SEVEN DAYS OF MOURNING

by

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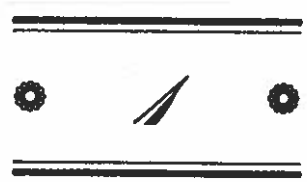
My grandfather was lame. Once they asked him to tell a story about his teacher. And he related how the holy Baal Shem used to hop and dance while he prayed. My grandfather rose as he spoke, and he was so swept away by his story that he himself began to hop and dance to show how the master had done. From that hour on he was cured of his lameness. That's the way to tell a story!

—FROM *Tales of the Hasidim*

We force a man to do good . . .

—FROM THE Talmud



We Shimanskys have to put our head and shoulders into the furnace, even to the back of its mouth, burning ourselves to the waist and more, before we're actually convinced the coals are red and on fire. It's a family tradition.

Now when that telegram came from Yanina, Ma and Dad should have known what to do. They should have insisted she stay away. But instead Ma telegraphed: "Come!" So they hitchhiked all the way from Boston and by nightfall were with us: Yanina; her husband Feivel; and Pildesh, her little boy with two outfits who'll be four years old very soon, though I don't remember his exact birthday. The only birthday I do remember is my

own, because all I have to keep in mind is the number ten. I was born on the tenth day of the tenth month of the year 1928, one and nine make ten of course, and so do two and eight. Otherwise, I'd forget. After all, why should the birth of a Shimansky concern me? Once when I was climbing up all our steps, as I reached the top and fourth floor where we live (counting the store at the very bottom, though it's altogether boarded up and without use, having sold few of its burial garments or its bottled syrups), I noticed something on the green wall near the banister, along the strip of Scotch tape covering the crack in the plaster. Just what it was I don't remember now, but the point of it all is that when I lifted my foot, I missed the step, lost my balance, and fell back down twenty steps or so. And for that I'm an invalid, a wheelchair my Messiah.

Ma says I've come to be like this, having to sit still in a chair, for disobeying her and trying to get away, with Yanina as my example. But that's merely her way of saying she's happy I finally have what I deserve, so happy she's come to believe God had a hand in it. You'd think, though, Ma would hate me for being so stupid as to miss a step: such a mistake could make our family look slipshod. Actually, she more than forgives me. Because now I can never leave the house, and that means everything to Ma. What stings her is I never once complain. On the contrary: I enjoy this small indoor existence of ours in a way Ma certainly can't. For her, it is too bitter a matter, too serious a struggle, every day of it.

So they acted, Ma and Dad, as though there had never been a past, as though Ma hadn't cursed Yanina on the night she married Feivel Leishik, the deaf and half-mute fugitive from Bolshevist Russia, with: "Dog!

She won't last out a year. Just she ever come back and I'll dig my hands in her throat!" Yet, I suppose Dad's really the one who'll never learn. Ma knew, I'm sure, exactly what she was doing when she sent that little telegram and must have had a plan somewhere, remembering her curse, every word of it, as she remembers all that happens in our house. But surely Dad had forgotten and eagerly looked forward to Yanina's homecoming after an absence of seven full years, because in his own mind we Shimanskys are people who live in harmony. Unable to bear differences, he goes on year by year rearranging, with great difficulty, his many notions. And every time I can, I wheel noisily over these notions of his and expose him to pain. So Dad too suffers, but only for a short while. Besides, he really likes to suffer. It makes him feel like Ma, and as important. With him it's almost a game. At the least disagreement, he shuts his pale-blue marble eyes, starts to whimper and then buckles over—a hand on his side, a hand on his throat, his head in his knees—and goes into a choking fit, pretending he can't swallow something. But because he's so thin and bony, he twitches and dangles like our old toilet chain and altogether loses his balance. That's just the way he is, forever hoping as he plays his game that some day we'll turn to pitying him, even though he knows full well that we all but ignore him, especially Ma. Disgraced, she sits down and says, lifting her heavy arms: "What a horse," while Dad walks around the whole house with those slow thin steps of his, wearing just his loose white underwear which hangs flopping round his knees, or, sometimes, down to his torn green socks. Since he hardly ever goes out, except in the morning for rolls, and after sundown to open up his small newspaper stand at the corner near the bridge.

And that's the difference between Ma and Dad: they are two people with opposite styles. Dad stays home so much because he likes to remain at rest, because outside the world is always moving. At 203 Broome Street he can sit free and forget and live carelessly, with only once in a while a slap on the head, and that very slap he's got so used to that if it didn't come his life would be empty. But, of course, Ma stays home in order to make up for the way she left her mother's house thirty years ago: running through the streets of Brooklyn carrying a packed-full shopping bag and not stopping until finally she was over the bridge and in New York where right off she met Zelo Shimansky and took him for a husband. He's had that newspaper stand by the bridge ever since his bedridden father, the supporter of our family (that holy man who lives down below on the second floor by himself), went ahead and bought it for him so he could establish himself in something and become a man, which hasn't happened yet. According to Ma's story, she stopped to rest and look at a paper, but when she saw that everyone who came short-changed the man and he didn't seem to care, or took some pleasure in it, she decided right there beside the stand that he was the best for her, especially in such need. That week they were married.

So both Ma and Dad, for their different reasons, leave the house almost as little as I, the family pest, and their reasons explain the clothes they wear. Ma's always going about in her very best dress and jewelry, gifts of her kind Aunt Gruna: earrings, a long necklace, and sometimes a cameo pin. Because, as I say, she worships the house and puts all her heart and flesh into it. But Dad doesn't really believe in anything or live for anything, certainly not the way Ma does, with her viciousness.

Therefore, he goes around without shoes, simply in his green Orchard Street socks, though they're half torn, and in his white underwear: a disgrace to the family. And Ma can never forgive him for that. Especially when he starts with his choking fits, grabbing at his body and then holding his head like a sick man, shivering. "Go on," yells Ma. "Cut out the act. That's enough, already. I've no pity for you, standing there naked." Then he begins to cry and says: "I'm going to die, I feel it, everything's piling up, I'm going to die. You don't care about the other party. Always finding fault. How long can you take it? Not only others, yourself. Building up tensions, tensions, tensions. For what, I ask you? I bring in a nice income. So what do you want from me? What?" "Who do you think you're fooling?" yells Ma. "When your sick father downstairs decides to have us pay rent we'll be regular paupers." "If you wouldn't spend so much on the house," sobs Dad, hiding his gladness in being so bold. "That's enough out of you," shouts Ma, "this house is worth more than a hundred of you. Where do you compare?" "All right," says Dad, "all right. Please, I'm sorry. Varda!" "Don't you dare Varda me," says Ma, "after the way you've acted all these years." "Oh, let's forget about it," cries Dad. "Please! And tone down already." "I can't tone down," yells Ma. "What kind of talk is that? I can't tone down, and you better realize, once and for all, that I'll never forget the way you've behaved. Never! I don't know why I even stoop to talk to you. Now that's enough."

But Dad's impatient to have things right again so he can return to his carefree ways and dream about his wife and family, and tell his ragged friend Getsel some tales, the one who sits openmouthed alongside him, bent

over his basket of old twisted bagels, his wares. Little Getsel, the red-eyed dwarf I knew and feared when I was a boy rushing up streets and overturning misplaced boxes, outside in the air. So Dad tries somehow to get us to smile, or better still to hold our heads and cry, like him. He comes out sometimes and asks us: "You see me crying, so why don't you cry, too? Don't be brutal. I know you're holding it in." And he stands there like a new orderboy, timid, hoping and hoping for the nickel tip he's never sure he'll get. Still, I don't let him have his way. "Crying isn't going to help, Dad," I say, as I wheel in front of him so he can't escape. "We have to face our differences, Dad." "What differences?" says Dad and begins to edge away, afraid to hear me out. Though I try to cut him off, he always manages to escape somehow, and as he backs off into this room and that, I have to follow him around like in a funeral procession. He coughs, too, while he sobs, so that I can hardly make out what he says most of the time. The upshot of it all is that I don't want anything right again, and Dad does. I want all our differences before me so I'll never forget them, not even one. It would be like seeing only half a movie.

When I finally corner him in a room, Dad wails louder and louder that I'm trying to cause trouble in the house and that everything would be fine without me wheeling around in my black robe, pointing to things that aren't there. "What did I do to deserve all this?" he sobs at last. "Where? Where?" And he looks so sick you'd swear he was about to fall apart.

That's when I answer, like an evil insect: "Dad, I'd like to pull right out if I could." Which is my way of teasing him and saying I don't ever plan on leaving. So he wails louder.

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Don't think, though, that Dad's more afraid of me than he is of Ma. She's a fat nail in his foot to make his skin go throbbing while I'm just a tack in his heel to set him off balance. Her cruelty is like the garden beetle's sudden turning on her mate and eating him through and through, leaving just the empty shell. It needs an explanation, I suppose. When Yanina, who is the oldest among us, came of age, she reprimanded Ma for never telling her all the things she heard about in the street. "Oh, close up!" Ma yelled. "I didn't know till I was married." So when Ma married Dad, she simply didn't know what it was all about. Besides, Yanina says that in a Russian aristo-

cratic family—yet I don't see what that has to do with us, I don't see what Russia has to do with the East Side —still, she says the boys are all corrupt, fully rotten, while the girls, they're as innocent as dumbbells. Which fits the Shimanskys all right.

But the point is Ma must have been scared out of her wits for the first time, that night in bed when Dad started climbing. Here she's been pushing people around, ordering them about and exploiting them for what they were worth for so many years, ever since she entered the Brooklyn business world at the age of twelve, being the oldest in a family of eleven at the corner of Nostrand and DeKalb, and ever since, as she's always boasted, she began to hide her earnings from her terrible Russian mother, when suddenly, while lying in bed at the age of twenty-five, a man jumps on top of her and Zelo Shimansky at that! I'm sure she was too shocked and too proud to show her ignorance and ask him what he was doing. She must have suffered all night in silence, to emerge the next morning with vengeance on her mind, determined to scour Dad through for the rest of his life.

Day after day she wore off little pieces, making Dad feel as if he couldn't use his own fork without knocking something directly to the floor, as if he couldn't open a window without crumpling the shade, so that, as children, we all thought Dad didn't belong in the house, that he wasn't supposed to be there, because in a very short while, from fear of Ma's hysterical criticism, he put his narrow head down and went to sleep. Once, he took Yanina and me to a ballgame, but that was on Ma's instigation. She wanted everybody out of the house except herself and Bracha, the nitwit sister of mine, so she could have space enough to punish her good for marking

up the bathroom wall with: KAKA MOTHER, KAKA SISTER, KAKA BROTHER. And anyway we didn't reach Ebbets Field because after straying through four or five streets Dad got lost. He didn't even know to cross the bridge, and Yanina and I wouldn't help him, since at that time both of us liked to watch Dad get a scolding. Afterwards, of course, Yanina began to protect Dad in order to knock Ma down.

As the years went on, Ma hated Dad all the more for his being so fearful, so cautious, so unforgivably slow, completely forgetting that she was actually the cause of it, that she had turned his entire life into one great fear, the fear the snail has for the hole in his shell, or the lizard for the tail at his back. But one night, seven years ago it was, the reign of terror came to a sudden end when Dad, subtle man that he is, figured out a way of getting around his dread by making a regular game out of it, with his tears and shivers and choking fits. Ma herself took a shock that night, the very first time Dad started up his twitching and dangling stuff, because she knew for sure that now her revenge was lost, she had labored in vain, Dad had beaten her after all. When Yanina ran off with Feivel, a stranger, so soon afterwards, Yanina's contribution to the newfound freedom and collapse of Ma's powers, Ma had to take it out on my younger sister Bracha, since she was so much like Dad, so sluggish and queer and speechless. It wasn't difficult for Ma to convince Mrs. Paltiel, the neighborhood's self-styled nurse and housekeeper for nitwits, to take Bracha, though she was only eleven, into her makeshift institution sixteen blocks away. Because Ma had driven Bracha quite convincingly insane from her childhood on, all Bracha could do was cry and twitch like Dad, except that Dad enjoyed his fits. I don't care what anybody says: the thing that

makes people go nuts no matter who they are is living with someone who's nutty. It's as simple as falling back twenty steps and ending up a cripple. And Ma's nutty. If that isn't clear yet, there just isn't any use in talking.

The secret of all living is who you take after, and poor Bracha was Dad to the very rag she wore. Like him, she had that long horse's head you rarely find on people, together with the horse's nose. Bracha's blue eyes were even more faded than Dad's, and she hadn't the little energy he had to create a daydream and make believe. Her head was as empty as it was long and it was impossible for her to think. Talking about disgraces to a family, you couldn't ask for anything worse. And Ma had to be satisfied with such material. No wonder she gave up in the end. Bracha she kept out of school so no one would ever find out, telling the officials that she would never allow her to go to dummyschool, not while she was living, and Zadie, Dad's sick father, had to pay for a private tutor to come work with Bracha five hours a day till finally, after nine studious years, she learned how to write, only to go scribble that *kaka* story all over the bathroom. Both Ma and Bracha got what they deserved.

Now Yanina is another Ma, or thereabout. Although she developed quite different ideas on how to bring up children and lets Pildesh go wherever his fat legs lead him, Yanina married for power and that makes her another Ma. Each is more than plump for her small size, as sometimes a radish is, and each has the same silly hairdo. They gather up their long straight hair, the color of leggy kitchen-beetles, a dull black, and wind it all around into itself, ending up with a sort of small tower on top. I've watched them. And I'm particular about the things I watch, like the history of my family and its attempt, at

last, to save itself. In reality I have Dad as well as Ma within me but I resemble most the handbrakes on either side of my wheelchair, what with my long thin body and round head.

And so I always have difficulty wheeling myself around our awkward apartment, its green shades pulled way below each window sill because Ma doesn't need anyone looking in, especially with Yanina home again. The front door opens into a long narrow corridor which meets every room except mine. It takes about nineteen revolutions of my small baby carriage wheels and almost six of my big ones to go from one end of the hall to the other, so it's approximately eighteen feet long. That in itself must have scared Pildesh when he stood there quite unnoticed during the first quarrel. Besides, the ceilings and walls are painted pink. It was Ma's order: as pink as her useless cotton nightgown, the one she's kept for thirty years, the one she wore that night at the age of twenty and five in bed with Dad. Pink, then, to continue the memory of her outrage. And after the old painters left, Ma went around with a small bottle of paint and with her own nailpolish brush to finish off and do up those places the old men dared not touch, the toilet chain and the legs of our tub.

But in particular, Ma's put her hand on my bedroom. I can hardly wheel myself in and out as she's piled all around, up against the walls, old broken household items she won't throw away because they belong to the house. And since the big window behind my bed is painted shut, I don't get much air at night. Ma does this, making me live in a small dry junk room off in the back, thickened with old smells, in order to hear me complain, and

for that reason I don't mention an angry word. When Yanina came back after seven years and Ma ordered her to tell Feivel, who's both a shoemaker and a carpenter by trade, to replace the worn-through leather seat and back of my wheelchair with grocers' boxcrate wood, I didn't even look disappointed, as it made no difference really. The whole contraption is secondhand, the spokes all gnarled and crooked, the thing itself clucking like a nervous hen running from the rude cock who would sit on its back. Ma is so cruel she thinks she's just, and there's no contradicting a fanatic. For instance:

Just before Pildesh fell ill and the doctor we called, Vossen Gleich, attempted to heal every one of us, we were sitting at the table when suddenly Dad sneezed. "You *pferd*!" shouted Ma. "You sneezed on my roll and butter, and I don't like it." "I coughed," said Dad, "but you don't care." And thin tears covered the bulging arcs of his eyes. "You did not!" Ma shouted. "You sneezed! Look at my roll. Rotten thing that you are. Horse, you don't care if you sneeze on it like a wild man. Thirty years now, and you haven't even learned to sneeze right. Put your finger to your nose and inhibit or I'll throw your head off!" Dad whined that he didn't know how. "I'm sorry," he said, "I can't. Not everyone is like you." But Ma wouldn't let him get away. "Yes, you can. Put your finger under your nose. You don't even try, so don't tell me you can't. Horse, you'll never get away with that kind of talk with me."

While Ma had him practice at the table, it hurt me to watch Dad enjoy holding his nose amid his family. But seeing Ma suffer in her seat for it, I had to laugh, together with Pildesh. Yanina, who had been encouraging

Dad to seek his own revenge from the very first, endured an agony equivalent to Ma's. Of course, Feivel was asleep in his chair, sitting straight and tall.

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The night Yanina arrived Ma had water in the tub waiting for them, and as soon as they stepped into the house, Ma said: "Quick, come on. The tub's all ready! Who's going in first?" Feivel didn't say anything, but Yanina answered that they'd take showers instead, downstairs at Zadie's, and later on, anyway. First they wanted to get a few things unpacked. Well, maybe the unpacking was a good idea, but why go down and scare our holy Zadie? He only would have been confused to see her coming with a man and a boy just to use his shower. With his bad eyes, how could he have recognized her, a stranger by now, gone seven complete years? At this point, Zadie was barely able to recognize even Dad, his own son. And Yanina never would have managed to speak long enough in Yiddish to explain herself. Besides, we ourselves hadn't visited him these past years. Because when he turned eighty-five, our Zadie, old Mr. Shimansky, all of a sudden insisted on being left alone, disregarded, content to take care of himself, sitting in the dark and draining his wens. So Ma was right in not letting Yanina go down to frighten him.

"Unpack?" she yelled. "After such a long ride? Ah, you still talk like a fool. How can you even look at those shopping bags? And I've let in the water. So you better jump into that tub, never mind about unpacking, Zelo will do all that! You won't be going down to bother a dying man this time of night. Both of you. And don't waste any towels! Or you can take your shoes and get out." Poor Ma, she was so used to telling Dad to put on his shoes and get out that she went ahead and made a mistake in front of everybody and told Yanina and Feivel to do it.

Yanina looked across at Feivel with *My God! What now?* in her dark black eyes, and Feivel, not quite sure he understood, being as deaf as he was, merely wiped his long forehead with his dirty handkerchief, and Pildesh, standing all by himself, began to scream. Ma looked down and noticed him for the first time. "Don't stare at me!" shouted Pildesh, stretching out his fat square hand like a policeman and turning his plump head and dark chubby eyes to the side.

"Who's THIS?" yelled Ma.

"That's Pildesh," said Yanina.

"Then he's going into the tub!" said Ma, and made a terrific face. She could really turn us white with the

faces she made, for there is nothing more frightening to see than thin black eyebrows come alive like caterpillars and crack all over. Besides, although Ma is a very fat woman and less than five feet tall, she's amazingly agile and follows your slightest movement. Her huge head is always tilted upward straight at your face, like the front of these new cars you see in the gutters. And since she paints her cheeks a soft thick red, powder flies off onto her large hips and all about her fat short feet, dry flakes of blood to decorate the bulk of her body. Therefore when Ma grabbed Pildesh by the elbow and dragged him down the long hallway into the bathroom, neither Yanina nor Feivel said a word. Pildesh, of course, spit and struggled as hard as he could, shaking his round head and his round belly and digging his round feet, but the door slammed shut and the bolt shot quickly across the crack to close him in. Ma won the first battle hands down.

Later on, when I was wheeling myself through the kitchen, I met Yanina and she whispered to me ever so softly:

"Barish, my God! Ma hasn't changed one bit."

Well, that wasn't any real shock: Ma and Dad would always be the same. The real surprise (though Yanina never said so) was seeing me in a wheelchair for the first time. Poor Yanina, home again after seven long years, she finds her brother wheeling around like some noisy insect. I'm sure she thought I was joking when she caught a glimpse of me sitting there in the hallway, against the wall, on my contraption. Because as a boy I used to limp sometimes to scare both my sisters. Realizing I was actually a cripple and forever needed a wheelchair to move about, Yanina's heart must have fallen through her body and through each floor of the building, down to the empty rotted store below.

"So why did you come?" I said.

"What kind of talk is that?" said Yanina. "How did I know? Why didn't you warn me? Ma tricked me into coming and I don't like it. I didn't have to run here on a fool's fish errand. Telling me to come and then going ahead to bury her without me: that's Ma's doing. I know it and you know it; so why didn't you warn me? And anyway, aren't we going to mourn? Don't we have to do something for seven days?"

What could I answer, especially with my mouth full of raisins? I wheeled myself back into my room and shut the door. Go ask yourself whether you wanted your sister or your mother to suffer and learn a lesson. You can't figure those things out. But one thing, at least, is certain: Yanina's coming home could only make the house more interesting and you can be sure nothing in the world would have persuaded me to save my family from what I knew would be the most painful moment in its history, comparable to that moment when sparrows should wing themselves through a barbedwire sky, a show worth watching whatever the cost. So I am very grateful to my nitwit sister Bracha for doing away with herself when no one expected it of her; I am grateful because she brought us all together again. In fact, perhaps it was Mrs. Paltiel who encouraged Bracha and put the idea into her head. But in any event it was Ma, when we heard the news of Bracha's death, who said, after thinking a good while, that Yanina must return home, but that the family must not mourn Bracha at all—just the opposite, we had to forget Bracha entirely. And Dad, though dressed for mourning, was quick to go along with Ma's decree, since he never likes to admit sadness into the house. Poor Bracha, she was as quick and thorough as a taxicab, and no one could stop her, not even the nuts who befriended

suicide

her. And despite her efforts, we Shimanskys weren't taking any notice.

Ma found out Yanina's address from the in-laws three streets down, of whom, by the way, we have little knowledge. Except that they were once wealthy but suffered for supporting the Czar, and that now the Mr. is a peddler during the day, a waiter at night, and an usher on Sundays to make up the loss while the Mrs. is a thin-lipped hunchback, and housebound as well. Feivel, as I've said, is a carpenter and a shoemaker and the one who suffered the most from the family's quick exodus out of Russia. He was so used to living flat on his back with both eyes shut that he fled the house three full days after his parents and was caught at the border, hit on the head and about the temples, and left for dead. But he managed to survive and reach America somehow, with only two deaf ears and a silent tongue for his troubles. So that's Feivel: he doesn't consider anything a misfortune. Because he's a lean dog sprawling on a cool sidewalk, hidden in the shade of a thick shrub, both soft paws curled in under its head, forever contented—do what you will to its nose or its tail. A wonder amongst men, a wonder amongst dogs, and no wonder Yanina married him. He's slower than Dad and twice as happy and almost twice as thin and has a head like an acorn or a cherry. Don't worry, Yanina knows how to pick them.

So when Ma got their address, she telegraphed: "Bracha dead. Funeral day after tomorrow." Yanina telegraphed: "Can I come?" And then Ma answered: "Come!" But of course, we buried Bracha before Yanina arrived, and in a grave good enough. I didn't go because the leather of my chair wore through that week and I found myself in too awkward a position to be wheeling

around a cemetery where everyone would surely laugh to see the cripple's ass sag forth beneath his seat. Anyway, the family tradition was broken, the tradition on my mother's side that once children leap over the threshold in flight, they never return but go their secret ways. Ma, for instance, has never seen any of her family or heard from them since she grabbed that shopping bag, stuffed it full, and carried her fat body to Zelo's newspaper stand, gasping and grunting and filling her cheeks with two candy bars for extra energy. Ma has always been a big eater.

I came late for breakfast the next morning, and Ma said for that I'd have to wait until everyone was finished. But I didn't mind: it occurred to me I could watch them more easily without bread in my mouth and a plate before me, and I knew there would be something to watch from the first to the last. Since we couldn't just let the time slip by with us all, like Feivel, half asleep and unmindful. If we weren't going to mourn, we weren't going to have a celebration either. Yanina was still burning over Ma's forcing Pildesh into the tub, and was also a bit afraid. Can't a full grown spider be afraid of its mother? Pildesh was eating the most and wearing the gayer of his two outfits: his apple-red shorts and his yellow polo. Feivel, never entirely mute despite the Russians, was talking a little to Dad, but Dad wasn't listening. At the bottom of a lot of Dad's oddities is plain bad eyesight, and Ma won't allow him to wear glasses, shouting: "Whatever he can't see, I'll knock into his nose!" So he wasn't listening to Feivel because he didn't see him talking, and you have to see Feivel talking since he speaks in such a dead grumpy whisper, as if he were a moron or worse. But that doesn't discourage Feivel in the least.

"Stop that!" shouted Ma. "Use your hands. You don't have to make such noises. The boy's already begun to talk like you and pretty soon so will my Zelo. And it's your fault, Yanina, more than his. Why do you let him gasp that way? And why do you let him stare at everyone's lips? He should look a person straight in the face, like a man."

"Leave Feivel alone!" said Yanina. "He'll do what's easiest for him. He's got to look at people's lips, to see what it is they're saying. And no one here knows his sign language."

"Never mind!" shouted Ma. "He's not blind. Don't make him worse than he is. He can look a person in the eyes and still see the nose the cheeks the lips and everything else he needs to see. My Zelo can look people in the face, and there's no reason why your Feivel shouldn't. Don't tell me he can't use his hands here; because my Zelo will learn all that in one day. He has nothing else to do. Let Feivel teach him."

"We're not going to be here that long!" said Yanina and gave her husband a quick dirty look.

"As long as you'll be here then," shouted Ma. "I won't have him whispering like that in my kitchen. Let my Zelo learn and your Feivel teach him," and she slapped the visor of Feivel's spinachgreen hat, the one his father had tailored especially for him (seven years ago, for those few days of courting) in order to cover up all his baldness, a unique sort of baldness where his forehead wraps clear around his head, cutting across his lean temples, by-passing his loosely drooping ears, to leave a small cap of red hair high on top. Feivel jumped, and the huge flashlight he always carries in the right rear pocket of his baggy pants fell to the floor and rolled till it hit the leg of Ma's chair.

"And he's got to stop carrying his tools around," yelled Ma. "Must everybody know he's a carpenter? Each place he goes he leaves a nail. And it's your fault, Yanina. What does he know? It's the way you've trained him."

"I said leave him alone," yelled Yanina and brought her hand down on the table so hard Dad's cereal spilled right over.

"Aw, close up!" said Ma. "You're not my daughter. I have no daughter. Look what you've done: you've ruined his bloomers. Now get him a napkin."

"No I won't!"

"Ah, you're jealous, aren't you? Where does your Feivel come to my Zelo? How can you even look at that man?"

"Feivel is good!" yelled Yanina. "So don't interfere. Or we'll all three pack up and leave right now. It's only for Bracha that I'm staying."

"You fool," Ma said, her earrings beginning to tinkle. "You scare me? Leave. I don't know you any more. I've seen enough of your family." And she went and got Dad a napkin. His underwear was covered with the creamy beige stuff, and Ma had a difficult time wiping it all up with Pildesh screaming and laughing and pointing the whole while.

"I haven't any use for you," she began again, looking directly at Yanina. But Dad thought Ma was talking to him.

"What did *I* do?" he said, half his narrow face pulled to the side, crying. "I just sat here. What do you want from me? I'll learn from Feivel. I will."

"I wasn't talking to you," said Ma. "Here, use the napkin yourself. You call yourself a man? After I've been praising you like a fool, you go ahead and show you're even worse than Feivel. I better not hear another word

from you. And that's enough out of you, Yanina. I saw you opening all the windows this morning. What do you care if we have to pay the coal bill. Keep your hands off the windows. Do you know anything about my house, gone seven years? And that Pildesh of yours. Why is he so heavy? You, too, Feivel! You hear? Better begin teaching Zelo right now. Barish! Wheel over, and I'll give you food. I never expected such a family, I never expected Yanina to come home with such a family. Wheel, but don't make such a noise!"

Ma and Yanina no longer looked at each other. Quite satisfied with all I had heard, I enjoyed my meal.

Even after the first few lessons, Dad could twitch his fingers and carry on a decent little conversation with Feivel. For Dad can be as quick as he is slow, depending on what the game is. So there they'd be, Dad in his stained white underwear and Feivel in his spinachgreen hat, the two of them twitching all day, working their fingers up and down and around, like spiders' legs running across a hundred strands of web so not a fly should go unpinched. They could have entertained a world of cripples the way they'd change once in a while, when Ma wasn't around, and go back to talking like two friendly morons, in whispers. For the first time in my life I was

proud of Dad, spending his hours so worthily, with only me to watch and take notice, except when Pildesh called me away for something.

"Uncle Barish, come wipe!" he'd shout from the bathroom, or: Come ride, Uncle Barish; come play, Uncle Barish; look; sing! He couldn't ask me, he had to order. Every other hour he had me riding him around the house while he pointed out where to go and when to stop. "Uncle Barish, stop here!" and he'd climb down and walk about with his hands behind his back like an old dictator. He thought he could take over the entire house that way, pulling his hand out from behind him once in a while, to stretch it up toward someone's face. But he did make a mistake when he thought up that new game. The way we played it, Pildesh lay down at the edge of the hall, the edge entering the kitchen and the bathroom, and I came rushing from the other end of the hall full-speed, clucking over those eighteen feet loud as ever. Either he got up and I wheeled into the kitchen, or he lay there and I had to make a dangerous quick turn into the narrow doorway of the bathroom. He always lay still, chin on the threshold, hands and feet reaching for each wall. He made a mistake, I say, because twice, slowing down somewhat but not enough, I wheeled right into him. So he didn't get the better of me all the time: after all, I couldn't allow anyone to take over my house.

Dad closed his stand early that night to return to his lessons with Feivel. "Oh, Varda, it's so good to be home!" he said, displaying his long bones as he took off his yellow-striped grayish pants. "It's so good, it's so good!" "How many times have I told you not to take off your clothes in this kitchen?" shouted Ma. "Your pants are a haven for moths! Horse, get out of my kitchen." "Sssshhh, you'll

wake up Pildesh," said Yanina, "and what if he does shake his pants in the kitchen? They can't be that dirty." "Ohhh, Zelo, Zelo, Zelo!" yelled Ma. "This has got to stop. She just dare tell me what to do. Once more, Zelo, and I pity her face." "What's happened?" said Dad, blue tears in his eyes, his hand reaching for his thin forehead, and ready to start a fit. "Everything was fine when I left. What's happened? What?" "Keep your mouth shut!" said Ma. "Nothing was fine when you left. And don't dare raise your voice to me." "What raise my voice? I always speak in a whisper. Even before I knew Feivel. You're the one that yells, Varda. The whole world hears you, and I'm glad. Me, no one hears: I whisper." "*Pferd, pferd!*" shouted Ma. "I'll always say it, you *pferd*!" and she pulled on the small tower at the top of her head and spread her legs. Her body, shaking up and down in a rage, set the wooden cabinet swaying, together with her jewelry. "Remember," she yelled. "Horse, I warned you. All of you, warned. And never will I forget."

Then Ma went to bed. Feivel was too tired to teach so Yanina seized the opportunity, pushed Dad over to the sink, and began her encouragements, advising him to revolt and leave with her and her family for Boston. "Look what happened to Bracha!" she said. "Look what happened to Barish! You have to leave, Dad, and you can. Didn't Ma leave her own home? Didn't she?" "Don't listen to her!" shouted Ma from the bedroom. "That was altogether different. I had to leave that house. We didn't even have a tub. Who ever heard of not being able to take a bath? And with eleven children, only one toilet. What does she know? Whenever I wanted to take a bath, I had to walk all the way to Aunt Gruna on Morse Street. And I didn't have a room to myself. I slept with my

mother till I was twenty-five, with my nose to the wall. So don't tell me anything. Zelo, you horse, go away from her. I'll take care of everything!" And the bed rocked as she turned herself over.

The next morning when Dad came in with his bag of rolls and his tall bundle of newspapers, Ma took no notice of him and began to assign everybody except Dad to his place at the table. Not knowing what to do, Dad started to arrange his newspapers, piling them with near-sighted exaggerated care up against the back door. Then Ma yelled: "Stop that foolish noise. You think if you straighten a few papers you've achieved something? Get that out of your head entirely. And sit down. I have enough things to think about without you. You ought to know how I handle the house. Why must I yell at you? I said sit down so what are you standing for? No, sit here beside Pildesh. Keep away from that girl if you can understand what's good for you. And don't talk to her. And you're getting farina again."

"Can I take off my pants?" asked Dad.

"You just try, Zelo! Go on," said Ma. "Just try."

"My God!" said Yanina. "Will you leave Dad alone?" And I swear she made a face because Ma turned white under her rouge and said nothing. I didn't think Yanina had it in her to push Ma off the curb like that.

Ma went over to the pantry and came back with a bowl of strawberries. She set it on the table and said, as if to no one:

"There isn't a drawer or a box he doesn't creep into. He has to be every place where he's not supposed to be."

"So what?" Yanina said.

"Never mind," said Ma. "That's a good one. She's asking me. That'll be the day I stoop to her level and

answer her stupid questions. For me, she's no one. Absolutely."

"What's the matter, Ma? Are you afraid?"

"Zelo! Did I say you could have strawberries? I said farina and you know it. Oh, I see you've disobeyed me and taken off your pants. You thought I wouldn't find it out? Go ahead and listen to her. But I warned you, remember. Now stand up and give her a crack across the mouth, what she's asking for. I know what she's been trying to do, she's been trying to take you away from me. So get up and crack her, Zelo. Get up!"

"What do you want from me? I can't do anything."

"Oh, close up! That's enough out of you, trying to make me the bad one. Go and put the strawberries away. I'll teach you, Zelo, whose house this is. There'll be no breakfast at my table today. No breakfast, no lunch, and no supper. So put away the strawberries, Zelo."

And Ma kept her word. She fasted that day, the third day after Bracha's death, and she made Dad fast, too. Yanina left with Feivel and Pildesh, and they were gone until evening. I suppose they ate by the in-laws, though they couldn't have gotten very much. As soon as the door closed, Ma talked Dad into a corner and while she scolded him with wavings and pointings and little slaps, I stole some dry toast and prepared myself for the day's fast with a few thick hunks of butter and a glass of orange juice. Dad hung his face in all directions. What did Ma want from him? That was the way Yanina always was, you couldn't change her, and you couldn't even suggest anything. But as usual Dad said the wrong things. He tried to edge away along the wall, pulling at his underwear. Ma made a terrific face. "All right," she said. "All

right, Zelo. Go, go. But look on, I'll have that girl taking orders just soon enough."

In a few hours, Dad was begging Ma to let him have some food, an apple or a little plate of cottage cheese, but Ma wouldn't hear of it and Dad started to cry: "I'm all pent up, I'm bursting, I can't breathe. Varda, my stomach hurts, but do you care? My back aches everywhere, my toes too, so I can hardly stand up. I'm suffering, Varda. You said we wouldn't mourn, and now we're mourning, I know it."

"We are not!" Ma yelled.

"Then why are we fasting?" said Dad, crying and trying to make a face like Ma's.

"Don't make that face. Stop with your face, Zelo!"

"No, I won't. I see what we're doing: fasting, the two of us, and him, too, Barish. Where is he? He's always hiding some place in the corner. Then he comes out to scare me. But I know we're fasting. Why do I have these pains? To mourn for Bracha, and you said we wouldn't. I'm all choked up. I can barely whisper, I'm going to die, I feel it. I have to have food in my mouth or I'll fall on the floor and die."

"*Halevei*!" said Ma. "*Halevei soll sein vie du sogst un sollst du punkt heint shtarben vie a pferd*!"

"I don't know what you're saying," cried Dad. "You always do that. Talk Yiddish to me. What do I know Yiddish?"

"I said you should die," yelled Ma.

"You didn't!"

"I did!"

"Oh, now what's going to happen to me?" said Dad.

So Dad had caught Ma: we were actually mourning, in secret. Bracha was back in Ma's mind somehow and

Ma couldn't avoid her. Why, any minute I expected to see Ma stand and rip her clothes, weeping in front of everyone, something I could look forward to.

On the other hand, maybe Dad was wrong, maybe Ma was just trying to starve us all to death.

5

Later on, our downstairs neighbor, Mrs. Charpolsky, came up to snoop around. In general, Ma has no use for intruders, but over the years she's allowed Mrs. Charpolsky some privileges. After all, poor sickly woman, Mrs. Charpolsky is always wearing scarfs and slipovers, with a long handkerchief, a family heirloom, hanging from a safety pin in front. And sometimes she wears her great big woolen sweater, its orange threads uneven and bulky, its two pockets stuffed with hard candies to suck on and all sorts of capsules to swallow. With her husband dead and no children born, she hasn't really much to do except cook for her three lodgers, those fat dirty strangers she's so deathly afraid of. More than once she's hailed a policeman from her window, claiming the three of them poisoned her food. So I guess Ma pities her because she herself knows what it means to be all pain, day after day.

"You ate a big dinner?" asked Dad.

"Who?" said Mrs. Charpolsky.

"You."

"I ate an egg," she said. "I cooked it yesterday when no one was around and ate it today."

"I had nothing!" Dad said. "We're fasting."

"You horse," yelled Ma, "does she have to know?"

"Say listen," said Mrs. Charpolsky, looking round the kitchen and sucking at her false teeth. "Is that your way to mourn, fasting? My lodger, may trouble come on him, the one who goes around with heavy sticks to hold himself up, you know him, Zalman Coolyk, he told me about Bracha, how she died. That robber, he's everywhere! So what's my business what you do? You want to fast, go ahead. But maybe you have some milk?"

"If you want some," said Ma, "it'll cost you plenty of money a glass. You don't know how blessed you are, without children. No one, Mrs. Charpolsky, can eat in my kitchen today."

"What do you mean?" said Mrs. Charpolsky. "Who wants milk? Maybe I can't ask a question?" And she walked into the pantry, opening all the bags as quickly as she could. "Maybe you have some bread? So you're fasting, but what about other things, boxes and candles? Oh, you have nice rolls, I see. Because of those three bums, I can't eat and I can't sleep. And who is there to save me? My niece Datya? She's a dwarf, with lumps. She visits me once a month, but you think I enjoy it? Any day she'll be coming again, my Datya. I used to have

a sister in Brooklyn and even one in Philadelphia. All I have now is one rotten brother. Rich as he is, he wouldn't send me a *kopekeh*! I'm all alone now, everybody's gone. And maybe I'm living? No such thing. Medicine, medicine, medicine! That's living? You see these pockets? Full, with special capsules. *Oi*, what a doctor I have. Any moment I can have a shock. And I can't even use my own toilet. Believe me, you should never know it, but what do they care? They splash all over the seat."

"Who does?" said Dad.

She finished her roll and said: "You know! Don't worry, you know who it is."

"I don't," said Dad.

"Haskel Soifer!" said Mrs. Charpolsky. "And his two robbers, that Zalman Coolyk I mentioned already and the big, big one, Kolnitz, Shragga Kolnitz. Those three fat bums. Hold-uppers what they are."

"Your lodgers?" said Dad.

"Who else then?"

And with that and a crouping cough, she hurried into the bathroom and shut the door.

Immediately Ma started to curse, but in a whisper, a whisper very similar to that strange gasp Feivel himself could make.

"Oh, Zelo, it's you, it's you! Why did you let her touch those rolls. I said no one would eat in my kitchen today. I proclaimed a fast and you knew it. Oh, someday you'll be sorry. What's important to me you don't understand. But remember!"

And Dad, doing his part, began to choke, spinning and grabbing at his body. Then, holding on to the walls, he fell right to the floor.

"What do you want from me? What do *I* know?"

he sobbed. "I'm suffocating!" And with his horse's head tilted up toward Ma, he wriggled all around the kitchen, going through his entire fit, his hand at his throat.

Ma said nothing and Mrs. Charpolsky started to bang away at the toilet roll. That was one of the things Bracha learnt from Mrs. Charpolsky, together with some other toilet stuff. Actually, Mrs. Charpolsky tried to teach Yanina and me the same procedure, but with less success. As children, the three of us would stand around in complete wonder while she demonstrated the whole thing. First, she filled the bowl with paper to block off the cold draught of air. Then she covered the entire seat with a double layer of paper strips and gathered up her thin black dress, pinning one hem to her orange sweater and throwing the other over her back. Standing in a crouched position, she lowered her underwear with her left hand, all the while holding on to the sink with her right. And at last, hanging desperately over the bowl, she struggled to deliver herself of her scanty burden. Then came all the wiping. Of course, Ma never knew we came under her influence. I myself sometimes stuff the bowl.

"Get up!" whispered Ma. "You dirty thing, she'll come out and find you on the floor and then what, Zelo? You want to be like her, like her lodgers, known as a character?"

Well, if anything bothers Dad it's the fear he's becoming a character, so he listened and got up. Actually, Dad's already a character: he compares to Mrs. Charpolsky and her three lodgers all right and everybody knows it. Bracha for instance was a real loony, doing away with herself even, and no matter how Ma managed and manipulated, she couldn't keep that girl a secret. The rags Bracha wore, the things she wrote, were as famous

as any item can be on the East Side. As for Dad, all of Manhattan runs off with his papers without once handing over a single penny.

While Dad was cleaning off his underwear with his usual care, we heard Yanina come stomping up the steps together with Feivel and Pildesh. And Dad, subtle as ever, quickly fell to the floor again, renewing all his moans and wailings as loud as he dared.

Still whispering, Ma said: "Close up. You want they should hear you too? And they should see you? How can I call you my husband? And I want to. Stand up, I said, and be a man. Or I'll forget you altogether."

"Oh," cried Dad. "What's the difference? You said I should die. You said it, you did, in Yiddish, I heard you. Today! So what can I hope?"

"I had to say it," whispered Ma. "Haven't you learned that yet?"

"Then let me eat, and put some food in my mouth."

Pildesh was the first to enter the kitchen:

"Look, Yanina! Feivel, look!"

"What's all this about?" shouted Yanina, at the same time covering Pildesh's eyes so he wouldn't see Dad lying the way he was. "What's Dad doing on the floor?"

"You keep quiet," whispered Ma. "She hears every word."

"Who does?" said Yanina.

"Mrs. Charpolsky does, you dog! She's in the bathroom yet."

For a minute Yanina didn't understand. Then she knew.

"That sick woman from downstairs? Does she still use our bathroom and clog up the toilet? My God! I don't want Pildesh catching all sorts of diseases from her."

At the mention of his name, Pildesh tried to struggle free. Yanina held him tightly between her legs, but he managed to peer through her fingers, a witness like myself.

"How do you know she's still in there?" I asked, and wheeled aside to give Ma the running room she needed.

"You see, Varda," cried Dad, and got up from the floor. "That's what I mean. Where did he come from, Barish? He was hidden somewhere. Then he appears and no one has time to escape. He speaks less than I do, and it's no good, Varda. My own son scares me. Is he ruling here?"

Ma pulled at the door but the tiny bolt held. We heard a voice within.

"What do you want? I'm making."

"You get right out of there, Mrs. Charpolsky," yelled Ma.

"I'm in the midddle," was her answer.

"In the middle?" said Dad. "How long does it take?"

"Never mind," yelled Ma. "Afraid of a wheelchair and he's here already. Zelo, I don't need you to tell me anything. I use my own head. All right, Mrs. Charpolsky. You can stay one more minute and that's all. So hurry up!" And she banged the door and twisted the knob to let Mrs. Charpolsky know she meant business.

In a short while Mrs. Charpolsky was gone, the toilet bowl white as could be and the wooden box on top choking and throwing water against the ceiling. The long chain swung back and forth, hitting the sink each time. Yanina and I remained by the bathroom door as Ma led everyone into the kitchen.

And this was our second talk together since her coming, just the two of us, brother and sister:

"She smells the same," Yanina said and opened the small stained-glass window above the tub as far as it would rise. After each lesson from Mrs. Charpolsky, Bracha would stand before that window, admiring the red shield in its center and the tiny blue diamonds running all along the edges.

Munching my raisins, I said: "Bracha used to like that window."

"And you think maybe I don't remember?" said Yanina. "Are you the only one, Barish, who remembers anything in the house? My God, Ma's got you following her footsteps all right. I remember those days: how Bracha used to walk around with her head down, till Ma decided she should walk head up and smiling. And Mrs. Charpolsky would sit hidden in the bathroom, like a spy, so she could hear Ma dragging Bracha along the hall. I remember as much as anyone."

"Well," I said, "if you remember all that, you're not such a bad sister. But I don't see you mourning. And didn't you ask me about that the night you came? So why aren't you crying for Bracha? I know what you'll say: who mourns the death of an idiot anyway, someone that had no real feelings, someone that wandered around the whole house without any words, like a ghost? But that's exactly what I am, too. Look at me, I wheel and I idle, and then I just look at everyone. So who's going to mourn for me? Mrs. Charpolsky?"

"What are you saying?" said Yanina.

"I'm saying you think you're the opposite of Ma, but you're not. I'm saying let's all stick our heads in the furnace downstairs, to examine the coals. It's all a game here, every day of it, and nobody actually gets hurt. I'm saying Bracha had her window and I have my wheelchair, hooked

as it is. Don't worry, there are toys enough for everyone. I'm saying we know you're up to something, Yanina. Otherwise, why are you here?"

Yanina turned her head to the side.

"Today we visited Feivel's parents," she said, "and tomorrow we're leaving. Feivel, Pildesh, and myself."

"Really?" I said. "That should be interesting. But what about Dad? Are you going without him? He isn't ready to leave yet. A little more time, and he'll come around. Maybe you should wait another day. Want a raisin?"

"Barish," said Yanina. "What's the matter with you? Are you my brother? I don't even recognize you. Why are you trying to scare everyone? You never go outside and you make believe you don't care what happens. Why are you always eating? Why do you use such a wheelchair? And who gave you that black robe? And why scare Dad?"

But I managed, wheeling sharply, to leave the bathroom before her.

If she was against Ma, why shouldn't I be against Dad—to balance things off? Besides, it was Ma who gave me the robe. With one heavy hand she pushed me into the back bedroom, with the other she handed me the robe. That's how Ma is. And as for me, although sometimes I can close my eyes and even forget I'm sitting on a second-hand wheelchair, as carefree and full of dreams as Dad, more often I'm wheeling into everyone. So I'm the worst. And if I eat most of the day, what's so bad about that? It passes the time away.

6

Ma was about to give Dad his bowl of farina when the three of them marched into the kitchen all dressed for travel: Pildesh in his khaki and white combination, the simpler of his two outfits, looking very much like a midget African explorer; Yanina in her long brown overcoat, a gift from kind Grandaunt Gruna at whose house Ma took all her baths and hid a pair of skates; and Feivel without his hat. Yanina knew they'd never hitch a ride with him parading around in a hat of spinachgreen. Out in front stood Pildesh, feet wide apart, hugging the little bag of rolls which would keep him quiet and busy the length of an hour perhaps, once on the road. Feivel himself had a packedfull shopping bag in each hand, since Yanina, like Ma, travels with shopping bags. And Ma on her part held the bowl of farina undisturbed and, in silence, glanced at everyone. But for Dad the whole thing was a terrific shock. Here he had fasted a day and a night, suffering under Ma's decree, only to have his breakfast interrupted. So all the while Yanina shouted condemnations, Dad smelled his hot farina but couldn't put a spoonful to his mouth. That was what bothered him especially, not the shouting, not the threatened exodus, and not the disgrace to Bracha, Yanina's leaving before the end of the seven days. I, expecting the worst, had wheeled myself into the pantry in the darkest dead of night and eaten my fill of lettuce and cottage cheese, things Ma would never stop to check. So my stomach didn't rumble in the least, and like a visitor I watched from my wheelchair, completely at ease and satisfied.

"Ma," said Yanina, "don't think you fooled us one bit. We know you tricked us into coming and you buried Bracha long before we even started out. That's just like you, the way you've always been. What do you care if Feivel loses his job? One slow stitcher like him a big store can afford to get rid of. Anybody can scrape leather and bang in nails and push chairs around. And that's what you want: Feivel should lose his job and all three of us should come creeping back to Broome Street. But we're not going to, we're not going to come back, and we're not going to live off Zadie the way you do. So get that right out of your head! You think I'll ever listen to you? I want you to know, and Dad too, that in Boston we live on the second floor, not the fourth like you. Dad could save half his climbing. Oh, what's the use talking! Come on, let's go."

Still holding the bowl of hot farina, Ma said not a word and Dad started to cry, fearing, I suppose, that Ma would proclaim another fast as soon as they were gone.

And then suddenly Pildesh shouted: "No! First I want to urinate!" and he stretched his plump hand up toward Yanina's face.

That was all Ma needed.

"What!" she yelled. "Urinate? *Ne doh gedacht.* What kind of talk is that? Who teaches a child to say such things? Let Pildesh learn to say he has to make *pippy* or he has to trickle or *ich darf gehn pishen.* Not urinate. I don't want to hear such talk in my kitchen from anybody, either from you, Yanina, or you, Pildesh. Go, go, who needs you. I've seen enough of you. But look! Look what you've made of him, your own boy. *Gott soll ophitten,* but what should I expect from Yanina? A lot she knows. She'll never catch up to me, never. She doesn't even know Yiddish."

Yanina, pulling at a button on her overcoat, her face white, looked at Pildesh and then at Feivel. She had wanted in her exit to prove something to Ma—that Ma was a failure, and not the other way around. But what was there to do except lead Pildesh to the bathroom? So she took him by the hand.

"Not there!" yelled Pildesh. "Out the window!"

So everyone was overwhelmed, but not Feivel. Lazy and calm as ever, he simply dropped the shopping bags to the floor, leaned against the cabinet and shut his eyes, no more interested in us than in himself. No wonder he let the Russians bang him all over, on the head, behind the ears, in his stomach, across the knees. What did he care? In the end he'd get over the border; he knew that, because his parents had already got across before him and

why shouldn't he? So he leaned against the wooden cabinet, his little cherry head just edging over the top, and waited. And in a way he reminded me of our Bracha, with his eyes shut, simply waiting. Except that Feivel feared nothing in his waiting, whereas for Bracha the waiting was itself a sort of pain.

Besides, when was Bracha ever free like Feivel? When could she curl herself up and go to sleep, midday, with all her studies: forever learning how to write, how to smile, how to walk, how to hold her head up, how to use the toilet, how to wash her rags? Everyone had something to teach her, and it wasn't often that she stood unmolested staring at the pretty stained-glass window. And didn't Bracha have some movement of her own, opinions even, and purposes too, I guess, though they were few and simple, like scribbling *kaka* stories all over the walls and doing away with herself at Mrs. Paltiel's to disgrace her family? And of course Bracha was so much smaller than Feivel, her head long like Dad's and her eyes a faded blue, so she was different enough from our brother-in-law. Nonetheless, I began to think maybe Yanina had married Bracha in marrying Feivel, and the thought pleased me.

"Just you dare, Pildesh!" yelled Ma and slammed the bowl of farina onto the table, in front of Dad's nose.

Yanina whitened some more and tried to explain. She said Pildesh once did it in Boston that way, a long time ago.

"He loves to watch the arc," she said. "And anyway, it's healthy!"

"Healthy?" yelled Ma. "For the cold air to come in, for all sorts of bugs and four-leggers to creep on him where they shouldn't? Ah, you'll never learn, so close up.

I don't want to hear anything you have to say. Go look at your Feivel better, he's asleep already."

That settled the matter: swiftly, Yanina picked up Pildesh and carried him to the window, opened it all the way and set Pildesh down on the sill, knees bent and apart. As the cold rushed in, the mid-winter cold of Broome Street, Pildesh worked as quickly as he was able but the bag of rolls hindered him, not to mention Ma in her face-to-back struggle with Yanina. So he lost his balance and splashed the shade, wetting Yanina's overcoat in the spray, and swung out the window, face first. With him went all the rolls. Yanina could do nothing, but Ma somehow managed to grab Pildesh's legs in time. We heard the thud, as his forehead hit against the side of our brownstone house before Ma was able to pull him back in. He came up all red and crying. Feivel missed the whole thing, but when he saw Pildesh choking and gagging, he moaned some words and came over. Dad himself got up to meet him and they held each other and cried while Pildesh suffered his fit, different from Bracha's of old and different from Dad's. They never turned red like Pildesh or pulled at their ears. And since I knew that Dad —for the most part—learned all his tricks from Bracha, I began to wonder where Pildesh got his ideas and for a moment suspected Feivel—but that was impossible, Feivel didn't seem to be fitful.

Yanina was helpless and, of course, Ma took over. She stuck her hand in Pildesh's throat—a fulfillment of her seven-year-old curse—and shortly had Pildesh vomiting over the floor. After Dad saw what Ma had in her fist, a clot of food, the first hunk that set Pildesh choking, he knew for sure he'd never get to eat his breakfast. So he held Feivel tighter and cried, sobbed and shivered.

Yanina was speechless altogether, amazed at her own downfall, Pildesh's sudden hurt, and Ma's success. She was grateful, she was jealous, she was angry. I thought she'd do something terrible, and I sat back and waited.

When she was through mopping the place clean, Ma carried Pildesh, who was still red and crying, into the narrow bathroom, stripped him of his khaki shorts and all his underthings, and dumped him into the tub, where she made her famous discovery.

"What's the matter with this boy?" she yelled. "He has no bags!"

"What no bags?" said Yanina.

"He has no bags, they're not there, they're gone. Isn't he a boy? I warned you, Yanina, warned you. I said never to marry that *umglick*, that Feivel. See what kind of a boy he gave you, without bags!"

"Oh," said Yanina. "I know all about it. They're smaller than you'd expect, that's all. But they're there. When he was born, the doctor told me everything. What do you want? It's nothing to worry about. So what if they're small?"

"So what?" yelled Ma. "A lot you know. And if they're small, where are they? Rotten thing, show me!"

And it was true. From fear or from the cold, the sensitive things were gone, had disappeared for a while. Yanina searched, using her hands, but couldn't find them.

"Zelo!" said Ma. "Go downstairs and get the doctor!"

"What doctor?" cried Dad.

"Mrs. Charpolsky's doctor," yelled Ma. "The one who gives her candies and medicines, go get him."

"How do I know where he lives?"

"I said go downstairs," yelled Ma. "To Mrs. Charpolsky! She knows where he lives. *Pferd*, you saw what

I saw? What Pildesh is missing? And you stand there? Horse, I've said something, so listen. Put on pants and go!"

Ma made a terrible face, her specialty, and Dad went and did what he was told.

Yanina was worried herself and didn't interfere. But she wanted to know why Ma hadn't discovered something from the beginning, when she gave Pildesh that bath as soon as they stepped into the house.

"He wouldn't take it," said Ma, examining Pildesh's forehead while he sat quiet at last, in the tub.

"But I heard splashing," said Yanina.

"So what if you did? Maybe I should waste all that hot water? I took the bath myself. I'm no fool, like you."

That was a surprise. When we were children Ma never showed us anything, her pink cotton nightgown was too thick to be revealing. But in front of Pildesh, a stranger, all of a sudden she had no shame. I guess Ma didn't want to consider herself limited in any way. Mrs. Charpolsky, of course, had no such motive when she lowered her underwear with all three of us looking on so closely. She simply loved to create and watch our amazement.

"Hey!" shouted Pildesh, red and holding onto his ears. "The ceiling's all broke!"

It was nothing new to us, so Yanina, head down, led Pildesh and Feivel across the long hall into their bedroom and I, anxious to meet Mrs. Charpolsky's doctor, clucked my way in the opposite direction, toward my dry junk-filled room in the back. Alone in the kitchen, Ma was again a recognized power.

7

The doctor, Mr. Vossen Gleich, turned out to be an ambitious little man. He had the orange eye of a pigeon and a lopsided chest, one side sunk in, the other humped and swollen to his chin. Yet, he thought he could cure people, not only Pildesh but our whole family, especially me. He distracted our attention and put us off guard, since he was altogether something to gaze at. But he had a scheme all right, from the very outset, and followed its each step with skill.

However, because of Ma's previous quick efforts at the window—pulling Pildesh in and applying her cold vegetable knife just soon enough—Pildesh had no lump

on his forehead. Therefore, we didn't tell the doctor about the bang Pildesh got and the entire examination was over in a short while. It was close to twelve o'clock and Yanina began fidgeting, so I knew she hoped to pay the doctor with one of Ma's dinners.

"Well, he's a *tumtum*," said Mr. Gleich. "Don't worry, I know something from the Talmud. But can I call myself a scholar? The boy's a *tumtum*, with his little things hidden and so small anyway. But look, he's much better now. What, maybe he isn't? *Danken Gott*, you can see them now, can't you? So why worry? It's good to call a doctor. A little at least he can always do. Say, is this your mother? She takes after you all right. Two such women could only be related. It's a shame about the boy: look here, he's not more than four. And who's the father? You the father?"

"No," said Dad.

"So you're the father!"

"Yes," said Feivel, in his dead grumpy whisper, never entirely mute, but not making a very good impression.

"Well, take the boy to a hospital," said the doctor. "That's what Vossen Gleich tells. And to say the truth, I'm superstitious, so if you give me four dollars now, it'll be like a charm, four dollars because he's four years old."

"He's not four yet," said Yanina, "he's only three."

"Let it be three dollars," said Mr. Gleich. "But I'm not saying I'm a Chassidic rebbi or anything like it. Vossen Gleich is a doctor and can't promise a thing, but as he says, he's superstitious. So it comes to three dollars, all right three fifty. After all, the entire way I had to walk. I have no machine, you know. I guess he told you, the one who came for me. Also I don't like to use a bus if I can help myself. Whenever I get off those things, I'm

afraid someone's going to spit on me from the window. Besides, I'm not so healthy myself. On my worst enemy I wouldn't wish my chest. And it's not just being with pains all the time that hurts."

"I understand," said Yanina fidgeting, and afraid the doctor would discover traces of the bump on Pildesh's head and then charge some more, above the three fifty.

"What do you think?" said the doctor, his tiny hands running up and down his chest, to soothe himself. "Maybe I don't care what I look like? Or maybe I don't know what I look like? Every time I walk among big people, I get a chill all over, because to be so small I'm ashamed. Forgetting my chest, being just short is plenty. At least I'm not a midget. But if I were really one of those midgets, from shame would I fall flat on my face once and for all, dead? No, a man is not his blemish. Besides, who would mourn for me? Still, I hate to use the streets during the day. All right, nighttime it isn't bad. But if in the day someone knocks at my door, often I don't answer. Natural, Vossen Gleich has no wife to answer and he has to live by himself, for who would marry a man like him?

"But it's more than that. There comes a time and I really want people to notice me and I'm afraid they never will, because I'm so little. To explain is difficult. I don't want people to see me and then again I do. Let them look what I am, a good look, what do I care? Besides, who wants to feel entirely neglected, forgotten, a chicken *puppik* in the garbage? But understand, I also wouldn't be able to live if people when they saw me just laughed. Children, even little ones, always they laugh. Once I had to throw a stone at a boy—am I a saint?—and then his brown dog came. That's already a story and

I don't want in any way to keep you back. I'm surprised, though, this one didn't laugh, but I can tell you he's been for a long time crying. Did he hit his head? I too cry sometimes, maybe I don't? Listen here, we all cry. But see, that's why I wear these big taps on my shoes: so people will take notice. They're a little bit loose now, still you must have heard me as I came in, I make usually a lot of noise. You heard me, didn't you? All right, about myself I told. Now soon I'll find things out about you."

"My husband can fix those taps," said Yanina, hoping to subtract something from the bill, perhaps fifty cents, now that the doctor was on to Pildesh's bump.

"He can fix them? What is he, a shoemaker or just a handyman? Because only a shoemaker can do a good job."

"He's a shoemaker," said Yanina. "And also a carpenter."

"From Boston," I said, "a real expert."

"What's the matter?" yelled Ma. "Can't you see from the tools sticking out of all his pockets he's a shoemaker? If in here you wear just socks, torn green socks, you'll step on a nail." And she turned her heavy round head toward Dad, the main offender.

"Good," said the doctor, heaving a few sighs from his twist of a chest. "I'm glad you speak well of him. So I believe you, and a penny it'll save me. But do you blame me for being ashamed? You must feel the same. I don't mean you two, for me you're giants already, like Og the king of Bashan, I know my history. This one in the wheelchair, he isn't so short either. But he has to sit all the time, so in a way he's like me, like Vossen Gleich, no bigger than a chair. The two women though, they must know how I feel, the whole year so depressed, like an ant,

a *muraske* in the backyard, because look, they're as small as I am almost. See, I'm standing right beside. And don't forget how fat they are, much too fat, who wants women so fat? All right, maybe about women I don't really know that much. About diseases, blotches, fractures, *nu melah* I know something, enough to make a living even if I am, God forbid, illegal.

"But look here, the lady downstairs, Mrs. Charpolsky, she's a favorite of mine. I wouldn't say I have any hopes or anything like it—how can I compete with her lodgers, how can I? She says, anyway, you're her good friends and I myself know that rich people you are not, and I see already that he's a cripple and he a deaf-mute or close to it, all in one family. And besides, I don't mind going out even in the day if I have company to begin with—and didn't he come with me?—so I'm not charging you anything. Why should I? I had no intention to charge from the beginning. I just wanted to test you, what kind of people you were, and now I'm satisfied. You think I care about money? God will give it back to me, I'm not afraid. Still, with something I'd like to leave. Not food, I eat what I must but believe me, eating is no pleasure. Right here I get such pains with every mouthful it isn't worth it already. Better I shouldn't eat altogether, God forbid."

"What do you mean?" cried Ma. "You should eat all you can. Then you wouldn't be short. And if you had something in your mouth you wouldn't talk so long. Why tell us everything?"

"Maybe," said the doctor. "I won't say yes or no. I see you're a doctor, too. But I can tell you this: never in my life have I been in a wheelchair. I know I don't look it, but it's the truth. What, is Vossen Gleich a lying man?

And such a wheelchair I've never seen, with a wooden back and a wooden seat. Did he make that, the quiet one, the shoemaker? Don't worry, I see things quick enough. A good job for such a contraption. But will it fall apart? It looks difficult to wheel yourself. I think I could manage, if someone gave me a small push to get started. Can he stand up, the cripple? Maybe I should examine him as well. So that'll be my fee, and we'll call it *gleich*, even. Just to the door, no more. Vossen is never greedy."

Well, for me to argue would have been useless, with Ma and Yanina in agreement. And why shouldn't I let Mr. Gleich wheel in my chair, if that's what he wanted? Such a sight, I told myself, I'd see only once. Swollen-chested as he was, I could expect to hear all sorts of groans before he was through. And maybe he'd never get started.

Yanina grabbed me by the feet and directed Feivel to hold me by the shoulders. Together they lifted me onto the bed, beside Pildesh.

"Go ahead," said Ma. "What are you waiting for? You've talked enough."

"So what's he doing in his underwear?" said the doctor, pointing to Dad. Somehow Dad had managed to take off his pants when no one was looking.

"Horse you," yelled Ma. "You love it when everybody knows."

"What do you want from me?" sobbed Dad. "I can't help it. You tell him to eat, but I haven't even eaten yet and I'm your husband."

With that, he coughed and ran out of the room, a tactic he must have learned from Mrs. Charpolsky. The doctor, Vossen Gleich, picked up his torn little bag

which hardly had anything in it, and struggled to get into my wheelchair. Out came his tongue, a splash of red to balance the orange of his eye. And the swollen hump of his chest rose up into his throat, so that he lost his breath altogether. When Yanina offered to help, he shook his head and gasped: "Vossen Gleich will make it."

Then Pildesh yelled: "Rotten apple! Go away. You scare me."

The wheels began to turn and my chair edged its way over the threshold, into the hall. Through the regular cluckings, I could hear the doctor sigh until finally he reached the front door.

"*Gott zu danken*," he said and breathed heavily. "Now I know what it feels to be a cripple. I'll come back later when I visit Mrs. Charpolsky, in a day or two, maybe even tomorrow. She needs someone to give her medicines. But what does she know? Out of candy I make her capsules. That's all she needs, candies. Don't worry, I know her, Mrs. Charpolsky. Well, put the boy to sleep, *soll er shloffen gesundahait*. So what if he calls me rotten apple? Better he should sleep and get well. He hit his head, didn't he? So I'm not one to bear grudges. *Nu*, good-bye, *sei gesund*!"

The door shut and Yanina went to fetch my chair.

"We're going to let you sleep now," said Ma, taking the opportunity to put some dread into Pildesh's bones. "But you think there are no bugs on you? On your legs and in between? On your hair? They're all over, spiders, beetles: leggers from the window."

"What are you telling him?" shouted Yanina, running back into the room, with my wheelchair clucking out in front. "I can't trust her for one minute. Hasn't

enough happened already? Why did I come? Just to see Barish in this chair? And I don't need that Vossen Gleich. Pildesh is all right."

Ma judged by the look in Pildesh's eye that she had been successful, so we were free to have our breakfast, to Dad's great satisfaction.

"You know what, Varda?" said Dad, all of us sitting at the table. "The doctor makes me think of Bracha. Maybe it's because she was always so quiet, and he's the opposite. Tell me, Varda, did we really fast for Bracha yesterday? I don't know anything."

"Never mind," said Ma. "And forget about Vossen Gleich. Does he know more than I do? I'll let him come again once more, but that's all."

8

Pildesh slept on and on, tired from all the shifts and confusions of the past few days. And Dad, right after our twelve o'clock breakfast, started his finger-twitching lessons with Feivel once more. He hoped Yanina's stay would drag on and his own intimate knowledge of Feivel's language would give him prestige in the house. Yanina, however, shut herself in with Pildesh, and lying beside him, silently debated, I suppose, how long she'd remain. Again in the old bedroom she used to share with Bracha, our sluggish sister, Yanina must have regretted, among her thoughts, ever marrying her deaf, almost mute Feivel. Especially after Ma's discovery, which showed us

the kind of son tall Feivel gave her. No, it wasn't much fun being a Shimansky back on Broome Street: with Ma pushing everyone around and Dad enjoying it, thinking Ma loved him, and I just watching everything from my wheelchair, a disturbance in itself. Poor Yanina, wasn't it enough she had a husband like Feivel and a son like Pildesh? Did she need as well a mother like Ma, a father like Dad, a sister like Bracha, a brother like me, a grandfather like Zadie whom she couldn't even visit, and now a doctor like Vossen Gleich who claimed he was going to find out all about us?

In the kitchen, as soon as Ma saw Dad was happy again (that unlike Bracha he loved his lessons, repeating them over and over) she handed him a wet bag of swill and garbage to take downstairs and sort out. Then I myself began to interfere, no longer watching Yanina at her doorpost, and wheeled in between the two of them to upset their friendship, to criticize and point out their folly.

"Dad," I said. "Feivel's going to leave us anyway, so why learn his language? Unless you're leaving, too."

That was all Ma had to hear, that she might lose her Zelo. She was either by the sink scraping carrots or off in the pantry looking for onions, close enough to rush out and support me by giving Dad another wet bag of garbage.

So the day passed calm and peaceful, with Yanina lying beside Pildesh, thinking of herself and also remembering Bracha; for after all, Bracha's death, though ill attended, was a real event in the family. Feivel and Dad played at the kitchen table, exchanging hands and fingers, with Ma and myself coming in now and then to interrupt, until at last it was six and dark out, supper all set

and ready. Minus the lettuce and cottage cheese I had eaten the night before, the small pantry light glistening over my head.

However, the family meal ended very soon. For just as Ma handed out the chicken-liver sandwiches, Pildesh began screaming in his bed and everyone left the table, gathering at different speeds, and for different reasons too, to hear Pildesh talk, wild like a Shimansky, of fishes and birds and insects: the things which went into his midday nightmare. He said there was a special bug somewhere, a terrible bug, a *murashke* up on the wall making noises, but he wouldn't look as he pointed. And though he cried that he wanted to get out, because of his constant gasps and wailings no one knew what he was saying. Feivel, a good father, was the first to understand, since he was watching only Pildesh's lips. He gave Dad the message quickly, a treat to behold, and Dad explained it to us all.

"So, Yanina!" said Ma. "Why don't you know your Feivel, what he says with his fingers? All these years and you never once talk to him? What is this? Did it ever happen that Zelo couldn't talk to me? And Feivel, why didn't you do something if you understood your Pildesh? Were you afraid you'd drop him?"

Both Yanina and Feivel said nothing, as dumbfounded and speechless as Bracha forever was, and Ma carried Pildesh into her own room across the hall. But Pildesh started to scream again about all the bugs. He turned red as he shouted and pulled at his two ears, scratching them with his fingernails. I thought Ma was going to send Dad running for the doctor again, but instead she figured out a cure by herself: she said I should

wheel Pildesh around the whole house and that would stop his crying.

Everyone followed in close procession, for just the kitchen light was on and darkness had spread over the house. Pildesh sat on my lap and shuddered from all his sobs. Once he turned around to stare at my face.

Finally, one half-hour gone by, Pildesh became himself. When I let him down, he walked out in front with his hands behind his back. So I and the rest moved after him.

Then suddenly, he stopped at a window and looked around.

"There are no bugs here," he said.

"That's right," said Yanina. "But look, there are stars. Way up, Pildesh, in the sky, see all the stars? How many are there?"

After he examined the sky in silence a moment, Pildesh said: "Five!"

"Five?" I said.

"Oh, he's only a child," said Yanina.

"What do you mean?" yelled Ma. "Maybe we should listen to what he tells us, because he's a child? You, Pildesh, there are more than five. Look again, you'll see."

But Pildesh turned red and began to cry, while Ma and Yanina exchanged glances.

"I don't want to look," yelled Pildesh. "I don't like stars. They're too far away."

So Ma had made another discovery: that Pildesh, like Dad, was shortsighted and had to look at things from a small distance in order to judge shapes and colors and count with precision.

"Ahhh, Yanina!" said Ma. "That's your Pildesh. What can I expect? You think I'm going to listen to him

talk nonsense, because he can't see anything? What nightmare, what bugs? You saw them? I didn't! And I know better. He just doesn't like to sleep. None of my children liked to sleep. I had to make you sleep. If only Pildesh took after Feivel, in this one thing at least, he'd sleep the whole day. Then I'd have no troubles."

"What do you mean?" cried Dad. "I'm like Feivel. Let Pildesh take after me."

"Is that you, Zelo?" said Ma. "Are you here already? That's a good one. It's so dark I didn't notice. Do you have your pants on?"

"See, see!" Dad cried. "You yourself can't see anything. So why do you blame me if they take my papers from me? At night, it's just as dark outside as it is in here. And there's no lamp at the corner. And you won't let me wear glasses. So what do you want from me? They bang on the counter, grab a paper, and run. How do I know if they've left money behind? Getsel can't help me, he's always thinking. And if I ever chased anybody, when I'd come back I'd find *all* my papers gone. So don't tell me any stories. Besides, do I care what they do? Let them take the papers for my part. I don't need the job. Is it that exciting? Anybody can arrange bundles in a pile. I'm no expert at it. My father will get me another job, and another business, too."

"All right! Keep quiet," said Ma. "You'll never know when to talk. These things tell me, when we're alone, and no one else! Why should anybody know?"

"But you don't listen to me when we're alone," said Dad.

"Oh, so you copy what Yanina says? Go ahead, you *pferd*! See where that'll lead you. Some day you'll know, Zelo, what it means."

"All right, I won't listen to her any more," said Dad. "I promise."

"Then close up," said Ma. "And we'll talk about it later."

"Then let's make up and forget," sobbed Dad, and tried to hug Ma in front of us all.

"Starting in again," Ma said. "You'll get nothing from me. Those days are over."

"But I'm going to change and do what you say. I'll only talk when we're alone. Didn't I go for the doctor?"

"Never mind the past!" yelled Ma. "Just do what you're told now, and don't expect any rewards. Because you're not getting any."

"What is this?" said Yanina. "A game? Is that it, a game? My God, then Barish is right, everything around this house is just a game."

"Oh, Zelo!" said Ma. "You hear? And you're the cause of it. I said we should talk by ourselves, so you go on talking in front of everyone like a horse."

Dad started to cry and Ma yelled: "Stop that! I can't look at your face when you cry."

"I don't say you should," sobbed Dad. "But I have something to tell. Feivel said I could, if it would help me. It's about Yanina. And Feivel, too."

Ma, of course, was interested. The two of them went into the kitchen where Dad started whispering. Yanina looked across at Feivel.

"What did you tell him?" she asked, slowly so he could understand.

"Everything," moaned Feivel.

So now we knew what Feivel was doing with his fingers: instead of giving lessons, he was telling Dad secrets.

Ma came back screaming.

"Feivel lost his job!" she yelled. "Your Feivel lost his job."

Yanina hung her head.

"Ahh, Yanina, that's why you're here, because of Feivel and not Bracha. Such a disgrace, how could you keep quiet and not tell me? Vossen Gleich, a stranger, told more than you. Shame, Zelo had to tell me. You live on the top floor, not the second. Your Pildesh always has nightmares, he bangs his head and shouts. You came to us for Zadie's money, that's all. Feivel is too good for you, Yanina. I'm ashamed of my children. I give up already. Barish, he has what he wants. Yanina, go take my Zelo, I don't care any more. From now on I'll live by myself, like a widow, like Mrs. Charpolsky, like Zadie. But you think I'll cry? No, I'll never cry as long as I live. Because do I mean anything to you?"

"Yes," cried Dad. "You do! I need you, Varda. Without you, I'm lost."

"Even Pildesh spit at me," said Ma. "As soon as he came."

"But not me," said Dad. "I don't spit at you."

"What's the use?" said Ma. "Wasted, all my efforts. Now I have to live by myself. Bracha was the best of my children, and look what she was, an idiot!"

And she left us, returning across the hall to her room, in the dark.

"What's going to happen to me?" sobbed Dad. "If I never see Varda again, I'll choke."

"It's your own fault," said Yanina. "Why did you tell her my secret?"

"What if I did?" said Dad. "Feivel said I should. Besides, you can go away but me, I have to suffer. I'll die,

and Barish will make sure I don't have a stone, just like Bracha."

"Oh, who has money for stones?" said Yanina. "We'll all be buried that way, with nobody willing to sit on a hard stool and mourn our passing." She picked up Pildesh, who'd begun to doze, and directed Feivel (her informer) to follow her to their bedroom. So Dad and I were left together by the window.

"Well, Dad," I said. "It's all because you refuse to accept differences. You know we'll never be happy, that we can never live with one another. So just admit it, that's all."

"Why?" said Dad. "Because you say so? Because you're so brutal? What did I ever do to you? A person should be so mean? For what? Didn't Varda fix your teeth? Didn't she save Yanina's ears? I remember. And she saved Pildesh, too, from choking. What's happened to us? I can't take it any more. I'll leave the house, or I'll do something terrible to myself, like Bracha. Tonight if I have to, but I don't want to. It's all because of you, Barish. You have some power, you think I don't know it? If you forgive, maybe Varda will. You're no smaller in our eyes if you're a cripple. Did you see the doctor, how gay he was?"

I didn't answer a word. Clucking, I wheeled away from the window and headed for my room. So I was the cripple who could save his family.

"What can I do?" cried Dad, following at my back. "Is it my fault? How can I help it? I wish everyone were helpless like me. Why can't we all talk with our fingers, instead of yelling? Otherwise, I'll run away. Yanina did it not long ago. And so can I. I'll go live in my newsstand with Getsel. I have a broom there to sweep. It's

like a house: with a roof, and a lock on the door, too. It seems I'm a sad man. I hope Getsel at least will stay with me. I'm not like my father, he can live alone. I can't. And what will Varda do? Live by herself? How can she? Varda and me are one person. Oh, I'm no good. Because who do I care about? Myself, that's all."

9

Ma kept her word: starting the next morning she remained in her bedroom, the door closed tight, and didn't bother to cry out a threat, warning, or curse the entire day. Without anyone's knowledge, she had collected some food: a dish of raisins, a few oranges, and a bottle of water in particular. Alone, admitting failure, her fat body all stretched out and covering half the bed, Ma began her brooding. I suppose she went over in her mind our whole history, asking herself if she had done the right things, if she were at all to blame for our downfall. This brooding had happened only once before, the day, seven years ago, Yanina ran off with Feivel, who was almost a stranger, and Ma arranged with Mrs. Paltiel to take Bracha into her institution so Bracha could be declared an official loony. Ma locked herself up in her room then, just as she did now, and brooded a day and a night, doubting the rightness of her actions. You see, Ma has to believe in herself to go on giving orders, for by nature Ma's not cruel. She has to struggle to convince herself that all her monstrosities, like dragging Bracha down the hall or forcing Dad to fast, are necessary, since we understand no other language. Her self-doubt always comes upon her suddenly, like a plague of ants, as if from nowhere.

But seven years ago when she came out of that room, Ma was worse than ever. Only two days later she called up the dwarf girl Datya, Mrs. Charpolsky's niece, who was on her monthly visit. Supposedly, Ma's purpose was to introduce her to me as a match, claiming we would some day stand together under one canopy. Actually, Ma wanted to embarrass us both, and chiefly me, so I wouldn't think of taking Yanina for my example and run away. The dwarf, of course, turned out to be an unpleasant sort of girl, rubbing the lump on her spine against the doorpost. And a week later I did try to get away, for amusement, intending to return soon enough, but had my accident instead, falling down all the steps, with my back and neck faring the worst.

As the five of us gathered in the hall beside Ma's door, Dad hollered, sobbed, and carried on, shivering in front of everyone.

"What does it mean? Should I go in?"

And he put his big cauliflower ear right over the keyhole.

"She's moaning!" he cried. "I hear everything so

clearly I'm afraid. What am I to do? Will she ever come out? It's ten o'clock already."

"Oh, let Ma be!" said Yanina, still hoping to win Dad over. "She knows I'm leaving soon and just wants to keep me back. Feivel will get another job, don't worry."

"Is Grandma in there?" asked Pildesh.

"Yes," said Feivel, in his green hat and his blue pajamas, smiling. And he touched Pildesh on his forehead (where Pildesh had his bang) and then under his chin.

"Grandma's rotten," said Pildesh.

Dad began to cry, his hand at his throat.

"Are there bugs here?" said Pildesh.

"See!" said Yanina. "That's what Ma's done to him, with her talk on bugs. That's why Pildesh had his nightmare. She's caused trouble enough and knows it. Finally, she's ashamed of herself and all her yelling, so what's there to worry about? Her being alone can only do her good. There are no bugs here, Pildesh. There never were. Grandma's rotten. Don't believe a thing she says."

"Is Bracha dead?" asked Pildesh.

"Who told you that?" yelled Yanina.

"Grandma."

"Well," said Yanina, "never mind anything she says."

"Why is everyone so brutal?" cried Dad. "What did we ever do to you? What did Varda ever do? Why can't we all be happy?"

"My God!" said Yanina. "Haven't you anything else to talk about?"

"But she's in there by herself," sobbed Dad. "Lying in bed alone, that's no way. Look how late it is. If she knew I was sick, she'd come out. I know it."

"Who said you're sick?" cried Yanina. "There's nothing wrong with you."

"Yes there is," said Dad. "Why do I cry all the time? Everyone's sick. Aren't you?"

"No," said Yanina and made a face. "I'm not sick. And now I'm having breakfast. Should I make some for you, or not?"

"I don't know," said Dad.

"Come on, answer me. Yes or no."

"She's still in there."

"Yes or no."

"What do you think?"

"It's up to you," said Yanina. "If you want, I'll make you some eggs."

"She's listening," sobbed Dad.

"So what?"

"All right," said Dad. "Let me have breakfast."

"Are you sure?"

"Oh, what do I eat anyway? Farina? That's for a baby, not a man."

"Well, you can forget about your farina. I'll give you other things."

"Whatever you give," said Dad. "My feet hurt standing here. If I don't eat, I'll die, like Bracha. And so will everyone else."

At first Dad was cautious, but it wasn't for long. Soon he liked the idea of sitting free, without a master. After breakfast, he and Feivel stood together by the cabinet and had a little conversation, telling each other some more secrets, I suppose. Yanina let Pildesh play with the junk in my bedroom. Then she turned to me.

"See how Dad likes it," she said. "It's wonderful. And why shouldn't he leave Ma, if he can? What did Ma

ever do for him? Or for you? Or for any of us? Make Bracha into one of Mrs. Paltiel's dumbbells? Then bury her without me? My God, she's a monster."

"Really?" I said. "Then so are you. And don't forget, Ma once had to go around and sell dirty cream, the stuff her mother made up from milk bottles. Besides her regular job. Did you ever do that? No, because Ma wouldn't send any of us to work, unless you count Bracha's tutoring lessons. And in the cold winters, didn't Ma have us wear our sweaters underneath, so the teacher wouldn't see them and make us take them off? So what do you mean monster? You've seen Ma's skates. They're still in my bedroom, the wheels intact. What monster saves her money to buy roller skates? If you ask Ma, when she comes out of that bedroom, to go skating with you, I bet she'll cry right before your eyes."

"This, from you, Barish?" said Yanina.

I spun around, a dangerous move for my second-hand wheelchair, and in four turns was out of the kitchen and entering my junkroom, smiling, and sure of upsetting Pildesh. It's more interesting when you say things a Shimansky doesn't expect. It sets them worrying, and Yanina, my older sister, is one to worry all right. Especially when she knew now for certain that I couldn't be counted on in any of her schemes.

Left alone, she went over to Feivel and Dad.

"It's warmed up outside," she said. "Why don't the two of you go for a walk? You can wear your overcoats. I'll take Pildesh for a walk later on, too."

"But she's still in there, in the bedroom," said Dad, and pointed down the hall.

"Oh, don't worry about Ma. Just do whatever you want."

Of course, Dad wouldn't have gone out anyway. But the notion of doing whatever he wanted, of taking over the house in fact, was a real temptation. So, once finished with Feivel, Dad went from room to room, still in uneven timid steps, but humming and trying to sing as well, calling out old tunes he had heard long ago, as he passed from place to place. Yanina walked at his side, encouraging him to continue his revolt yet further. Finally Pildesh himself began to hum, and running out of my room he soon followed Yanina and Dad in their unsteady path as they curved and redoubled themselves without a stop. Then I myself thought to follow Pildesh, clucking in the rear, so in a short while we had a musical of our own to celebrate the day of liberty and upheaval, with Feivel, of course, sitting silent and uninterested, alone by the kitchen table, his lids down over his eyes. When we entered the kitchen, the four of us making noise, I got it into my head to put Feivel's toes aflame, remembering how I used to set spiders and their strands of web on fire, in the shrubs of our backyard, placing a match to their bellies, with Dad and Bracha watching from the windows.

But that was a momentary feeling only. Feivel didn't care what was happening? Or even wish to see us march around? All right. Let him be. Go pinch a dead cat. (For that matter, go spit on the twig that took your eye, go rip up the step which turned you into a wheelborne cripple.) The important thing was the change in Dad, how he went about giving orders, now that Ma lay quiet in her bed. And Yanina was so eager to serve him, hand and foot: she washed Dad's back and sewed his torn green socks, with Dad sitting barefooted and legs apart on the kitchen floor beside Pildesh, who was making a pile of the junk

bits he'd found in my room and was able to carry off. Feivel must have been against the whole thing, though he never said so. Instead he sat at the table with his back to us, fearing nothing, wanting nothing, and having nothing as well. Dad was hurt; still, he stretched his bones on the floor and made all sorts of requests to Yanina, almost exhausting her by nightfall.

And Yanina didn't mind. She was glad to work that hard, to make up for everything. She even washed the shade Pildesh spoiled, so Ma couldn't say she left any stains in the house. Now that she had cleaned here and there, she hoped to take Dad away with her to Boston, figuring between the two of them, Feivel and Dad, she'd find her support.

I thought Ma would rush out of her room any minute, but her door remained shut. So in the spirit of the day, I presented Dad, unbidden, a glass of cool water and a cracker spread thick with marmalade. Dad was happier than ever, regretting only that Feivel wouldn't share in the goings on.

Later, when it was dark out, the doctor came, good to his words, and right in the kitchen gave Pildesh a quick re-examination.

"The boy's a *tumtum*," said Gleich, "I was right."

"We're going home now," said Yanina. "My father agrees to leave with us."

"And what about the mother?" said Gleich, his tiny hands running over his swollen ungainly chest. "What about the mother? Where is she? Is he going to leave without his wife? That's no good, for him to abandon her. All of a sudden she's a stranger? And what about this one, him in the wheelchair—he works hard pushing himself around each day—are you going to leave him, too?

Who ever should do such a thing? Not Vossen Gleich. And what does he say, the quiet one, him, do you know? Listen, he doesn't look like he agrees to anything. Better think over, all of you, that's what Vossen Gleich tells. Now where's the mother already? At home? Or has she run away first, and here I'm talking nonsense?"

"No, she's here all right," said Yanina. "In the bedroom. She's brooding, that's all."

"The whole day she's been that way," cried Dad. "And Yanina washed my back."

"What are you telling him for?" yelled Yanina.

"She's brooding?" said the doctor. "Your mother? The one who told me about him?"—pointing to Feivel—"That he has tools in all his pockets and I should be careful of nails? A hard nail could rip out my taps, you know, now that they're loose. But who'd ever imagine about your mother such a thing? Brooding? So why do you stand out here? Go inside and cheer her up." And he headed down the hall toward Ma's bedroom, judging it by the closed door, and started to make his way in.

"Yoohoo!" cried the doctor. "Are you dressed, Mother? You know your husband's in his underwear again, and they're all dirty—what, has he been sitting on the floor with the boy?—and listen, I'm coming in. Ready?"

Not a word.

"I warn you."

Not a word.

"Vossen Gleich talks no jokes."

Not a word.

"*Nu*," said the doctor. "So I tried. Maybe I didn't? And better I shouldn't go in. If she keeps quiet so much, it really means too bad. Well, I have to go now, it's late.

You, remember what I say, if you're really her husband. Perhaps in another day I'll be back. I must see that Mrs. Charpolsky tonight, dear lady what she is and always, God forbid, sick. Her husband never should have died. Who wanted it of him? Not Vossen Gleich. So all right, I'm going already, here's my bag and coat, ripped of course, good-bye, *sei gesund*."

Then we all went to bed, Dad sleeping with Feivel, so maybe the two of them made up after all.

But poor Yanina, how could she have slept knowing her Feivel, that he was probably telling Dad (with his fingers) to listen to the doctor?

10

Well, what saved Dad was Mrs. Charpolsky's sudden appearance, not his own little speech, rolls and newspapers in his hands. Back with his bundles he told everyone the doctor, Vossen Gleich, was right, no man should abandon his wife. So the revolt was over, Yanina's encouragements were useless and Dad returned to his old ways. Yanina hung her head. Who would support her now? She'd have to ask Ma's forgiveness when Ma came out of her room, and live with us like a daughter again. Unless she could manage somehow to run off with Zadie's money, the stuff he hid in his room down below. Maybe that was her idea in the first place, as soon as she arrived,

when she thought she'd take a shower downstairs but Ma said no.

"Tell me," sobbed Dad, a hand on his forehead, a hand on his throat. "How can I ever leave? I'd be lost, suffocating all the time. I'm not going anywhere from Broome Street, I'm staying right here, home."

As he took off his gray pants, he cried: "I'm sorry I ever listened to you, Yanina. See, she's still in there, with the door closed and sounds coming out. One day I was without her, that's enough. I sat on the kitchen floor with Pildesh. You washed my back and my underwear, and sewed my socks. I even walked around later, to do as I please. You said so, Yanina. But what does it all amount to? I wish she'd come out already and tell me what to do. Look how I'm shivering. I have to see her right now or I'll die. I'll fall on the floor and never get up. I have to say I'm sorry so she'll forgive me."

Crying, he ran down the hall in his underwear and green stockings, put his ear to Ma's door and searched for the keyhole. Bent over, dangling, holding onto the doorposts for support, he lost his balance.

That was how Mrs. Charpolsky caught him when she entered the front door (Dad had forgot to lock and bolt it as Ma directed) like an old-time Yiddish actress: her orange sweater, the orange of Vossen Gleich's eye, placed around her shoulders to keep her back warm, its handkerchief hanging.

"Another naked man? God save me, last night there was one, now a second. Give him clothes already, I'm fainting!"

And as she brought her long handkerchief up to her face, the bed in Ma's room made a noise, soft and deliberate. So Mrs. Charpolsky, a stranger, an intruder, snoop-

ing as usual, woke Ma from her slumber to end her brooding. Everyone awaited Ma's coming while Dad ran to put on his pants. I, in particular, was anxious to see Ma, to find out if she had changed at all. Maybe I'd go lock myself up in my back bedroom and follow her example.

"Mrs. Shimansky!" shouted our downstairs neighbor. "That's you? What's the matter you don't look so good? And where's your earrings and necklace? I wouldn't even recognize you. Why did it take so long to reach the door? Say listen, it's not my business but maybe I can't ask a question? Sometimes I like to be a friend. But you'll have to forgive me, I have something terrible to confess. That's why I came up, I'm no snooper, I have good reasons. But as soon as I opened the door, there was your husband, all bent over and naked, so I screamed. What then? Do you blame me? After last night especially."

Ma didn't answer. As if turned speechless, like Bracha, receiving that Divine blessing for all her suffering.

Standing in her cotton nightgown, altogether mute, exhausted for the first time, her black hair down across her heavy shoulders, her face both red and white, her soft flesh spreading, there was something beautiful, never mind alarming, in Ma. She was different from the person who ran up to Dad's newspaper stand all afire.

Dad, back again, clad this time, was overjoyed to see her, but afraid to speak. Yanina stood at a distance on the kitchen threshold, and Pildesh, in hiding, showed between her legs. Feivel was nowhere to be seen. I, doing my part, watching everyone, sat thumbing my wheelchair on the other side of Ma, Dad, and Mrs. Charpolsky. In my looking, I noticed a rip in Ma's night clothes, just a

slight tear near the neck, but enough for me to realize that Ma, while brooding, had torn her garments for Bracha, to mourn in earnest. If I wheeled right into her, she wouldn't have said a word, because she had actually given up on us, as she'd promised. And you couldn't blame her: there'd be no end to the blemish in our family; Feivel and Pildesh, carrying on the tradition of ill health, the deaf half-mute and the *tumtum* alike, would scatter anyone's dreams. So what's so bad about making believe you were childless, if all you had was a warped, twisted litter?

Mrs. Charpolsky, though surprised, didn't like Ma's silence. She thought Ma was trying to stop her own performance.

"I broke my vow," she said. "So why don't you say something? Maybe I should fall to the floor? Believe me, I've seen your husband do it. My *neder*, my vow, Mrs. Shimansky, after all the years, I broke it."

"What vow?" sobbed Dad, already in tears, either in fear of Ma or in sympathy with Mrs. Charpolsky. Put to confusion, he was sure to have his fit, because he thought he cheered us up with that dangling stuff he learned from Bracha.

"Listen to him," answered Mrs. Charpolsky. "What vow does a widow make? So that's the one I broke. Last night. And now I have to find three men and tell them I broke it, my vow. Then I'll be forgiven, according to the law. What's the matter with that? Am I the only one who wants forgiveness? God forbid, like Vossen says. But maybe I should ask my lodgers? Those bums, they're not men! Say listen, are you a man?"

"Me?" whispered Dad.

"My nose is turned at you, so who else? My rich brother? That'll be the night."

"Yes," said Dad and gave Ma a glance, who kept her silence like a mourner of one day, "I'm a man."

"And you?"

I said yes, too. For wasn't I a man, if Dad was?

"And you, little boy? I see you hiding there."

"Don't answer her, Pildesh!" yelled Yanina. "She's a fool."

"No," said Pildesh, bringing his face around Yanina's thigh. "I have a doctor. I'm a boy and I'm sick. I have nightmares."

"Gleich? Is he your doctor? A little man with orange eyes?"

"Yes," said Pildesh.

"I know him, the rascal. He's my doctor, too. So you're sick, like me? Well, everyone's sick in this house. You shouldn't feel so bad. But listen, where's your father?"

"By the table," said Pildesh, and disappeared. In a moment he was back, leading Feivel across the threshold and pushing Yanina aside.

"There he is: Feivel. He doesn't hear."

"So how can I ask him if he's a man?"

"I know Feivel's language," said Dad, proud yet timid. And then, showing off before Ma, he twitched his fingers under Feivel's face, displaying his skill. Feivel answered in return and closed his lids.

"He's a man," said Dad. "He said so himself."

"Good. Then I've told three men, now I feel better. So maybe you have some cheese or herring or some eggs? Oh, never mind, I have to go to the bathroom already. I almost forgot."

"You liar!" yelled Yanina. "You haven't told us anything. You love to sneak in here, steal food and cause trouble. You're worse than Barish. Leave my Pildesh

alone. And my Feivel, too. I don't want you talking to them."

Suddenly Ma spoke, in a new voice, barely audible, a voice careless to form clear sounds.

"So, Mrs. Charpolsky. You slept with a man."

"Listen, what else?"

"Who was it?" asked Ma. "One of your lodgers? Me you can tell."

"My lodgers? It would be just like them."

"What kind of talk is that!" yelled Yanina.

"Tell me," said Ma, in less than a whisper, ignoring Yanina. "Who was it, Mrs. Charpolsky? I have to know."

"Why?"

"I must."

"If you ask me a question, all right," said Mrs. Charpolsky. "Maybe I'll give an answer. But without names."

"Was he tall like my friend Feivel?" asked Dad, eager to play any game and help Ma as well.

"At night, who has to be tall?" said Mrs. Charpolsky. "Besides, all my lodgers are tall."

"Was it Kolnitz?" said Dad.

"No names."

"Was it Soifer?"

"No names."

"Was it Coolyk?"

"No names."

"Mrs. Charpolsky," said Ma. "Bring them up here, your lodgers. I have to see them, before I'm too tired. Bracha was always tired. I used to find her sitting in the hallway asleep. I stumbled on her during the night. So where are the lodgers? Mrs. Charpolsky, get them. I know one slept with you."

Though Ma spoke strangely, Mrs. Charpolsky took

little notice. For she was accustomed to strangeness. Didn't she lower her underwear in front of us, clever as Dad, so we'd always remember her, keeping her somewhere in our minds? Enjoying her task, she went downstairs and gathered her lodgers. She must have told them Ma was going to examine them, because they came in all frightened. They knew what Ma was like, having heard her voice for years, and now, I suppose, expected her to evict them. They sat in the kitchen, eating some cold foods they found on the table, and waited for Ma to call to them, one at a time, from her bed.

I stationed myself in the long hallway in front of Ma's door, glad to watch the whole business, however it might turn out. After all, it was the only entertainment we had, and as mourners we couldn't expect too much anyway.

Haskel Soifer, as Mrs. Charpolsky's first tenant, was examined first. Huge and flabby, he hurried past me.

"Who are you? What do you do?" asked Ma, still in her faded pink nightgown. "Sell newspapers? Well, why do you just stand there? I'm talking, so answer my questions. I'm tired."

But Haskel had no answer, for like Bracha, he had no voice. So Feivel and Dad were called in to interpret the things Soifer chose to reveal.

"Once he was an agent," said Dad, in a whisper himself. "But, Varda, he was shot in the foot on his very first mission. See, he has to wear that monster shoe to make up the difference. Can you see it, Varda? Move over on the bed. Then later he was shot in the throat, too, and lost both his voice and his job. That's why he makes those noises in his nose, to be heard like anyone else."

Dad retold Soifer's tale of escape across the country

back and forth: dragging his bulky shoe and snorting with his plump nose, from taxicab to train, to airfield, to streetcar, to bus, finally reaching New York again where he saw the sign in Mrs. Charpolsky's window: *Three Rooms, Come Up. And Watch Your Step. The Banister's Loose.*

In the warmth of the room, seeing Ma in her nightgown, Soifer became even more intimate. He explained why he stole one of Mrs. Charpolsky's pot lids. When his big pistol was taken from him, he made it his chief business to keep indoors, scraping from one window of his room to the next, throwing them open and running the side of his head along the sill in search of his enemies from the local underworld. Whenever he thought he saw someone, he screamed through his nose. But now that his only weapon had turned cancerous from all his panting and blasting, the speechless Soifer decided to smash his black monster shoe against Mrs. Charpolsky's little-used pot lids.

Having heard enough, Ma asked: "Soifer, did you sleep with your landlady, Mrs. Charpolsky?"

But Soifer wouldn't answer, despite Dad's promptings, so Zalman Coolyk was called.

A big man, somewhat bigger than Soifer, his giant belly sagged far beneath his groin as he labored to bow-leg himself down the hall with two fat sticks rubber-banded to his wrists. He wore a shrunken blue overcoat, buttonless and stained with paint and dirt from the front paws of a hundred dogs.

"Why are you so dirty?" said Ma. "Whose coat is that, a stranger's?"

"It's mine now," said Coolyk. "I do my best, I wear what I have."

"Your landlady complains about you. Is it true you're a thief and steal everything?"

"I take what I must," said Coolyk, "but first I beg. For a shirt, a coin, a watch. What they refuse, I collect my own way. So I'm a sick man, anybody with eyes can tell. I have to minister to myself. And it's not easy for me to climb other people's back stairs and take their laundry, the stuff they hang on lines. Wet clothes is heavy; and how am I to carry a bag or a sack with these sticks around? Did you have a good look at my legs? Like them old-time harps. So what do you expect? I rob others, sure. But first I beg. From street to door. I have no wife. She died in London where I've come from. Bombed she was, like me. Only I escaped, to sit in a broken room, hungry. My mind went bad from fear and grief, that's right. Whatever I need, after all my asking, I take. Maybe you have something to give away yourself? A hat, a comb? I use everything: I'm always out and amongst people and have to look my best."

Then he laughed, losing his balance, so he left unbelieved and altogether suspect, one of us, a Shimansky.

Shragga Kolnitz, Mrs. Charpolsky's third lodger, also proved shrewd and deceiving. He entered gasping for breath, with sweat in his armpits, waving his hands and feeling the air.

"Why do you bring me here?" he said. "I'm lost, I see nothing at all, I'm a blindman. Once I could look at the sun and laugh at anything, even cripples. I'm no righteous one, believe me. So how can I resort myself? I'm afraid of the whole world. Talk already, I'm listening. They say you want to examine me."

He moved a little forward, and then he moved to the side. In doing so, he hit his head against the wall and

right away started to howl, his fingers under his chin. Well, I don't blame him for banging his face on purpose. He thought Ma was going to accuse him and let the others go free.

So it was all over. There was no hope now for Ma to hear any admissions. The blind Kolnitz had to be led downstairs. And finally, remembering that Dad must have surprised Ma, thirty years ago, the way one of the lodgers had surprised Mrs. Charpolsky now, I realized what Ma had been up to: she had wanted to start all over again and heal herself, by facing the culprit and forgiving him.

Mrs. Charpolsky, closing the door, whispered a last abuse: "They poison my food."

So Ma said: "Why do you lodge them?"

"Say listen," said Mrs. Charpolsky, sucking her teeth, and answered, "I like those fat bums, they remind me of my husband."

Thus defeated, it was natural Ma should fall into the hands of the doctor, Vossen Gleich, appearing as he did on the heels of the examination, offering her another chance to make up for everything. He came without a rap, like Mrs. Charpolsky, since now Ma herself had become lax and forgetful, leaving the latch unhooked, to give anyone entrance unbarred. Whoever wanted, could peer in on our household.

"No names," whispered Mrs. Charpolsky. "But that one, you know who, he has orange eyes and looks like a pigeon. With him I broke my vow."

II

He rushed in like a rooster mourning the loss of his hens, cheeks dark and flushed, orange eyes round and wild. Turning to each of us, back and forth, out of breath, he grabbed at his awkward chest and cried: *"Hamokem yenachem eschem, hamokem yenachem eschem!"*

And Pildesh, frightened I suppose, spit at him and said: "Go away. Something's wrong with you."

But the doctor went right on talking, grabbing at himself. "God console you," he said, "comfort, bring you peace. Who would have known it? Who would ever have thought? Not Vossen Gleich, an onlooker. I see chairs, not boxes. And the memorial candle, where is it? Fraide,

Mrs. Charpolsky, she told me the story, Fraide my patient, and you too are my patients. A girl without a voice, a fish God forbid, a close relative, from a window to fall on purpose! I have no heart left to think of her, alone in a strange house. But who kills himself? Who can be so wicked? *Oi*, Shimanskys, let me take her place. I'll be her and say the things she couldn't."

"What are you saying?" yelled Yanina, and ran up to him. "Are you talking about Bracha? Bracha killed herself? Ma, you wrote she died, that's all. You never told me, I didn't even know, never. Why didn't you tell me as soon as I came, right away? To trick me, so I'll seem the worst? But look what you've done, you've let me forget my own sister. Oh, I shouldn't have come. Now what can I do? Why did you keep it from me? How did it happen?"

Well, I guess the time was ripe for me to wheel forward and give Bracha her proper eulogy, explaining how she was buried uncleansed, in her own old rags. But Mrs. Paltiel, Bracha's housekeeper and landlady, had already done all that; weeping before us—Ma, Dad, and myself—she told how Bracha fell, bled, and died almost in one instant. She landed on her head, which cracked against the small stretch of pavement in the back yard and spilled open. The blood spread from the stone to her clothes and when the sexton came and examined everything, he decided they'd have to leave her stained rags on and bury her that way, with the stone under her head as well. Like a nitwit she lived, and like a nitwit she died, never causing harm except to herself. And you can be sure I won't take Bracha for my example, as I once did Yanina. If I became a cripple and sat on a wheelchair at the age of thirteen, does that mean I should become a

dead man at the age of twenty? Especially when I know my family will never visit my grave, or bang on the ground with their hands and feet to wake me.

"Never mind how she died," cried the doctor. "I don't like to hear such things. But what you said is good, I see there's hope. You didn't ask about your sister right away? You forgot? Don't worry, you can make amends, for everything. Because I'm here, to save. And listen, I punish too, it has to be, so remember what I'm telling, the laws of mourning: no cushions or pillows, for anyone. And without embracing or kissing the whole seven days."

"Ah, Vossen Gleich," said Ma in a sigh and a whisper. "How can we listen to you? You say no kissing, but you slept with Mrs. Charpolsky last night, like a *goy*. Better you should admit it, and ask me forgiveness."

"Mother," cried the doctor. "I'm glad to see you're not brooding any more. You know, I tried to come into your room, to cheer you up. All right, it's good that I didn't. You were brooding because your daughter died, now I understand. But why don't you do other things? You should all be sitting on stools, talking of Bracha in low voices and chanting prayers for the dead. Why else did this one come with her family?"

"We can't," said Dad.

"What do you mean?" answered Gleich.

"We're not supposed to," said Dad.

"Who told you that?"

"Varda," said Dad.

"And who's Varda?"

"My wife," said Dad. "She said we shouldn't mourn."

"God forbid," said the doctor.

"She is," cried Dad. "She's my wife. I married her.

And I wish she'd yell at me like she used to. Because now she neglects me, and I can't take it any more."

"Never mind," said Ma. "We don't have to tell the doctor anything. He slept with Mrs. Charpolsky."

"And maybe I did?" said Gleich. "When you deal with sick people, you can't be clean yourself. Look here, I have my reasons. How else am I to move in the house? I can't walk here all the time. Now I'll be able to take things into hand. You Shimanskys have to light a wick for the dead. If not, your neglect will never leave you. What's this you're not mourning? Are you such people? Even if the girl was a rascal like her brother, still you must weep. Not too much, just the first three days. Who asks you to cry forever? Vossen Gleich? So listen what I tell. Go sit on stools and think what Bracha meant, all together, the whole family, the mother and the one in the wheelchair, too (you think I remember his name?). Don't be afraid, that's why I'm here. Everyone, let's sit on the floor right now, never mind boxes, and take off our shoes. Him, the cripple, let be where he is, it would pain him too much. So why do you wait? Listen here, do as I say, you Shimanskys, I'm talking, a change will come on all."

But none of us moved. After all, we weren't used to following his orders. As for myself, though I did hand Dad some marmalade, like a servant, the day he listened to Yanina and walked around the house humming a tune, I would never accept the doctor. Unless he performed wonders, either opened poor Kolnitz's eyes or, better still, brought Bracha back to us, just as she always was, her clothes hanging, her eyes almost without color. So, in the end, if the others ever gave in to him, I'd be left to grap-

ple with the doctor alone, he laden with false cures, the stuff in his black bag, I nimble as my wheelchair.

"All right," said Gleich finally. "Maybe I speak too long but I'm your doctor and here to help. So I don't have medicines, a little I always can do, though I'm not a midget. I've seen them myself, out my window. I understand what a midget is. Fraide's Datya, she's a midget, with a big head and lumps. Listen, I also have lumps, maybe I don't? You think I'm saying Vossen Gleich is better than Datya? I should live so long. And if I did say it, would I admit? Never. I'm a rascal, too, don't worry. But forget about me, you're the people I'm after, you Shimanskys. If it behooves me to live with Mrs. Charpolsky and use nice language, I will. How else am I to heal you, the way I want? Besides, it was my first time with a lady. Such a pleasure I've never had. But how much can I do? You've seen my chest. All right, now you will see what I can attain. Because when I'm around, the whole house is a family. I could tell that from the beginning. So take notice and obey. Everyone."

Still, no one spoke. Until Pildesh, wearing his khaki outfit, called out: "Are you a pigeon? You're sick yourself."

"God forbid," answered Gleich, his shoes tapping. "I live in health, downstairs now with Mrs. Charpolsky. This morning I brought in my clothes. What, is Vossen Gleich a wealthy man? In one walk, no more, I established myself and changed my lodgings. So I'm starting today already to teach you how to mourn and live together. Why should the mother be against mourning? Pildesh, can you bring peace? Then quiet, not a word. I keep the covenant, I understand what must be done. I must tell you: where there is no man, be one yourself.

And where there is no God? You see what kind of things I say? Important. Like a Jew.

"First I uphold the father: peace must come. Doesn't your father want peace? That's why he cries and falls on the floor. Look, I'm taking him to Seward Park, and bargain for him glasses. He'll hold a newspaper till he can read, and then we'll leave. I know them all, they'll charge us nothing, I'm their doctor, the poor ones: Gedaliah, Pinchas, Avner, Reuven. Each one by his first name I call. So now I must know your names too. His already is Pildesh, the *Tumtum*. Who else has a name? Come on, this you can do, let me hear, to be intimate. You, the father, what's your name? Don't worry, I can imagine."

"Zelo," said Dad.

"Wonderful," said the doctor and held Dad at his waist. "You do nothing, you're a mourner and can't embrace. Just me, Vossen, I can do everything. You stand still, that's all. All right, next."

Well, it seemed harmless enough, so as the doctor became warm in his greeting, each of us pronounced his name:

Feivel, a mute restful husband, by means of Dad his friend.

Pildesh, his inadequate son, loud but acceptable.

Varda, our mother, somewhat changed, in a whisper.

Zelo, the father, ever the same, two times, smiling.

Barish, myself, a handicapped son, with unclean lips and secret thought.

Yanina, my elder sister, frightened.

(Bracha, the youngest yet first to die, for whom we were about to mourn, lost out as usual.)

"Good," said the doctor, finishing his round. "Now

you are mine, and must listen. Mother, your shawl over your face, where is it? Father, Zelo, see I remember, why aren't you reading a prayer book with your head covered? Come here, let me see your fringes, your *tsitsis*. I have mine."

Poor Dad was in great trouble now for he had no fringes, not a one.

"Look, Shimanskys," said the doctor. "What I've discovered. He wears nothing underneath, no *tsitsis*. Quick, have no shame, put on mine. I must make you pure, all of you, never mind about myself. At Seward Park I'll get another. For Barish, too. And Feivel."

"Feivel wears one," said Yanina.

"God bless him," said Gleich. "And the boy, Pildesh? Why doesn't he? See, I'll find him a little one, nice. And this reminds me. You mourners can't lift him or take him into your arms. That's the law."

"Barish had him on his lap," said Dad.

"When?"

"Pildesh had a nightmare, like he always does," said Dad, "and Barish wheeled him around in his wheelchair."

"He did?" said the doctor. "All right. He saved a person, didn't he? Good, I'll save him too. You think I won't? I'm not afraid. But more, look here, no work can you mourners do. You must stay indoors."

"Feivel fixed Barish's wheelchair," said Dad.

"So who's Feivel? A close relative? No. Then for him it's permitted. He can work."

"But he lost his job," said Dad.

"Oh, so now I understand why they're here," cried the doctor. "Because he lost his job, and not because of the dead one, Bracha. That already is something. I'll have to think it all out, how to make up for it. But how long

will they be here, the three of them? To the end of the seven days, or forever?"

"I don't know," said Dad. "What do you want from me? I can't guess everything."

"We're leaving after the seven days," said Yanina. "Tomorrow night."

"Then remember what I speak," said Gleich. "I'll be testing you any minute. You can't wash your body or your clothes. Comes mourning, mourn."

"Varda took a bath," said Dad, "and Yanina washed my back, and my underwear."

"Why do you speak?" said the doctor. "Is that how you live together and hold peace? Don't bear tales, so many of them. One or two I can understand. Are you so righteous? You don't talk Yiddish, and you're an old-timer. What, am I, in a Jewish home, a stranger, or something dead, God forbid, like your Bracha? I'm a doctor, no more, but I know things, I study, I learn, even in the bathroom. There's always enough light. Me, every day I speak something in Yiddish. We all must be scholars. Look here, every time to be a Jew must be taken. You don't know this? That's why I'm here. But I see already there'll be trouble. A Jew must have brown eyes, and his are blue. *Oi*, Shimansky people, who are you? What brings you together? Better go over and study, and mourn. Like myself, the doctor, Vossen Gleich, all the time I mourn. Can you see my black bag? I have medicines for everybody."

"Enough!" yelled Pildesh and closed his ears with his plump thumbs.

"Yes," said Dad. "Varda tells us what to do, not you. You don't own this house. You're just a stranger. No matter how many times you say your name I won't re-

member it. And why should you know ours? I'm sorry I told you mine. You slept with Mrs. Charpolsky, not her lodgers."

Yanina, encouraged, flared up, with Ma standing right beside her, silent.

"Yes," she shouted. "Close up. All we hear is you. You're not our father."

"There, sister Yanina, you're wrong," I said and wheeled about so as to escape. "Gleich is our father in heaven."

"Hold!" yelled the doctor and ran in front of me. "If I were a big healthy man, with a round neck and heavy legs, I'd give you a whack, two or three. But still I wouldn't hurt you, don't worry. Why should I? Is Vossen Gleich a brute? Why cause harm? Because of my chest to avenge myself? Never mind my chest, that's my trouble. But you, Barish, you like to cause harm. How else can I talk? I must say the truth. You're afraid I'll heal you, that I'll make you do good. The blindman downstairs, Kolnitz, Fraide's lodger, he doesn't want to be cured either (I've talked with him). But do you know why? Because he's afraid when he'll see the world again, he'll begin to sin. He's afraid to do evil. You, Barish, are afraid to do good. Myself, I'm not afraid to do anything. Think over what I say when you're alone. But now, let me examine you. The Talmud says a nephew takes after his uncle sometimes, and not his father. And your nephew Pildesh, he doesn't have anything, like a *tumtum*. Don't feel ashamed, hold and let me see, right now. I have to know these things, I'm your doctor. You think if you cover yourself up with your robe I won't find out?"

But I wouldn't remain still. Instead I wheeled into the bathroom and shut the door.

"Come out!" cried the doctor. "I know, you're not satisfied being a cripple. But what can you do, kill yourself like Bracha? *Oi*, Barish, you do worse than that, I see already. Bracha at least brought you all together. And now I'm here to finish everything. I bring peace. All I have is today and tomorrow, then the week will be over. But I'll show you, Barish. I'll bring joy, too."

I could hear everyone gathering at the door, and I kept quiet.

"What are you going to do?" asked Dad. "Why did you chase him into the bathroom?"

"Yes," said Yanina. "Why?"

"I have to ask him questions," said Gleich. "So no talking, all of you. Barish, are you grateful you have life?"

"No," I said.

"Barish!" said the doctor. "Your whole family is here on the other side of the door, Pildesh too. So be careful what you say. Maybe you can't hear me too good. I'll talk louder. Barish, do you have God?"

I laughed.

"All right, I still can heal you. Are you like me, a human being? That is the main thing. Barish, are you like me?"

"Yes," I said, figuring he was as maimed and unfit as I.

"Good," he said. "But are you afraid at night? Do you sleep? In the daytime do you struggle at all? Barish, do you want to be healthy? I have the cure."

"It's too late," I answered.

"Ah," said Gleich. "Like your mother, you're bitter. And like your father, you don't want to change. Let me come in, Barish. Too late it's not. I know. Look at me,

you think I was a doctor always? No, for a long while I was just like you, living in misery, and not wanting to be cured. But I changed. Twenty years ago I bought myself a black bag, put some candies inside, changed my lodgings (that's very important, the Talmud says so, not only myself) and I became a doctor. Why? Because I asked myself one question: What is it, Vossen Gleich, you want most to do? To help others. So I became a doctor."

"Well," I said, behind the door. "Then I'll become a murderer."

"God forbid!" cried the doctor. "*Oi*, quick, Barish, pull your ear. Are you pulling it? I'm pulling mine. If not, I can't save you. A demon is inside you and I have to find out its name. All you Shimanskys have demons inside you, why else does Pildesh have nightmares? Barish, the time has come for you to know who I am, for you to talk differently and do good. Your sister is dead and you don't realize it. My mother, my father, my brother, where are they? Can I see them, can I ask them a question? You don't know what death is, Barish. I must tell you a story. You'll be better afterwards, maybe better altogether. If you listen. An animal was going to be slaughtered. What's so strange? It happens all the time. But the animal ran away and bumped into a rabbi. Near a slaughterhouse there are always rabbis. And the animal looked up at the rabbi as if to say: Save me. But the rabbi answered: Go, it's your fate; for this you were created. After that, Barish, the rabbi was punished, he had trouble with his teeth for eleven years. And do you know why? Because he had no pity. Maybe it is our fate, but have pity at least. An animal is dying and you feel nothing? May your teeth bother you, so you'll know what

it means. All right, now you understand. If you cry, I'll listen. If you ask forgiveness, I'll forgive. I'm in your hands. *Nu*, so what are you waiting for? Ask already."

"Let me tell a story instead."

"Wonderful," answered the doctor. "Go ahead."

"When I was thirteen years old," I said, "my sister packed a few things and ran down the stairs. She didn't come back until a few days ago, that makes it about seven years. Well, I liked to plan jokes so I decided I'd do what Yanina did, for a game. So I did it, and slipped. That's how I became an invalid. Just for a joke."

"Quiet!" yelled Gleich. "You don't know how to tell a story. When you talk about yourself, you must cure yourself. Otherwise, don't speak. If I were lame, I'd dance and show you what I mean. But you're not ready yet. So I'm leaving. I'll give you a day to think over what I say. Then I'll be back. Good-bye, Shimanskys. *Sei gesund*. Tomorrow is the last chance for everybody."

"Let him have his way," said Ma when Gleich was gone. "I'm too tired. Maybe he can do something." And she sat down, as if she felt herself too heavy to stand.

But Dad was the one who was really excited. I guess he wanted to find out the name of the devil inside him.

"I knew there was something wrong with me," he said. "Now Gleich is going to find out and tell me."

Yanina gathered her family behind a closed door, and gave instructions, I'm sure. As for myself, I let the hours pass by.

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If the doctor was going to try to cure us, I had my black cloth to preach with and pronounce us sick forever. Come to think of it, I myself, thumbing my wheelchair, was a proof against the world's goodness.

Our last chance began with a meal of condolence, prepared by the doctor and his mistress in our own honor: eggs, lentils, grapes, things which had no mouth, like mourners. The food they brought from downstairs, saying we couldn't be expected to care for ourselves, we had no time, our job was weeping and sitting together. Besides, we didn't have a meal of condolence the first day, a week ago, so we had to make amends. And since

it was Saturday, a Sabbath, we could wear our shoes and change our clothes. With all of us silent, especially Ma, Gleich explained how we had to ask Bracha's pardon or else always mean nothing to each other, just passing sickness among ourselves like contaminated pigeons. "I must say the truth," he cried. "Do you want when you embrace, it should be to cover your sores? Then do what I say, even if I am no bigger than his wheelchair. I'll try to name your demons but do I know them all? And can I see a person's whole life from first to last? Well, this is our final day of mourning, and I want everybody good again in the house. If we can't be sad together, we can't be happy either. All right, Varda, Zelo, Yanina, Barish (Feivel and Pildesh I let sleep, they're not close relatives), stand up and tear your garments at the throat. Mrs. Charpolsky, you're only a visitor, to console them. You just sit. And the doctor, Vossen Gleich? He's no relative but he'll mourn with you, and tear his own clothes. So watch and discover what to do. First you weep and then rip quickly, because you're in great pain when you hear news of death. Take notice. Everyone:

"*Oi, oi, oi, Tatinkeh, Oi, oi, oi, Tatinkeh mein!* I call *Tatinkeh*, my father (peace on him), but you say differently, for a daughter and a sister. So were you watching? Here's the tear, the length of my hand, on the right. You understand now? Good. The father, Zelo, start. Then Varda, Yanina, and the one in the wheelchair he doesn't have to stand. A cripple has other laws, natural."

Well, at the very outset we had trouble because Dad, inept as usual, couldn't tear his cloth, an old shirt once belonging to his father, our wrinkled pale Zadie below, the family's only support. Each time he twisted he lost his balance. Vossen Gleich, of course, saw Dad's predicament—that though an expert at spasms, he could only make believe—and would have helped him rip his clothes, but after all, the doctor himself wasn't tall enough to reach Dad's neck. So Gleich, poor Gleich, ran back and forth, shamed in front of his mistress, and urging us to repent, called on Ma and Yanina to do their act of mourning at the same time.

Like twins, they held their garments beneath the shoulder as if bewitched by the doctor's orange eye. But then they did nothing, the two of them, just standing there, waiting with their hands on their clothes. Maybe in the end they wanted to mourn on their own, without Gleich around to give orders. Or maybe they just couldn't ask Bracha for forgiveness. Besides, Ma had already torn her nightgown so why ruin a good dress? And Ma didn't have much strength left anyway, tired as she was. And, anyway, it would have been disappointing if Ma and Yanina had performed the ceremony together.

Wild with anger, the doctor kicked my wheelchair, his loose tap flying off at last from his shoe. "Barish," he cried. "It's up to you. Save them! If you, the afflicted one, a cripple, have love, the others must too. Life is a misfortune, I admit it. But we must make it sacred. Quick."

But I was in no hurry. "Mr. Gleich," I said, while the others called him doctor. "I decline the sacred honor. I will not play your little game. Because you're nothing but a meddler. For all I know, you're a false prophet as well. I, too, can preach and use nice language. You couldn't cure anything, not even a scratch. What have you done so far? You've seen Pildesh naked, and of course Mrs. Charpolsky too, unless you slept with the lights out and the shades down. Those three lodgers thought one

of them would have her, but then you came along. Maybe you'll even throw them out. You tried to run in on Ma when she was lying in bed, and you're not finished yet. As soon as you stepped into the house you stole my wheelchair. You thought I'd forget? Why are you so eager to come among other people? Now you want us to rip our clothes. Well, you're the only one who's done it so far. Dad didn't, Ma and Yanina didn't, and neither will I. My sister is dead and I won't worship her."

Weakened by the chase the day before, my contraption could wheel but slowly now, yet I moved quickly as ever, clucking loud. The doctor shouted after me, angry because I ruined his business and used fine language besides.

"Cripple! At the beginning I offered you peace when I sat in your wheelchair and rode myself to the door. This you won't understand. We were brothers then. Now you have chosen to war and must fall, my enemy. I must ban you like a Canaanite. You think I'm afraid? All I ask is for you to mourn. What, are you untroubled by her loss? I am Vossen Gleich. I am your hope, your encouragement, and also your last warning. Cry to Bracha, then you will do kindly to strangers like myself. I am Vossen Gleich. Why do you oppress everyone? I know you from the Bible, a poison-root. Don't wheel up and down like a talebearer, don't watch idly when someone is dying, remember the stories I told you, don't talk foolishness, and don't bear grudges even against yourself. I am Vossen Gleich and may have to pluck you out altogether. Keep these laws: wheel outside and visit the sick, know your parents and study, don't make fun of yourself, or the deaf or the blind, why hate anyone? Or lie? Be a friend to God. I am Vossen Gleich, and admonish you: when will your

venom spend itself? Do you want to become a wonder, a sign, a byword, a curse, a blemish unworthy of Israel? *Oi*, Shimanskys, hang your laundry indoors for Barish to twist and drag. He has to have torment in his hands. You use nice language, Barish? I use better, I am Vossen Gleich."

With my back to the doctor, I wheeled down the hall, thinking of Bracha, because of his talk on blemishes. I expected Gleich to run after me, but he didn't. Just as I stopped myself, at the end of the hall, Feivel appeared at his door carrying in his arms Pildesh, who was screaming the kind of wail Gleich would have liked us to raise for Bracha. Feivel moaned some words and passed on by me, heading for the dimly lit kitchen, I following.

"Feivel!" cried Dad.

But this time we didn't need any finger twitching to explain his coming: Pildesh's eyes were puffed and his belly swollen, together with his arms and legs. As if full with water, he was heavier than ever. Yanina held him, then the doctor, Ma, Dad, Mrs. Charpolsky, and myself. He was twice his weight.

"You see what happens when you don't mourn?" cried the doctor, almost losing his voice. Acting the physician as usual, he sent Pildesh to the bathroom, telling him he should urinate. Which he did, while grabbing at his ears and turning red. But then he asked to use our window, falling back on his old habit. Without complaint from Ma, Pildesh spread his knees on the window sill in front of Bracha's own stained-glass, and pissed in a steady stream like a horse.

Watching his skill, I could hear Ma yelling *pferd* and wondered if we Shimanskys were under the curse of some horse, what with Bracha's long head and Dad's long

head, Feivel's sleeping while he stood his eyes shut, and Pildesh's great pissing.

It was quiet as the doctor busied himself with Pildesh, until suddenly Dad began to cry. He said Feivel himself was sick, that he hadn't gone to the bathroom since he came and hurt all over.

"So that's why he keeps his eyes shut," said Gleich. "To forget his pain. But that's no way. How will he see my cure? Let him learn from others. I say others, but I mean myself." And leaving Pildesh, he placed Feivel on the toilet seat and stood over him. Turning on the faucet, he whispered: "Make, Feivel. It's good for you. The pain will go away, just sit back, nice. See, I'm putting cold water on your stomach, to soothe you. Why didn't you tell me right away? All right, let me look now what you've done, anything?"

Nothing, so the doctor brought in prunes from the pantry, saying Feivel couldn't eat them in the bathroom, because he had to make a blessing first. Feivel, stooped over his lowered underwear, came outside, ate, and returned. Then Dad, out of sympathy perhaps, began to complain of a pain in his groin, indicating his hurt with his finger. Though busy with Feivel and Pildesh, Ma looking on closely, the doctor helped Dad of course, handing him an empty bottle to work with and cure himself. Because he was eager to show me he could wash our sores and clear us of any defects.

"Tell me everything," he cried, delighting in his activity. "Don't be ashamed. Life is an affliction for us all. Remember, the first time I came I told you about myself. Now you Shimanskys must speak. Then we'll embrace. That's how I cure people, with a sudden hug."

Well, after a while Feivel made and repeated what

Gleich recited to him by heart, to thank God for his relief. But when he sat down at the table (his son Pildesh was through at the window by that time, and looking much better), he squirted his own eye with his grapefruit. So the doctor rinsed his face in the sink, while Dad stood off in the corner holding onto his bottle. By now Yanina was amazed at the doctor's success and told him she had heavy breasts which drew on her chest constantly. Opening her blouse, Gleich reached up and rubbed her softly.

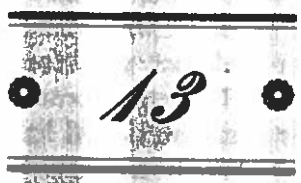
"Don't worry," he said. "I do everything."

"Vossen," called Mrs. Charpolsky. "And what about me? I'm sick, too, and need medicines. When are we going downstairs? The boy's all right. Say listen."

"Good," said the doctor. "Now we can go. The cripple has seen what I've done, the mother too. But I'll come back in the afternoon, a short while. I have yet to heal this family. What, are they pure? I'm a priest, a *Kohen* of old from the tribe of Levi. You know it was the priest who cured the lepers, in the body, in the clothes, in the walls of the house. Sometimes the whole house had to be thrown down. Like me, he understood the signs, the secrets of holiness. I can't say more. Is Vossen Gleich a gossip? I examine the men and women alike. Next time, in a few hours, I expect to hear something from each of you, about Bracha and about yourselves, while the Sabbath is still with us.

"Let the boy Pildesh go to the bathroom as much as he can. Don't forget, I'm your doctor, the only one who helps. Will your Zadie downstairs save you? He can give you money, nothing else. Fraide tells me he has visions, but does he know to treat sickness? Better I should go down and help him, too. He must be sick like the rest

of you. Tomorrow or the day after, I'll visit him. Do I have to ask permission? I'm Vossen Gleich. All right, I'm leaving. I must see the house where Bracha lived like a stranger. They, too, must swear they never shed her blood and pray, through me, the doctor, for forgiveness. I'll make sure there's a ceremony there, everyone is responsible. Something no one thought before me. I discover more things than all of you Shimanskys together. Because I'm different, I'm Vossen Gleich. Come, Fraide. You and I will show them how to be happy, and how to live together in peace."



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Ma, for instance, was incapable of anything but pain, so how was the doctor going to get her to be happy, especially when she was too tired even to walk around? And she herself couldn't get Bracha to hold her head up and smile. Still, the doctor returned, gay and hopeful, bearing a present for Dad, the glasses he promised from Seward Park, accompanied by Mrs. Charpolsky and one of her lodgers, Haskel Soifer, who had that monster shoe. It looked as if the doctor wanted another witness as well as another comforter.

"Later, I'll take you there," he said, "and I'll find you ones which fit, now you must get used to having

something on your nose. See, there are just holes, no glass. Here, wear them, it looks nice. If you want, I'll wear some myself. We'll all go round with glasses. And listen, the place were Bracha lived (how can I forget what she did?) they're having what I asked, a candle and prayers. So everything now is fine. You should have heard the wonderful things that Mrs. Paltiel said about our Bracha. Come, let's sit down and eat dinner, everyone. We'll tell each other stories, what I have to hear before I'm finished. Soifer, you know, has no voice, just like Bracha. So he won't say a thing."

Mrs. Charpolsky, his mistress and our own faithful comforter, sat beside him, making sure he wouldn't start up again with Yanina. The rest of us squeezed in around the table. With a spoonful of tuna in his hand, the doctor explained what he wanted us to do: rid ourselves of our shame, complete our mourning and do some kindness. But first we had to say something about Bracha, each of us. For me that would be easy, because I remembered a lot of her, how I used to watch her all the time, wondering what she was thinking, how I took her to the park tied to me with a rope so she wouldn't get hurt.

"She was the best of my children," said Ma.

"She had blue eyes, like me," said Dad. "But she was Jewish. And so am I. You don't have brown eyes yourself."

"All right," said the doctor. "Who's next?"

"When she was a baby," said Yanina. "I sang her a song and she looked up at me. Then she lay back, shut her eyes, and went to sleep. I sing Pildesh the same song."

"She came to me last night," I said. "Just like a ghost. She said, 'Boo,' and tried to scare me."

"Keep quiet," said the doctor. "Remember, Soifer is here. Good, now talk about yourselves, Shimanskys."

"Let me go first," said Dad, eager to be a friend to everybody. "I have nothing to do in the house. But I'm not to blame, that's how I am. I'm afraid to be anything else, everyone knows that. Even my friend Getsel. You think Feivel is my only friend? Getsel likes me too. Both of them, they forgive me as I am, because I'm only a boy. So why can't you all do it? What's so difficult? Let's forget about everything. I can forget, and you push me down like wood. Varda, too. And she's my wife. Varda, please love me. You haven't even talked to me yet."

It was the mentioning of her name, I'm sure, that upset Ma at last, ending the days of her whisper.

"I can't," she yelled. "I can't eat with a man like him. My food is bitter."

And she left us, running.

Dad, crying, got up to pursue her.

"No," he said. "I won't let you."

So he rose in defense of all the good things in his life, his lessons with Feivel, together with the doctor's gift.

Finally he caught Ma and brought her back down the hall to her seat.

"Come, Varda, eat at my table, the food's not bitter, you made it yourself, please. Mrs. Charpolsky doesn't yell at the doctor."

And Ma, following, cried for the first time, a muffled cry, to herself, a sound as if come from a nailed-up coffin.

"Good," said Gleich. "Now let the daughter cry, Yanina. She too must love her husband, and her son

Pildesh, though he's very sick. On him anything can befall. What, does he only have two outfits?"

But Yanina couldn't speak. All she could say was: "I'm sorry for everything. I have faults, too," and wept with Dad and Ma and Feivel, who shielded his eyes with his green hat, not wanting to see his wife's tears.

"I'm sorry for Bracha," she said at last. "For Batish, for everyone, even Mrs. Charpolsky. I am!"

So Mrs. Charpolsky lifted her long handkerchief and wailed, like a widow of yesterday. She thought she was helping the doctor that way.

Soifer began to gasp and scrape his shoe against the floor.

Pildesh, still red and fatter than he should have been, stood up on his chair and screamed, his hands on his ears:

"Is this my home? Are we in Boston?"

The doctor answered, tears everywhere on his face:

"You have a new homeland, Pildesh. I'm your doctor and know what's best for you. Let everyone be well, *gesund sein*, God in heaven. Me, too. My chest hurts like fire on me. To heal you, I must take over your sickness. Now I myself can't go to the bathroom."

So everybody around the table was howling, except me. I was eating my fill of bread and tuna, and raisins, too. Until a dish dropped to the floor and smashed, the food scattering.

"Good," cried the doctor. "Soon there'll be a wedding. Now that we've mourned for ourselves, not just Bracha. Pildesh, you're too young to understand, you're only four years old (your mother says three), but this is a great wonder. For us all the right moment has come. I, too, ask forgiveness. The cripple, your Uncle Barish, will have to give in. We have cried together, now we can laugh."

So Gleich had finally got us to mourn, in spite of Ma's decree to the contrary at the very beginning. And it seemed as if he was going to have his way entirely, but suddenly there was a wild banging at the front door. We gathered in a hurry, most of us frightened, and a voice cried out from the other side:

"Where is everybody? Here? He's dead, downstairs, I found him, so open up."

The banging came from the middle of the door, so I knew it was Datya, Mrs. Charpolsky's niece, on her monthly visit, Datya the Dwarf, the match once proposed for me, whose head rose just over the knob. Rubbing the lump on her spine against the doorpost, she brought news of another death in our family, upheaving everything.

"When I stepped inside, it stank," she said. "So I followed my nose. Say, that's a good one. And I've got some nose to follow."

Zadie's door was always left open, in case of any emergency, especially after he said we shouldn't visit him. My poor grandfather, he hated the toilet chair we made for him, yet that's where Datya found him, the basin underneath stained and he himself full with odors.

Gleich was helpless. "*Oi, oi, oi,*" he cried. "What can I say? I'm losing faith. Blessed is your judge. I also will die."

Everyone ran wild.

"Last week Bracha died," cried Dad. "And now my father."

"I was going to visit him," said Yanina. "As soon as I came. But Ma wouldn't let me. I said I'd use his shower, remember?" She looked at Ma, who said nothing.

"Their Zadie is dead?" said Mrs. Charpolsky. "It hurts, now they'll have to mourn again."

"You say it stinks, Datya?" asked Dad.

"It's no disgrace!" said Datya. "I stink, too."

And Feivel twitched his fingers, saying something which only Dad understood.

"Never mind," cried Gleich. "Blame me, Shimanskys, no one else, your doctor. But there's still hope. With the money from your Zadie, we'll have a nice wedding, God forbid. Two weddings even. Barish and I, like brothers again, we'll stand under the canopy one after the other. In thirty days, according to the law. My lady is Fraide. And Barish's? She's with us right now. Oi, what news to bring, a bride like herself!"

"Gleich," I said. "You won't be using *our* money for *your* wedding. So just forget it. You're a failure."

"Soifer!" cried the doctor in his rooster voice, full of alarm. "I need you. I prayed that I wouldn't. But all right, smash his chair: both sides. Now. Have no pity. I'll stand right beside to hold him."

We were in the hall, all of us, but wheeling sharply in and out, I managed to escape, my spokes reaching out and making noises. Out of the hall, I cut across the kitchen and headed for my room in the back. The doctor caught me, though, at the threshold and spun me around. But before he or Soifer could seize me, I twisted free, wheeling to each side, and began again my frantic uneven path. I circled the table knocking down chairs, and made for the hall. Gleich, never tiring and never stumbling, stayed close behind, all the while carrying in his hand his torn black bag with its several cures. I rushed down the corridor, the narrow passageway where Bracha got all her punishments, and turned at last into Ma's bedroom, immediately to slam the door and press with all my weight against it. In a moment they had pushed the

door open; I was unable, however I tried, to keep them out. The doctor was hidden somewhat (but I could see his bag), while Soifer scraped forward unimpeded. With the shades down, their figures were dark, and I imagined Soifer on a leash.

"What are you doing?" yelled Ma.

"Leave him alone," said Yanina. "Enough has happened."

And Pildesh cried: "Stop!"

I struggled, but Soifer did his work. I heard everyone screaming words. Then my chair sagged to the floor, and I could no longer move.

The beetle was turned on his back.

My family was quick to surround me, a twist of shape without movement.

Yanina ran up to Soifer and slapped his face, shouting: "You brute!"

"No," cried Dad. "Gleich's the brute. Hit him! He said he'd name our devils, but he's the devil, not us."

"Yes," said Yanina. "All you want is our money."

"Ah, Gleich," sighed Ma. "What have you done? I thought you were a good man."

"I am," cried Gleich. "Look, I made you come to help him. I brought Soifer just in case. At first I didn't think I needed him, when we were crying together. But then Datya knocked on the door, and Barish said there'd be no wedding. So only one chance was left. And it worked. You all wanted to save him, trouble-maker as he is. Now you're a family again."

"But you didn't have to smash his chair," Yanina said. "You heard us say not to, from the beginning."

"It's for his own benefit," said Gleich. "Now he can't wheel around and cause trouble. And more impor-

tant, you'll have to buy him a new one. See, I'm still Vossen Gleich."

"Vossengleich?" said Dad. "What does that mean? Is it Yiddish? Does it say how mean you are?"

"Ah," sighed Ma. "Ah, Vossen Gleich."

"Brute!" shouted Yanina. "Vossen Gleich, you brute!"

And Pildesh said, "Go away, Vossen Gleich."

Crying, he opened the door. "Let me stay," he said. "Look what I've done. I'm Barish, I'm Bracha, I'm everyone."

"Come, Vossen," said Mrs. Charpolsky. "Soifer, you too. We have to say *haydolah*. *Shabbos* is over already."

They carried me into my room—Ma, Dad, Feivel, Yanina, Pildesh—and then went down to see Zadie.

We had lost our grandfather, but we Shimanskys were finally free of Vossen Gleich.

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While they were at the funeral, I lay on my bed and had a dream:

Pildesh and I were playing our game together when suddenly Pildesh started to shout. He got up from the floor and kicked in all directions. "A bug!" he cried. "Uncle Barish, a bug!" And there was one, with black crooked legs and a puffed up stomach. I was at the other end of the hall, still I could see the bug. I was sure everyone would say I had brought it, because wherever I wheeled I usually left some food, a raisin or a breadcrumb. I rushed down the hall as fast as I could, but the bug reached the kitchen before I caught up with it. Then

it ran quickly to the wall so I wasn't able to wheel over it. Along the edges it went, turning at each corner. Pildesh pointed, and screamed.

So I decided to wheel into the wall.

I banged my head and broke my wheelchair, but the bug lay smashed on the floor.

Pildesh ran over, pulling at his shorts, and hugged me. Yet I was sorry I had killed the insect. Then I heard a voice: the insect, huge and bulky, was getting up from the floor.

"See," it said. "At my own expense I made you do a kindness." And at once I saw that the bug was actually Vossen Gleich, his overcoat ripped. "An evil man," he said, the lids over his orange eyes going up and down without a stop, "an evil man you are no longer. Oi, Barish. Why did I talk so much when I came? Because I wanted you all silent, so you'd have time to look at each other. If I wound, I heal. And now I have healed you, Barish. Good-bye. *Sei gesund.* Of me you'll never be free."

I woke screaming, like my nephew Pildesh, and couldn't catch my breath. I got into my wheelchair and headed for the bathroom. But I could hardly manage it. My chest felt heavy, and swollen. Feivel had fixed the wheels so I'd be able to get to the bathroom and back, but the chair wouldn't move; the wheels kept catching and snapping. So the strain was on my chest.

Finally, I entered the hall and saw a piece of paper ahead of me under the front door.

I knew what it was right away, a note from Gleich, his last plea and warning. I wheeled to the door, wondering whether Gleich had heard me scream, and picked up the sheet of paper.

It said we Shimanskys would die one every week if

we didn't listen to our doctor. Dad should wear his pants from now on, Feivel should tell stories each Saturday about Russia, his escape at the border. Gleich himself would become our jester, to cheer us up and make us laugh. And there was to be a double wedding, he could hear the music already and see the dancing, all the hopping and spinning under one canopy. "Barish," he wrote, "why shouldn't you have issue? And seek the excitement between Datya's legs? I speak freely. Let me do good deeds with you, a hundred a day, to both our joys. We'll set up house together on the same floor. May we be gay."

I tore up the note and when I was finished in the bathroom, threw it down the toilet. So Gleich hadn't accomplished anything in the end—except in my brief dream—whereas I performed my task throughout: a cripple, I wheeled myself, and that was enough; a scorner, I sat on the chair of scorners.

We weren't going to mourn for Zadie, that was Ma's last decision and decree as they all left for the funeral. Poor Ma, she was so tired she could hardly open the front door. As for Yanina, she'll be moving in with her family, to live downstairs above the rotted boards of the store. (Feivel, despite the short notice, managed to complete a nice coffin for Zadie.) And Gleich, we've already evicted him, him and his mistress, Mrs. Charpolsky.

I flushed the toilet once more, then headed for my bedroom off in the back. Any minute I expected my chair to fall to pieces. So I hurried.

About the Author

L. S. Simckes stems from a long line of rabbis. He was born in Saratoga Springs, New York, in 1937. Educated in Boston, he is a graduate of Boston Latin School, Hebrew Teachers College—whose program included a period of study in Israel at the Hayim Greenberg Teachers Institute—and Harvard College, Magna Cum Laude, Phi Beta Kappa. Upon graduation from Harvard he was awarded a writing fellowship at Stanford University; there he completed his novel *Seven Days of Mourning*, taught freshman English, and received an M.A. in creative writing. He is now working toward his doctorate in English at Harvard University, where he also teaches a course in short-story writing.

Mr. Simckes' first publication, apart from a translation of two stories by the Israeli writer S. Y. Agnon, was "Behold My Servant!" which appeared in *Stanford Short Stories 1962*.