching into such an emotional tide with which I knew I could not cope. I did not know how to proceed. I kept quiet. But in my mind I was planning to find a way to discover my mother's whereabouts. It was much easier said than done.

How could I leave my dear grandmother—now to be all alone—to sit by the window, staring out into space. She had lost all her friends, because who would want to remain with her while she lamented her sorrows? Who would want to hear her vanquished sighs, her body and soul wrapped in unrelenting grief?

And how could I have the indecency to leave her in this barren life—empty—secluded—now only waiting to die? She could justifiably think that her life was meant to be discarded now, with my *zeyde* gone. God now had no meaning to her except as a scapegoat for the gathering clouds of tragedy closing in on her.

In such a plight, how could I have the temerity to walk out on her; to give her a kiss goodbye—look at her for the last time and just walk away? She was good to me. How I would often catch her gazing at me with such fondness. She always made sure I had plenty to eat, enough clothes to wear and not to be caught walking the streets with holes in my pants or shoes. I would hear her talking about me to the neighbors. "*Oi*, my

Herry—like his father—so smart. So good-looking—has a voice from God."

She boasted of my role as a cantor with Yosele Rosenblatt. When I sang in the synagogue, she would push the curtain aside and watch me as I sang. I could read her lips saying, "this is my *anekeel*—my grandson—singing."

As I sat quietly and looked into her swollen eyes, a single thought possessed me. I asked the question of God: "why were you causing my dear *bubba* to suffer so much? Why did you not give her some pleasure and love? Why are you making it necessary to have to choose whether to find my mother, or stay in this depressing flat, waiting for her to die?"

The days and weeks flew by. The weather was becoming very warm. I could sense the fragrance of magnolia in the air. Loneliness took hold of me. My life was empty and void. One day was much like the other. I didn't feel like going to the synagogue any more. I did not want to sing the prayers any more. The school was closing. Vacation was coming and I had a decision to make.

How could I make it? I had no plan. I had a purpose, but I had no strategy. If I had, how could I break it to her?

And, even if I left, where could I go? Would I just leave and walk into the congested streets and walk anywhere—just anywhere? I did not want the summer to go by without making some effort to find my mother. But where—and how? From

Eldridge Street to—where? And what would I say to her? "*Bubba.* I want to leave you to find my mother."

Why, she would howl in the night. She would pull her hair. She would go mad—insane. She would become deranged, her face lined with such pain that I did not think I could cope with it.

But there had to be a way. I spoke to Rabbi Berman and he said I had to take that chance. "Your grandmother has to know that you yearn for your mother. She has to understand that she raised you, but she does not own you. Her problems with your mother are not your problems. It is your duty to tell her how you feel, that you want to go out and try to find your mother. The question is where to look. That you will have to decide. But the day must come, Herry, when you will begin to turn over every possibility to find her."

The advice was good and made much sense to me. But I could not follow it.

June came and became July. I sat on my fire escape and heard the explosive firecrackers. I could not tolerate the noise because I could not think. In me was a snarling beast—restless, uneasy, tense. I had the opportunity now to make an exhaustive search for my mother, but I was allowing precious time to elapse.

One day—and this is a day I will never forget—a letter arrived from the Electric Company. It was upon the receipt of

this letter that awoke in me a calculating purpose. The very heavens opened up and cleared away the clouds of gloom and doubt surrounding me. It was like a great sounding thunder in my brain. Clarity came upon me. Suddenly I knew what to do. All of the vaporous clouds of despair—half-seen—half-formed—now burst into a resplendent brilliance of certainty. I held that letter in my hand, studied it, and I knew how I was going to use that letter to liberate myself.

I opened the letter, bolted up the stairs, and blurted out, "*BUBBA! BUBBA!* Let me read you this letter. It is from the camp in the Catskills. It says: 'Dear Mrs. Finkelstein, Your grandson, Harold Finkelstein, was chosen to join us as a camper in Monticello, New York. He is being asked to leave immediately. The bus leaves today at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. Make sure he meets us at the Delancey Street Station, and he will go with a group to Monticello. Sincerely yours,'"

She looked at me. I studied her eyes and tried to measure her response to see if she knew what I was doing. She believed the letter I falsified. "You have to go now, Herry?"

"Yes, *Bubba.* Now."

"That is so nice, Herry. You should have a vacation. You have been through so much. Let me pack for you. You'll need your knickers—your sneakers---"

Her words continued, but I did not hear them. I was out of breath. I wanted to weep for joy. O God, O God, how merciful thou art. You have lifted me as a leaf, a cloud. I saw the face of my grandmother. It was benign and soft, like the picture of a saint. It was there that I saw how much she loved me. She did not question me. She did not doubt what I had read.

This was all too easy. It was as though this plan was directed by God. I stood there and watched her take a flannel bag out of the closet and pack the clothing in it. When she was done, she tore down the charity boxes and gave me over a dollar.

"Come, Herry, you cannot be late." I was in a state of shock. I was worried that my Uncle Louie would come by and spoil this success. But he did not come. I walked on air as I proceeded to Delancey Street. She walked by my side, holding my hand. She hugged me and kissed me for what seemed to be forever. A part of me began to sense guilt for the lie I told her. But, now—now it made no difference at all. Not at all as I detached myself from my grandmother's arms and watched her as she walked across the street and slowly fade away in the distance.

Suddenly it occurred to me that I did not know what I did with the electric bill. If she had it, she was bound to show it to someone—my uncle or a neighbor—who read to her all the

letters that came. But I did not care. I did not care. I WAS FREE!!!! FREE!!!!

All of my doubts passed like a phantom into the shadows of the night. I walked down the steps and saw the sign that said "CONEY ISLAND". I stood on the platform. As the train roared in, I knew that a new destiny awaited me. Every nerve of my body was quivering. My head whirled with sensations I had never before known. This was the first time I had been on a subway, and I loved the movement. I looked at the passengers and they seemed to smile at me. I was on my way. To where? I did not care.

At this moment, all I knew was that I was a boy no longer.

CHAPTER XLVIII

My mind was filled with formless dread as I followed the crowd down the runway to the streets. I never saw so many people gathered in one place. Children were carrying balloons and eating what they called "custard ice cream". There was more excitement during this exodus that I ever saw in my life. I heard screeching on all sides of me. Someone pushed me and laughed. "Hey, kid, get a move on," I heard someone say. They all laughed. The crowds, the bawling kids, the excitement bewildered me. I had read in the book about Pinocchio where he escapes into a fairyland and experiences all sorts of merrymaking—the same kind I saw here. I was apprehensive as I walked down the plank which led to the open doors to Stillwell Avenue. I had never seen such light or heard such screaming and shrieking. Nor did I ever smell such a salty tang in the air. It was a new world for me, a world of fun and games.

No longer the barren and glutted streets thronged with gangsters with crooked mouths and their cynical speech. No more the derelicts wandering from garbage pail to garbage pail. The synagogue where I prayed had no place here, I thought, as I walked into the bright sunlight, the dancing shapes of sight and sound before me.

What seemed to me to be thousands of people strolled behind me. There was so much life and animation. A world of

adventure awaited me. For a while I had completely forgotten the purpose for my mission. When I thought if it, I panicked. I did not know what to do first. Nor did I know in which direction to begin walking. With a dollar and a half in my pocket, the things I could do, the ice cream custards I could eat, and the hot dogs I could devour. Here was a land waiting for my discovery.

No longer was my soul fettered to the poverty of Eldridge Street. The men and women of Eldridge Street no longer existed for me.

I heard the honking of horns. And saw people greeting each other. I saw the trolley cars rumbling and the electric wires sparkling and crackling. It was all too dazzling to the eye as I watched with amazement the Cyclone ride thundering down with squealing kids and adults holding desperately onto the iron bars in front of their seats. It was all a blur to me as I looked around and saw Nathan's Hot Dog Stand, Feldman's Restaurant, the Bushman's Baths, the billboard advertising, the Lido Pool, the Steeplechase, the gyrating rides and the Loop and the merry-go-round.

My mind became an arena of madness. My heart leaped and my pulse raced. It was all too much glitter, too much noise, but I loved it. I was lost in the mob of people walking down the street like a stream, or a river drifting to the sea.

The deep voice of the barker jolted me. "C'mon folks, come in and see for yourselves. Never will you ever see the likes of this again. We don't lie to you, folks. See the half man and the bearded lady. See Fatima and her great bosom. Come on. It's all here for you to see. Just 10 cents and you will see the Mighty Atom lift 1000 pounds over his head. You will see him pull a car with his hair. You will see the Neanderthal Man, walking on a bed of burning coals."

He pointed to me, " c'mon, kid, give me a dime and you can see all of this and you can tell your mom and dad about what you saw."

I hesitated. I could not react to all of this sudden excitement. I asked myself where I had been all of my life that I missed all of this paradise. My eyes were wide open, but the more I walked up the street and saw the wonders of the world before me, the more I felt my heart pounding furiously against my chest.

To devour all I saw—that is what I wanted to do. The Cyclone. The Wonder Wheel. The rides. The games of chance. "Pitch the ball and win a teddy bear. Here, for one little nickel, you can win this beautiful and cuddly baby teddy bear. Just knock those pins down and win this teddy bear who needs a home and will be your friend for life."

All of it, the crowds, the ice cream, the hot dogs, the half-naked women dancing, showing their navels and their

undulating breasts—all of it came to me in an instant. I was unable to digest it all at once.

This was a land of enchantment, far from the sad moorings where I lived. No more the glum people standing and sitting and bowing over the prayers, the phylacteries I had to wear and the Hebrew school with the strict Cantor Rosenblatt pounding in my senses to sing the Torah tropes correctly. All of it was out of my mind. My words could not describe each new event which came to me with sudden import like the syllable of an unknown tongue.

It must have been a dream for it was, all of it, ripped away from my narrow dimensions of understanding. It was, yes, a fairy tale, an illusion. My desire and fancy were playing on my sense of reality. I was afraid that suddenly I would feel the tapping of my grandmother on my shoulder saying, "Herry, *meer doff gain in sheel.* (Harold, it is time to go to the synagogue).

I stopped and bought a vanilla custard on a sugar cone. I tasted it with such relish and happiness. I could have eaten a dozen custards. The reality of where I was going or where I would sleep tonight did not matter to me at the moment. I had even forgotten who I was, where I came from, the synagogue, my poor grandmother. And, yes, why I came to this place where nothing in life seemed to matter. Not the Torah. Not the

Mishna. Not the Rabbi. Nothing. Only the joy of following the stream of people moving forward.

I decided to walk toward the water, for I had never seen an ocean. This, they told me, was the Atlantic Ocean that led to all nations of Europe. I wanted to see as far as the eye could see. I walked up the steps; and there, before me, was the wooden boardwalk and the ocean, the liquid horizon. It was a thrilling vision as I watched the giant waves crashing toward the shore.

I saw a man looking at me. He was smiling. He looked like a fine man, dressed in a fancy suit with a bow tie, an elegant straw hat. He was distinctly different from the people walking in both directions. He came toward me. He stopped, looked down at my face and smiled again. He seemed to be a very kind man. "Hello, sonny," he said.

"Oh, hello," I replied.

"With your parents?"

"No."

"You mean, you're alone?"

I nodded.

His voice was smooth and deep—thick with honeyed accents—but not flippant. Only sort of inquisitive. "You did not answer my question. Alone?"

"Yes."

I was finished with the ice cream, but didn't want the cone. I but did not know where to dispose of it. He showed me a waste-paper basket, where I dropped it in.

"Don't like the cone?"

"I dunno. I liked the ice cream."

"Want another one?"

Without thinking, and feeling a sense of trust in his presence, I said, "oh sure."

"Come with me and I'll get you one."

He stopped at the ice cream stand. "Vanilla, or Chocolate?"

"Vanilla."

"I like vanilla, too," he said.

I licked the ice cream with relish.

"Good?"

"Oh, sure. Thanks, Mister."

"Where were you going?"

"I dunno."

"You mean you're just walking?"

"Yeah."

He looked down at me again, smiled and showed his flashing, white teeth. "Hungry?"

"Yeah."

"How 'bout a Nathan's hot dog?"

"Are they good?"

"Good? The best! The very best in the world. You mean you never heard of a Nathan's hot dog, sonny?"

"No."

I began to get annoyed with him calling me "sonny" so I rushed to tell him, "My name is Harold."

"And I am Fred Stanton. How 'bout that hot dog?"

"Why are you so good to me, Mister?"

"Stanton. Why am I so good to you? I like you."

"You don't even know me."

At this point I remembered my dear grandfather warning me about strangers, especially those who wore good suits and were all dressed up.

"There's something about your face, Harold. So innocent and yet so bright. You are a nice boy—not a ragamuffin like some kids I see here. You're well-mannered. You must have a nice home. Where do you live?"

"Eldridge Street."

"Oh," he said, grimacing slightly. "Oh, there's Nathan's. I take it you've never been to Coney Island before, or you would have known about Nathan's."

"No. This is the first time."

I stood with him before the steaming counter surrounded by what seemed to be hundreds of people. I heard the demanding voices. The man in the white suit was holding up two hot dogs. He gave it to Mr. Stanton, who took them and

handed me one. I held that juicy, broiling hot dog in my hand. Oh, the smell if it, the appetizing look of it. I heard all of the sounds—the ringing of the cash registers, the money exchanged, all of this confusion and noise—just too much for a little boy like me to understand, but the hot dog dispelled all of the confusion. My mouth watered. He led me back to the boardwalk where I bit into the luscious hot dog, sucking the juicy sauerkraut, and felt a hunger I have never before experienced.

"Oh," he exclaimed. "You want soda?"

"Yeah."

"Stay there and I'll get some soda."

He left and walked over to a soda stand and came back with two bottles of soda.

I began to like and trust him. He was such a gentle human being. I noticed he had blue eyes and platinum-blond hair. My God, he looked just like that picture of my father above my grandfather's trunk that he used as his praying stand. I felt so good, so comfortable sitting here with him, looking into his handsome face. This was all too good to be true, I thought.

I devoured the hot dog with hurried gulps as we looked out into the sea and enjoyed the silence of the moment.

"So. You've never been here before?"

"No."

"What made you come here today?"

Suddenly I grey tense. I could not find the words to answer his question. Though I trusted him, I thought that he could have been the police. My Uncle Louie probably knew by now that I had left home and my grandmother did not know where I went, so it was possible that my uncle sent the police to find me.

"Don't you want to tell me?"

"I don't even know you."

"Then, would you like to get to know me?"

"I dunno. You could be the police," I said, looking away.

He began to laugh. "Why would you be worried about the police? Did you run away from home?"

I nodded, but did not answer his question.."Are you the police, Mr. Stanton?"

He pat me on my back. Laughed softly and said, "No. Don't you worry. I am not the police. I am a traveling salesman. How 'bout another hot dog, Harold?"

"Oh, no thanks, Mr. Stanton."

"You like them?"

"The best I ever tasted. Even better than the kosher ones I get at Gittelstein's Delicatessen."

"You're Jewish?"

"Yeah."

"I'm a Catholic. Know what a Catholic is?"

"Yeah. You believe in Jesus."

"You believe in God, Harold?"

"Yeah. I believe in God."

"Good. So do I. I guess that's why we get along so well. Right?"

"I guess so."

"Where are you going to go from here, Harold?"

"I dunno."

"You sure you're not running away from home?"

"Well—not exactly."

"You don't wanna tell me?"

Silence followed. I looked into space.

"Well, Harold, if you want to tell me, you'll tell me. Right?"

"I guess so."

He smiled again, placed his hand on my shoulder. I was grateful that he did not question me anymore.

"Let me tell you something so you won't worry if I'm the police. You wanna hear it?"

"Sure."

"I am a salesman of toys. My office is on 23rd Street. I sell toys for children of all ages. If you come up to my office, I'll give you any toy you like. Did you ever play with an Erector Set, where you can make anything you want with screws?"

"No."

"You're missing something. It's a great toy for someone as smart as you."

"Thanks."

"Just you come to my office anytime, and I will give you toys you will like. A boy like you should have toys to play with. Right?"

I got excited. "Any toys, Mr. Stanton?"

"Sure."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Stanton."

"What about you? What's your second name?"

"No questions. Okay?"

"Okay. No questions. Go to school?"

"Yeah."

Suddenly I felt the need to talk. I was sure he was not a cop and if I talked how could he hurt me? "I am the boy-cantor with one of the greatest cantors in the world. His name is Cantor Rosenblatt. I am a serious student of the Torah and Talmud. I love my faith. I love being Jewish, even if I have so many questions that I need answered. You know, Mr. Stanton, that my father died before I ever knew him? My mother gave me up and I was living with my grandparents. My grandfather was crippled and he begged for a living. This is the way we lived. Well, a few months ago, my dear grandfather died. Do you know how it feels to have lost the most important person in

your life? He cared for me. He taught me so much that I know. Well, now that he died, I came here to Coney Island to search for my mother. She lives somewhere here and I want to find her."

"You mean that you live with your grandmother now?"

"Yeah."

As I spoke, I began to feel the upheaval of my emotions, the swelling of my face with hot tears coursing down my cheeks.

"I know how you feel, Harold. But I'm sure you'll find your mother."

He held my hand, embraced me, brought my cheek up to his lips and kissed me. "You're some kid, Harold."

There was a pregnant silence, both of us watching the steady rhythm of the waves against the receding shore. I grew frightened. Could it be that I told him too much? And now that he knew all I said, he would take me to the police and have me taken back to my grandmother? We just stared at the deep and soft, summer, eventide. The winds began to stir. In my heart I heard the sweet music of a new life. I did not want anything to happen to my plans. If I saw just one movement that suggested that he wanted to take me to the police, I was ready to run away from him. He held on to my hand and I drew back.

"No, Harold, don't be afraid of me. I will not harm you or change your plans. You should find your mother."

"You won't---"

"No, Harold. You deserve to find your mother."

Suddenly he changed the subject. "Wanna go to the movies?"

"You mean it?"

"Sure, I mean it. There's a good picture playing at the movie house here on Stillwell Avenue. The name of the movie is WHOM THE GODS DESTROY."

I got very excited. "Oh, Mr. Stanton, thank you, thank you. I don't know what to say. You are so kind."

"All right. Come with me."

He took me to Stillwell Avenue and walked toward the movie house. My heart was pounding. I could not believe that so many wonderful things were happening to me. He bought the tickets and, suddenly, we were in a dark room, walking on a soft carpet. I could hardly see anything as we sat down in sheer darkness. The silver screen flashed the Pathe News. We saw a cartoon and some shorts with Laurel and Hardy. I laughed out loud at Laurel as he got Hardy into trouble. He left me and returned with popcorn. It was something I never ate before.

"Comfortable?"

"Oh, sure, Mr. Stanton. Thank you."

The movie was about a man who was on a luxury liner with his wife and child. The ship struck a glacier and began to

capsize. The man, ignoring the roles of disembarkment during such emergencies, dressed up as a woman and was allowed to board a lifeboat, leaving his wife and child behind. They left on another lifeboat. The newspapers reported him dead and now he was a man alone. He was ashamed to return home, for the dastardly thing he had done would make him a pariah and the shame of the nation. He became a derelict and walked the streets begging for scraps of bread and occasional shelter in a flophouse. I began to cry for his plight as I felt Mr. Stanton's arm around my shoulder. He hugged me, and I snuggled up to him. I needed this affection. After my grandfather's death, no one hugged me or fondled me. My heart stirred as I felt his warm hand on mine. I lay back in his arms. God was surely understanding of what my poor and neglected soul needed. I needed this warm companionship as I needed a father—a person who actually looked like the father I never knew. God must have sent Mr. Stanton to me.

"Comfortable, Harold?"

"Oh yes. Very comfortable."

As time went on and the movie began to unfold, I felt him unbutton my shirt. He was now with his flesh upon my flesh. I liked it, but I could not understand it. However, his movements became bolder and bolder. Soon his hand was moving down my body with more and more pressure. I heard him breathing loudly and groaning. "Like that, Harold?"

I did not reply.

Then he bent over and kissed my cheek and then my lips. I could not understand what he was doing. When his other hand searched for my knickers, I tried to move away, but he held me tightly. "Don't be afraid, Harold. What I am doing is good. You'll feel good about what I am doing. I mean it."

He succeeded in unbuttoning my knickers and probing my crotch.

I was transfixed in a surge of passion, mixed with revulsion as I felt myself breathing harder. Sensations I never felt before overcame me. My body became hard. Trembling, I rose, all confused, stunned by this unexpected experience. I ran up the aisle and out into the warm and glaring sunshine.

I did not know where to run. Terror filled my brain as though I was face to face with implacable doom. My soul compressed into a single agony of prayer. My heart was wrung with a sudden homesickness for my poor *bubba*, sitting home, and whom I tricked in order to embark on such a riotous adventure. This lechery was the last thing that came to my mind. I felt a deep sense of shame. I was ashamed that a part of me wanted to experience what he was doing to me. But the other part was revolted by it all. Deep repentance smothered my conscience. I felt dirty and I needed to be cleansed. I realized at once that my knickers were still unbuttoned as I took a seat on the bench looking at the sun dipping into the

western sky. Drowsiness descended upon me under a haze of golden twilight. I realized that the day was beckoning the night. I felt in my pocket and knew that I still had about a dollar. I was ashamed that I wasted the whole day when I could have used it to search for my dear mother. I watched the orange pomp of the setting sun while the murmur of the surf softly invited the darkness to cover the firmament.

CHAPTER XLIX

There I was, watching a mute and melancholy horizon, the music of the wine dark sea and the sky now drowned in stars. I kept my eyes on the North Star as it gleamed forth like a diamond sparkling a prophecy of hope. I rose and walked over to Nathan's and bought another two hot dogs and French-fried potatoes. I sat and mused as I stared out into the darkness of the night. I heard the squealing of the crowds eddying forth on the boardwalk—laughing, halting, murmuring. Beside me, two lovers were whispering words to one another I could not hear. Gradually I succumbed to sleep and was awakened by the cries of sea gull floating fearlessly above my head. I had no idea of the time; but, as I looked toward the horizon, the shadows of the night seemed to retreat into a new light of day.

The sky was turning to silvery blue as the sun was creeping over the beach. I rose, stretched and knew that today there could not be any more distractions. I had a mission to fulfill and I must do it today and not turn back and admit that this mission was a failure.

Somewhere there is a woman stretching her limbs, eating breakfast. Somewhere there are my brothers, Steven and Jason, still in Pleasantville. Or, perhaps, at home, now grown boys, hugging my mother, laughing because even my mother could not tell the difference between the two. Being

twins they had to fool many people because they could be taken for one another. Somewhere—somewhere in this world is my little brother, Evans, playing with Steven and Jason, running around, teasing them.

Somewhere on this island, upon the fringe of the frothing, churning, golden sea, there was a beautiful woman with eyes as black as coals, her long hair falling in long tresses over her face. She came to me as a vision of pure loveliness. Her face was a place where men may dwell with a strange fire of love. There was this woman, somewhere, who would, perhaps, be thinking about me and missing me and loving me; who, at this moment, must know—must have a strange premonition of my search.

But where was she on this stretch of land?

It could have been a mile or two, a few yards or in some house near the boardwalk. Or she could have been shopping at some grocer, buying the twins' favorite ice cream or cake. She could have been walking the streets with my twin brothers and Evans, or with my stepfather, Mr. Weisman.

But somewhere here, there or anywhere, she was doing something. Somewhere, near or far, she could be standing or sitting or lying down.

But where was she? How shall I find her? This is what I had to know. Now was the time. I could not tarry any longer. I had to start to walk. To walk, where? This I could not know.

I began my odyssey on Beach 16th Street. I walked up and down each block, looked into the faces of those who passed me by. On one street, children were playing. On another street, the sanitation trucks rumbled by. Janitors were cleaning their sidewalks. There were merchants transporting their merchandise to the beach. I looked deeply into their faces.

I began to lose faith. I could never find my mother this way. What a foolish errand I gave myself. I was tired. I had to return to the beach and rest a while. This was useless. There was no way I would be able to find my mother. Not only was I tired, but I was discouraged.

I felt hunger and thirst. I grew impatient. I wanted to eat, but my need to search for my mother became more compelling. I knew if I did not eat, I could never continue this search.

I had a glass of milk and jelly doughnut. I walked back to 16th Street, where I left off. I watched people walk by. Saw the children at play in their bathing suits. Despite my breakfast I felt that my mouth was dry. My legs were weak. I was beginning to think about taking the train back to Eldridge Street, because evidently this was going to be a failure. What should I tell my grandmother? I said to myself that I will worry about that when I return.

I sat down on the stoop of an old wood-framed building with my head bowed and my spirits fallen. I guess I had—NO!

NO! NO! This cannot be true! Never be true—or I was seeing a mirage. I could swear my eyes were deceiving me.

There, on the porch of the house across the street, was a young girl sweeping. I knew this child, but from where? Of course! This was FAGEY! My cousin! I saw her often when I was a child with her mother, my Aunt Anna.

Yes, yes, yes, yes—that was FAGEY!

Oh, my God. Fagey. I found my mother, for where Fagey was, my mother cannot be far away.

I stood up, walked over to the porch where she was sweeping. I waited for her to look up and for her to see me. With one sudden outburst, I cried out, "Fagey! Fagey!"

And she cried out, "Harold! Is that you—you are Harold, cousin Harold."

With that she threw herself into my arms—and I knew. I knew a joy that could never be adequately described. My body trembled with an exquisite fire of happiness. I knew I saw her last night in that northern star—and now here she was, in my arms.

I looked into her face—her eyes. And she looked into mine. I wished I could have laughed or cried. I could not do either as she showed me the way upstairs—to the startled look on the face of my Aunt Anna.

"Harold???!!!"

"Yes. It's me, Aunt Anna."

"Why—I don't understand. Harold. Why are you here?"

I wish I could find the words to answer her. I ran over to her, took her in my arms and held her for what seemed an eternity.

"Is there anything wrong, Harold?"

"I want my mother, Aunt Anna."

"Your mother? She is not here."

"Can you call her and tell her that her son, Harold, is here?"

"My God. Harold. Did you leave home?"

"Sort of—yes. I left home because it wasn't my home. When I will be with my mother, then I will be home."

"Why did you come here? And why aren't you with your grandparents?"

"My grandfather died."

"Oh."

"I came here to find my mother. Aunt Anna, I will not leave until I see her."

I could see the twisting and turning of her face as if trying to find a way to avoid my plea, but I was firm in my appearance before her. I knew she had to tell me where my mother was. But I also knew that she did not want to tell me. I never liked my Aunt Anna because she was there when my mother brought me to my grandparents and she had pulled me

away from my mother's arms when I resisted being left behind with my grandparents.

"Aunt Anna, do you know where my mother is?"

"Well---"

"Aunt Anna, please. I know you know and you have to tell me."

"Of course, Harold. You must be starving. You must be hungry and tired."

"Yes, Aunt Anna. I am hungry and tired, but that is not so important right now. When I find out where my mother is, I'll eat. But not until then."

"Just relax, Harold. I'll tell your mother you are here, but you must eat. Soon your cousins Pacey and Solly will be home. Remember them?

"No, Aunt Anna."

"They know you. I think you'll like to see them."

"Aunt Anna, I must see my mother. Are you going to call her?"

"Yes, Harold. I'll call her."

"Can you call her now?"

"I don't have a phone."

"Aunt Anna, you are going to have to throw me out of this house bodily. I am not going to do anything until you call my mother—and until I know, for sure, that she is coming to see me."

"Does your grandmother know you are here?"

"No."

"Where does she think you are?"

"In camp."

"In camp?"

"Yeah. I told her that I was going to camp."

"She believed you?"

"Yes."

"When do you have to be back?"

"In two weeks."

"Oh, my God. Harold. What did you do? We can't have you here, and your mother does not have the room to keep you. We are going to have to send you back."

"No, Aunt Anna. You will not send me back until I see my mother. Then you can do what you want."

She rose, went to the window and watched the sun sneak in through the curtains. "How do you know, Harold, that she wants to see you?"

"I don't understand."

"Well, you see, Harold, your mother is very poor and, well, she has no money. Mr. Weisman left her. You know, Harold, when you grow up, I think you should go over to see him and beat him up. He has treated your mother awfully. He beat her. He cam home drunk. He went out with other women. He left your mother with nothing. He does not support her. It

got so bad that your brothers are not with her either. Steven and Jason are in Pleasantville, and Evans is in a foster home."

"I know."

"You know, Harold, and you came here? Where is your sense, Harold?" She can't take you home, even if she wanted to."

"But, Aunt Anna, if she wants to, she'll find a way."

"Oh, you kids. You want. You want. You do not always get what you want."

"Where does my mother live?"

"She lives in the Bronx with friends, Claire and Harold."

"I am still waiting for you to call her."

"I'll call her, Harold. I know it has to be done. But don't expect anything to happen."

"As long as I see her today, we can think of tomorrow, tomorrow."

As we spoke, two young boys came in dressed in bathing suits.

"This is Pacey, and this is Solly, your cousins."

And to them, "This is Harold, your Aunt Henrietta's boy."

"Hello," I said, shyly.

Solly was thin and tall and Pacey's face was pock-marked. This made him look roguish, but when he smiled he was warm and soft. I liked the both of them immediately.

Pacey placed his arm around my shoulder. "Hey, Harold. How 'bout joining us at the beach. Got a bathing suit?"

"No."

"I'll give you mine."

We sat around the table for lunch—Solly, Pacey, Fagey, and myself. I talked about my life with my grandparents and they listened intently. We made friends.

After lunch I was wearing a bathing suit, laughing and joking with my newly-found friends. I followed them down the street, chuckling and making jokes. Fagey took my hand in hers. I was suffused with a warm feeling, expressing myself in the lightness of my heart. Here was true happiness. A new life was born in me.

"So. You are Harold," Solly said.

"None other."

"He is the cousin we heard about. Right, Pacey? We wanted to see you for the longest time—and here you are."

"Staying long?" asked Pacey, as he picked me up and put me down. Boy, you're light."

He offered me his back and I climbed up and he carried me. I had never felt such a true joy. Here I was—only a few hours ago steeped in uncertainty, and now frolicking merrily with my family—my cousins; laughing in convulsions of delight; cavorting through the streets on a fine summer day,

with a rapture of being close with members of my family—my dear cousins.

When we got to the shore, they jumped in and started to swim. "Come on in, Harold. The water's great."

"I don't know how to swim."

"Sure you do. Just walk in."

They tumbled all over me, pulled me into the water. It was cold. When I began to shiver, they laughed. "It gets warm when you get in."

"I'd never know it," I protested.

They got out of the water and sat on the sand with me. "Where were you all our lives? It's so good to have a cousin," said Pacey.

"With my grandparents."

"Mom is calling your mother. She is coming over tonight."

"You mean it?"

"Oh, sure—tonight, Harold."

I felt my hands tremble and my throat tighten.

Suddenly they started to wrestle with me and I got up and ran. They chased me on the sandy beach. I ran through the crowd. Pacey picked me up and carried me on his broad shoulders. I never laughed so much and so heartily with giggles of joy. "Come on, Harold. We'll go for some rides."

We entered a building where I saw kids my age driving small toy cars, bumping into one another. "Wanna drive a car, Harold?" Solly asked.

"Sure. But I don't have any money."

"You don't need any money."

They put me in a car and showed me the accelerator and how to steer it. I was off. It was such great fun, driving a car and bumping into other people. Someone bumped my car and soon Fagey swung toward me. Her car hit my car as I swerved to the right and then to the left. I chased her and struck her car in the back.

"All right," she cried. She chased me and flung into the side of my car.

I heard about having fun, but nothing like this. Why, the excitement in every jolt, the love that I began to see I could have and that I did not have on Eldridge Street. I screeched with unbounded laughter. I did not recognize myself. Here I was, chasing and bumping and swerving and laughing so loudly that I could not believe this was me. It was sheer madness. Exuberant, unreasoning madness. Total insanity. With no books to be read. No prayers to be said. No solemn psalms to be sung. I did not care now if this ever stopped. I wanted it to last forever.

They Pacey, Solly and Fagey took me to the Cyclone. I was afraid, but I could not refuse them. After all, why should

I be afraid? I was a person with courage. But I wondered as I saw the great drop, if I would be able to cope with such heights and falling. I sat up and began to feel the movement of the car going up and up and up—and them down and down and down. It was then that I held on for dear life. I was captured in the throes of fear, but with that fear came the excitement of falling and screeching together with my cousins. When we finally landed, my cousins grabbed me, took turns hugging me. We stopped for custards and walked along Surf Avenue as one happy family.

We returned as the sun had begun to set in the west. We walked up the steps of the house into the kitchen—.

And there!!! And there, before me—I could not believe it was true! It was as if God heard my prayers—my God, oh, my God—there she stood, my dear mother, her face smiling broadly at me.

I fell into her arms. "Mother, mother, mother! Never, never, never leave me!"

She drew away from me to see my face. She smiled at me, kissed me over and over again.

"Oh, mother. You are here. I love you, mother. You hear? I love you."

"And I love you, my dear son."

I don't know how long I held her in my arms, but when she finally sat down, Aunt Anna began to serve the meal. I could not remove my eyes from my mother's face.

"Harold, are you going back home?"

"No, no, no, mother. I don't want to be without you ever again."

I saw her exchange significant looks with Aunt Anna.

"I can't take you with me."

"Oh, yes, you can. I don't want to be without you again, ever again."

I heard my voice raised to a higher pitch.

She rose, took my hand in hers, kissed me on the cheek and went into another room with Aunt Anna. When she returned, she smiled and said, "Harold, Aunt Anna tells me you are not supposed to be home for two weeks."

"Yes, mother."

"You know, I am living with my friends, Claire and Harold. They have three children—Renee, Honey, and Herbert. I just called Claire—and guess what?"

"What, mother?"

"She invited you to stay with them for two weeks. You will be able to sleep on the couch. All right?"

"ALL RIGHT???!!! ALL RIGHT???!!! MY GOD! Oh, my dear God! It's all right once, twice and all the time, all

right! I would sleep on the floor or at your doorstep just to be near you!"

I did not ask any questions. I did not want answers as to why my mother left me for seven years, visiting me only once during that time and never writing to me. Those were my thoughts at that moment as my Aunt Anna placed a bill on the table for the food she fed me. My mother paid the bill.

"Come, Harold," she said.

I hugged my newly-found cousins, Pacey, Solly and Fagey, and we left the house, promising never to lose touch with one another.

All I could see as we walked toward the train station was the sun reaching for the western sky, brightening my day with a happiness I could never find a way to describe. On the train I could not take my eyes off her beautiful face. We said not a word as I heard the rattling train stop at each station. I knew then my destiny was foretold—that I knew. That I knew. That I knew.

EPILOGUE

My dear mother sat by my side as the elevated train rattled along. This was the joy I needed—to sit there with her and look into her beautiful face as the city in front of me rolled by. I knew that for the next few weeks I would be close to her, near to her, able to feel the affection that was missing from my life for so many years. Oh, only to feel this joy forever, I thought. Only to hear her voice, to touch the very hem of her dress, to walk with her, to hear her call my name. What more did I need? A happiness overtook me, ran through my blood like a radiant light. It did not matter that soon I would be back with my grandmother. All I cared about was for this moment, only this precious moment. What was to be later was like a veil—hidden from my thoughts. My mother was here for me now! And there she was now sitting by my side.

I said, looking into her eyes, "where are we going mother?"

"We're going to my friends—your Aunt Claire and Uncle Harold."

"Are we going to stay there?"

"Well," she hesitated, "yes—for two weeks and then I must take you back."

I grew silent. I wanted to say something but the silence which overtook me hung over my mood like a pall. Back to

what, I thought. To the stifling poverty? To my grandmother's loud lamentations—now becoming more intolerable to hear without me wanting to bolt down the stairs away from the pain that she showed me every day without stopping? I grew frightened for the moment, but I took my mother's hand in mine as the train screeched to a halt on 149th Street.

"We'll stop for a sandwich at Freeman Street," she said. She smiled at me and I smiled back.

When we emerged from the train at Freeman Street she told me that we were now in the Bronx—a place I had never experienced. We entered a huge room with many people strolling back and forth with trays of food in their hands. I held on to my mother's hand out of fright for this new experience. She described this place as a cafeteria. We sat down. My mother told me to wait for her. She left me and all of a sudden the world seemed so lonely. I felt so abandoned without her here. Did she decide to leave me sitting here? Would I never see her again? Did she tire of me and want to get rid of me? Was this to be the last that I'd see of her? I grew apprehensive.

But when I saw her coming with a tray full of food, my heart grew lighter. She placed a corn-beef sandwich beside me and a glass of soda. I didn't realize how hungry I was as I took huge bites of the sandwich while I saw my mother smiling at me. When she took off her coat, I noticed that she was wearing

a white dress. She had told me that she was a nurse and took care of sick people in a hospital in the Bronx.

But there was tension. I felt it as I noticed that she had difficulty speaking, that she was searching for words to say. They came out like dull throbs of pain, haltingly. I saw tears fall down her face. Soon she said, "You know I love you, Harold?"

"I know, mother."

"But you must hate me. Do you hate me, Harold?"

"Hate you? Oh, mother, I love you."

"I know that, but you also hate me?"

"Oh, no," I protested. "I can never hate you. Never! Never! Never hate you!" I sounded almost as though I was trying to convince myself.

"But, Harold, dear, I have not been a good mother to you, have I?"

I did not know how to answer her because, as she said, she hit a nerve. I remember the long nights I lay in bed thinking of her. I remembered the tears that would roll down my cheeks, and my convulsive sobbing finally ending in my sleep. I remembered the words of my grandmother reminding me daily how she abandoned me. I looked up at her and this time I avoided her eyes searching for mine. "Mother," I blurted out. "You are here with me now and I love you."

"Yes, I know that, but I do owe you something, Harold. You must know why I neglected you and your brothers, Jason, Steven, and Evans."

I began to twist in my chair. I did not want to hear her story because I knew they would be apologies for a past that would only change the mood of joy I was feeling now. It would probably arouse a deep anger that I knew that I had felt for her neglect. I only wanted to look at her, hold her hand and consume this wonderful moment—biting into the sandwich and drinking the soda. But I saw that she felt a need to speak. I grew silent, put the sandwich down, and waited for her words. "Want some more, Harold?"

"No. That was very good."

"Some cake?"

"It's all right, mother. I'm full."

Someone came by and cleared the table while we sat there. She looked away from me, turning her head to watch the busboys clearing the table.

"You know, your father died when you were six, Harold, and you had a stepfather?"

"I know, mother."

"And you know that Mr. Weisman was your stepfather?"

"I know, mother. I remember I hated him."

How well I remembered Mr. Weisman. He would come home in the middle of the night when I lived with my mother, his body sweating with a repulsive and foul odor, his presence sending such a noisome stench of liquor into the room. He would stand over me and call me foul names, his eyes glassy and blazing with fierce anger.....

"You son of a bitch, Harold, when the hell are ya gettin' outa here? Go with your brothers."

I began to cry out loud:

"Mother, mother, come, come! He's gonna beat me," but she pretended she did not hear my cries. I sat there in fear, looking through the darkness of the night for my mother to appear, but she never came. I heard her cry, but she never came. I saw his hands clenched in a menacing fist and the veins on his neck stood out like a tangle of snakes.

All of this came back to me as I sat there watching the crowd of people rushing in and out of the cafeteria. I turned away from my mother with my head bent to the table at which we sat. I could feel a tear fall from my sodden eyes.

"If you are angry with me, you have a right to be. I know you hated Mr. Weisman. You were afraid of him. Weren't you?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"And he was mean to you, but Harold, dear, he was also mean to me. He was always drunk. He beat me so hard once

that I thought I would die. I was afraid that he was going to beat you—and that's why I brought you to your grandparent's house to live. But one thing I want you to remember, Harold, dear, I loved your father more than I ever loved any man in my life. And a part of the love I had for your father is my love for you. I miss him so much. He was good to me. Kind and loving. We were so good for one another. He lived in a world all his own. He lived for his music and poetry. One day—are you listening, Harold?"

"Yes, mother."

"One day he came home. You were about one year old. He began to cough—coughing blood. He got it all over his tan suit. I brought him to a doctor and he found blood in his saliva. The doctor said that he would have to go to a place where they could care for him. That place was Colorado. He would have to stay there where the air was better for him. He died when you were six years old, Harold."

She began to cry, her face creased with such pain. I started to become uncomfortable. I wanted to reach out to her, but she drew away. Some people stopped to ask her if they could help her. I did not know what to do. Then she dried her face, looked at me through the burning tears and smiled faintly. I held out my hand to her. She grasped it strongly. Many questions began to rise in me, but I could not ask them. I only wanted to stare into her eyes, to hold her hand, to walk out to

where she said she would take me. I wanted to ask her why she came only once in the years I was with my grandparents. Though the words formed themselves in my mind, I could not ask her. We took a cab, and, as we rode to the destination she had for us, I leaned back in her arms. She kissed me and the cab drove on through Claremont Park, up some hills and stopped at an apartment house. As we emerged from the cab, I grew afraid. I felt queasy and stiff as my mother led me to the door of the people I was to call "Aunt Claire and Uncle Harold".

I knew—yes, I knew when I returned back to Eldridge Street, a new chapter in my life would lead me to a new beginning. But I also knew that Eldridge Street would never wane from my mind as a place and time of hope and love for my grandparents and my Jewish faith.

THE BOY FROM ELDRIDGE STREET

By Edna Junemann

February 8, 1996

Where is the sad little boy
Left so often alone
With only a cat and a teddy bear
To cuddle and cherish and call his own?
Did no one know of his sorrow?
Did no one know of his pain
His longing for love and maternal affection
And to be wanted at least now and again?

If I had known the sad little boy
When he lived in his Eldridge Street home
I'd have gone over and joined him in play,
and he would not have felt so alone.

I'd have brought all three of my dolls.
Two of them had neither eyes nor hair
And one doll neither arms nor legs
Yet the dear dollies I loved I'd have shared.

But I didn't know the sad little boy
Long ago when he felt alone
And now he's a rabbi helping others
Who have not even a home.

Harold Finkelstein, a young and tender boy of 7, stood at the threshold of his grandparents' home at 172 Eldridge Street on the east side of New York City. He was in a state of tears, trying to force himself away from his mother and aunt. He did not want to be there. He was being abandoned, left there to live with his grandparents. What made it worse was here he stood in the presence of a man who was called his grandfather, sitting in a wheel chair with his legs cut off and a woman screeching lamentations over her son and the boy's father who died at the age of 25. He never met his father or even knew of his existence. The boy wanted to run away. He openly cried tears of pain.

The foregoing is contained in the opening chapter of *Out of Eldridge Street*, a memoir written by Rabbi Harold Finkelstein Swiss. It is a story of alienation, poverty, loneliness, love and joy.

This is a story where the only means of survival came from the few coins his grandfather earned as a beggar. It is also a story of a boy who discovered Judaism. It is about the people he met, the cantorial role he played as a boy cantor at the Roumanian Synagogue on Rivington Street.

Out of Eldridge Street opens the life of this boy with the saga of pain, the synagogue across the street, the intellectual and spiritual life of the people who entered the synagogue, the Eldridge Street Tea House, the cold of the winters, the flats without heat, the horrors of the dispossessed standing with their furniture in the streets, the hunger which ate into the soul, the economic depression of the '20s and '30s – and the climax of these memoirs with the boy searching for his mother and finding her. It is a story of love and hope for all of us.

We hope you enjoy
Out of Eldridge Street.

ISBN 0-7392-0040-2 $14.95

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