

# LOVE HANDLES

A Work of Fiction

By the author of TAR BEACH

Richard Elman

“This is a very important right  
(the right to write badly)  
and to take it from us is no  
small thing.”

Isaac Babel, 1934

Sacred to the memory of Al Goldman,  
(writer, friend)

Nota Bene:

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

### Part I

1	As Always, Uncle Barney.....	2
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### Part II

1	Miss Eleanor Holm.....	21
2	“The Draft”.....	30

1	Long Ago and Far Away.....	42
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### Part III

1	The Match.....	53
2	“Love Handles”.....	65

### Part IV

1	“The Visit”.....	81
2	Trust.....	102
3	Choosing My Own Profession.....	110

### Part V

1	Uncle Barney’s Coming to Get You.....	127
2	Vicky.....	142
3	Addie.....	155

### Part VI

1	The Right to Write Badly.....	166
2	The Sorriest Time of All.....	174
3	The Stroke.....	191

**As Always, “Uncle Barney”**

I once had an “Uncle Barney.” Barney Goldman. We weren’t really blood relations, nor related by marriage. Barney was just a family friend of long standing. He played handball and pinochle with my father at the Temple health club, and sometimes made love to my mother, and regularly came to dinner at our house with his wife, “Aunt Minna,” and their spoiled rotten daughter, Masha, who was about three years older than I. Barney sold insurance and Minna taught public school. I was to call them “uncle” and “aunt” out of respect, I imagine, as well as affection. As I grew up, I sometimes wondered what my mother called him in private, and what he called her.

My father always said Barney was “far too good-natured for his own good.” He seemed to regard him as half simpleton, half sap, and was more charitable toward his old friend than anybody else of his acquaintance. A big, attractive galoot, Barney resembled a caricature of himself: he was fair and open-faced, with a handsome mustache, and a commanding paunch on which he seemed to be buoyed through his various affairs in life like a finely crafted ormolu carriage in a royal procession.

He had a strong clear basso voice and used to sing out expansively at weddings and funerals to earn a little extra money. In public, Mom seemed to have Minna’s permission to fuss over Barney, along with Minna--as she could not with my brusque father—always straightening his ties, or picking lint off his jackets. “Barney Google,” she called him because I suppose he really did have “goo goo googly eyes” that were pale blue and always flirting gallantly with any women in the room, through thick blond lashes.

If my father ever noticed all this, he didn't seem to care. He was much too in love with his own chances in life back then. Dad's temper tantrums toward me and Mom sometimes were hallucinogenic, though toward his friend, Barney, he usually was placid, tolerant, amused. "Barney is a 'Bohemian' and a chaser" was one of the first things I ever heard him say behind his back about their oldest friend. And the rejoinder from that other party was, "After all these years, it's harmless enough, isn't it?"

Even Barney's wife, Minna, was always making allowances for him. My mom said Minna was just "very insecure." But she had reason to be. Minna was narrow, plain, dark as a squint, with straight hair, and lots of dandruff. A funky odor clung to Aunt Minna's dark school outfits; she never wore jewelry or did up her nails. She was rumored by Barney to be an excellent cook, but she didn't like to entertain at home because they lived in a small dark apartment with Masha sleeping on a sofa bed in the living room.

Barney really wasn't much of a provider. He was always hard up for cash, and Aunt Minna and her daughter, according to the conversations I overheard between my parents, were simply not getting what they needed from Barney, who really didn't enjoy selling insurance. Sometimes, irascibly, my parents felt compelled to subsidize the Goldmans. What they got in return was Minna's timid, "thank yous" and Barney's half-hearted expressions of good will, but no vows to reform their errant lives. Barney still preferred card playing to visiting clients, and he enjoyed afternoon jaunts along the Storm King Highway to the Bear Mountain Inn for a roll in the hay with some lady friend other than Minna or Mom. I wanted to think of Mom and Barney as lovers. I never really had any hard proof. After a while, I just took this for granted, as I did a lot of adult behavior.

According to my father, Barney seemed incapable of that necessary day-to-day chicanery that bred success. He was “totally irresponsible.” But, once, I overheard my mother talking to someone in a soft voice on the phone with such easy intimacy I knew she couldn’t be speaking to Dad. I could not make out the gist, just that caressing tone of voice, and words like, “I could die.”

Many other people also found Barney charming. He had a line of gab like most salesmen. Barney had briefly been a CP organizer, and he was now a solid ALP voter, and always sold his customers that Stalinoid line. Though no longer an active party member, he subscribed to “The Worker,” and to cultural evenings at the City Center Theatre, and to fellow-traveling “PM,” and he loved to talk about current affairs: The Dnieper Dam, the Second Front, FDR, Vito Marcantonio and FEPC.

With his big deep voice and robust elocution, Barney could sound quite impressive. At a performance of “Othello,” I can recall him confiding sotto voice to my parents, “A black man with a white woman has all the bigots in Venice going crazy with jealousy.”

I also recall his version of the Hitler-Stalin pact, which he continued to alibi many years after the U.S. entered the war as Russia’s ally: it had been a deliberate ruse, Barney said, by a woman named Ivey Litvinoff, the wife of a high Russian official, to beguile the Germans while Russia prepared to defend the Sacred Homeland.

Barney’s parlor pink attitudes were somewhat more problematical to Aunt Minna, who had to fear the Livingston Street Board of Education; and they were probably embarrassing to Masha growing up, though she and I rarely talked at all. His family regarded Barney as

potentially hazardous, unstable, though benign, -- this totally losing proposition. Barney was hardly making his “draw” from the insurance office, and, whenever something important around the house was needed, Minna had to borrow from her family or friends to make the purchase. Barney just never seemed to care about camp for Masha, or owning a TV, an air conditioner, or purchasing life insurance for himself, but he always had money to pay his health club bills, and for that weekend shack in Fire Island he occasionally shared with some other left-wing insurance colleagues, members of the gang he called his “Rum Scoundrels.”

“Life insurance is a capitalist swindle,” he confided to us once at dinner. “You pay and pay and pay and then you die. And who benefits? Your creditors.”

“With the commissions he earns from such a swindle,” Minna pointed out, “it’s no wonder I have to buy everything we need on time.”

When they argued a lot at the dinner table about Barney’s self-indulgence, my father and mother usually served as referees. As though this was a movie I saw only last weekend, I can still hear Minna overcoming her timidity to berate Uncle Barney for his behavior at a sales meeting upstate the previous weekend at the Tamarack Lodge.

“Barney was being so firm for once in our life that business was business that I stayed home and wrote lesson plans and did the income taxes, and when I called him Sunday morning to ask if he’d be coming back in time for supper, as Masha and I were planning to see “Gone With the Wind” again at the Patio, a woman answers his phone. I’m so embarrassed. Then she hands the phone to lover boy here, your friend, Irv, and he tells me I have it all wrong. The lady is a Vice President of his branch of the Utica Mutual in charge of annuities, which he’s hoping to sell, if he can learn enough between now and Monday morning to write a business letter.”

“I try never to miss a learning opportunity,” Barney interjected, with a grin.

Even Minna thought that was amusing. And my father, when he was asked to intervene by her directly, acted as though he was more entertained than outraged by Uncle Barney’s ‘impulsiveness.’ As an act of charity, he continued to buy all his policies through Barney, but he did get angry when he referred law clients so Barney could sell them policies too, and, with great panache, his friend sometimes talked them out of the ‘protection’ they sought, and signed them up for a two-week family holiday at the CP’s Camp Beacon.

“What are you trying to do to me, fella?” Dad yelled into the phone on the little table in the hall between our bedrooms. “Never in a million years will Abe Fogeller come out a Bolshevik. But I’m probably going to lose a client sure as I’m standing here.”

“Suit yourself, Irv,” he later reported Barney saying while sniffing into his mustache. “If you don’t trust my judgment, don’t make me such referrals.”

“You do it for Minna and Masha,” my mom always pointed out.

“Well little Mrs. Hoity Toity Minna can take care of herself very well thank you from now on,” Dad said then, as though disturbed by the implication that he could be less than magnanimous to his best friend.

“Barney and I were high school frat brothers when he first came to Newark from the Lower East Side,” he reminded Mom. “He introduced me to you. We go way back. Can I help it if the guy has a screw loose?”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” I heard my Mom repeat, “but I told you it doesn’t mean anything really,” just as she always did when their talk was about Barney Goldman.



For a little while, after such episodes, Uncle Barney and Aunt Minna would not be invited to come around for visits quite so often. Then the friendship revived. My father must have felt some guilt for being so driven because he seemed to believe that Barney was a better person than he in some soulful, indefinable way, or else Mom might lecture him about keeping up old friendships. Mom once implied he needed Barney in his life to keep him from murdering me.

Ever since I had been old enough to talk back, Dad and I had been enemies. I was scared of his violent outbursts with his hands and feet, and he was convinced I was so totally loopy I would someday bring him shame. For some reason I never quite understood why my father thought of me as having affinities with “Uncle Barney” and he often called him over as a go-between when our relations became so bad they could become homicidal.

One Sunday, when I was fairly little, my mother went to Loehmann’s on Bedford Avenue to buy a “formal” for an affair given by Dad’s savings and loan association at the Waldorf Astoria; Dad was assigned to look after her only son. I pestered him so much with questions that I interrupted his perusal of the *Sunday Times*’ real estate section and he threw me against the radiator head first, opening a big gash in my forehead. Uncle Barney was immediately summoned from a few blocks away to restore calm. He pressed a gauze pad wrapped around an ice cube to my head and eventually took me and my bleeding head to the Caledonia Hospital to get it stitched up.

“Just tell them it was an accident,” my father said as I bawled away, and Barney held me close and tried to soothe me.

“Don’t worry, Irv,” he said, “they don’t have to know everything you do. They just have to fix the boy’s head.”

“I feel awful about this,” Dad said.

“YOU FEEL AWFUL?” I screamed at him.

“Easy does it boychick,” said Barney. “Your father doesn’t know his own strength. You feel awful, and he feels awful too. So sue him. He’s a lawyer. What do you think you’ll get?”

He signed off on all correspondence with “As always.” He liked barber shop shaves and hot towel facials. I think I always liked “Uncle Barney” better than I liked my father in that I was never really afraid of him, but I also never thought Barney and I were at all alike. He’d gotten lost somewhere in his life where nobody could really rescue him anymore, and I was this outsider, this onlooker, who thought he knew certain things about this lost man that made comparisons to him unflattering. But, after one of my father’s frequent atrocities to my head or hams, Barney was the perfect person to have on hand to diffuse our rages. After I interrupted a game of pinochle and got a tooth-loosening slap to the face my father said, “Crybaby! If you want pity ask your Uncle Barney.” Barney’s ability to pity, like his loyalty to the family, was unquestionable.

As my father became more affluent and began to realize more of his dreams for himself and his family in the material world, his depredations against me happened less and less frequently. We also saw quite a bit less of “Uncle Barney” and “Aunt Minna.” They were still called “best friends” and “like family.” But now they were the sort of “Bohemian” friends my parents as a couple were all too glad to see infrequently. Every once in a while Barney’s name would come up at dinner as an object lesson in why a simple heart and good intentions often brought one to the brink of outright catastrophe: He had asked to borrow money; he was out of work again; Masha was in trouble at school....

I never heard happy stories anymore about Uncle Barney and Aunt Minna even when they did socialize, or take weekend trips with my parents, except from my mom, who always used to insist “they’re good eggs.” Mom seemed to believe Barney was not as outraged by life as her stoical husband, and more fun to be with. When Minna got ovarian cancer and was in the hospital, Mom and Dad kept saying they must both go to visit her, but they never did. Then she died when I was about thirteen, and they both went to the funeral at Garlic Brothers as Dad was their lawyer. After the funeral, it turned out that Aunt Minna had been a considerable squirrel, and she left bank accounts plus pension funds, and shares in a small company called IBM, and a whole lot of Utica Mutual insurance to Barney in trust for Masha’s and his own upkeep.

Barney reinvested life insurance and Minna’s money shrewdly so that he managed to live in modest comfort for the rest of his life. He quit selling insurance, dropped left wing politics, took up golf, bought and sold “collectibles,” and did Sunday painting almost every day in the week, at first in the manner of Diego Rivera—huge brightly mottled peasantry Jewish faces surrounded by colorful serapes, with Hassids floating overhead as in a Chagall, and titles like, “Zippedy Doo Da Dearest Minna #4.”

I was in first year high school then and doing very poorly. In every teacher’s Delaney book I was considered a suspicious character, an outcast. I had an older girlfriend named Mona Anne Sequens, and she was two years ahead of me, a rightist Irgun Zionist, planning to immigrate to Israel with a gun. “Good riddance,” said my mom.

My father was convinced the best I could ever hope for was to be “a sanitary engineer,” his sarcastic way of saying “garbage man,” on the Suez Canal. I rarely got to school, was in trouble with the Dean for telling him “Go fuck yourself,” and was also thinking of immigrating

to Zion through the left wing Hashomer Hatzair, which was an embarrassment to my father, a macher in the United Jewish Appeal establishment.

Everybody recommended counseling for me, therapy. My father said in my case it would be a waste of money as I had a big mouth and just wouldn't listen. He wanted to send me off to military school to improve my posture, but Mom reasoned with him to summon Barney from his new studio and residence in Valley Stream. The three of us could have lunch together at Lundy's in Sheepshead Bay, and Barney would help him to enlighten me about how I was fucking up my life.

I argued with my father that "Uncle Barney" was really his friend, and Mom's, and why would he care? And why should I listen? But Dad told me Barney really thought a lot of me. "He claims to think you have potential," Dad said. When I saw the gleam of menace covering over the dull hurt in those cold green eyes I relented, got dressed up in new chocolate brown slacks and a camel's hair sport coat from Rogers Peet to have lunch one Saturday with my father and "Uncle Barney."

It had been some time since I'd actually seen Barney in person. He came dressed for sport, too, in a bright lemon yellow cashmere gold sweater, and burnt sienna trousers, a Greek sailor's cap. He'd acquired a neat brown tan, I noticed, and was wearing a toupee between his balding head and the dark blue cap that matched perfectly with the pepper and salt of his mustaches and sideburns.

When we were seated, my father ordered plates of oysters on the half shell for all of us, and then went off toward the Men's Room to make an important phone call, he said.

Then Barney reached across with his big paw and took my hand, and asked me what was

my favorite make of car.

“I can’t even drive yet,” I said.

“I own a new Austin Healey with a stick shift,” he announced. A shtick and a half...”

He laughed silently. “So boychickal, he said, “I know lots of things are pretty lousy with you at school and in the home. So tell me is it like that in every way? How are the girls treating you?”

“They’re all right,” I said, flatly.

“You do like girls,” he asked, avidly, “don’t you?”

“O, yes,” I said. “But I’m still a kid and I’m not getting much really.”

“Call me Barney,” he smirked. “Forget the Uncle. At 14 I was a repeater pencil, as I still am....”

“You are?”

“More or less,” said Barney. “The thing is be nice to them. Nice gets you nice, more than any other way from what you call the love angle.”

“Thanks a lot,” blushing.

To change the subject I complimented Barney on his ensemble.

“I should introduce you someday to my haberdasher,” he said. “Really take you in hand and handle you, as it were....”

Then my father returned and he asked Barney when our oysters were being served to talk to me man-to-man.

Grimly, Barney nodded his head. “Your dad sure is worried about you.”

“I need that like I needed that hole in my head.” I said.

Dad bared his teeth.

“Even though you’re growing up like a weed,” Barney said, “it’s important to listen to your parents and not waste your chances for a good education.”

“That much I know,” I said.

“It’s really no joke,” he said. “A boy like you could have real potential...”

“I want to make *aliyah*,” I said. “Go on back to the Land.”

“That’s one way to get nookie, I suppose,” Barney said, followed by that silent laugh again, so I knew he had me there, having had similar thoughts, and now they made me blush a second time.

My father seemed impatient with Barney’s Socratic method. “I asked you to lunch,” he said, “to give the boy some of your hard-earned wisdom about stepping off the deep end. You know how much trouble life can be.”

Barney glanced about the large crowded room with its Moorish archways as if to take in the confidentiality of our circumstances. His pale eyes watered and he took a deep gulp of beer and swallowed. “If you don’t ever do it when you’re young and fit,” he told me, expansively. “you’ll never learn to swim like Lord Byron in the Bosphorus of Life. And only shmucks dog paddle,” he added.

“That’s not what I meant at all,” my Dad said.

“He’s not your stooge,” I said.

“One or two days a week I still am,” Barney said. “But on the whole that’s neither here nor there! It’s dog eat dog out in the world.”

“The world should probably know better,” I said.

“Birds of a feather,” my father said, and looked off into space as another oyster slid down

his throat.

When we finished lunch, Dad got the check and Barney and I walked out together into Sheepshead Bay's fragrant salty air.

"I guess I sounded pretty half-assed," he said.

"You did fine," I told him. "Thanks a lot."

"I did it for you and your mother," my father's best friend said. "But he's really not the worst. Just stay out of his way and he'll give you the shirt off his back."

"I really want him to leave me alone," I said.

"He can't do that," Barney said. "He's your Dad."

"So what?"

"What's going on you two," Dad demanded when he came out through the revolving doors.

"Irv," Barney replied, "your boy here is teaching me all the facts of life."

I never did go to Israel back then. I never even saw very much of Barney again except from time to time when he would get in touch and invite himself for a visit and become part of my life and fade away again.

And the times we did see each other almost always involved a family crisis of some sort—mine, his, my parents', Masha's—so that there were periods when I thought of him almost exclusively in italics, or capital letters, moments set off from the ordinary affairs of a young outcast from a family of comfortable strivers after the good life.

What little else I knew of Barney I learned from my parents, or Masha, if he was on speaking terms with either party, or from the times we bumped into each other at family affairs,

though I fancied he was still my closest relation, almost a friend and comrade. Then, after many years of silence between my Father and myself, when he was in a coma and my aunt begged me to come East to visit him before he died, there, waiting outside the Intensive Care Unit to which I'd been directed, was a meager replica of my "Uncle Barney," with a wispy white fringe of hair and a trembling lower lip, and wet rheumy eyes.

He seemed to recognize the grown man who had once been Irv Fishback's kid just as soon as I stepped off the elevator, for he called out my name.

I went over to Barney and we shook hands. "It's nice of you to be here at this time," I said. "Dad didn't really have that many old friends left..."

Uncle Barney truly seemed glazed with shock that I was here to see his old friend, Irv; he'd been visiting with a girlfriend who'd smashed up her pelvis in a car on the Southern State Parkway.

"There was a lot of internal damage," he said. "But she'll make it. How's your father? Ok?"

"He's dying," I said, flatly.

"Poor Irv," he said. "I tried to see your mom before she passed away but he treated me like liver spots. Wouldn't let me enter her room. I didn't mean him any harm."

"Of course I remember," I said. "Don't you remember? I asked you to come. Dad could get very crazy sometimes."

"He had his reasons," Barney said. He truly looked grim, more so than I was allowing myself to feel.

Looking me over again, he said, "You've filled out some. It's a good sign. You have a



family?”

“I’m recently divorced for the second time,” I said, “but I have a lovely daughter whom I see a lot of.”

“It’s probably better that way for all concerned,” Barney said. “We’re neither of us meant to be family men.” His voice was very soft and vaguely quavering. “Is Dad still conscious?”

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“Could I,” he asked, “come in with you? I’d really like to see him one last time.”

I said I didn’t think there was much to see, but sure; he could come into the Unit with me.

We entered this vast dimly-lit loft filled with cubicles and glass boxes connected by cables and asked a nurse to direct us to Irving Fishback.

Dad was stretched out between curtained walls on a cot, naked with tubes reaching out from his arms and legs. The air was very chilly; there was a bank of monitors above his head. He seemed to be trembling. From his left side a thick rubber drain drew fluids out of an open wound from surgery. His drawn handsome face was graven with pain, seemed blind to light.

But, suddenly, he sighed and his whole body shook, and then was silent again, breathing easily, though never once did he open his eyes to see us.

For all I was losing and never, in fact, had really ever had, I was fearful.

“It’s terrible what happens to all of us,” Barney said. “He loved you. I guess you know that.”

“You were the best friend he ever had,” I also lied.

“More like I was your mom’s friend,” Barney corrected me. “A lot of what I did I did for

her.”

“I think I always knew that,” I said. “It doesn’t matter now.”

“I guess you were so smart you figured that out for yourself,” he said. “But after a while I began to feel sorry for him anyway. He never really knew how to relax, but in a lot of ways he was a better man than I was.”

“I think he probably felt the same way,” I told Barney, who turned away from me, quickly, and sobbed. I laid my arm across his frail shoulder.

“There’s nothing really I can do for him,” I said. “I thought at least we could say goodbye. But he doesn’t even hear me.”

“Try talking to him again,” Barney said. “Make the effort!”

I came beside the bed and bent over low and mumbled, “Dad I’m here.”

“It’s your son Ron, Ronald” I added. “I’m sorry we quarreled so much. I kept waiting for you to apologize to me for all the hurtful things you probably never meant to do but now it’s too late so I’ll do the apologies. I’m sorry, Dad, sorry we quarreled. Can you hear me?”

“LOUDER,” Barney said.

I thought I saw Dad’s eyes peek open a moment, but when I looked again they were closed, his breathing softening. He seemed even more remote from my words.

“TALK SOME MORE IN YOUR NORMAL TONE OF VOICE,” Barney said, “and just keep on talking. He could come out of it. You’ll see. You never know.”

“Dad,” I began again, “Dad, I’m here, your son, Ronald, I’m so sorry. Can you hear me? I’m standing here right next to you with Barney, Uncle Barney...”

“Bastard..!” Dad’s last utterance.

“I can’t believe. And after all these years,” Barney exclaimed.

“Father,” I repeated. “Dad!”

“Have mercy kiddo,” Barney said.

“Dad.”

“Kiddo....”

“Bo....”

When I stopped and looked up, Barney Goldman was gone from the room like a bad smell. As though called elsewhere to his own accounting, he’d left without even saying goodbye.

I looked down at the figure in the bed. “Dad,” I said, “Dad, I’m sorry. Barney’s not here anymore but I still am. Can’t you try to listen to me even now?”

I kept on cajoling him to respond to me until the nurse told me there was no point in talking anymore.

I sometimes wonder if Uncle Barney could still be alive somewhere. He would have to be quite ancient, almost ninety. But, as Dad used to say grudgingly, “That palooka takes real good care of himself.”

I was maybe ten or eleven years old when Uncle Barney took me out on the Pulaski Skyway to Bears Stadium in the Jersey Meadows to watch a minor league baseball playoff game between Newark and the Montreal Royals.

Jackie Robinson and Roy Campanella were Royals stars. This treat from Barney was on account that Marsha was a girl and didn’t like to watch baseball games all alone with him.

After the game we drove back to the City in his old grey Plymouth coupe. Barney let me

sit in the rumble seat and scream and make faces at all the passing cars. The noise of traffic was sometimes earsplitting, though upfront I heard snatches of his loud basso intoning “My Bonny Lies Over The Ocean,” to his daughter Masha, only he pronounced the name as “Barney.”

“My *Barney* lies over the ocean.

My *Barney* lies over the sea.

My *Barney* lies over the ocean.

Bring back my *Barney* to me.

Bring back bring back

Bring back my *Barney* to me.”

As we were late for the special dinner Mom was fixing at our house, he gunned the motor now and then.

I closed my eyes to keep out cinders. While Masha remained stony silent like an Easter Island statue beneath her babushka, Barney sang on.

“Bring back o bring back

Bring back my *Barney* to me to me

Bring back bring back

Bring back my *Barney* to me.”

It was peacetime then, after many years of war. Inside the Holland Tunnel the car got stuck in traffic. Barney’s lugubrious echoes bounded from the tile walls.

Exposed as I felt, I suddenly was fearful that all those tons of water and alluvial mud surrounding us might collapse their containing walls and we’d be engulfed beneath the river and perish. All seemed calm enough, the air stagnant with car fumes, and stifling, as Uncle Barney

changed gears loudly, and dispelled my imaginary disasters with his orotund stout vocalizing of another Rum Scoundrel tune:

“He don’t own *term life*.

He don’t own *whole life*.

And sucker buyers

are ripe and rotten,

but ole man Barney

with all his blarney

he just keep rolling along!”

## **PART II**

## MISS ELEANOR HOLM

I was born with an atrophied chest muscle, a birth injury, I was always told. So I would not feel self-conscious about such a minor deformation, Barney urged my worried parents to take me to specialists just as soon as my baby fat disappeared and my oddly-concave right chest was visible. Exercises of all sorts were recommended, push-ups, and chinning ten to twenty times a day on a bar suspended high up in my toy closet. “Upsy daisy boychick,” Barney would remind me when visiting our house. “Upsy daisy!”

When I refused to participate in such painful mortifications, he suggested learning to swim the Australian crawl would almost certainly develop compensatory muscles all over my non-existent right pectoral region and that would be a pleasant and fairly natural method of muscle augmentation.

“It’s doing what comes naturally,” he insisted. “You swam inside your momma. We all did in one momma or another.”

I was only six, and ignorant about my prenatal habits, and already very self-conscious about my peculiar physique, when my parents enrolled me in weekly swimming lessons with Tobias—I never knew his last name at the Temple swimming pool.

He was a large sleek man with Franz Josef mustaches and a body as effulgent as that of a small beluga whale. Tobias had a thick Austro-Hungarian accent, and a gentle but persuasive manner. A champion himself, he was also a teacher of champions; he’d won gold medals for his native Hungary in various international meets in swimming and water polo, and, as a former

“Coney Island Olympian,” he was the present coach and teacher of a young and beautiful Brooklyn girl named Eleanor Holm, who was an AAU champion, a future Olympic contender, and later the wife of theater impresario Billy Rose.

Under Tobias’s tutelage (and with occasional assistance from Barney) I took easily to swimming, and before many months went by I was doing the Australian crawl five and six lengths at a time in the synagogue’s unpleasantly chlorinated Olympic-sized pool, and then ten, and fifteen, and twenty lengths, an hour or more, my skin galvanized, my arms weary, eyes burning a little, with adult spectators peering down into the aquamarine waters at the wake caused by this profound invigorating monotony, astonished by such a prodigy of the cupped hands and butterfly kick.

A year or more went by in the same routine. Even though I enjoyed the constant approbation I received from Barney and so many other of my parents’ circle, I found swimming laps unrelieved torture which was only softened by also being a terrible *bore*. But every afternoon at four I went at it, hoping, thereby, to short-cut the time when my muscles would effulge and compensate, and I would never have to do such exercises again. I did it also, after a while, in hopes of catching a glimpse of the lovely Miss Eleanor Holm.

She was then no more than nineteen or twenty, a strawberry blonde, as I recall, with extravagant bosoms, and a body of voluptuous turns and curvings, and beautiful blue eyes, and freckles. Movie-star beautiful she wasn’t, I now know from her photos, but her face and body were modeled and healthy; she gave off well-being and a sense of joyful concupiscence. That she wasn’t even Jewish didn’t really seem to matter at the Temple, which had the best indoor pool in our part of Brooklyn, and the best coach, because the elders of the synagogue, impressed



with Eleanor's incipient stardom, had allowed her workout privileges in return for which she was to assist pampered little kids like me with their swimming lessons.

"Lovely stuff," Barney always said, from afar.

"Wholesome as strawberry shortcake," my father used to say of Eleanor Holm, disguising his gruesome lust for this fetching young woman with a mouthful of whipped cream and mush.

To my mind she was nothing less than a Goddess, immortal in her youthful vivacity, the ringing tintinnabulations of all that fulsomeness of hair and dark full lips and Aryan Nordic cheekbones, and I worshipped in her wake, whenever she entered the pool, following her graceful legs when they rippled along the surface as though we were in procession.

With Tobias always looking on to stop-watch, or call attention to her form, Eleanor, as I called her, worked hard at her speed drills and distance exercises, but sometimes she just swam to keep her muscles loose and supple; and once when I was in the pool with her she had me swim on top of her as she reclined, scissor-kicking on her back, with my face among her "bubbies," as I called them then, overflowing from her one-piece suit; and her hands holding me in place by the buttocks, she propelled us through the warm phosphor of reverie and wetness.

If love is union formed by intuitions, I was, at the very least, infatuated with Miss Eleanor from that day on, and she was always in my eye, and on my lips. Just thinking of her in the shower caused me chilblains and an embarrassing boner. One day with my feet dangling at the side of the pool while she swam, I serenaded her with a song I'd learned in nursery school:

*"À la claire fontaine  
m'en allant promener  
j'ai trouvé l'eau si belle*

*que je m'y suis baigné...."*

Eleanor grinned and swam on, probably not wishing to be hurtful, just oblivious to the feelings of that small tenor with his twisted chest and peevish look of admiration and agape. She was so much in demand in those days, as a competitor and as a woman, was only just beginning to move with the Broadway crowd, and though a relative innocent, she knew as beautiful women like her almost always know the bliss she should be seeking would eventually remove her from our little parochial world of Brooklyn, and this synagogue swimming pool, to the rich enjoyments of Manhattan and the great world beyond. "The real goods," Barney called her. "The genuine article. A full course meal," and, because she was so conspicuously who she was, he never made any play for her and offered me no competition. "She's really not my type," he begged off once.

Sometimes Eleanor would emerge from the pool in a crystalline thrusting upward of her beautiful shoulders and shake thousands of shivers of wet light across my admiring glances, and then toweled, pass right by me, and pat me on the head, or the shoulders. "Nice workout, peanut," she'd say. "You're getting there."

She seemed to my ears to be singing at me in a rich husky Brooklynese from Seagate, or Brighton, or Canarsie, and when she walked toward the showers she had the grace of Bathsheba disporting for David on the rooftops of Jerusalem.

Eleanor was also a much sought-after four-wall handball partner for men like Barney and Gipper Horowitz and it was with that excuse in mind I recall my father always pursuing her to be his partner, too. "That girl plays the game just like a man," he would say. "And better than

most,” he’d add.

My mother didn’t think so. She was not a good athlete and just beginning to lose her figure. An attractive woman, who usually played helpless with anybody except Barney, I suspect, she was easily jealous and became keenly aware of competitors for my father’s glance, which must have seemed awfully peculiar to a young woman like Eleanor, who had many male admirers and certainly wasn’t going to settle for a struggling lawyer with two kids in Depression Brooklyn.

One Saturday afternoon, a few summers before the war in Europe, when we had all been sunbathing on the Temple roof, Eleanor and my father emerged from the dark stairwell leading to the handball courts, and they were both squinting from the glare.

They’d entered onto the Men’s section, where nudity was usually permitted, but that day, a family holiday, the sunbathers wore bathing suits and were of mixed genders. When Eleanor and my father emerged, wiping the sweat from their faces with sweat-darkened handball gloves, my mother, who was sitting beside me, alarmed, got up to greet them.

“You two have been gone awhile,” she announced

“Now Shirl,” my father said. “It was only a game....”

“Some playmate,” my mother said.

“Lay off them,” Barney said. “It’s only a game.”

“Some playmate,” my mother said.

“He must like that *shiksa* better than his own family,” my mother said, pushing her face up close to his, “the way you are with her...it ain’t right....”

“What do you mean? I’m the way I always am,” Dad shouted back in her face, with all

the sunbathers now sitting up half-naked to listen in, and Eleanor, seeming shocked, blushed as she turned away and ran down the stairs.

I followed her, and on the darkened stairwell heard the sound of sniffing. She was in tears, sobbing into her hands one floor below me in the light.

I stayed back and listened and watched her, and, after a while, she squared her shoulders, pulled herself together, and continued on down the stairs to the level of the indoor pool.

A moment or two later I followed her there. She was standing beneath a sanitary shower. As the water rained on her, she let her hands roam ceaselessly up and down her body, as though they were disembodied, the hands of another person. Her head was bowed, eyes closed, and every curve on her was delineated behind that bright curtain of water beads. But, suddenly, she glanced up and saw me and smiled, and started to laugh, harshly I thought, as though making fun of me.

“You do laps now, Eleanor,” Tobias called to her. “I been waiting.”

She looked at me again and her lips moved.

“You poor kid,” she seemed to be saying. “I really pity you....”

And then she turned and yanked off the shower and walked away and dove into the pool and commenced to do her laps.

I was so ashamed for my mother I wanted to run and hide from her, and never look into Eleanor’s beautiful sunstruck face again. At the same time, infatuated with this Naiad, I wanted to linger and admire her, and perhaps say something to mitigate all the embarrassing shame.

“O Eleanor,” I said, “you mustn’t mind Ma she’s just stupid sometimes....”

She grasped the side of the pool and hung on there.

“What’s that you say, peanut?”

“My ma’s a stupid.”

“Well she’s wrong about me, for sure,” she said. “And that’s the honest truth.”

She pushed herself off, and was floating away from me on her back, her “bubbies” buoyant, rigid little nipples and all.

“Some people just have a lot of gall,” Eleanor announced, and her words echoed in the tiled pool area so that even Tobias glanced our way.

“Please don’t you let it upset you,” I told her.

“Thinking that way of another woman,” she said.

“You’re right. It was dumb. She should know better, show more respect.”

“You’re a nice kid,” she whispered back. “Stay that way.”

And she rolled over and started doing the crawl to the other end of the pool.

In my bare feet I ran along the slippery tiles to meet her there.

I asked, “We can still be friends, can’t we?”

She’d reached the other side of the pool just in time to hear my words with her head, in a tight white bathing cap, now well out of the water. And dripping on her elegant shoulders as she held on, she warned, “It will make your ma angry....”

“So what?”

“Well jump in, peanut,” Eleanor said, “and you and me’ll do some laps.”

Her kind words to me were scorching. I felt a little paralyzed. “Not right now,” I mumbled, “maybe later.”

She had turned once again and was splashing her way to the other end of the pool.

From there she called to me again, a *Lorelei*: “Don’t be frightened, peanut. Just jump in. I’ll hold you. You won’t drown.”

Instead of a racing dive I did a painful belly whopper, and thrashed my way across the pool toward Eleanor who, seeing I was in some distress, swam out and reached for me, and pulled me close to her body, and drifted back toward the shallow end again.

“That-a-boy,” she said, “that’s my peanut, just like Buster Crabbe,” while I relaxed in her embrace, and we floated, reclining all the while. I wonder to this day what she would have thought if she’d known I was having a buster of a boner again. But there it was beneath my trunks, resplendent; in the arms of this Goddess, there was I, safe and wet and warm, as in the womb of love, all cuddly and content; and so we floated like that for moments with Eleanor holding us buoyant with her powerful fluttering feet, her warm breath against my neck, speaking low into my ear, “Why not sing that song to me, sweetheart, that you always sing? The French one about the fountain in French.”

As pool water gurgled against my lips, I sang the words as I knew them, only approximately:

*“Je voudrais que la rose  
fût encore au rosier  
et moi and ma maîtresse  
dans les mêmes amitiés....”*

And on the refrain I heard her sort of joining in:

*“Il y a longtemps que je t’aime  
jamais je ne t’oublierai....”*

It was the last time we were ever to be together. Little did I know she was training to be in the Olympics right then and there, and later that summer would go abroad and win hearts and some medals, and never come back to our synagogue pool again. The only other time I saw Eleanor was at Flushing Meadows, at the Billy Rose Aquacade, in a stunning gold lamé one-piece suit, like the Oscar statuette, on a high diving board far away in the dark, surrounded by a disk of cool white spotlight.

I was so very far away in the stands that night, with my parents and Barney and Minna and Masha, it was hard to believe she and I had ever been so close, and now she was aglow in the darkness in which we all sat chasing off mosquitoes, apart from that Brooklyn she'd left far behind.

My mother truly seemed to prefer it that way. "She looks so attractive all the way out there by herself," she said. "Very."

Naturally she and Dad were too embarrassed to take me backstage after the show to say hello to our old friend. The orchestra played "Tangerine" and Eleanor's reflection undulated in the water of the big pool like brightly beaten gold.

## THE DRAFT

My Dad was a little too old to be drafted for World War 2. Just a year or so younger, Uncle Barney was taken into the Navy 8 months after Pearl Harbor. He went to boot camp and served about 3 months on one of the heiress Barbara Hutton's wooden yachts converted to be a mine sweeper, and was discharged after his drunken and sclerotic C.O. pushed him down a hatch, causing permanent damage to both his knees, and, thus, assuring him of a small pension for the rest of his days, more or less.

Barney suffered hurt feelings as well as hurt knees from his discharge because he said he believed he was a victim of anti-Semitism; then it all ended up as another joke he liked to tell on himself. "When I was a gob," he used to remind us like it was part of a Bob Hope routine, "the U.S. was losing to the Japanese everywhere you looked. Then they retired me with disability and things took a turn for the better."

In fact, Barney hadn't really disliked his Navy service. "Bless 'em all," he used to sing. "The long and the short and the goys." He was proud to insist he was less of a coward than he ever thought he would be, and he enjoyed the warm weather around the Florida Keys, the nightlife, and the nurses in the hospital at Swarthmore College where he later went to have his knees 'rehabilitated.'

After his hospital stay, he was released back at his duty station in the Keys just as a lot of younger men in the neighborhood were being processed to serve, chiefly in the Army infantry. Our next door neighbor, Hal Krober, was eventually one of these, and out of tactlessness and guilt, I suppose, Barney told Hal's parents his own injuries were only made worse by the



physical therapy he'd received at Swarthmore. He said he now had a permanent case of "Quaker Puffed Knees."

Hal Krober was his father's sweetest wish come true, a handsome 18 year old handball protégé of Barney and my father. "A fine young stripling," Barney called him. His parents were also my parents' other set of really close friends, and clients, and next door neighbors. They had a lifetime subscription for rumba lessons with the local Arthur Murray Studio and thought well enough of their son's charm and dark Jewish good looks that they paid to have his nose "fixed" the week after he graduated high school so that it looked acceptably straight to gentiles. "That way the Germans won't know what they got if he's ever captured," Barney joked.

Actually this decision really had to do with the possibility of Hal's going off to West Point instead of the Army Infantry. Hal really wasn't much of a student so he couldn't get a scholarship deferment of any sort, but, as he was a graceful athlete and quite well-built, his dad was trying to pull strings to get him an appointment to either West Point or Annapolis through our Congressman, Ben Cruller, a crony of my dad's. When that didn't come through in time for high school graduation, Hal underwent the operation to blunt any hostility he might encounter in the Service, and then was shipped off to Fort Bragg, North Carolina, for training as an infantryman parachutist, a death sentence in effect.

Hal's parents were, needless to say, very upset about this canon fodder MOS. His father even set aside some money in a Swiss bank to ransom Hal by private means were he ever taken as a prisoner of war. The invasion of Europe had recently commenced and the military was throwing away irreplaceable young lives willy-nilly after only 6 weeks of basic training. The Krobers were decent, mind-your-own-business sort of people except where Hal was concerned,

so they came to resent Barney's being back at liberty a lot. How had he managed to find a way out of war's slaughterhouse?

Barney's perennial good humor was part of the problem. He boasted about his "lucky knees," and then, suddenly, was being called up for reexamination by his draft board. It soon became a widely held suspicion among some of Barney's friends that the Krobers, and some other parents of young draftees, might have been responsible for blowing the whistle on Barney.

He had, after all, only one child and a wife who worked, had no skilled occupation, and a barely perceptible limp; and he was already back to playing handball at the Temple, or outdoors at Brighton Private, as the Krobers well knew, being active members of both places as well. When Barney had a brief fling with Estelle Krober's sister, Lucia, in Atlantic City and left her "flat on her can at the Shelbourne after she turned romantic, rather than risk an entire weekend with her gush," in my Dad's words, the bad blood between Barney and the Krobers got even worse.

Hal was now somewhere in the European Theater of War and the big German counteroffensive through the Ardennes was making a mess of Allied ordinance and supply routes throughout France and the Low Countries. It looked as though there might have to be a massive retreat to the Channel ports over the bodies of possibly thousands of dead GIs, including perhaps the Krobers' "stripling," Hal.

During this fairly grim time, Barney, who'd done his service honorably and been injured, even abused, according to his lights, didn't always observe proper wartime decorum. He sang "Peat Bog Soldiers" at a Temple benefit for "war relief." He was known more than once to express "pacifist sentiments," and he made jokes at the expense of the local war profiteers. I

guess he was just glad to be alive, not drowned at sea in Barbara Hutton's wooden yacht. "Eat, drink, and be merry," he announced at a roof party attended by the Krobers, "for tomorrow could bring the Duration and the end of cost plus contracts."

Barney remained in some respect a Browderite who wished his own motives were less suspect and refused to pretend otherwise. Life insurance, for the moment, seemed to be booming. Though he claimed the actuarial tables were rigged, they were no more so, he insisted, than the ponies at Havre De Grace or Aqueduct. If a lot of the officers were buying additional coverage to what they received from the Pentagon, Barney joked the rates were as "truly as competitive as Standard Oil of New Jersey." He pocketed the money and lacerated himself and others.

Max Krober, a furrier, was also doing very well from his "war effort" of providing fur linings for aviators, but he claimed to think only of the welfare of his beloved son. "Competitive with what?" he demanded. "*What's your competition?*"

"The German 88 millimeter," Barney quipped, tactlessly. "Or maybe a V I rocket."

The only war Barney now took seriously was being waged on the Russian front. "They'll get to Berlin long before our boys," he said. "You wait and see!"

"Where does he come off with that shit?" asked Max. "How the hell do you know anything?"

"Of course it's anybody's best guess," Barney added.

"Right now our boy is in the thick of it," Max said.

"Don't you worry about Hal," he said. "He'll make it."

"I don't need your soft soap," Max said. "How would you know?"

“I...really don’t,” Barney had to admit. “But the odds are with him, wouldn’t you say, Irv?”

He turned to my father for backup. My dad only looked the other way. Max sneered. “Why don’t you shut up? You’ve got his mother all upset. Odds? You are a fucking ignoramus. A *Pascudnack*,” Max said.

“I’d die if anything happened to your Hal,” Barney protested, “or any of our boys.” Then, feeling humiliated for speaking out of turn, he skulked off toward the picnic table to freshen up his Haig & Haig.

Barney must have felt he deserved most of Max’s worst reproaches because the next morning, which was a Sunday, he came to our house with bagels and bialys to talk to my father about making another effort, if he could on behalf of “young Hal,” to get him out of the line of fire.

“It’s too late to close the hatches,” my father said. “Your ship is sinking with all hands aboard. In future keep your mouth shut when you’re around Max. They’re pretty worked up.”

“A sensible suggestion,” Barney said. “But not much for me in the way of relief.”

The very next day he got another notice that he must once again report to Whitehall Street for induction into the U.S. Army.

“It’s probably just a clerical error,” my Dad, as his lawyer, reminded him. “Go and see and be deferential and polite. I’m sure you can straighten the whole thing out.”

Barney nodded as though in agreement. When the day arrived he was a no show. A few days later Minna opened her door to two MPs, and a guy in civvies from the CID.

Barney was in Lake Mahopac with a person or persons hitherto unknown to Minna, so

she lied to the Military that she hadn't seen her former husband in weeks, ever since they separated after a quarrel, and, when they left the flat, she called Barney's office and got his secretary to give her the only number on Barney's rolodex for Lake Mahopac. She dialed Barney at a colleague's vacation house.

For the sake of Minna's self-respect, Barney improvised brilliantly: his visit to Putnam County certainly wasn't the end of the world; he still loved her and Masha; and he was helping to counsel, as he put it, "conscientious Christian objectors."

"You?" she objected. "You're Jewish. Hitler is killing all the Jews."

"I wish to hell he'd started with that asshole Max," Barney said. "Or at least roughed him up a little bit, he and his wife are causing me a lot of problems."

"It's their son they're worried about, basically, not you Barney," she pointed out. "Come on home immediately and get Irv to go down with you to Whitehall Street and clear this matter up once and forever."

Barney agreed he would try, but he was low on gas and lacked coupons. He needed to find an agreeable filling station, or a bus. It might take him a while to figure this one out, Barney said.

"If you're thinking of having another go with that broad in your room," Minna said, "whoever she is, just forget it. I mean it! Come on home!"

For fear of losing his only constant source of affection and income, Barney Goldman did as his wife commanded. But, as soon as he stepped through the doors to his shabby apartment house lobby, he was arrested by the two MPs and clapped into irons and taken off to Governors Island. From there, some hours later, Barney managed to call my dad while we were eating.

Dad was to inform Minna of his presently dismal circumstances and appear tomorrow morning as his attorney at the Island for a hearing at 10 AM.

“The way you let things slide,” my dad said.

“It was all on the up and up,” Barney said. “I was counseling these queer twins on whether they should take their chances in the military or ruin their future lives with a section 8. The mother is an old friend. A former high fashion model at Klein’s.”

“If I believed all that,” Dad said; then he changed the subject. “I’ve a really good mind to let you rot there a few days longer. You ought to know better.”

But he appeared the next morning at the hearing with Barney’s medical separation papers, supplied through Minna’s compliance, so that Barney’s draft status was finally and forever resolved. There’d be no more harassment.

Barney returned to his insurance business, and his disappointed household. They no longer trusted him but found his alibis so outrageous they were bulletproof. He tried to get work at a defense plant and Minna said it wasn’t right a man of his background should be doing such things as manual labor.

Soon enough, Barney began to be involved with various burgeoning postwar ‘peace’ committees, and joined the United World Federalists. The German counteroffensive was turned back with heavy losses on both sides, and then the Krobers received word that Hal’s appointment to West Point had come through. He’d been pulled out of a snowy foxhole in the middle of Bastogne and was being flown back to the States to Stewart Air Force Base in Newburgh where he’d be escorted to a barracks at West Point to begin his training as a plebe.

Although initially relieved that his precious son was no longer in danger, Max Krober

started to worry about this new turn of events just as soon as Hal was stateside. Victory and peace seemed imminent. Max really didn't favor a military career for his only son. Max was getting older. He'd built up a good business. Hal was to be his successor. Max kept asking my dad to inquire just how long Hal would be required to serve after he received his commission. When my father mentioned the likelihood of 3, or possibly 6 years, Max shuddered. He wasn't sure he could hold out that long. He needed to retire. He had a bad heart.

“So wait until Victory is won and have the boy flunk out,” Barney suggested.

“That would be truly disgraceful,” my Dad said, angrily.

Max wasn't so sure. He rebuked Barney but must have thought he could live with such disgrace because a few days later he went to visit his son in his barracks at the Academy.

That was the same week we learned Eddie Semmel, the son of another neighbor, had perished some time previously in a low altitude “pin point” bombing attack for which he'd volunteered after his twenty-fifth mission.

At dinner my father said, “The Semmels are crazy with grief.”

“Looks like Poor Eddie was the one who got the pin pointing,” Barney said.

“How unfair,” Dad told him.

And later Max himself said, “I feel so bad for those poor Semmels....”

“I guess they just didn't have the necessary ten Gs,” Barney pointed out.

“WILL YOU KILL HIM OR SHOULD I?” Max shouted.

Right in front of Temple the next morning, after the memorial service, he leaped at Barney so they almost came to blows and my dad had to separate them. But when Max went off to visit his son once again at the Academy, Uncle Barney was invited to come along to help

cajole the boy into doing the right thing.”

Barney had become very interested in veterans and their rights. He was inquiring if he might be eligible for the newly proposed GI Bill to take voice lessons at Juilliard. Even a career in a small time opera company, he thought, would be better than selling insurance. He claimed to have a little money put away from his war profits.

When Hal was finally released from the Academy after V E Day because he'd developed pleurisy from the “walking pneumonia” he'd contracted at Bastogne, it was Barney's idea to throw a big welcome home party for all the returning boys on our block. He would see to the refreshments, and act as MC. Wearing his gold colored veteran's pin, Barney serenaded our neighbors with “Lili Marlene,” and “Meadowlands,” “*Stenka Rossen*,” and “*J'Attendrai*.”

Needless to say, the Semmels stayed away, but Max and Estelle came, and Barney, Minna and Masha, and all our neighbors, and a pretty blonde woman with a throaty voice from Bay Ridge named Helika Krohn. In my presence, Barney introduced her to my mom and Minna as his latest singing coach, brought along to hear how Barney actually sounded in performance.

It was a hot night, a boisterous affair, with a keg of Trommer's beer, and Scotch whiskey from the Fort Hamilton PX acquired through underhanded means by Max and contributed in thanksgiving for Hal's safe return.

There was dancing in the streets, a bonfire, hot dogs, and hamburgers, sparklers and streamers, and Charlotte Russes for all the little kids. There was a huge cake shaped like a battleship with whipped cream gun turrets.

After food and drinks were brought out, the little Mickey Mouse band played slow tunes for dancing, like “You'll Never Know” and “I'll Be Seeing You,” and Hal, who was dressed in a



loud Hawaiian shirt and white ducks, asked Barney's voice teacher for a whirl.

It soon became clear that lovely Miss Helika and Hal wanted much more from each other than to dance cheek to cheek, and the Krobers seemed to grow jittery that something infinitely more intimate might come to pass that very night, as did Barney, I observed, who had Minna walking guard duty around him, and his long face, and rapidly blinking wet eyes.

As Hal monopolized Helika for dance after dance, Barney tried to seem unconcerned by refusing to cut in and discouraged my dad from volunteering to do so. He stood at the curb with a mug of beer, and licked at the edges of his mustaches, a weak smile pasted to his lips.

Abruptly Hal and his new lady friend started to edge away from the light toward the muddled dark end of the street.

Looking as magnanimous as a Civil War monument, Barney puffed out his chest and just stood there, and let them disappear into the darkness, the remains of his smile disappearing with them.

He tapped his toe on the curb, and licked at his upper lip, and didn't make a move. He looked lost, hedged in a forest of reservations.

I came up beside him to observe, "Finders keepers losers weepers huh Uncle Barney?"

"Don't wise off with me young Ronald," he replied. "You're still a brat!"

"I got eyes just like you," I maintained.

"Go fry a fish," Barney said. "If you got eyes you should know me better than that. I never court other women when I have my wife's company for the evening," he declared loudly.

"I consider that rude."

"She sure is a knockout," I told him.

“Too old for you,” he snapped back.

“But not for you.”

His eyebrows arched: “If you mean the long legged Helika she’s my welcome home gift for young Hal. The lad benefits to make up for all my recent misunderstandings with his mom and dad.”

I was dubious the Krobers, as I knew them, would be that pleased Barney had given their son over to the ministrations of a *shiksa*. Barney, though, was trying to look pleased with himself.

All I said was, “What happens if they get serious like in the movies?”

Barney wished to seem indignant. “Go explain to a ten year old,” he said. “I’m talking one gorgeous night of love, not the Siege of Leningrad.”

“Still,” my dad observed, who had joined us on that curb, “things can get out of hand even in one night.”

“I got to hand it to you Irv,” Barney grinned as broadly as his well-suppressed envy would allow. “But do I really look that needy?”

He leaned way over to peer down the block where Hal and Helika were no longer visible even as shadows.

“Another woman in my life is less important to me at the moment,” he announced, “than a truly first rate singing coach, preferably a male, I think.”

“You can say that again,” Minna put in.

“At least for the moment,” Barney added in a whisper I hoped only I could overhear.

“When I get the word from Juilliard,” he went on, “a lot of things could be different again with me and Helika.”

## LONG AGO AND FAR AWAY

In her early teens, Masha Goldman, Barney's only daughter, was, in some people's estimations, a girl of loose morals. She started dating at age twelve and by thirteen was sleeping around with all the hipsters and *shmendrick* high binders in the neighborhood who would give her a second glance.

"Should anybody be surprised by that," my dad exclaimed, "considering how Mister Barney behaves?"

Masha was no conventional "dish" but she was big in all the right places and so "easy" that around the schoolyard she was known as "Masha Lift My Pullover," and "Masha Pushover," depending on the time of the month and the season of the year. She wasn't cross or sullen; she wasn't passive, just rather obliging.

Now I like to think it was instinctually life-affirming and shrewd of her to be so open, tacit, sincere. Back then, despite the closeness of our two families, Masha and I didn't really get along. Not that we usually spoke. Just looks. We just stared across at each other over the family dinner table as though through bars in opposite cells in a prison.)

Basically, my antipathy had to do with Minna and Mom bathing us together naked in the same tub one summer in the Rockydale Bungalow Colony when we were both very little. There were before and after pictures of the event; there I was with a stubborn little peanut shell and Masha all grins, half a head taller than me, naked except for her cowboy chaps worn backwards which hid everything worth looking for. I always felt so vulnerable in her company that I

wrapped myself in emotional chain mail, choosing to believe Masha was a silly dummy because, as she grew up, she really didn't like to read; and I thought she thought I was a twerp because I did, and because my dick was so very little in that old photo and I really couldn't remember seeing anything at all of hers, frankly.

By age 15, Masha's poor performance at school was almost as legendary as my own (I got As in English but failed almost every other course) and her steadiest date was Big Abe Pearlstein, the 6 foot 6 inch center on the high school basketball team, down Bedford Avenue, who'd refused to shave points for the bookies in the Interscholastic Tournament and, as a consequence, was given the penance of staying on at school and being called derisively by all "Honest Abe."

Everybody in our neighborhood claimed to know that Masha and Abe were making muffky fuffky all the time in his parked Nash Rambler with the bed in the back way down at the end of Cropsey Avenue by Gravesend Bay, and we all had fantasies about how they carried on. My Syrian friend, Abel Hassan, used to swear, "Abe's got a kebab big enough to skewer two Mashas back to back, and then some" which always made me shudder.

I was not 13 then and still a virgin, though just barely. I'd had stinkfinger a few times with Annie Sequins, and I was hot to trot, though nervous about how to bring it off. "Give it to me give it to me give it to me quick," I shouted at my wanking face in the full length mirror, as though unsure if I was the male or the female in this affair. Though I knew I needed a tutor, this subject was not in any of our official courses of study.

Somewhere deep inside me was a secret longing for Masha's most ardent favors, bestowed like a gift after a surprise party, when I was least expecting such to happen, a favorite fantasy of

mine. So that nobody would ever know I had the hots for “Grunt Grunt,” as I sometimes called her, I was often very rude to Masha in public. “Masha the squasher,” I called her in reference to her alleged pudginess, and “Bubbles Blueballs” because I was really into alliteration, while secretly her name, intoned to myself, “Masha Masha Masha” brought me to the verge of ecstasy and climax.

I even composed the first lines of a little conundrum poem I also kept strictly a secret to myself.

“Masha in our summer heart garden  
If I’m so hot please beg your pardon.  
I’d give a million bucks  
for one of your sweet fucks.”

With a grim look I used to recite this over and over to myself while mowing the family lawn or taking out the garbage, but in her presence remained remote, stern, tongue-tied, mute, and I thought she was always endowing me with what I took to be severe reproachful glances.

Evidence that she and I didn’t get along was quite upsetting to Uncle Barney, when he bothered himself to know of it. He held to a charmingly naïve belief that “you two young people have a lot in common and should be allies,” and he thought I was acting “pretty high hat” toward the child of his young love, and that she could definitely improve herself as a person in my company, as could I. But every time we were thrown together for a movie or a family excursion we kept our distances and gave each other the silent treatments. Masha acted as if she was my reluctant babysitter, or oldest sister, just putting up with me, and I was always coarse and vulgar in my putdowns to myself of this so-called “easy lay.”

That situation changed when “Aunt Minna” died and my mom and I paid the first of many condolence calls to the Goldman household, with and without dad, while Masha and Barney were sitting *shiva*. As Minna’s oldest and best friend, Mom cooked a whole lot of things, in casseroles and the pressure cooker, which we brought to the flat to feed the Goldmans and whoever else happened to be around during the *shiva* period. As Mom’s designated shlepper, of course, I had to come along with her to make these deliveries.

I’d never been to a house of mourning and didn’t know what to expect. I suppose I expected open grief and sadness, hysterics, gruesome contorted faces, or even photo representations of the deceased in her final agonies, as I saw much later on in Central American households during a war. I was greeted by a serene Masha in a housedress that could have been Minna’s it was cut so full, looking womanly, even matronly, and placid, with the smell of cooking throughout the rooms and with her weary red eyes, and a throbbing to her voice, and her long dark hair down around her face.

She told Mom, in my presence, she’d just roasted a turkey breast up for Barney and herself to have for supper.

“I’m proud for you sweetheart,” Mom said.

Then we talked about Minna’s last days. Masha said it was a blessing God had taken her mom, at last, because she was in such pain, and she said her dad had just gone down the street to the store for a container of milk.

Then the three of us sat in the living room and stared at the carpet.

But, occasionally, I peered up at Masha with incredulity; her mother’s death had transfigured her. I could see her delicate shoulder bones beneath her wrap and she looked

slimmer than her garment allowed. She'd lost her sloppy ungainliness along with a lot of weight and was now a shapely, almost beautiful young woman.

Then Barney returned and he and Mom hugged and clung together tenaciously before she broke away and led him to the kitchen to show him all the things she'd brought to eat.

They stayed there quite a while and Masha and I just stared. I knew then the interest was mutual but muted. We simply needed cueing.

"I really loved Aunt Minn your mom," I said, after awhile. "I'm so sorry for you."

"You shouldn't feel you have to tell me that," Masha said.

"But it's true. Honest."

"My mom was an honest saint," Masha said. "Honest she was, until the very end, though it's against the Jewish religion to say so."

She seemed flustered, her face very flushed.

Feeling weak-kneed, and for lack of anything else to say to fill the spaces between us, I asked if she and Barney were now talking about moving elsewhere. I mentioned Mexico.

"Dad's alright right here just as he is. You know dad," she said. "He takes care of himself. ...Where else would we go?"

Just then Barney and my mom came back into the living room and when Barney saw his daughter looking bewildered, perhaps on the verge of tears again, he came over and caressed her dark hair and said, "My little *balabusta*, why don't you show Cousin Ronald your poetry?"

"Poetry?"

"Masha wrote some things to her ma when she was in the hospital," Barney said, "and they're just like poetry to me, if you ask me."



“I’d like to see them, too,” my mom said.

“Shirl let them be,” Barney said.

Masha had her face in her hands but now she removed her hands and her face looked scared. “You really wouldn’t like to see them,” she asked me, “would you, Ronald?”

I felt trapped. The last thing I wanted to do at that moment was insult or embarrass Masha, though I had standards. A real poem had to look like e.e. cummings.

“It’s really ok if you don’t,” she told me.

“Absolutely,” I declared.

Mutely, she got up, and touched my knee and led me into her departed mother’s bedroom. There she found an ordinary white stationery box on a stand next to the rented hospital bed that had not yet been removed by the rental company, and took from it a single sheet of paper, and handed it over to me.

“A little girl,” I read, “has lost her whole world...” and flooded with feelings I broke down and started weeping, as I had not since kindergarten.

What a relief that was for me, as well as for Masha, I suspect.

“You really did like mom a lot, didn’t you?” she said.

“And your dad,” I said. “I like him, too.”

“Sure you do,” she said. “I know that. You would.”

“He wants to be good-hearted,” I added.

“Just shut up,” she told me softly.

Masha looked a little grim with dubiety as she came and took the paper out of my hands and put it on the bed and draped her arms around me so that I felt all her warmth when she held

me close, and tasted all the fecund rich breath of her womanhood as we rocked back and forth, and back and forth on our heels. I felt like I was being smothered a little but I also felt a thick heaviness in my legs and, at the same time, lightheaded, excited by so much aromatic female closeness.

“My father thinks he can love just about anybody,” Masha said. “I know all about Barney. Mom and I were always more particular.”

Warmly, she kissed my lips and the side of my face.

“Masha,” I said, “I hope you’re going to be alright really.”

“We’ll just have to,” she said, squeezing me all the more, and then started to draw away.

To keep her in place I put my hands against her buttocks and pressed her even closer.

“Darling Cousin Masha,” I said.

“We’re not even really relatives,” she reminded me.

“Thank God for that,” I said, pressing her even closer to me again.

“I’m still having my period,” she announced, “so all we can do is hug, if you don’t mind.”

“It wouldn’t bother me at all,” I lied.

“Not tonight Ronald,” Masha said, firmly. She broke away and reached behind her and found another poem.

“Since your feelings were first  
ma, I have so much grief in my mouth  
I could almost burst  
the sweet sap you gave me

in my infant life for succor  
and now our subsequent drouth....”

I was standing a little removed from Masha, waiting for my passion to subside. I knew she expected me to say what I thought. “The word *succor* there,” I said. “Drouth and mouth don’t actually rhyme. And *succor*....”

“I know what you mean,” she said, matter-of-factly. “It sounds too much like cock sucker.”

“Something like that,” I remarked.

“I don’t think it would be right for me to take you into my mouth just now,” Masha said, “in mourning.”

I sat down on the bed and she sat close beside me, our hips touching.

Just then my mom called out my name. It was time to leave. She had suppers to fix for me and Dad.

“So?” Masha asked. “Are you seeing anybody at school?”

“You mean girls?” I asked.

She nodded.

“Naw,” I said. “What about you?”

“Nobody special,” she said.

“What about Honest Abe?” I asked.

“That’s a lie,” she said. “We just talk. He’s a real sensitive guy and he’s feeling real badly for snitching on all his friends. They’re all banned from interscholastic basketball for Life.”

“Is that the truth?”

“It’s really not the way you think,” she insisted. “He needed a friend.”

“So do I,” I said.

“You’re not the only one,” she told me.

Moments later my mother knocked on the door again.

“Coming,” I told her, and stood up and blew Masha a kiss goodbye, even though I really wanted another hug, and in the living room I kissed Uncle Barney right beside his mustache, and left the flat.

From that day on until Barney moved to Valley Stream, Masha and I were allies, if not friends. Though we were never again physically close like that, I felt her warm blood coursing through my system when she used to give me little hugs and winks if I looked “fucked over,” and we sometimes ate lunch together in the school cafeteria like the two outcasts from all our prissy achieving schoolmates that we truly were. She told me an awful lot about girls I really never knew, and told me also which ones liked me and would probably let me have my way, and I, in turn, showed her books to read, and poems she would like, and corrected her essays as best I could.

Masha graduated a couple of years ahead of me. She married more than once, studied child psychology at Brooklyn College, and moved to Baltimore and took a PhD at Johns Hopkins, working at the Shepherd Pratt Hospital on the ward for schizophrenics, and today has two grown sons and a dark-skinned Yemenite doctor husband named Ari; they are both analysts, with specialties in family and sex therapy.

We always used to keep in touch, though nowadays our communications are more and

more infrequent. When my father died, she sent me these lines she'd translated from Heinrich Heine:

“So we constantly question  
until someone stops our mouths  
with a handful of dirt –  
but is that an answer?”

I wrote back to tell her about meeting her dad outside my dad's Intensive Care Unit, but she must have gotten busy right about then and has never yet written back.

She continues to have a hold on my fantasies. Whenever I'm in a jam, or have a bad case of the blues, I think of getting in touch with Masha, and I remember holding her body close to my own that day and feeling the pulse of her remorse as sexual.

She's the person I keep in the back of my head to turn to as a last resort and protect me from my most evil, suicidal thoughts. Even to utter her name aloud: 'Masha...Masha' dispels my fears. It's possible I may even die with that name on my lips.

## **PART III**

## THE MATCH

“I’m scared,” bare-chested Barney said. “Your father used to be pretty good with his fists and once in a street fight he bit a fella’s ear off.”

He hesitated, as though afraid of being overheard by the man checking himself out in the lavatory mirror, not too many steps away.

“What happened to the man’s ear?” I asked.

“This guy was fighting dirty,” Barney said. “Your Dad had a terrible temper.”

“How well I know,” I told him. “He hits me sometimes so it really hurts.”

Barney ignored my bid for adolescent martyrdom.

“Dad just doesn’t know his own strength,” he said. “I wish I could worm out of this. I just can’t. He always was the...better athlete. Even in the Party I never liked strong-arm tactics and goons and I never was much for street fighting...but if pressed I can defend myself... You wait and see.”

He seemed to brighten up a moment, but then went dim again, his gaze far off.

“I still can’t see why you’re doing it,” I told him, not sure if Barney’s agreeing to box Dad was bluffing or bragging.

“There’s nothing really at stake,” he said. “Just my own-self-esteem and the esteem of others.”

“Who cares?” I said.

Barney looked irritated by my statement. He spoke slowly, with emphasis. “The man said, Put up or shut up, Goldman. We’re both a little over the hill but this Barney Goldman doesn’t run away from friends when they need him, even if they think they have to beat up on him to show it. I’m not afraid of your dad. Only his fists bother me, and I will try to give him back his *what for* in this just like Sherman took Atlanta.”

We were sitting on a bench in the locker room at the Temple getting ready for the big event. Two rounds in boxing gloves between Irving Fishback, attorney at law, in the black and Barney Goldman in white. Tobias the swimming coach had agreed to referee. They’d laid out mats in a square maybe thirty paces across the gymnasium floor. My dad had suffered all he could possibly take from Barney. Now it was either two rounds with the gloves or I swear to God I’ll put a contract out on you Barney through Longy Zwillman himself.

It was 7 AM on a Sunday morning in late summer. There would be no other spectators but me. My dad said he wanted me along to teach me some kind of lesson, too. He never explained what that lesson would be about.

When he finally came out of the toilet Dad pawed at his waistband and grunted toward Barney and me; he already had on his bulbous grey gloves, seemed in pretty good shape, squared off at the shoulders and rigid through the torso up to the waistline, except that his pecs sagged a bit, and he had a small pot, knobby knees, a sour lemon look.

Barney, on the other hand, who was probably thirty pounds overweight, displayed a gunny sack of paunch over little pale bandy legs. It was the reason why he always wore double-breasted suits. He’d chosen the dark maroon pair of gloves, and probably could have used a B



cup bra. He wore white tennis shoes, and my father old black high tops from his former fighting days.

When I pulled the puffy gloves up over Barney's wrists and tied each one on for him, as I'd done for my dad some minutes earlier before he went off to use the john, Barney said, "In the words of Philadelphia Jack O'Brien, Any man who has no fear of pugilistic encounters just has no damn brains at all."

"You're so scared?"

"Good thing I'm wearing a cork," he joked. Barney recalled just loud enough for Dad as well as me to hear how his old chum Irv had once sparred with light heavyweight champ Gus Lesnovitch, and later heavyweight Jersey Joe Walcott, in exhibitions for pay at the Sunnyside Arena in Queens while in law school.

"That was before you were even born," my dad boasted, "and it was at the Velodrome."

"My friend Irv has a right hand that's probably worth avoiding," Barney told me.

"Don't call me friend," Dad interjected. "If you're trying to say you're sorry, don't even bother now."

"You're not being quite fair you know," Barney said. "I've never fought anybody with my fists. I told your dad maybe we should wrassle."

"A big pile of shit like you," Dad said. "Where does he get off? Really?"

"Did you tell Dad that?"

"He's the offended party," Barney said. "Look at him."

"Still, I said, "why go along with him?"

“A matter of pride,” he said. “He’s the offended party.” He seemed to be smirking. “We don’t even have mouth protectors.”

“You deserve just what you’re gonna get Mr. Barney Google The *Gonif*,” my dad put in, then, from the corner where he was doing stretches.

I was under fourteen at the time, not quite fully grown to my over six feet of height. Both these men, with their shirts off, gave me a feeling of unformed puniness.

My dad had curly black and grey hair all across his pecs and along his shoulder blades, in swatches, down to his waistline.

Barney, on the other hand, with his broader shoulders, looked infinitely softer, though no less a behemoth, an aging Viking, festooned with his golden curls of chest hair and a sporran of the same that began above the waistband of his trunks, around his navel. His skin was so fair and fuzzy blond along parts of his upper body I could see the faint blue tracings of his veins. One meaty slab of thigh was also traced with a faint blue anchor tattoo from his Navy service.

As a safety precaution, Barney had removed his toupee and his bald head glistened with a thin oily sweat that comes from fear.

I don’t think he really knew how seriously to take Dad’s threats; he just couldn’t quite back away entirely.

“A deal like that,” he told me, “wasn’t so special he and I should come to blows.”

“It’s the attitude, not the deal,” Dad said. “This fuck everybody attitude of yours, Goldman, it has to go. It really stinks on ice.”

“Forty years of friendship,” Barney reminded us.

“I’ve decided to cut my losses,” Dad said. “Business is business after all.”

“This isn’t real business,” Barney said. “It’s show business. A stunt for the boy’s benefit, or yours.”

This observation was pretty much on the money. Ostensibly they’d quarreled about an aborted real estate transaction, Barney backing out at the very last minute from a parcel in Crown Heights my dad’s syndicate (to his great embarrassment) was arranging.

“I’m no rent collector,” was Barney’s alibi. “It’s just not me.”

“Be a damn fool on your own time, not mine,” Dad told him.

There was a text unspoken, the life of a woman both men claimed to care for in their different ways, and Dad needing to assert himself as Mom’s husband and protector after one of Barney’s frequent flings, then, raging far beneath, a jealousy.

I doubt if Dad could ever have allowed himself to believe he was fighting over something as frail as affection. He claimed not to see any real cause for suspicion or alarm. Shirl had never chased him from her bed or the house. Barney and Shirl had known each other since 5<sup>th</sup> grade.

“I don’t like my friendship taken for granted by that lummoX,” Dad said. “He’ll learn because I’ll teach him with this....”

When he’d shaken his fist at Mom and me over the dinner table last evening, she said, “Don’t you really think you’ve made your point galore?”

“You keep out of this, Shirl.”

“Don’t you think,” she went right on, “you ought to stop before you two hurt each other?”

“I know how to defend my business and my family,” was all Dad said, the night before at our dinner table.

“Don’t do it for my sake,” she told him.

“What have you got to do with it?” he replied. “Not for one minute!”

Denial is the stunt we do for the approbation of our other selves we might find it hard to live with under more stressful circumstances.

But now, as Dad did a back stretch, and spread his legs and touched the floor with the flats of his palms, I thought of Dad and Barney as aging biblical warriors mooning over who had been with Rebecca or Rachel last.

Sitting up and turning to Barney with a scowl, he looked as fit as a wooden carving, the wild pulse at the side of his brow quickened.

“Goldman,” he said, “I’m going up to the gym now. I’ll give you ten minutes to show up, or I’m coming back down and we’ll do it right here in the locker room and then somebody will get murdered. Come with me, Ron. I want you with me,” he ordered. “Barney can do his own crying over spilt milk like the coward he really is.”

“Brave men die a million deaths,” scoffed Barney. “We cowards die but once.”

His laughter sounded a little tentative and vague as I heard it with my back turned when my father dragged me along up the stairs to the gymnasium.

On the way up Dad didn’t say a word to me. I heard only his labored breathing. Dad was forty-five and a cigarette smoker. It had been twenty years since he’d put on the gloves with the likes of Lesnovich and Walcott.

At the second landing he said. “I used to go up and down these stairs on a jump rope. Can’t say I’ve done that in a while.

Through the dark stairway he pushed open the gymnasium door and we stepped out into a vast airy space and there, in the center, standing on some mats, with his hands planted on his hips, was big brown Tobias. He looked like some creature washed ashore by the sea, this sleek epicene man with the maternal figure of a dugong, still wearing a necklace of pink rubber nose clips from his early morning workout.

At both ends of the gym, glass backboards took light from the floor-to-ceiling frosted windows as in a cathedral. The huge space echoed when Tobias called out, “You can’t fight alone, Irving. Got maybe an opponent?”

“My opponent,” said Dad, “is down below pissing into his sneakers.”

“Must we do this thing?” Tobias asked.

“I’m only gonna teach the sorry sonuva bitch some manners,” Dad said.

“In Hungary,” Tobias said, “in the old times, we are all the time dueling with pistols to settle such disagreements.”

We walked across the room to join him on the mats.

“Dad and Barney are old friends,” I told the referee. “They’re not real gentlemen like in the movies.”

“Mind the way you talk about me, son,” Dad said.

“I make damn sure,” Tobias said, “nobody should get hurt. Is that so?”

“You be the ref,” he said. “I don’t really want to kill Barney. I just want to knock some sense into his skull.”

“Maybe you making him even stupider.” Tobias laughed.

“O come on,” he said. “It can’t kill him!”

I noticed that his knees were trembling, and the little vein at the side of his head pulsed like pancake batter on a hot griddle.

“A man,” Dad said, “must be able to trust his friends in life.”

We heard a door slam and Barney emerged from the stairwell like some mushroomy growth that had been sheltered from the sunlight for too long. Dangling from his wrists, were those big blood blister gloves.

“Irving,” he announced, “I’m giving you fair warning. I’m not wearing a cup. Hit above the belt. Those are family heirlooms.”

“He’s telling me,” Dad laughed.

“Let’s get this over with, gentlemen,” Tobias said.

He summoned Barney over to the mats.

The two men stood less than an arm’s length apart, face to face, my father pugnacious, Barney suppressing a mockery that seemed to bend his smile.

Tobias told me to run and fetch towels from a pile on the nearby grandstand and keep them in readiness.

When I came back he had separated them with his arms and stood between them with a hand on each shoulder.

“When I count to three,” he said, “I step away and you two boys do whatever you like to each other above the belts. Ready? One two three.”

He stepped to the side as Barney backed off in panic and my father rushed forward swinging, and missed, and swung again, and came much closer, but missed again.

“If that’s what you call Joe Louis,” Barney said, “I’m Irish Billy Conn.”

Barney sidestepped along the edge of the mats and my dad swung again and landed with a thump on his bare right shoulder just above Barney's heart. "In case you didn't know it, that really hurt, Irv," he said. He didn't swing back.

Startled by the passivity of Barney's declaration, Dad stood stock still; now they were separated by a few yards. "Where ya running to?" he asked. He had his gloves up to his face and he came forward slowly again.

Barney tucked his head into his chest and rushed forward and grabbed my dad with both arms and started hugging him. "Come on Irv," he said. "Enough's enough. You've had your fun."

"This is no joke," Dad said. He seemed embarrassed by the intimacy of proximity and tried to shove Barney backwards and when he succeeded he launched a short uppercut that landed against his friend's throat. Barney made a terrible sound and dropped his hands and started coughing.

My dad came up close again to inspect the damage as Barney hocked up a mouthful of bloody phlegm and spat on one of the mats.

"Throw a towel over that *boychick*," he told me. "I'll clean it later."

His hands were still at his sides. "None of this was really necessary," Barney said. "I told you my reasons. We're different you and me."

He glanced up and saw my dad leaning over to inspect him like a piece of road kill. Barney had his gloves flung back down at his sides and a pained look on his face. He couldn't breathe but he rasped and coughed.

With his gloves still raised high, Dad drew closer, and still Barney couldn't stop the coughing when it came on him again and when Dad saw Barney couldn't defend himself he let his gloves drop also.

Barney glanced sideways at his opponent and rushed at him again and again threw his arms about his waist. He wasn't coughing anymore, and Dad was turning colors, seemed truly put off by such a clammy hug from his adversary.

"Hey jerko," he exclaimed, "what's this supposed to be?"

"O shut up," Barney said. He held Dad's arms in place against his body and wouldn't let go, even though his opponent squirmed and shook and stomped at his feet.

"Back off," Dad said.

"Pay attention please to the rules," Tobias said.

"What rules?" asked Barney.

"Back off," my father screamed. He didn't look particularly victorious just yet. Blindly, snapping his head back and forth against Dad's shoulder, Barney held on to Dad's body so tightly you could hear the slither and swack of belly against belly when they breathed. Barney just wouldn't let Dad free his hands to hit him again. He wouldn't let go. He looked like some infantile monster being cuddled by its dam.

"Is this the way you fight?" Dad asked him.

"Don't lecture me anymore," he said. "You really hurt me!"

"I'll rupture you," he threatened, "if you don't let go."

"I'd like to see you try, Counselor."

All the while Barney kept Dad inert with his body hugging him close.



Only by not struggling could Dad break free. At last he took a big breath and announced, ‘Fight’s over,’ and Barney dropped his arms and they broke free of each other, and stood there a few feet apart. They were breathing very loudly, there were tears in Barney’s eyes and two big red marks on his chest and his neck, and the sweat like grease all over his body.

“Here’s my chin,” he said suddenly. “Take one final free swing if you like.”

“Don’t be an idiot,” Dad replied.

“Do it,” Barney urged him. “Why not get it out of your system, Irv?”

“You haven’t got the brains you were born with,” Dad said.

He backed further off and shook his head. Both men’s bodies were shiny wet.

“Drop it right now,” Dad told Barney. “Just forget I ever said anything, you dumb *shmuck*.”

When I tossed him a towel he shrugged and started off toward the stairwell door.

Tobias approached Barney and asked how he felt.

“There’s something sticky in my throat,” he said. “I wish I could throw up.”

“A warm shower sometimes helps,” Tobias said.

“You better go to your father,” Barney told me. “He must be feeling pretty awful.”

“You never even touched him,” I said, with some pride for Dad’s show of fisticuff prowess.

“Irv can’t help himself,” Barney said then. “So why make it worse by hurting back? Even if I could,” he added. “When I had him in my Strangler Nelson hug it was my chance to get even,” he said. “But you saw I just let him go. Why do dirt if you don’t have to? Maybe I’ll forgive him someday and maybe I won’t.”

“Maybe a little ice around that throat,” Tobias said.

“It will be ok,” he said, fondling himself and wincing. He soon started coughing again and I then saw him down on all fours with that towel scrubbing up his bloody mess as I started toward the stairs.

Two floors below the gym in the dark chilly locker room, my dad sat on a bench with his head in his hands.

“Did I hurt Barney real bad?”

“What do you care?”

He took away his hands to glance at me and his face looked younger and more untroubled than I could ever remember seeing him.

“He’s my oldest friend,” Dad said. “A man ought to be able to trust somebody like that once in a while.”

“Mom sure does,” I said.

“There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to protect you and her,” he said.

“You mean Mom, don’t you?”

He closed his eyes as though to ward off a sudden migraine.

I came closer, touched him on his warm sweaty shoulder.

“Did Barney even hurt you at all?” I asked him.

Dad pushed my hand away. “I told you I can take care of myself, son,” he said. “See how your friend Barney’s doing. I’m ok,” he insisted. “When I need your sympathy, I’ll let you know.”

## LOVE HANDLES

Uncle Barney's notorious dalliance with the Rabbi's wife, Nanette, is something I should have mentioned earlier. I can't recall how old I was when it happened, probably just about to enter adolescence. I mention it belatedly only because it was so connected with his relationships with both my parents. Being a studiously virtuous man, only Dr. Glickfeld, the rabbi, somehow managed to avoid taking notice of what was going on right under his nose and what was being said.

It certainly didn't escape the notice of Mom, another one of Uncle Barney's lady friends, nor of Barney's putative girlfriend, Beth Steingut, who was trying to replace Minna as Mom's best friend. These two women regularly monitored Barney and consulted each other about his other "activities." They seemed to feel, though it was never stated quite so openly or directly between them, that whatever went on within the confines of an extended family circle comprising themselves was more or less acceptable. Stepping beyond this into an area of public sanctity, with the Rebbetzin, of all people, was crass, boisterous, ill-mannered, and embarrassing.

Once I overheard my mother and Lady Beth, as my dad called her, talking about "that slut, Nanette."

"You would think," Mom said, "she would be aware of the vulnerability of her husband's position in the Community."

"If his contract is not renewed," Beth pointed out, "she'll have only her open legs to blame."

It was different when “Uncle Barney” had his little thing with Mom’s sister-in-law, Dora. Dora had a good divorce from Uncle Mac, Mom’s brother, and was so well-to-do and such a climber it was a foregone conclusion Barney wouldn’t persevere with her for longer than a boast, in Minna’s words. Then he was widowed and set free and others set Barney’s heart ablaze for a weekend or a fortnight and he dismissed them as passing distractions. But now, a stubbornly single man, both the major women in his life were jealous of Barney with the beautiful Nanette and began to utter ominous predictions. Just as I would surely catch a bad cold if I went outside to play basketball in changeable April weather without taking along a sweater, so Nanette Glickfeld’s wreckless “carrying on” with Barney Goldman, despite her beauty and renown at Jewish cuisine, was jeopardizing the job security of her husband, the Rabbi, and the mental health of their only son, Robbie.

“It’s a shame she can’t stick to her books and pots,” my dad said.

“She likes putz, not pots,” said Beth. “For shame!”

Because such prognostications were intended chiefly as ways of reassuring Dad, Mom and newcomer Beth that they still counted in Barney’s charmed daze of a life, they had barely any effect on affable Barney or the Rabbi’s wife. Nanette Glickfeld was much too busy wrapping her long legs about her lover’s bulky body and otherwise enjoying his company. He would drop in from Valley Stream for a matinee and sleep over at our house. They were even seen together once taking lunch at Michel’s French Restaurant on Flatbush Avenue, sharing shad roe and bacon and glasses of May wine with strawberries.

During all this Dr. Glickfeld remained husbandly and devout; he was a bald portly man with a pout suggestive to my childish mind of his being as disappointed with the Creation as his Creator no doubt was with him. The rabbi and his beloved Nanette both hailed from well-established, prominent Ashkenazi quasi rabbinical families of means from the Midwest. Independent of her husband, she had long ago cast off puritanical restraint and seemed sensual, easy and fey. She was an avid folk dancer and gave lessons in the *hora* and the Greek circle dance. Every man in *shul* probably would have liked to *shmeck* her cooking, were the departed Minna's words for this woman who was not yet a rival. Nanette was this pale, somewhat wan, leggy redhead with a soft blue stare who rarely came to synagogue to pray except when she had a new dress, or hair style, to show off. "A bundle of looks," my mother said.

Usually Nanette wore her dark red hair piled high on top of her head in a bundle. Sometimes she showed up with little ringlets along her cheekbones like Madame Recamier, and once, on *Lag b'Omer*, when she planted a flowering Japanese cherry tree in a tub on the sidewalk before services, she had a long ponytail dangling over the back of her seat afterward in Temple.

My Sunday school chum, Paul Pines, said he would just like to reach out and touch her sometime.

Though sexy, Nanette was demure, favoring dark velvet and brocade dresses with scooped necks. Generally she showed more bosom than most other women in the congregation, but always decorously, sitting as near to the *bima* as she could during her husband's sermons, with her head bowed beneath a piece of old lace, out of respect. She was said to be an eager student of Midrash and Pentateuch. As he addressed the congregation, Rabbi Glickfeld seemed to take small delight in his wife's physical bounties. Bashfully, stumbling a little on his words,

he liked to interject little parables here and there about what his comely and gracious wife had said to him that very morning over breakfast concerning an item in the news about the Palestine question, or an event in Jewish History.

“History is like the proverbial *kreple*,” I can hear him perorating huskily. “We stuff it with our own hopes and desires.” He likened women in the congregation to Ruth and to Rebecca, the ever-vivacious radiance of the *Shechinah*.

But, even in an upscale, modern Jewish congregation such as ours, a Rabbi was expected to control his wife and not be a goddamn patsy, as my dad put it, with his usual lack of self-knowledge. So Dr. Glickfeld’s unrequited love of the Godhead was considered by all the important trustees as far more acceptable than his unrequited love for his loose wife. When the Congregation voted that spring his contract was not renewed.

Almost everybody, except my mother and Beth, blamed this on Uncle Barney. He was accused of heartlessly seducing this fragile weak woman, of being a house wrecker, a *bulvan*, and a ne’er-do-well.

“If that’s the case,” Beth replied, “who forced Miss Fancy Pants to sunbathe with her round heels and her nay nays showing in the Botanic Gardens?”

“She had her hooks out for your guy all the while from the very first day I agree,” Mom said, presuming, I suppose, she would have the intimate side of “Uncle Barney” almost to herself from then on.

It didn’t happen to work out that way. Barney had fallen “hook, line and kisser,” in my father’s words, for the beautiful scholar *rebbetzin*, and was threatening to elope with her to Mexico where they could easily live in sin on Barney’s income and her trust fund.

“Barney couldn’t last a month in Mexico,” my mother said. “He has to have his smoked fish and the Times every Sunday morning.”

“My very thought,” Beth said. “I wouldn’t mind travelling with him sometime. But let him go for now. It will teach him a lesson about *Pirge*, even *nafkeh*, from a *rebbetzin*.”

My father, nevertheless, was alarmed by the public impropriety of the situation and summoned Barney to our house to discuss his plans.

First Dad informed Barney that whatever else one thought of the Rabbi he was a noteworthy scholar of Aramaic and the book of Maccabees, and his *kurva* of a wife was his pride and joy, a homemaker par excellence, whatever else.

Then he offered to pay Barney a small monthly stipend not to desert his dependent daughter and new girlfriend. Then he berated Barney and even threatened him. “I’ll have your insurance license revoked.”

“Go right ahead. Do me the favor,” Uncle Barney replied. “There’s no such thing.”

From the next room I could hear the nasal falsetto rage in Dad’s voice. “It’s longevity in a relationship that counts my friend, not just nooky. How dare you do this to Minna’s grave? To all of us? What about me?” he caterwauled. “I’m your friend and I might be President of this institution some day.”

Uncle Barney’s basso rejoinder was full of sadness, though barely contrite: “I’m sorry about the scandal, Irv. You just don’t understand. The rabbi’s marriage was essentially loveless. Empty *balkes*.”

“A *shtup* I understand. A roll in the hay?” my father said. “What’s to understand? But an adulterous relationship with the wife of our spiritual leader is right out of Sodom and Gomorra.”

“It isn’t that way at all,” Uncle Barney said. “It’s more much more...a certain tenderness.”

“Don’t give me that tenderizing crap,” my father said. “You were being impulsive!”

“So be it! I love the woman,” Barney said. “Don’t you know what that means? There isn’t strength enough I can ever get to resist her!”

Love like that was certainly news to my father, who like most of the men at Temple regarded male responsiveness as unmasculine, almost sissyish. He asked Barney since when was he an expert on right and wrong?

“I’m talking amour and passion,” Uncle Barney said. “There is no right and wrong. It’s a color to the face, a taste in the mouth, a different heartbeat and it could mean a lifetime commitment. A first in my heart.”

“I’ll have you committed to King’s County!” Dad scoffed. “What are you saying? Up down up down on the bed is that commitment? Children? Money in the bank?”

“More, it’s so much more,” said Barney. “I can’t ever get enough of her, the smell of her on my face, in my hair.”

“O come on, fella.”

It’s never been like this before, Irv,” said Barney, and he got up from his chair and stormed out of the house.



Immediately Mom and Beth left the kitchen, where they'd been stationed by Dad to eavesdrop, and hurried into my father.

"He's throwing away our life together," Beth announced.

"And so selfish," Mom added.

But as there was plainly nothing my father could do to stop Barney, the two women seemed to calm down after a while and wait and see what would happen next.

In a month the Rabbi gave his farewell sermon and moved back to Cincinnati with poor little Robbie in tow. Nanette and Barney flew to San Miguel Allende and sent back no pretty postcards. Mom and Dad went off for a brief vacation in the Bahamas.

When they returned, Beth took Masha for a week's vacation to a dude ranch in the Hamptons as her guest. My dad hired a private detective from the Federal District of Mexico to investigate Barney's circumstances in San Miguel.

The reports he sent back were unequivocal. Barney and his lady love were still enthralled with each other. When, at nightfall, they appeared at the principal café near the Zocalo to take refreshment after so many hours of roilsome lovemaking, the *mozos* and their customers applauded, and the *mariachis* voluntarily serenaded them. They were celebrities, known to all as "*los Gringos chingandos*."

Since Beth, meanwhile, couldn't look after Masha permanently, and Masha had passed her driver's ed course and now had a license, Barney's teenaged daughter was allowed to live alone in Valley Stream while she finished high school, and my father sent her a small increment to Barney's monthly maintenance check which Dad said he would eventually collect from "Little Mr. Goldman's hide."

Then, one day, Barney returned from Mexico alone and glum and saw his estranged girlfriend and then his child and immediately took up residence again with Masha, though not Beth. They saw each other only on weekends now. My father explained in Yiddish to my mother how “the *rebbetzin* did him dirt with a wealthy industrialist from Cuernavaca.”

“What did he expect would happen?” she declared, angrily.

Beth seemed gladder than Masha to have Barney back. He found a company in Binghamton whose policies he wrote for a while, and for a while his little improvised family arrangement seemed to prosper again.

Only Mom remained cross, displeased. It was terrible to feel like an old shoe. She didn’t want Barney around the house anymore.

But they must have run into each other somewhere somehow at least one more time because by June of the year of Barney’s return from South of the Border he’d quit insurance again and was driving Mom and me to Jones Beach on hot days when Dad couldn’t leave the office early and, in front of the Roadside Rest in Rockville Center I heard him tell Mom in Yiddish, “In all respects you more than equal Nanette.”

“Don’t even mention that woman’s name,” Mom replied.

“Only as a relative disappointment in your superb company,” Barney continued. “As I even told Beth....”

Later, when we went bashing into the waves while Mom sunbathed on a towel, Barney shouted into my ear above the crashing surf, “This is the life kiddo. You’ll see. You’ll be grownup someday soon.”

“I really can’t wait,” I shouted back.

And as the tide pulled us into shore, I heard him bellow a song out from flat on his back:

“When Israel was in Egypt Land  
Let my people go.  
Oppressed so hard they could not stand  
Let my people go.”

Later that summer, I went to camp Balfour Lake, in the Adirondacks, as a counselor in training, and, wonder of wonder, one of my charges was little Robbie Glickfeld with his myopic stare. He didn't recognize me but I knew who he was. According to our senior counselor, Bob Keane, Robbie and his mom were now living together again in Great Neck where his father had a small congregation, though he and Mrs. Glickfeld were now divorced, the rabbi having remarried to a lawyer.

On Parents' Day Nanette herself brought a huge flashlight and a big box of Barricini chocolates for her son. She looked sunny and fit, though older, of course, a little careworn, and she also didn't seem to recognize me when she handed me a \$10 tip for teaching Robbie the Australian crawl all of July so I introduced myself as Irv Fishback's son and she turned beet red and asked had I seen Barney Goldman lately?

“O,” I said, “he'll be dropping by later in the day with my folks. They're all on vacation together.”

Later that day my parents and Barney and Beth Steingut did show up in Dad's brand new midnight blue Chrysler New Yorker to take me out to dinner and a movie. They were on an automobile tour of the Adirondacks and tomorrow would be visiting Masha at riding camp in Saratoga.

I don't know who spotted who first—Barney or Nanette, or Beth? Or my dad? Or Mom?

All I know is at Fan & Bill's in Warrensberg the mood was very glum over sliced rare steak and tomato salad. Barney's excuse was he wasn't feeling at all well. He thought he needed hydrotherapy at Bear Mountain. Beth whispered to my Mom, "He still pines for that slut...."

"Don't be foolish," Mom replied. "He couldn't care less. He barely looked at her."

My father recommended a GI series with Moe Glass and an EKG.

"I'm fine really," Barney said. "I just have no appetite lately. Tired blood."

We ate the rest of the meal in silence. At dessert the hostess came to our table to ask if one of us was Barney Goldman.

"I guess that's me," he said, rising from his chair with a weary leery grin on his face as the rest of us just stared.

The hostess said she had a call for Mr. Goldman at the cashier's counter and she led him away with her.

"Honestly," Mom said, "the nerve of some people."

"It could be Masha's camp," Beth said. "Barney told them we might be eating here just in case she didn't want me to come along to visit with him.

"You're always making excuses for the guy," Mom said.

"Please," Barney's weekend wife said. "I don't want to talk about this right now with you."

Barney was gone ten minutes or more. When he returned he looked even more crestfallen, pale, and trembling, and I noticed for the first time an unsightly gravy stain on the breast pocket of his white short-sleeved shirt.

“You can choose friends,” he said when he sat down among us, “but you can’t choose when they’ll call.” He glanced at every person in his audience, as though making sad acknowledgment of the disastrous consequences of his former scapegrace behavior; and, when she asked what took him so long, he spoke to Beth with a delicacy and tenderness I had not noted in him toward her previously.

“You needn’t fear, dear heart,” he said. “I’m not planning to leave you again for that woman, or any other,” he added, “but certain things in life demand punctuation. The end.”

“What are you telling me now?” she asked.

“That, as I know you suspected, was Nanette Glickfeld on the phone,” Barney said. “She wished to apologize to me for past cruelties, and I accepted, of course, but I said she didn’t owe me any explanations as I was no longer so taken with her.”

“That’s what I like to hear Barney,” my father said.

“The end,” he repeated. “What goes up comes down. Finished Fishback!”

“You mean to say she didn’t know that already?” Beth asked.

I guess she just wanted to hear it said, as I did,” Barney added. “You can choose friends,” he repeated.

“O Barney please,” Mom interjected.

“I closed,” he added, “by hoping we might just all be on polite terms again someday.”

“You mean friends?” said Beth. “Of all the gall.”

“In a manner of speaking,” Barney said. “She’s a very troubled person, very serious, and lonely, and she has a problem child,” Barney added.

“Welcome to the club,” my Mom said.

And Beth said, “If she ever.”

“Leave well enough alone, please Beth,” said my dad. “It’s a bit of a shock, I grant you, but it’s best we all make bygones into bygones.

“Who can disagree?” shrugged Barney.

“That’s not my heart you see on my sleeve,” Beth added.

“Change the subject somebody,” Mom said. “Irv, will you change the subject? I want my coffee.”

To the best of my knowledge in the years that followed Barney’s last goodbye to Nanette, he and Beth were on fairly good terms and he rarely strayed, except maybe once or twice a year, or with Mom on special occasions.

In the late 50s, when I was fully grown, Nanette Glickfeld-Fleischman, as she now called herself, became one of the first female rabbis in our branch of Judaism after a long course of study, and my parents and widower Barney, but without Beth, as they later told me, were present at her ordination, along with her ailing and frail ex-husband, the Rabbi. As one of the foremost laymen in Liberal Judaism, my father was asked to say a few words and Barney helped him to write down his thoughts in advance.

He quoted Micah: “Do justice. Love mercy.”

Afterwards at the reception Barney and Nanette hugged and “it looked almost innocent,” my mom reported to me in a letter.

She said she and my dad were about to make their first trip abroad together on the Zim Line to Israel, Morocco, and the French Riviera.

And Barney? I wrote back. What's old Uncle Barney doing these days?

"Like always there's Beth and he still runs around with the occasional chippies, but he seems like a changed man. He just can't do enough for Masha, and he's paying back all he owes to your father in installments."

"And you are still a part of his life?" I wrote back with deferential politesse.

Mom called me on the phone at college and spoke sharply: "I don't know what you think you were talking about with me and your Uncle Barney and I don't want to ever hear you say such things to me ever again...and if you make trouble for me with your father you'll be sorry..."

"Mom," I said, "I didn't mean it the way you think."

"What do you know anyway about women's lives?" she shouted. "You and Mr. Barney Google, you're all alike. So goddamn selfish you don't know how you hurt until you draw blood."

"I'm very sorry," I told her again.

"Sorry?" she mimicked. "I only wish poor Minna were still alive. She told me once she was actually ready to divorce Barney but she was just too sick by then. "I'm long gone," she said. "Masha needs at least one parent anyway." Minna was the only one who kept Barney from going completely haywire," she added, "and she and I could talk...O how we talked," Mom said.

"You must be very lonely without her," I said.

"Why do you think we're sailing first class to Israel?" Mom said.

When I wished her *bon voyage*, she added, “Ronald my son, take a good look at yourself someday in the mirror and then ask yourself.”

“Meaning what?” I inquired.

“I’m not saying physical,” she told me. “But you two are as alike as peas in a pod in the manly dimension and God help your father if he ever had the sense to notice that.

Before we stopped talking entirely I once told my father in an argument that I doubted he and I could be of the same flesh and blood.

He didn’t seem as hurt as I’d hoped he would be.

“Just because your mom and I conceived you on a weekend trip to Loch Sheldrake with the Goldmans in the old days,” he told me, “doesn’t mean you’re the boy of my dreams.”

Later, at a chance encounter with Barney when I had just published my first book, called “Philanthropy: The Consumer’s View,” I mentioned this exchange with the man who had been Irv’s best friend.

“Surely you must see, Ron,” he said, “that you can’t expect love and understanding from your own flesh and blood. Hurt makes hurt,” he added. “It’s the way some families actually are.”

“And you?” I asked. “How are you such a different *neshoma*?”

“I doubt if anybody could be as dumb as I once was,” Barney told me. “To deny the possibility of Paradise in the arms of my beloved?”

“You mean Nanette?” I asked.

“I mean my total lack of faith,” Barney said. “Violating the Commandments is only one indication of how alone I always felt.



“You?” I asked him.

“You had better believe I’m still a very lonely person,” he added. “I always have been. Except when I’m actually in bed with a woman and then I do whatever I can to please and try to keep my big mouth shut.”

## **PART IV**

## THE VISIT

Sometime in the fifties, when I was in the middle of my teenage slump, Mom and Uncle Barney went off on a sort of holiday trip together; I went along more or less as their chaperon.

To visit Masha Goldman in Florida, where she was then living with her first husband, Lieutenant J.G. (Joe) Dolan, Barney convinced his friend, Irv, and his own current companion, Beth Steingut, from Long Beach, Long Island, that my mom's presence would be essential for making peace between Masha and her dad.

Barney felt Masha's sudden elopement after only three or four dates with a young Naval officer from Patchogue whom she'd met the first time on the Eastbound LIRR was "the cry for help of this motherless child."

He tried by legal means to intervene, at first, and then kept his distance a while, and just sent checks.

"She still needs her father," my mom said. "But you have to learn how to accept her as a woman."

After just one phone call, Barney finally decided that letting go would require seeing and talking with Masha again. He went to see a prominent psychiatrist who prescribed Ritalin for his own mood swings, but this doctor also thought Masha's behavior was decidedly rebellious. He said she needed to see people she cared about who had been in her life when she was little, as she was living entirely among strangers and was probably very alienated from them, too, he supposed. I doubt if Barney told the psychiatrist about Mom and himself because the man said Mom, as mother Minna's closest female friend, could do a *mitzvah* by accompanying Barney.

He had Barney point out to Beth that Masha might even have taken offense if he brought along one of his current “girlfriends.”

Barney knew he could trust Mom not to make a big deal about his thing with Beth. Beth was just company, a distraction, no real threat to their friendship. Mom and Barney had an understanding, I suppose, that as long as she remained married to Dad he would be permitted to also have friendships with other women like Beth. “Company” is what he called them.

The day before we departed on this surprise visit, Beth called my mom on the phone, ostensibly to check out if she could send a present along to Masha through Mom to help the reconciliation along, but also to determine by indirection if this trip was truly on the up and up.

She spoke to my dad, who was much too busy at the office these days to take time off for a trip South and he told Beth Mom would also be travelling with “our son, Ronald.” He explained his wife felt she couldn’t leave me to my own devices in Brooklyn for a week or I’d end up “in all sorts of trouble.”

With the way cleared for all three of us to form the travelling party that flew to Miami, Barney arranged to rent a car to take us down along the causeway to Key West where Joe was an aide at President Truman’s “vacation White House.”

Though I never doubted that the other purpose of the trip was romantic, I went along with their charade as mascot and decoy. Surely nothing too sexy would be taking place while they were in my company.

When Beth showed her face at Eastern Airlines to see us off, Barney displayed no outward sign of embarrassment. “What a perfect blendship,” he announced when he gave Beth a

big hug and a kiss goodbye and accepted the crystal vase wrapped by Altman's she insisted he deliver for her to his daughter.

Seated together afterwards in the cabin of the plane, Mom and Barney almost seemed like an old married couple on an anniversary jaunt. When they went down the gangplank onto the tarmac, with me dragging behind them, and into the frosted confines of the Miami Airport, we looked like one of those very ordinary Diane Arbus families on a holiday visit to the Fun House, in those vertical panels of mirrors we kept passing.

A book club premium of "Remembrance of Things Past" in a three volume boxed set had arrived at our house in the mails recently. Nobody else in the household seemed eager to read Proust; I was young enough not to have any fear of so much verbiage. I started my daydreaming with Swann's Way. Then Barney recommended that I take an entirely different approach to my reading project, beginning in the middle and reading backwards and forwards at the same time to increase my sense of the "circle-jerkularity" of the form.

"This is all probably over your head right now," he admitted. "I know it's over my head. That never stopped me from browsing into great literature. Proust is the Romain Rolland of underground sex," Barney said. "For every Jewish boy he's a must. The *sine qua non* on jealousy," he added, "and love."

On the plane south I'd lugged along *Albertine Disappears* and *Guermante's Way*. Barney came and sat beside me for some moments.

"You see," he said. "It's better to write long than short. People will take you more seriously."

He told me to notice how actions and words were never alike for anybody in the novels save for Joupin, the pimp, and his customer, the Baron Charlus. “*Albertine Disappears*,” he pointed out, “is a lot less candid because Albertine is not really so needy. Imagine Marcel Proust writing *Swann’s Way* on Ritalin,” he said. “Imagine him writing anything at all on Ritalin. The man had a terrible asthma.”

I said I didn’t quite get the connection.

“The stuff seems to seal off my head in a perfect vacuum, but outside of it I sit here with your mom like a bag of worries and I’ve got to get myself together before we see Masha.”

“She’ll be glad we came,” I assured him.

“Don’t bet on it,” Barney told me. “Read Proust. Search for lost time! Study to be a genius!”

When we arrived in Key West, he registered us in a suite of rooms in an old hotel from Flagler’s era along Duvall Street. He said it would be so much cheaper and commodious than each of us having his or her private accommodation, and besides, he pointed out, the suite had recently been air-conditioned whereas most of the private rooms in town had not. Mom was given a large airy room with a king-sized bed facing front, and Barney assigned me the “cork lined” serving maid’s warren next to the kitchen. He’d be sleeping on a sofa bed in the living room “like Masha used to do when she was little.”

My mother was in very good spirits as soon as we left Beth and the bitter cold of a New York late March behind us. She’d bought new outfits for herself and presents for Masha and her husband, and house presents, and she was humming and singing “Sentimental Journey” and

“Red Sails” all the way down the narrow concrete ribbon of causeway. Once, Barney stopped the car on a speck of land between spans and made us step out above the coral key and look out to all sides at the beautiful emerald green sea.

“Thalassa thalassa,” he chanted, “the sea is our massa.”

“That’s Greek to me,” Mom shrugged.

“Forever rebeginning,” he said. “*It’s like a puzzle, back and forth, all the time, like the waves....*”

“What’s he talking about now?” I asked her.

Barney, she explained, was just full of odd and distracting memories with this medicine nonsense.

As soon as we got up to our rooms and had all showered and unpacked, he said we’d take a stroll around the old part of the City, and “reconnoiter,” his word for it, “Masha’s living quarters” and have us a big crab sucking dinner and pay her a visit “right about Vesper time, I imagine.”

“I was stationed here during the War,” he reminded me and Mom. “Lovely little garden spot, Mr. Hemingway kept company here with his rich second wife, Miss Pauline, and the artist Audubon, who was a person of color as we now know. During the war, German U-boats were only a few miles out to sea guarding the sugar lanes to Cuba.

“Beth’s guy Jose was a gunner’s mate on our boat. That’s how we all met again at a reunion of the old crew. It was a great place to spend the war. Anti-Semites aside,” he pointed

out, "I was actually sorry when I got demobilized. You shoulda seen Beth in a one piece suit back in those days."

"Frankly Barney," Mom said, "you do blab on a bit too much."

"I guess so," he agreed solemnly. "I didn't take my dose this morning." But he seemed to cheer himself up almost immediately, and returned to his garrulous manner.

"I wrote a poem back then," he announced as he gunned the car down along the elevated causeway with sea on all sides of us:

"Titty bobbing sea  
sea rich with mollusk stinks  
and kiddy pee  
and dolphin caca,  
sea with an ebbing spritz  
of salt against the eyes  
and foam between the wader's legs,  
hygienic sea, rowdy  
delinquent sea  
full of sharks and conch  
and cuttlefish ink...."

"Must you be so smutty all the time?" Mom exclaimed, with a little giggle. "You'll embarrass poor Ronald."

"I've heard worse," I told her.

"The sea's our mother," Barney went on.



“Womb of the world  
which the sleek undersea eel  
penetrates.”

“That’s disgusting,” Mom said.

“You’re never very far from the sound and sight of the Caribbean down here in the Keys along the Florida Straits,” Barney said. “And those sunsets. We used to go out with a deck full of depth charges and a hold stacked full of beer to chase U-boats and there they all were, in crystalline shallows, like schools of marlin.”

“I doubt if marlin run in schools,” I corrected him.

“Barracuda. You get the intent,” he said, “of my figuration. This is no place for a young bride, I assure you,” he told Mom. “The sailors running riot every payday, the outrageous fairies and dykes and cross dressers.”

“O Barney please,” Mom said. “It’s a government reservation.”

“Homintern maybe,” Barney said. “Mr. Truman comes here to drink and play poker. I know whereof I speak. The only industry on the whole island is boozing. Those drunken sailors used to run poor Beth ragged. That was wartime I admit. Stuck here with her Navy lout my poor Masha.”

“You never know,” she said. “Joe could be extremely sweet and attentive.”

“You don’t know sailors like I do,” Barney told her.

Later, after supper we all went to pay a visit to the new bride and groom. Just as we were going out the door my father called to find out if we’d arrived safely. All I heard was Mom’s end of the conversation.

“Yes...what is it, Irv?” Of course we got here. We’re safe? What’s not to be safe about...It’s a big old hotel nothing fancy...I’ll call when it’s time to leave. Don’t worry...O stop that I won’t...But I’m not...I miss you too, Irving.”

“Your dad probably had an idle moment,” Barney told me.

“He was worried about sharks,” Mom explained, with a red face, after hanging up. “I shouldn’t go swimming with my period.”

“Just what we need is half assed superstition,” Barney grinned, nervously.

He was concerned to make a show of good feeling at the initial encounter, didn’t want to make Masha and Joe “defensive.” “Personally, I’ve got nothing against the bum,” he said, as we drove off, “but I’m also partial to Big Joe Turner, the blues shouter, and I don’t think he’d be right for Masha either.”

“We’ll see,” Mom told him.

Masha was living in a cottage faced with lime and oyster shells on the lee side of the Island. The American flag flew from a pole sticking out of the eaves. There was a tiny flat sandy green lawn and a banana tree, a couple of lime bushes close to the house, and when we arrived Dolan had changed over into civvies from his duty whites after his day’s tour at the base and was sitting on the front lawn in a deck chair in Bermuda shorts with a can of beer. He was a lean good looking fellow with a shock of blonde hair cropped short on top. Just the sort you’d want to help guard a President.

Barney parked the car a few yards down from the house and bade us follow him. As we approached, Dolan realized these strangers were visitors.

“Don’t bother yourself with formalities,” Barney told him with a wave of his hand. “That I’m your father-in-law Barnett Goldman, Masha’s pa, goes without saying—and these are old friends and we thought we’d stop by and say how do to my favorite daughter and her mate, since we never have been properly introduced. Is Number One daughter about?”

“O yes sir,” the slightly addled sailor said, snapping to attention: “Masha honey it’s your dad come to see you with some other people.”

“Take it easy number one son-in-law,” Barney told him as Dolan raced up on the veranda like his footman to bring down more deck chairs. “Please,” Joe insisted, “make yourselves comfortable. Can I fetch anybody a beer?”

“Not at the mo’,” Barney said.

A little later Masha appeared out on the veranda, looking pale and careworn and, surprisingly, pregnant, in a flimsy frock imprinted with tiny pink wild sweet peas, and when she saw who was waiting for her on the lawn the color came to her cheeks, and she ran to greet us.

“Pop,” she said. “Why didn’t you tell me you were in Florida?”

She threw herself into his arms and hung there, and then broke loose and kissed Shirl and me, and made sure to inquire if we’d all met Joe and if he’d offered us any hospitality.

“It seems to me,” Barney said, “under the circumstances, daughter, Joe can’t be faulted one bit.” He went over to his son-in-law and slapped him heartily on the back. “Gotten her in the family way have you old son?”

“Why yes sir?” he stammered.

“Please don’t sir me Commodore,” Barney said. “Take a seat! We’ll only be a minute or two on family business.”

My mom took this as a signal and went to the car to get her presents and Barney said he'd have a brew now, if the offer was still valid, "and a couple of cokes for my crew," he added, "and they don't even have to be Kosher."

When Joe climbed the veranda again to fill Barney's order, my mom handed Masha her presents. "You don't have to open them now," she told Barney's daughter.

There was Beth's vase and a service for four of George Jenson stainless steel flatware, and a couple of platters, and a lovely white summer handbag from Lord & Taylor's, and a fancy Chinese tea pot, and little porcelain cups in the same design and a kosher salami, and a pretty tin box of Ceylon tea, and I can't remember what else. "It's a good thing I didn't try to buy you any dresses," Mom teased.

Masha laughed. She was delighted with everything and belly proud and very pleased when Barney handed her a big roll of twenties and told her to buy things for herself and the baby which she'd be needing.

"You'll stay with us," Masha said. "We have plenty of room."

"We're doing just fine in our hotel downtown," Barney said.

"O, please," she said.

"It's been my observation, child, that uninvited proximities can often lead to unwanted acrimony," Barney observed. "I snore and fart a lot of late, due to these medicine salts I've been ingesting, as I suppose you recall, and you do need your space. Shirl and I will be as comfy as toads in our individual beds downtown."

"You've come all this way," she said.

“Well,” Barney paused to grin and lick his mustaches, “Junior here is a little cramped in his cell. What about it, Ron?” he asked me. “We’ll only be another couple of days.”

I felt for Masha and Joe as Pip must have felt when the convict Abel Magwitch came to visit him in his rooms that first time. I also felt very protective toward my mother (and my father), and I certainly didn’t care to spoil any of her and Barney’s fun. Also I didn’t think I’d enjoy overhearing them...So, at last, I was coaxed into becoming Masha’s and Joe’s houseguest. After Masha’s husband returned with our refreshments, Joe drove me back to the hotel to get my things.

Before I left Mom took me aside. “You’re really welcome to stay with us. Barney had no call getting you to do otherwise. And you can telephone anytime you get uncomfortable at Masha’s!”

I said I thought I truly might be more comfortable at Masha’s, under the circumstances.

“I’m sure you know what’s best for you,” she shrugged, “but there’s really no reason....”

As it turned out I rather liked staying with the newlyweds. When he wasn’t in uniform Joe had a lot of time on his hands and he let me drink beer with him and taught me how to roll my own cigarettes. He taught me his way with push-ups and sit-ups and something he called the Navy Squat. He told me all the funny dirty things Truman would say to his escorts when he had a bag on.

“With a woman as far gone as Masha it’s hard to stay in shape,” he confided to me, “but I’m still working at it.”

Joe got me up at dawn's first light every morning and we went for a run, then he showered, and changed into the fresh whites that Masha had laundered and pressed for him the night before, took a little breakfast, and had a beer and left for the base, which meant Masha and I had plenty of time to chat and get reacquainted. "Joe really likes his beer," I told her.

She said he used it to "cool off."

When I asked if she was happy in her new life with Joe, she told me she felt "less isolated" than living alone with Barney in Valley Stream.

"Joe's not like me in lots of ways," she said, "but he's not Navy trash and tries to be good to me most of the time."

I thought this was an odd way of talking about the man with whom she'd eloped and I asked about her having the baby. Was she very excited?

Again Masha's reply had a note of fatalism. "It was probably inevitable," she said, "because Joe's Roman Catholic and wouldn't use a thingy, and he wouldn't let me, either. Either he knocked me up on the first shot, or maybe it happened even before that," she giggled.

"You know what I mean, don't you?" she insisted. I was blushing.

I said I even kept a few little "thingys" like that in my wallet just in case, but I had never had any cause to use them.

"You will soon enough," she said.

In the heat Masha was often uncomfortable with her bulk so she used to lie out on an air mattress on the veranda and I'd be sitting up next to her watching her belly slide back and forth beneath her frock when she breathed.

Usually Barney and Mom arrived about 11 every morning in the car after a late breakfast and Masha would prepare a picnic and we'd all go off to the beach for the day. It was my first time in Florida and I enjoyed the surf bathing, and Barney truly reveled in the warm clear soupy water while Mom and Masha stayed behind on the beach blanket and chatted, or waded.

Barney had great trust in Mom's ability to talk woman to woman to his daughter. He considered Masha gallant and smart, but she lacked humor and took her impulses too seriously. She definitely needed talking to, "softening up," he said, as she was being much too stoical. "Making love is one thing. Running off with this Dolan fella," he insisted, "was a suicidal act," not so much rebellion as profound disaffection. He called Joe "a bell bottom hick."

"I don't believe in gilding the lily," he said, "But I admire my own candor."

"Seems to me," I put in, "you admire yourself a lot more than you think. Joe's really OK."

"OK is Swahili for very ordinary," he said. He thought his daughter was making the mistake of her life, but he also told me when we were standing before the urinals in a public "comfort station" off the causeway that there was no mistake a person could make before the age of thirty which wouldn't easily be rectified.

There wasn't any doubt in my mind that some of Barney's attitudes were influenced by the love he'd rekindled in himself for my mom. She and he looked so blissfully happy that they were together at last. You could tell from their cheery dispositions in the mornings when they arrived to pick us up; they rarely tried to hide their expressions of delight with each other. Mom's expression was constant and joyful at every moment, as though she was inhaling the perfume of a very fragrant but invisible rose that kept her slightly addled and besotted.

On our last day in Key West, President Truman and his retinue did arrive for a brief holiday at his vacation cottage and security on the island was considerably tightened. When we went to the beach we were questioned by a Secret Service man in a cabana set. “Do I look Puerto Rican?” Barney asked.

For the evening’s meal he had proposed that we all go for a big Cuban dinner in a restaurant he’d heard about as his treat. Unfortunately, Joe pulled guard duty around the base where Truman was staying that night so we went as a foursome. Mom, me, Barney and Masha.

We decided we would all watch the sunset and leave Barney’s car in a lot near the waterfront and walk to the restaurant along Duvall Street. In the fragrant darkness Masha was short of breath and a little slow in keeping up, while Barney and Mom walked ahead, hand in hand.

Mom was wearing her new outfit, a flowery white jacket and skirt with a scoop necked middy blouse from which a lot of bosom was showing. Walking by her side, so much taller than she was, Barney kept peering sideways down her top as if standing guard over those irksome bosoms.

“They look like a couple of overgrown truants,” was Masha’s comment.

I didn’t agree.

“You mustn’t be too shocked by what’s doing on,” she said. “I got used to it at an early age. Barney and his women friends were as much a part of my childhood as Jack Benny on Sunday nights. The older you get you find yourself getting used to things like that. Now that the baby is coming,” she said, “Joe is seeing this other woman at the base, and I find it doesn’t bother me at all. It’s sort of a relief.”



“O Masha,” I said. I was truly very sad for her.

“Barney’s always had the right ideas,” she said, but her voice cracked. “People do these things. Not monsters! No use in getting real worked up.”

“Do you think we’ll ever be happy?” I asked her.

“You mean,” she said, “like my dad and your mom?”

“Sort of like that, maybe.”

“Depends on whether we happen to sin as much,” she grinned. “Lots of girls are going to like you, Ron. I know that.”

We entered the restaurant behind Mom and Barney and we were shown to a large round table in the rear. Barney took one look at the menu and said if we liked he would order for all of us. He asked the waiter for a bottle of cold white wine.

Mom was a little disappointed in the décor. It was a long homey diner of a place, surfaced entirely with Formica, chrome, Naugahyde and plate glass, very different from the sort of establishments where she usually dined with my Dad.

“I wouldn’t know what to order in a place like this,” she said.

Masha thought she would just have a little white bean soup and a salad, as her stomach hadn’t been quite right.

Barney ordered that for her, along with a rich chocolate shake “for the baby,” he said, and for us plates of black beans and plantains, and yucca, and avocado salad, and sliced suckling pig, and a grouper fish deep fried, and a plate of spicy Spanish chorizo sausages. This was going to be a Cuban high cholesterol celebration.

The place was getting crowded. They were mostly Secret Service men in Palm Beach suits. “What’s the President up to these days?” Barney asked his neighbor.

The man pretended not to hear him.

“Honestly,” Barney asked. “Do I look like an assassin?”

“More like a jackass,” the man said.

When the meal was served he announced to Masha that she had no idea how pretty she looked “knocked up.”

“Do you ever have morning sickness?” Mom asked.

Barney repeated she looked just fine. How pleased he was that their families had been reunited.

“I can’t believe you said that Dad,” she told him.

“These things just come popping out of Barney’s mouth sometimes,” Mom declared.

“Do you throw up a lot?”

“Truth is,” Masha said, “Mom told me once if she hadn’t been late that time we wouldn’t be much of a family at all.”

“That’s rather an exaggeration,” Barney replied.

“Mom told me,” Masha said, “while she was in the hospital giving birth, you were boffing one of her nurses.”

“That’s also not quite true,” he protested. “But, even if it were, there’s no time like the present for starters. And now that I’m gonna be a grandpa it’s going to be a different story entirely.”

“Don’t sell me insurance,” Masha said. “Be my father Barney!”

“I didn’t did I,” he told her. “I just wish you two an awful lot of joy.”

Masha’s face was flushed. Her downcast eyes were brimming over and now she couldn’t really stop the tears. She put her hands up to her mouth and eyes.

“If it hadn’t been for you, Dad,” she said, “I might have thought an affair was just a catered party.”

“Honey,” Mom said.

“What’s the matter, sweetheart?” he asked softly. “Why do you hurt me like this?”

She couldn’t take her hands away from her face and she couldn’t stop sobbing.

“I’m not staying here anymore,” she announced. But she didn’t get up to leave.

“You’re a married woman now,” Mom pointed out.

“I don’t think that’s any of your damn business,” Masha said. “I can’t live with Joe anymore. I don’t even love him.”

“O honey,” Mom said.

“Doubled and redoubled,” Barney announced. Needless to say I wasn’t as surprised as they were.

Masha’s hands dropped away from her face. “Isn’t this humiliating?” she asked me, wide-eyed.

Barney didn’t seem to think so. He immediately began to make new plans. Joe wouldn’t know what hit him. We’d all go to the hotel after dinner and, while he took his medicine, Mom could make Masha a reservation on the same plane back as ours. Masha and the baby would live with him in Valley Stream. There was plenty of room. He’d be glad to help out. She should be thinking of going back to school.

Masha listened carefully to every word her father had to say. When he finished, her face was streaky, and she spoke softly. She wanted to thank us for coming. She really did want to leave her husband, she just couldn't do it as Barney recommended. She needed to talk to Joe. He wasn't a bad sort and he really wasn't any happier than she was. He'd be glad to let her go, she felt. She'd wait another week or so until after her next doctor's appointment and then she would talk to him. He deserved as much from her for taking care of her that last half a year.

"Some men," my mom said, "get very strange when there's a baby involved. Are you sure you're doing the right thing?"

"It isn't his baby anyway," she said, "and he knows that. He won't be any problem. And neither will this other man."

"A love child?" Mom asked.

"Bull's eye is more like it," mumbled Barney.

Masha nodded.

"Wunderbar," he exclaimed. "A little bastard. He's certainly not the first in our family."

"Don't say it if you don't really mean it lover," Mom put in.

"Of course I mean it," he said. "When have I ever lied? Masha is my only daughter."

"O Dad," she said. "Dad. Dad."

"It's ok sweetheart," he said, patting her hand softly. "You don't have to say anything. I really do mean it."

When dinner was over I walked back home with Masha. Barney and my mom returned to the hotel. They'd be dropping by in the morning to pick me up and drive us all to Miami; we

could say goodbye to each other then.

Masha and I had very few words on the way but we held hands. When we entered the house she said she was going up to bed. There was ice cream in the freezer, if I wanted a treat, and beer. Joe usually got home from guard duty after midnight. I read old *Life* magazines and waited up for Masha's husband, but he never returned. Finally I went to bed and slept very soundly.

At 6 in the morning Masha woke me. Joe hadn't come home; she was quite worried. She thought of calling the guard room. I talked her out of it. At ten Joe called. He said there was a note for her by the cookie jar. He was being transferred to Roosevelt Roads in Puerto Rico. He wouldn't be coming home again. The Provost Marshall would be sending a detail to collect his things. Masha was welcome to stay as long as she needed to. The Navy had his security deposit. She could keep their old car to do with as she pleased, just so long as she made the payments.

Masha seemed more confused than upset by his news. "Even when you try to play it straight with a person," she said, "They don't often let you. He must have known things weren't working out and he did what he needed to do for himself, I suppose, and I just wish I had."

"I guess that means you feel badly?" I asked her.

"I just wish we'd had a chance to talk before we said goodbye," she told me. "But maybe it's really better this way."

She didn't go in search of Joe's note right off, but when she found it she showed that to me also.

In a large child-like scrawl Joe told her, among other things, “I’m not a husband for you, nor do I wish to raise some other man’s kid.”

All in all, Barney thought that was a fairly ungracious way to put it, but it was probably better for Joe and Masha that they hadn’t had words in person before the break-up. He again recommended that she fly home with us. Masha had this doctor’s appointment and she plainly didn’t want to leave so abruptly.

“It’s as if I was never even married to him,” she said.

“In some respects,” Mom said, “you probably weren’t.”

Barney and Mom were anxious to leave as soon as possible. They were flying back to New York that very evening or, if worse came to worse, he added, with a sly lachrymose grin, in the morning. He said Masha could call anytime and he would meet her plane at La Guardia, or Newark. But he agreed it was probably a good idea that somebody stay on with Masha, and I was the only person who seemed willing to volunteer.

“Can he really stay a little longer?” she asked.

“Just so long as he’s not in your way,” Mom said.

“Shirl,” said Barney.

“I mean,” she added, “he does have to be in school eventually, but if it would help.”

“O yes it would, please,” Masha said.

“Well,” Barney said, “I guess Shirl and I will just have to find our way back without you junior.”

There were hugs and kisses exchanged and promises exacted that Masha would call if there were any more problems whatsoever, and Shirl gave me money to help Masha with the household expenses.

“You’ll be the man of the house now,” she told me.

“I’m sure we’ll manage,” I said. “Tell Dad not to worry.”

“He has enough on his mind,” she said, “believe me.”

And Masha said, “I hope I haven’t caused any problems with Irv.”

“Irving’s not your problem sweetheart,” Barney said, and I felt a stab of anger against my heart, and tears crowding my eyes.

But it was for a lot of other reasons—mostly having to do with Masha’s well-being—that I have never been sorry I stayed on, and slept beside her fully clothed in her bed, and comforted her with my hands and kept her company during the final months of her pregnancy and then helped her and her new baby son, Michael Goldman, move back to Long Island to live with Barney and begin their new life together.

As Barney later confessed, “Joe really wasn’t a bad sort. He’d just gotten in over his head, as I always said. I knew when he called me in Valley Stream and invited us to pay them a visit right away it wasn’t because he suddenly felt the need to barbecue some ribs for his in-laws.”

## TRUST

Uncle Barney's teeth were discolored and always falling out. He didn't trust dentists; in fact, he hated them, and he had reasons, an alibi: When he was little and poor, his father took him to a free clinic to get his teeth fixed and the sadistic hack promised him he would be getting pain killer but drilled young Barney cold turkey for a half an hour, without Novocain. "Even now when I close my eyes at night," he said, "I can still hear that sadist's auger."

He was always being pestered by Minna and then Beth and Mom to see a dentist, and always looking for ineffectual but painless practitioners. He didn't mind the waste. What he sought most was a fellow his own age, or a few years younger, without much prophylactic zeal, with whom he could *schmooze* in the chair about this and that, politics, culture, business, women, and have only the minimum of work done on his mouth. He didn't mind not having all his teeth. Just a scattering sufficed. He thought the God of Dentistry was barbaric and had to be appeased, and placated, with the least sacrifice of sensate human flesh.

As a consequence, people were always making their propitiations to Barney to please do something about his dental problems, urging and entreating him to improve his oral hygiene. The only time I ever saw him express outright hurt was when Sheila next door told him his mouth from across the room smelled like wet peat burning.

Barney's face turned a lurid pink. "Strangely enough," he replied in front of Mom and Estelle Krober, "none of my other intimate friends seem to mind really, just you people." Barney was wise enough not to get any more specific.

It was my Dad's idea finally to lure him into the chair of his client's daughter, Amy Horowitz, a very fetching brunette who had just started a practice of general dentistry on the



Upper West Side. Amy was said to be a crackerjack with the scalpel and probe, and so attractive to look at that her mostly male clientele were generally not pleading with her to administer Novocain or sweet air, though she would, of course, if such was required. Amy had the newest high-speed drills and never gave up on a tooth. “A truly gentle soul,” Mom who’d sampled her gum work said.

The only problem was she was in a serious relationship with an oral surgeon from Sutton Place, and did not encourage flirtations on office time.

Amy was all business, my dad said, and Barney should consider himself lucky as Lindbergh that Amy would even consider taking him on. Knowing how phobic his old friend could be in the chair, he also ordered me to accompany Barney to the office and wait for him in the reception room until the end of his first consultation.

On the day he and I went off together to the Upper West Side so that Barney could “open wide,” he seemed rather more edgy than usual, but not so out of control fearful that I worried he would make a scene. I’d just gotten my driver’s license and our arrangement was he’d drive to Amy’s office and have whatever work needed to be done, and if he was doped up or under sedation on the way home I would take over the wheel.

We’d arranged a late mid-afternoon appointment so Barney would not feel embarrassed in the company of other strangers in the waiting room. When we entered that suite of offices a handsome young black man in a white lab jacket greeted us. He explained he was Amy’s receptionist and hygienist. Amy was talking on the phone to another patient. She was expecting us and would be along presently.

“So? Are you the scaredycat?” he teased Barney.

“Just as you say young man,” he replied, “and not in the least ashamed.” Barney tried out a brief low-register scream which caused the young assistant to wince. “You’ll really dig Amy,” the fellow said after a moment’s reflection. “She’s a pussycat.” And left us to the mercies of the décor.

The place was furnished in quiet Danish modern, with rust colored upholstery, and bowls of silk roses and lilac, and there were the usual stacks of magazines, and luridly illustrated cartoon charts on the walls for kids about the progress of decay and periodontitis. Through hidden speakers came the Mozart harp and flute concerto. Barney remained unsoothed. He paced back and forth, and refused to focus on anything but his own nervousness.

“It only hurts once,” I assured him. “Relax.”

“It’s not the pain,” he said, “it’s the anticipation. I hate it when they poke around inside because they always find something sore as a burn but I never know when they will or where. Sooner or later it’s always a surprise.”

He crumpled next to me against the sofa.

“Barney,” I said, “the first time all she’ll probably do is reconnoiter. If there’s any work to be done, she’ll have you make another appointment. First she’s got to look and take X-rays.”

“I hate the way the X-ray plates cut up my gums,” he said. “Seems to me you go to the dentist to get your teeth filled and before they even get to work they’re poking and prodding and boring away at you, making your gums bleed, chipping up the enamel on purpose. What a nightmare.”

“True enough?” I glanced up. This fine boned willowy young woman with very pale skin and very dark shoulder length hair stood in the alcove separating the waiting rooms from the

operating rooms.

“You must be Barnett Goldman,” she told Barney. “I heard all your trepidations through the ventilator.”

She glanced above our heads with her very beautiful dark purple eyes.

“It can’t be as awful as you think it will be,” she said, extending her hand as though to a schoolchild. “Come along with me and let’s take a look.”

“Lord love a duck,” said Barney, suppressing his tendency to adore this new person in his life by such a folksy admonition to himself. He stood up and, like a small fretful schoolboy, followed her into the operating room.

Almost from the start I thought Amy had the situation well in hand so I stayed behind and read *Time* magazine.

Just before the door closed, I heard Barney say, “I’m so pleased we could get together like this.”

“We’ll do it one step at a time,” Amy said.

“My very thought,” Barney said. “Merci Lord!”

The door shut tight; there was a murmur of voices, and then a jangle of the cutlery, and silence. No more shouts or screams or sudden outbursts of hysterical alarm from Barney. Just a sweet sustaining silence so unexpected it was unsettling.

After some 45 minutes the door opened and again there were murmurs, and Barney and white-coated Amy Horowitz stood in the doorway and politely shook hands. He said aloud he would be calling just as soon as he had a chance to look at his date book to make another appointment, and she grinned at him dewy-eyed and went into the next room, her private office.

As soon as we were on the street again, seeming very pleased with himself, Barney offered me a beer which I refused. I wanted to get home, as I had other things to do for myself.

“That didn’t sound like such an ordeal,” I said.

“Once I got the knack of her,” he pointed out. “A young woman like Amy has very strong motherly instincts and once I pointed out what an awful coward I was she found it comforting just to reach out to me as she and I had a lot to talk about it turned out...”

“What did she happen to say about your mouth?” I asked on behalf of my family.

“We never really got around to much of that,” Barney said. “She took note of the devastations of time, but there were no reproaches, thank God. It was mostly all about getting in touch with one’s feelings. Things like that of that sort...”

“You paid good money for that?”

“A bargain,” he said. “I’ll buy her lunch some day soon, send her flowers. She’d had a very long day on her feet. Dentistry is high stress work. We talked about what it can do to the legs as well as relationships. I told her she should find her inner toddler at certain times of the day at the office and just plop right down and have a good cry, or a giggle, depending on her mood. She seemed very pleased with all that,” he said, “especially when I recommended that she stop smoking cigarettes. A most unattractive habit, I pointed out.”

“Don’t you think that might not be so easy if she’s really feeling stressful?” I asked.

“I told her smoking can make a woman’s face wrinkle prematurely,” Barney said.

“Recommended sugarless chewing gum if she had to do anything, but of course she can’t and won’t do that.”

We were moving slowly down the West Side Highway in stop and go rush hour traffic.

The sky was overcast. A broad gleam of light on the turbid Hudson flow suddenly broke through as silver striations.

I asked Barney, who was driving again, what he intended to do about his teeth.

“Live out my life with them, I guess,” he said. “But I will be making another appointment with lovely Amy after a decent while because we have a lot of problems in common, and I think I can truly be of some help.”

“And she really wants to make time for you?”

“Absolutely,” he replied. “There’s a whole lot more to life than flossing after every meal. This is a form of mutual aid. And so much more human than just plopping down in the chair with a stranger and allowing he or she to perpetrate all manner of indignities. We’re arriving at a point where we can begin to trust each other.”

“Then what?” I asked him crossly. “You seduce her?”

“Not a bit of it,” he explained. “She’s very lovely and has good hands, but she’s much too young. I have only paternal feelings for her, and she for me,” he added, “maternal-wise.”

“Awful phrase,” I said.

“I *am* concerned about her oral surgeon boyfriend,” he said. “I don’t want to go into details. He doesn’t seem at all trustworthy to me. A hot shot.”

“Don’t you think you’re getting in a little too deeply?” I said.

“Not a bit of it. It’s a sharing experience,” he said, “I allow her inside my mouth and she allows me to know the secrets of her heart.”

Barney shut his eyes a moment and opened them again and seemed to be cooing at all

Riverside Drive and, beyond that, the whole City of New York skyline, as the old buildings high up on the island passed by our windows.

“Eventually I imagine you’ll find a way to get inside her pants too,” I said to Barney.

“I told you,” he replied. “It isn’t at all like that. It’s just sharing. Amy knows how phobic I am about all dentists. I told her so right off. Well she’s a big achiever pretty phobic about fun relationships which is why she’s settling for this oral surgeon creep, Feigenbaum. So we really do have a lot to talk about.”

“What about gum disease?” I asked. “Caries? Loose teeth?”

“There’s a time and place for everything in a relationship,” Barney said, “Once you become truly intimate.”

We were deep beneath the harbor in the Battery Tunnel.

“I don’t think,” he said, “anybody at the NYU dental school ever talked to Amy the way I just did.”

“What exactly did you tell her that was so different?” I asked.

“She’s earning a hundred Gs a year off the sweat of her brow,” he said, “and she still thinks she has to spend her life with this East Side bore. I told her take a chance on yourself. Look around. She’ll always be able to make a living, but her self-actualizing potential was enormous and still unfulfilled.”

“I’d certainly be willing to date her,” I said.

“She’s not for you chum,” Barney said. “She could have her pick. Male, female, here, or on the coast. She’s only 27, a mere child,” he added.

I said, "Sounds like you're an admirer."

"Only way to choose a dentist," he pointed out. "Though she hardly touched me I know that woman has got million dollar hands. You can choose your friends," he added. "But you can't really choose your dentist. It's a *satori*. She has to choose you."

As he drove on out into the smoggy air of Red Hook, he reclined his head against the seat rest a moment, and then snapped to attention again behind the wheel.

"Million dollar hands," he observed, "and no slouch when it comes to empathy herself. She feels my pain, my anticipation of it anyway," he added. "I think we have the start of what Buber calls "the I and thou," Barney said, "and maybe someday we'll even get around to my fucking teeth. God knows what that could lead to, once she's had a little more experience. Trust." he said. "Trust. Is anything sweeter than trust?"

## CHOOSING MY OWN PROFESSION

For reasons of my future security, Dad wanted me to study pre-law, but for security reasons of his own, he didn't want me to be a lawyer in his firm, or with any of his clients. With me on hand, he always said, they wouldn't last a week as clients.

"I really think he's ashamed of me," I told Barney.

"Wouldn't you be?" he asked. "Frankly it could be the other way around if you were so motivated. What do you want?"

"I want to write about life and people and things like that," I said, "as a writer."

"Then don't become a lawyer," Barney said. "Lawyers are peevish and quarrelsome. A butcher would be more like it. The late Joseph Conrad was a fishmonger."

"He was at sea," I said. "But not fish."

"Might as well what the hell?" Barney said. "Same difference."

But when my mother chided him for giving out such *ex cathedra* advice, he took me aside at a family gathering and said, "Having an education isn't really the worst thing in the world. It's just what people sometimes do with it, kiddo."

I agreed I should probably go to college someday to please my mom, and dad, if only I could get through high school, but I was failing nearly everything, and it looked pretty hopeless. All my schoolmates were applying to the Ivy League or MIT, and the college advisor recommended the Army or Basic Skills vocational training for me.

"I told you so, Shirl." My father was too ashamed to say anything more than that to my mother. Barney, having once been in therapy briefly with "a crazy Irishman named Sullivan," again assigned himself the task of being my "alternate validator."



I could see knowing math and biology, he argued, if you were to become a doctor and had to prescribe, or make atomic bombs. But to be a writer it's only necessary to know what from who, and for that getting by will do. You should just endeavor to be a student of human nature," he counseled me.

And to my dad he recommended that we "shmeat" some of the teachers who regularly taught me so that they would serve as my after hours tutors. Costly as this was to my father, it also worked out to good effect: I soon began to pass subjects I had never dreamed of getting through.

"You needed confidence in the ways of the world," Barney announced. "Even if you never go on to higher education, let this confidence be your upsy daisy, remember kiddo. It's a leak proof diaper after such *pishikeh* bladder problems."

My dad was as usual indignant. "What's the point of learning to be second rate?" he asked us. "This doesn't happen to be your money going down the drain, Barney."

"He also doesn't happen to be my kid," Barney replied.

My dad paused a moment, then he said, "Just like it's never your wife, I suppose."

Barney asked, "What's that you said?"

"You heard me..."

"Are you talking about Minna?" he asked. "She's long gone and I truly mourn for her, Irving. No woman on Earth was ever so good to me consistently."

"So you say." Glum as a horseshoe crab at mating season, Dad relented, paid out the tutorial fees, and got for his money report cards with passing grades. Then the school placed me

in college prep, though at the very bottom of my class, just above those who were somewhat mentally retarded.

“A genius in disguise,” Barney exclaimed, “with hardly any knowledge he gets an eighty-one on his Regents Examination. Think of what he would get if he really knew anything at all.”

Ruminating over college, though, remained troublesome, a mystery to me. My father fancied places like Williams and Amherst, but they were really out of the question. When we went up to Williamstown for an interview—he offered the Dean a “modest contribution” (bribe) and we were summarily asked to leave the premises.

Even then Barney remained optimistic. He thought if Hutchens were still at the University of Chicago he might take a chance on a wild card like me. More practically, after some counseling, Mom suggested places like Upsala, and Ursinus, Hofstra, Muhlenberg, Bucknell and Franklin & Marshall, expensive finishing schools for nice dumb Jewish boy kids from the middle classes who couldn’t make top grade status in the public schools and were prepped in places like Cheshire Academy and Staunton.

Aside from all other considerations, I couldn’t see leaving home for someplace even more restrictive, church-ridden, and grubby. Many of the places Mom got advice about said they still maintained curfews and parietal rules; they insisted attendance at chapel was mandatory. One usually had to take math courses. I wanted out of mathematics, not more of the same, but with gentiles.

About that time Barney and my mom had a disagreement, I assume, about his seeing another woman during certain times when she was not available, and, for a while, I was forbidden from paying any attention to Barney’s attempts to influence my life. I also lost interest

in Zionism and switched to a pro-Palestinian position, infuriating my father, and making Mom very unhappy with this “state of affairs.” Barney was again contacted to deal with the maverick. After our luncheon at Lundy’s he called and told me he thought I was probably going “pretty far out on a limb politically,” in his words, but he could see some of my reasoning. He bought me *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, and a copy of Paul Bowles’ *The Sheltering Sky*.

“They’re all a bunch of buggers out there in those desert sands,” Barney said. “Think of Cherry Grove with hand grenades. It’s the *emmes*, I suppose, if you like that sort of thing; there’s as much justice on their side as Herzl ever dreamed of, though you also have to overlook the Grand Mufti, Ali Hackem Alive, or whatever his name is, who is one big anti-Semite Nazi, if ever I saw one. So? What’s it to you anyway? You’re not a displaced person. You have a life and a family here in the *Goldene Medina*, and you even have me *boychick*. If what you want is life experience, I’m your Virgil.”

After such a spiel he took me for a drive out to Plum Beach and showed me all the couples making out in cars.

“This Henry Ford was an undeniable anti-Semite, for example,” he said, “but he was also our greatest sexual liberator. Why do you think he dangled those straps from the windows of his cars?”

In those days Barney’s favorite song was “Come On A My House.” Now that Masha was back at school (and he was helping to care for his grandson) he was seeing more women than ever on a casual hit or miss basis.

One of the women he saw more or less regularly was the daughter of a Tarahumara Indian Shaman who was studying dance with Martha Graham in Manhattan; Barney called her "People." Another, he told me, was "the voluptuous granddaughter of Joachim Most, the anarchist agitator." There were also a surprising number of registered nurses and shopgirls from De Pinna and Best and Company.

Often, after a quickie, Barney dropped by to take me on excursions when my mother wasn't looking. She was going three days a week to the Pratt Institute to study "theatrical make-up." Barney said she was a natural at it, an "auto-didact." The hours she'd put in on her face and poor Minna's in the old days, he joked.

He said, "Women who see me as their critic fail to note how glad I am to be of service. I adore women, and I'm the only man in town available on 24 hour basis, as I do not have to work at jobs for my livelihood."

"You want to date young women?" he added. "I'm with you there of course; a better muscle tone and they're less discouraged than some of the *yentas* I hang out with."

I thought he was being a little vulgar and cruel, which he rarely was about personal things, but I was also glad for his chatter and a chance to get away from the house sometimes. Barney had all sorts of plans to edify me and make me more worldly, and hip. Once he took me to night court to watch all the lowlifes being arraigned, and, once, to the Hunt's Point Market to look at whores in satin basketball shorts warming themselves in midwinter in front of trash can barn fires. "You've got to know about everything," he told me, "if you want to really write like a writer."

He took me to see the Potter's Field on Hart's Island when the tiny plain white caskets of stillborns were being covered with quicklime by convicts in khaki city coveralls. After bribing the night clerk, he got me to peer inside one of the Lyons flophouses on the Bowery. He was constantly telling me what life was really like for "us sentient human beings," and it was this palpable and vivid substance easily turned rancid by a lack of curiosity, the failure to be infused by what he called "the old *elan vital*."

I thought that must be like a spring tonic, sort of like the *Elixir Lexoprin Compound* our doctor made me swallow when I had the mumps. But *Elan Vital* was, in his words, what was so absent from that other life, so rancorous and day-to-day, a grudge, a grind, encapsulated—though Barney never explicitly said so—in my father's sour look, Minna's untimely dying, the peevish trustees at the synagogue.

"Even with death staring her in the face," Barney said, "Your Aunt Minna insisted everything should look normal and well-adjusted. I used to say to her, why not live a little hon?" he told me. "We don't have to pay our bills first of the month like clockwork. We could travel, see the world. Show Masha a bit of life. Well Minna couldn't. She wouldn't. She could only allow me all these liberties and then feel badly about herself afterwards."

If only he'd had a proper subject Barney might have been a great Chatauqua lecturer. He had some favorite lines from Heine he was always quoting. "The good little people are not stupid. They eat quite content tonight."

About his own lack of ordinariness, Barney never seemed to have the smallest self-doubts. His eloquence was learned from liberal newspapers and left-wing weeklies, fed by his

voracious paperback reading habits. He made me read José Martí, Engel on the female question, Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money*, and Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and then his own special bootlegged edition of *Tropic of Cancer*.

The latter book made a truly vivid impression on my flesh. I said that was how a writer should live, with all these terrific characters, and hot women, and in Paris. "Too many poets have died in the City of Lights," he said.

"If you can stand the garlic," Barney added. "If you don't like to bathe. If you've got a yen for bedbugs...But how women are a dime a dozen in New York and Chicago also. It's the men usually are the problem," he explained.

I asked what sort of problem was that?

"They don't like working for their pleasures," he said. "They turn their noses up. They *kvetch*. Carry on. They're depressed."

"Women are too," he added, "though they're more self-sufficient. They don't actually abuse the wonderful privilege of being alive."

"What do these guys think is waiting for them at the barrier gate?" he demanded.

"Men. Phooey," Barney said.

He was now painting a lot "from life," as he put it, and travelled everywhere with his sketch pad, and a paper bag full of soft lead pencils and pieces of gum eraser. He liked most to draw in restaurants. Barney said when people were ravenous their character traits came alive.

"You can see it on their faces," he said. Barney favored Mediterranean pizza and souvlaki parlors, Automats, cafeterias, a number of Irish free lunch bars with photos of Pierce

and Kevin Barry on the walls, and a midtown place called “The Exchange Buffet” where you were on the honor system and paid only what you would and should on the basis of what you actually consumed, putting your money into a receptacle by the door when you were finished. They never argued with you at the Exchange Buffet about how much you’d eaten; you just told them with a toss of a bill or some change, and they believed you. Barney usually cheated. Said he had the Waldorf salad when we’d devoured roast beef. He said they expected it. “You have to take advantage of the breaks,” he said, “in this social order it’s not all chicken pot pie. A lot of Jews are still cab drivers and cutters in the garment industry.”

Once when I told the truth to the cashier Barney seemed cross with me afterwards in the street. “Save your honesty,” he advised, “till we have Socialism.”

Another place we sometimes ate when we went to the Metropolitan Museum to look at Goyas was the cafeteria of the Henry School for “single taxation” in the East Eighties. Barney liked their stews and goulash soups a lot, and the prices. He would draw the old women serving behind the narrow steam counter and tell me to make up stories about each and every one, their lives, their husbands, lovers, children, pets.

They were all so ugly and weary, beaten down. I just wasn’t inspired. I still wanted to write about my contemporaries, and to make love to movie stars. “With an attitude like that,” Barney said, “You might as well go the University of Miami to study the mosaics at Wolfie’s on Collins Avenue.”

My feelings were hurt. Sure I wanted to write, but why must all my subjects be so grim? So devout with squalor?

“I think you need to see another piece of this world, maybe even Paris,” Barney said. A few days later he informed me he’d started buying synagogue raffle tickets in my name, and also the Mexican National Lottery and Irish Sweepstakes. If any one of them ever came through, lucky Ronald would be on his way.

“Barney and his big ideas never really do pan out,” my mother chided now that he was back in her good graces for the same unexplained reasons as his previous disgrace. “He daydreams enough for the two of you and you haven’t even filled out that application for Upsala. There’s an essay.”

“Shirl,” Barney said, “it’s nothing he couldn’t do with his left hand if he wanted to. The boy has a literary flair.”

“But his grades,” she said. “He can be so slipshod.”

“Why not let them know he’s been disadvantaged?” Barney suggested.

“What do you mean?” she asked me. “With our address?”

“Then you write the essay and, if he won’t go, you go in his place,” he said. “It’s in a better neighborhood than Pratt. Probably right up your alley. Your sister’s daughter lives in Maplewood, doesn’t she?”

My father was telling everybody who asked he would never subsidize an ignoramus with a literary career before he knew “how to wipe his own ass.” He also told Barney to butt out. I was going to get a job as a messenger, or something, until I learned the value of a dollar and a college degree. I wouldn’t be allowed to just float like grease.



So I found work for a Polish concern off Hudson Street, the Atlanta Trading Corporation, delivering large fancy canned hams in gelatin to various minor TV and radio celebrities in order that they might plug them on the air.

Everybody in the office except I spoke Polish, and they all looked like Skippy Homeier's dad in "Tomorrow, the World!" Nazis, I believed. When my train coming from Brooklyn was delayed in the tunnel, they docked my pay.

It was now the middle of my senior year of high school and I still hadn't made an application anywhere. All my pay went for carfare and lunches, and occasional movies. I wished I had a girlfriend, that I was an orphan, could speak Polish, and make time with one of the pretty secretaries.

One day Barney called the office and left a message with Mr. Danziger, the office manager, our only other Jew. I was to get right back to him in Valley Stream.

Unfortunately, the Poles wouldn't let me call Nassau County on their phones, so I had to wait to use a coin phone after I had filed all the invoices alphabetically for the month of February and gone to fetch people their afternoon coffees.

So it was nearly 4:30 in the afternoon when I finally got through.

"I bring you glad tidings," Barney said.

"You won't believe this. You just won a 26 inch Stromberg Carlson TV with an FM, short waves, a reel to reel tape deck, and an automatic record changer."

"Sounds like just what I needed," I said. "Do I have a large enough family?"

“They presently go for over \$2000 kiddo,” Barney said. “By the time you give a small donation to the *shul* and pay taxes, you should have about 2 grand left. You could be sitting pretty on the Boul Mich with some pretty nifty trim.”

“What about my parents?” I said. “Don’t they have to know?”

“Not to worry,” Barney said. “I’ll give you \$1500 cash up front and take the Stromberg off your hands, no questions asked. What do you say we tell them once you’re on the way?”

I said I thought that was probably a lot better than getting my head banged against the radiator again.

Barney asked me for a recent picture and procured me a passport from an old flame in the Consular Service.

The week before I was supposed to sail for Europe on the Hansa Line’s S.S. Anna Saline out of Montreal, I finally wrote my essay for Upsala, just in case I got homesick. “I want to write, need to explore myself and others,” I began, “and knowledge must be one of my uttermost tools....”

“Nix the uttermost,” he said. “Sounds like cow talk. Give them some of the old *Elan Vital*.”

There was also a scholarship application and I applied for full assistance, declaring myself—as Barney suggested—a Puerto Rican orphan, a ward of charity.

He was also my only available recommender. “This young man,” he wrote, “has talent to burn and a heart of gold. He’s a hopeful swallow in a long dry summer, a windmill on the dusty plains of life, a dissenter from life’s sellouts who must first find himself before he cultivates the

fragrant and lush first generational garden where he has found himself implanted. Through his departed Hispanic mother, he's the white hope of our community, a slow learner but thorough, his brilliance coruscating. If he chooses your school, and you choose him, courage will be married to innovation, and the progeny will be artistic enterprise. As a friend of his late family, I advise you to disregard the calumnies of high school pedants and let your instincts and impulses guide you. You wouldn't want a better youth, and he wouldn't get a better setting for the maturation of his genius."

"Don't you think that's little overblown?" I asked him.

"They need to feel good about themselves out there in Orange, New Jersey," he said, "or even they won't let you in. A little flattery never hurts. This isn't Dropsie or Drew. It's a money mill, a factory, a Princeton for Jewish Princes, and mine is a character reference among other things, a pincer movement around the aim of acceptance. You don't have no academic endorsements as you know."

"Alright, already Barney," I said. "Let it be!"

Barney had me vaccinated by the Board of Health against smallpox, cholera, and typhus, and he bought a ticket on the sleeper out of New York along Lake Champlain so that I sailed up the St. Lawrence from Montreal en route to Bremerhaven and Cherbourg. Now that I was out to sea I didn't feel too badly that I never bothered to say goodbye to Shirl or Irv. At Barney's urging I had called Masha to say goodbye. "Don't let Barney send you east of the Rhine River," she told me. "He tried to get Joe and me to spend a belated honeymoon in Varna on the Bulgarian Riviera. Joe could have gotten himself court-martialed."

I told Masha if my parents inquired about me to say I had enlisted in the Marine Corps.

“You a Marine? They won’t believe that for a minute.”

“Ron,” she added. “Take Barney at his word about girls when you’re in Europe. Nice gets nice. Remember?”

“I’ll remember,” I said.

“A sentimental education,” Barney had said. He hummed *La Vie En Rose*. He had bought me a money belt and, at the last minute, he stashed an extra hundred dollar bill inside along with my agreed-upon cash and traveler’s checks. “Save this for when the exchange rate goes sky high,” he said, “and always check out the American Express for mail and things from home. You’re going out into the Empire like a young Roman,” he said. “So don’t lose sight of your perks. It’s a nasty system for the Eytis and the Frogs but you’re a *Gringo*. Don’t abuse people but make the most of everything.”

A lot of this advice went right past me. On the boat I stood everybody I met to beers, and lost nearly all my ready cash in a poker game with some of the sailors. When I got to Paris there was a general strike and I was lucky enough to find other Americans and Europeans, stranded without funds camping out in the *Bois de Boulogne*. I knew only three words of French: *combien*, and *citron pressé*. When the strike was finally settled, I went off to the American Express and found a letter from Barney.

“Kiddo your mom’s totally falling apart at the seams, and I haven’t got enough stitches to hold her together. Call her collect and there’ll be no reprisals, I promise.”

I’d been gone nearly two weeks when I asked the overseas operator in Paris to connect me collect with our number in New York.

I'd forgotten about the time differential. It was 4 AM in Manhattan. My father answered like he was under twelve feet of water. As though drowning he accepted the charges.

"Did I wake you, Dad?" I asked.

"Who can sleep?"

"Are you sure?"

"I'm sure, and if I'm not so what? You've driven your mother crazy. It shouldn't be my turn next? Here," he said. "Speak to her."

Mom actually seemed quite serene. "I was just thinking of you, sonny."

Then I heard my father again: "When is he coming home?"

I said I was fine and I would call again when I knew my plans. I was probably going to rent an even cheaper hotel room than I presently had and write something about Paris.

"You only just got there," Mom said. "It could take you a while. Come back to New York which you know so much better."

I said when I was done I would consider all my options and I would call again in a few more weeks.

They asked for a phone number, an address.

"Write me care of American Express," I said. "I have very little money."

"Just be sure you eat in clean restaurants," she said.

"If he gets a rash," I could hear my dad, "tell him go to the American Army clinic in *Fontainebleau* and don't talk to strangers."

"He wouldn't do anything like that," she said. "Don't be silly, Irving."

"He could get VD your son."

“I know all about the personal hygiene stuff,” I assured her.

“What about your mental hygiene?” she asked. “You sure you wouldn’t want to see somebody? Barney had a friend at a hospital....”

My dad was shouting again: “Barney can’t fix the dough on a cruller.”

I hung up.

That was the early afternoon of the day I met Yvette. There I was walking back across the river with my knapsack from the Right Bank when this woman stopped me and suggested perhaps we could get on friendly terms.

“*Combien?*” I inquired.

“I am no prostitute,” she shouted. People on the street stopped what they were doing to watch our contretemps. Embarrassed, I invited her to a nearby café for a coffee or a *citron pressé*.

It turned out Yvette also was hungry. I bought her an omelet. In gratitude she invited me to her fifth floor walk-up behind the Luxembourg. I learned things that day I’d always been curious about, and when I finally emerged from Yvette’s large sunny studio room to buy some groceries a few days later I also bought a postcard and airmail stamps and wrote Barney in Valley Stream: “Dear Barney, my life’s journey has brought me to this not uncharming city of lights which, on a special day like today, as it’s pictured on this card of the Gardens across the way is rich with promise and fulfillment and never again will feel like an utter waste of precious *Elan Vital. Merci Bien.*”

A week or so later I received an air letter from Barney care of American Express: “What a lot of vague pretty words to tell me you’ve been getting your ashes hauled. If you want to be a writer be more direct. Think of Miller on Van Norden, the turd in the *bidet*. The image counts for everything nowadays. Barney.”

There was also a letter from my mom in that day’s mail. Muhlenberg and Upsala were simply not prepared to accept me without certification from a licensed psychiatrist or therapist that I would not run amok and could function in a collegiate environment. Also, I would have to enroll in either pre-law, or bus admin, or pre-accounting.

“How could you dare tell them you were an orphan?” she asked me. “How could you tell them I was Puerto Rican? Your father says he’ll never speak to you again. I say wait till the summer’s over. But how could you, Ronald, my son? How?”

## **PART V**



## UNCLE BARNEY'S COMING TO GET YOU

That summer when I ran away to Europe through Barney's sponsorship happened to be right in the middle of the Korean War. By the end of August I'd received a draft notice at my parents' address. I consulted with the U.S. Vice Consul in Paris and was informed unless I was registered as a student at a recognized institution of higher learning I would have to do my duty or be treated as a draft evader, a not very popular thing to be in the Cold War early 50s.

So I made plans to come home again on another converted Liberty ship around the third week in September (for schools started their fall terms much later in those days), hoping to enroll as a "matriculating student" at the New School for Social Research, which my father said he would pay for if, again, I studied "pre-law." My parents also instructed me that they would be at our country house on the Jersey Shore entertaining clients the weekend I arrived, but I was not to worry: Uncle Barney who was considered by them a "culprit" and "the instigator" of my trip abroad, was coming to get me in Port Newark, and he would expiate for his previous sins by driving me and my suitcases to his place in Valley Stream where I could just cool my heels for a few days while I inquired about colleges and they arrived back in the City.

It was the summer of the year the Rosenbergs were finally about to be executed, as I recall, a bleak time, the weather already turning cold across the Atlantic, and overcast and chilly all the way to Sandy Hook. When we started across the lower Bay, I came out on deck and saw the skyline of Manhattan like the silhouette of a rusty hacksaw blade off in the distance. I really wasn't happy to be home. In Paris as I was leaving, my passionate affair with Yvette, this lovely French woman ten years older than I was, had blossomed like a steady flower through our living

together. We thought of ourselves as in love which I had found exhausting, at times, though also wonderfully exhilarating, even better than dribbling layups. A popular Parisian song of the period declared *Les amoureux sont seuls au monde!* Feeling as alone in the world as the song said, I had no reason to believe that I would be able to see my woman again. Though I had promised her I would surely return by the following summer, I was just as certain I wouldn't have the same luck with other women when living in my parents' house, even if I did attend school by day in Greenwich Village.

When my ship docked, I went through customs and immigration with a diligent lethargy, and made my way inside the shed to the street entrance in anticipation of the lift I always got from Barney's big cheerful face, and basso-voiced greetings, his lush porky body language.

When I finally reached the sidewalk with my bags there was a traffic jam of cars and yellow cabs, but no Barney anywhere in sight. The air stank of gasoline fumes and burning rubber.

I found shelter from the chill cindery South wind blowing off the river and lit a cigarette, waiting patiently.

"Come on Barney," I said. "What's stopping you? Come on!"

An hour or more passed; most of the other passengers were already departed when the baggage chief sought me out and asked, "Hey kid you waiting for a lift from your Uncle?"

I assured him I was. Indeed! He said Barney had just telephoned. He was unavoidably delayed in the City on important business and was at the Holland Tunnel. He shouldn't be very much longer.

About two hours later Barney arrived, sweating heavily, despite the chill, and when he got up close to hug me he reeked of an aromatic sweet cologne underlying a bouquet of pussy.

There were lipstick marks on his light tan windbreaker jacket. Barney explained an important “out-of-towner,” a former customer, was at the Commodore, and “this person,” as he called her, “had just lost her husband in a homicide and Met Life and Pru are giving her an awful screwing on the double indemnity so she really needed my expert advice.”

“What about you?” I demanded, as I handed him one of my bags.

“Me?”

“Looks like you may have been giving her a bit of a screwing yourself,” I said.

“O yeah kiddo,” Barney nodded, flatly. “Hah hah! I’m the Rock of Gibraltar,” he bluffed. “Something like that.”

He showed me to his new sports car and we stowed the bags sideways in the back seat and took off.

With the top down it was noisy and cold so I asked Barney if he would mind pulling over and closing up.

“Sure if you like.” He drove onto the shoulder, and closed the top and got back inside. Before we took off again he apologized again for being so tardy.

“I’m not going to make you any more lame excuses,” he said. “It was inconsiderate of me to keep you waiting. I’m sorry. I just got lucky, almost at the last minute.”

“How’s Masha?” I asked.

“She was home most of the weekend,” Barney said, “but she was going off with Little Mikey to a friend’s place and should be gone by the time you arrive.”

“After all,” he added, “she’s a woman nowadays, and she has her needs.”

We were headed for the Lincoln Tunnel along the Pulaski Skyway. Now there was no more Bears Stadium to see, no more *Holleranderize* or *Otis* elevator signs. Barney shifted gears with jerky imprecision.

“Why,” I said, “do you suppose you are so inconsiderate? You haven’t even asked me about my trip.”

“Those are good questions,” Barney said, “but if you don’t mind I’ll take them one at a time.”

“First off,” he said as we passed the Kearny Shipyards where Barney and my dad had both worked as teenagers, “I believe it’s inexcusably rude to turn down nooky when it’s offered to you. It’s like going to somebody’s house for dinner and not eating...and with little Michael around the house I’m not as free as I used to be.”

“Enough said,” Barney added. He raised his hand to stop me from responding to his words. Then he said, “Nooky isn’t everything of course.”

“Is this my Uncle Barney speaking?” I asked.

With half a laugh he said, “I guess my childhood was deprived.”

In his beige cashmere sweater, his belly was a bulge against the bottom rim of the steering wheel, his cheeks ruddy. Barney looked as though he’d been compensated more than amply already for the deprivations of his childhood.

I told him I thought the deprivations of childhood was a bullshit alibi.

“So do I,” he said. “But Minna used to buy it...the truth is,” he added, turning off the exit that led to the Tunnel, “I just never seem to notice when I’m being inconsiderate, as you say,

until a little while afterwards.”

“You said it,” I reminded him. “I didn’t!”

“Yeah,” He replied, “But you got to admit kiddo I did drop everything and drove right out to get you.”

“Three hours late,” I reminded him.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a wheeze, and drew his finger under his nose, and sniffed at it, and settled back and smiled, waiting for an aisle in the tollgate to clear.

In the tunnel we talked a little more about Europe. Barney had never been except, as he pointed out, “when I was a tiny baby just out of my momma’s belly in *Minskgobernya*, but he had desires to go as soon as he could wind up “certain business affairs.”

I told him about Paris and a little about Yvette, my girl.

“I’m glad you tried some of that onion soup,” Barney said. “They’re world famous for it, you know...with all that cheesy stuff.” He was chuckling again as we sped across town on 42<sup>nd</sup> Street toward the Midtown Tunnel.

We were somewhere near the Library when Barney asked me if I had a driver’s license.

“What have you got in mind?” I asked.

He shrugged at me as who should say?

I said, “Come on Barney spill it.”

He explained with little Michael out of the house for a few days he was thinking of staying on in the City and giving me the car to drive back by myself to Valley Stream. He’d be out first thing in the morning on the Long Island Railroad.

I had a license, but I wasn’t sure about how to handle a manual shift. And I didn’t quite

know the way to Valley Stream. The main reason why I didn't jump at the chance to scoot to Long Island in Barney's nifty Austin Healey was my feelings were hurt. Bad enough my parents were too busy to come and fetch me. Now Barney was also deserting me. I must have had halitosis.

"I guess," I said, "this one is special for you."

"It's hard sleeping alone at night in the suburbs for a man my age" was all Barney would say. He drove south on Second Avenue, and made a left-hand turn around and then into the tunnel.

He seemed very gloomy for a little while so I told him I was sorry if I was being such a drag. "Don't talk chum," he told me. "Chew Tops Gum."

"It's not you kiddo, it's me," he added then. "I'm truly sorry. Your first night home and I'm running off on you. I'm devastated. Treating you as though you were Minna. Really I'm sorry," he said. "Are you the least bit hungry?"

I said I would be by the time we arrived in Valley Stream.

It was close on twilight. Barney thought he knew of a place where we could stop for a nosh nearby.

This was a vast drafty German rathskeller of a place with rafted ceilings and deer heads stuck to the wainscotings located somewhere in the wastes of Queens like Ozone Park to which we detoured through winding city streets. When Barney entered, with his embonpoint leading the way, he seemed to be a familiar to the waiters who greeted him, to my surprise, with "Long time no see Dr. Goldman." Even some of the customers, as mustached and paunchy as he was, nodded to him over their plates of *spaetzles* and *sauerbraten*, and called him "Dr. Goldman."

“What kind of doctor are you claiming to be?” I asked him.

“Does it matter?” he replied. “A title like that improves the service.”

Barney found us a table near the bar, ordered two steins of beer, and went off to the Men’s Room to remove some of his war paint.

“Best thing on the menu is the venison liver,” he told me in parting, “with red wine and forest mushroom sauce. Also the Maryland shad stuffed with crab. Be my guest. Enjoy.”

There wasn’t a woman to be seen in the place, not even a waitress or hatcheck girl, and Barney told me when he returned, zippering his fly en route, that the place was strictly stag except at Christmas and New Year’s Eve “when get happy is the rule.” The waiters, he said, were all Krauts and Dutchmen but a lot of the customers were now “Hebes like you and me.”

“This used to be Bund territory,” he explained, “and keep out kikes, cozy as a fart,” as he chewed on a taste of my venison and surveyed his plate of sweetbreads and rice in a sauce of creamy mushrooms. “Since the war,” he added, “they’ve been busy making amends and doing a pretty good job of it, too, I might say,” he added, with a whole gland stuffed between his teeth, and he swigged more beer to wash it all down.

The food made him jolly and nostalgic; his gloom had passed.

“The old Bund is now just like the Steuben Society,” he said. “Pity you didn’t get to Germany, Weimar. I’ve always wanted to spend my middle years in Weimar like Goethe. Ah, to have Lotte to myself in Weimar in the fall of life.”

I expressed surprise that he was so familiar with and fond of German Culture of the Romantic period.

“I just like Romance any old way I can get it,” Barney said, “with *saltzstengels*, or any other way for that matter. On toast.... The land where the citrons bloom was, I think, Italy from a German imagination,” he sighed dramatically, chewing all the while.

Prior to this Barney had never divulged such literary interests to me. “What did you happen to study in college?” I asked him.

“Who went to college?” he exclaimed. “I took a few night courses at the Jefferson School with Professor Harry Slochman of the Brooklyn College and I always liked to read, Schiller, Heine, Kleist, Kraft-Ebbing, Karl Marx,” as he bit down on another sweetbread and a little juice dribbled down his face.

With a clean white cloth napkin, he wiped himself. “So did Minna,” he added. “That was before we discovered sex, of course.”

He laughed at himself and seemed to invite me to join in at his expense. He raised his stein and we clinked.

After the meal Barney told Henry the waiter to bring us two “medicinal” Asbach brandies. “Or perhaps you’d prefer Alsatian Pruneau?” he asked me. I said brandy would do just fine, as he beckoned for the check. “*Ober sturm ban-fuehrer*,” Barney called out.

The bill came to nearly \$50. He fished through his pockets and came up with only two 20s, \$40. Without a hint of embarrassment, he borrowed a twenty from me and left a \$10 tip which had me feeling temporarily put out at the way Barney was treating me as his guest. Just as soon as we got back to Valley Stream, and we were in the living room which now had Michael’s playpen implanted in its center, he found an old leatherbound copy of Goethe’s poems and handed me a twenty from a small pile inside, and pocketed a few more for himself.



Barney lived in a modest stucco-faced Tudor style house with a small backyard and an unattached garage he was using as his painting studio. The downstairs rooms were also small and wainscoted. There was a privet hedge waist high around the circumference of the property. After his debt was paid off, he offered us both another brandy, and I accepted.

In the small living room was a fireplace and, beyond that, a central staircase leading to the upstairs bedrooms. Its lived-in look, with old policies and magazines and other papers strewn everywhere, was confirmed when I went upstairs with my suitcases and found all the bedrooms in a state of disarray. Michael's nursery was a menagerie of stuffed animals and a crib and posters on the wall of ball players and Disney characters. But none of the beds were yet made up in the other rooms. Barney suggested I should sleep in Masha's room because it had its own private bath, and he handed me fresh sheets and towels from a linen closet, and remarked, "Sorry about all this turmoil. Place needs a woman's touch...Masha hasn't really got the time."

"You mean a cleaning woman," I suggested.

"Maybe so," he chuckled. "Come on downstairs and we'll have us that brandy and I'll make us a fire."

"I'm not cold," I told him, but when I joined him minutes later, after using the bathroom, he was crumpling old glossy photos and newspapers among the charred logs in the grate, and glanced up with a half guilty expression at me from his crouch like he was a spy caught destroying pilfered documents.

"Old flames," Barney teased.

“Don’t you want to call home?” he demanded of me, suddenly.

I told him I thought I should wait for them to call me, as they knew where I was, for sure, having arranged it all.

“That was some stunt we pulled,” he said, from an armchair, with the papers ablaze, after a sip of brandy. “Running off without leaving word... and me helping you as I did.”

“I guess they’re still pretty upset with you,” I said, “and with me.”

“Your mom was...concerned,” Barney said. “Your dad was just furious, as he always is...But it wasn’t fatal, was it?”

“That’s the way it usually seems,” I said. Then I smelled a lot of choking smoke in my nostrils and lungs, and started to gag and cough huch huch huch huch, uncontrollably. Barney had neglected to open the fireplace vent.

He rushed into the kitchen for a pot of water and splashed it all over the flames, causing even more stench and smoke. Now we were both enveloped in fumes and smoke and coughing.

Barney reached high up in the chimney and yanked open the vent. Then he went about the house opening all the windows and turning up the thermostat so that we would stay warm. The air remained viscous, grey. He suggested we repair awhile to the finished basement with our drinks while the upstairs ventilated.

Barney’s cellar den had a well-stocked bar and a big Wurlitzer jukebox, and a ping pong table. There was a small old-fashioned TV with a round screen, rabbit ears, and a plastic magnifier, and the brand new Stromberg Console. On the walls were full-length photos mounted of FDR with his cigarette holder and Soviet Marshall Timoshenko, as well as some of Barney’s Rivera paintings.

We were seated again and he was pouring out another round of brandies when he confessed he was not very handy around fireplaces and things of that sort. “I hope your lungs can bear it,” he said. “I notice you smoke. That’s one vice I’ve never had, except for cigars.”

“It’s an off and on thing with me, too,” I said.

“Well I’m sorry about all this smoke,” Barney said. “It will pass.”

“In my house,” I said, “this would have been a major disaster with blaming and yelling galore.”

“I agree,” Barney said. “Your father needs to be more accepting of the flow of life, but, of course,” he winked, “sometimes one can go a little too far.”

By now we were both quite plastered. I found myself on the verge of dozing off. Barney murmured. “Tomorrow morning first thing you’ll call home, no matter what.”

We sat a while longer, settling into our individual stupors. I was bleary-eyed. I watched Barney’s thick blonde lashes closing over his eyes. He seemed to slumber a moment, then woke with a grunt, an “Oh!”

“You’re still here?” he asked, more like an announcement.

I said I presumed it was safe by now to head upstairs to bed.

“It may be a mite acrid up there even now,” he said, “and pungent, but we should be able to manage.”

He rose and I followed him clumsily up the cellar stairs and then through the living room again with its reek of ashes as he shut some windows, and left others ajar, and I lowered the register on the thermometer, and then up that stairway again to the bedrooms.

Outside Masha's door we parted. "Rest well, kiddo, and think of girls," he told me, "and welcome home. I'm glad I chose to forego certain other distractions at least for tonight."

"Me too," I replied.

We started to shake hands but Barney pulled me closer and hugged me in his rough embrace, then gently moved out of reach again.

I went into my room and undressed and was sound asleep in minutes.

Sometime during the night—I had no watch to guide me—I was almost fully wakened by an engine throbbing softly in the alleyway, but I pulled the pillow over my ears and slept on.

At ten in the morning when I finally woke up the sky looked clear and blue. Warm air blew in through a window in the kitchen and the stench of burning was almost dissipated throughout the house, leaving nothing more than a faint ashy aftertaste on the palette.

On a trestle table in the hall was an LIRR timetable along with a note from Barney:

Had a very early meeting with a dealer in the City. It's now 6 AM. Be sure you call home. And the New School. Don't bother to lock up if you go out but shut the door. Whitaker Chambers was born in this Burg. They'll all just as honest as he is...Ugh! And fake. It's an opera out here in the suburbs but not yet cops and robbers. Say what you will kiddo, it's perfect Jewish camouflage. My neighbors think I'm a Dutchman.

You'll hear from me again before sundown so for now the cocks are crowing, kiddo, and I'm off, or will be soon enough.

Stay sweet  
As always  
Uncle Barney Goldman

A few weeks later when we were talking again my father told me over dinner one night that Uncle Barney was in the hospital.

"Is it serious?" I inquired.

He explained Barney was having a hernia operation and would be up and around in a few days.

I went to visit him at Brooklyn Jewish even so, and he seemed very pleased to see me. Lying in a room with three other men curtained off in their beds, he had his knees propped up under the covers on which rested a sketchpad, and he was drawing cows with human faces. But he stopped what he was doing when he saw me.

“How are you?” I inquired.

Barney said he was still too doped to know for sure.

He took a stethoscope from the night table beside him and stuck the earpieces in place and started listening to his own chest.

“Nothing doing,” he announced, at last.

“I want you to know,” he abruptly said as he removed the device, “I’ve had this hernia since I was a kid from schlepping sides of beef at the Washington Market. I was just on the cusp of puberty as I recall.”

“I’m glad you’re finally taking care of it,” I said.

“It has nothing to do with the way I carry on,” he added.

And winked at me.

“Why would I think otherwise?” I said.

“I just wanted you to know” he said. “You can’t really hurt yourself making love. That’s all a myth. I’ve been this way since kindergarten... a little discomfort now and then, but I’ve never been *hors de combat*, nor do I ever intend to be.”

“I’m grateful for your advice,” I said.

“That time,” he went on, “I was so late to pick you up, the pain was so great I passed out on this woman. But then she revived me with a glass of brandy and seltzer water and I got right back up and did it again, and almost passed out again.”

“I guess you were trying too hard,” I said.

“Trying to do what?” he blinked. “I had this hernia....”

“I thought you told me that never stopped you.”

“It didn’t really, that’s just it,” he said. “I just kept on doing it, pain and all. It wasn’t like any pain I’d ever had. It was like all centered in my ass and my groin... You can’t imagine what it was like,” Barney said, getting flustered. “Like something sharp was coming out of me there.”

“So, in some ways,” I said, “It was heroic the way you wouldn’t stop.”

“The most heroic thing was having this operation,” Barney said. “I’ve been putting it off since I was 12 years old.”

“I get you,” I told him.

“Don’t even try to be like me,” Barney said. “It’s beyond me why you would even want to.”

“I know that,” I said.

“Talk to Masha,” he said. “She’ll tell you.”

“I have a mind of my own,” I reminded him, “and I’ve met worse.”

“Talk to Masha,” he insisted. “She’s a mother now herself and can tell you. She knows all there is to know about me.”

“There’s nothing I need to know,” I said. “I’ve got my own life.”

“Everything in black and white,” he added. “Masha can tell you as I live and die. You really ought to get her side of the story.”

“Maybe,” I said.

“Absolutely,” he insisted. “Positively! I mean it. Masha’s the one.” He closed those big blue eyes and shut me out again. “I want to rest now. You owe it to yourself,” Barney added.

“Go talk to Masha!”

## VICKY

“Dear Boy,” Barney wrote to me in Deal, New Jersey, at my parents’ vacation house, from Agadir, Morocco, in the 60s, when he’d gone there on holiday with Beth Steingut, “it is a fact well-known that when an attractive unattached widow of early middle age goes to North Africa with Barnett T. Goldman in tow she must be in the market for a husband.”

My parents were then in Banff and Lake Louise on a second honeymoon, as Mom called it, making a face. I was finished with school at last and working on my first book, writing mornings and evenings while employed days as an usher for the season at the Monmouth Park Race Track.

In general, I seemed to enjoy my short-lived solitude. There were women who were very available who played the horses at the track and a Red Bank woman friend of my mother’s, the only person I knew in the area, often invited me over to meet her pretty daughter. During the day I saw enough pretty women and horseflesh at the track and never bothered to show my face. In my spare time I went to movies in Asbury Park, and fished for the first blues of the season from a rowboat.

“I think,” Barney’s letter went on, “I’m the only straight guy I’ve run across between here and Tunis. So why did I agree to this trip to the Third World, this hegira among pederasts, junkies, *pied noir* hi-binders and transvestites? Beth more or less forced my hand by arriving one day with the Air France tickets, First Class, and reservations at some of the grand hotels of Islam. You know what a grand hotel in these parts means? They give you a room and a boy.

Beth, as I say, arranged this whole shebang, a pith helmet for me and *djellaba* against the desert sandstorms, mothers’ helpers for Masha back home in Valley Stream, and two nights in Djerba to visit ancient *mikveh*s, circumcision pits, and synagogues.

Beth collects, as you know, rugs and silver *pintelech*, and embossed *kiddush* cups, Judaica, in short, and with the Middle East heating up for another holy war, the remaining Jewish populations of Morocco and Tunisia who have not yet passed on are liquidating



all their holdings. Our bags tinkle, tinkle wherever we go with Arab silver and other *chochkes*. I bought myself a pair of tiny silver balls inscribed with Ladino verses and I'm going to tell people in New York these were once attached to Henry Kissinger.

Theoretically I am here to chaperon my lovely widow Beth, who is originally a Sephard from Casablanca, to find a suitable and virile replacement for her late lamented husband, Jose (whom we called Joey), but the best-looking guys I've seen so far have all been sewn up inside shrouds. With all the other straight fellas *shtupping* other fellas I've been drafted to do a man's work, and haven't had a free moment to cast a roving eye at all the beauties. Widow Dildo widow dildo, I say!

It's exceedingly hot and I sweat through a clean shirt in a matter of minutes. There's shade inside a *djellaba* and underneath the belly of a camel, I suppose, if you can stand the fleas. Morocco is the only place I've ever been where the flies come the size of the lamb chunks in the butchers' windows. They make a spicy blood sausage here that looks and smells just like a turd with a lot of garlic, and the cucumbers in the market stalls could sate a mare.

There's wine and *pastis* everywhere, but cognac costs an arm and a leg, and all the meat tastes like jock itch. I'm picking up a little Arabic. Know how to say I would like a cup of coffee. Also, I would like a cup of water. Wonder how you ask for certain other things?

As always  
Barney

Before I even had a chance to reply, I got another letter from him on the Isola de Ponza, off the coast of Italy.

I am rustivating here for another week or so after a stunning series of events. On our last day in Casablanca we were robbed at gunpoint in our hotel by a fellow who looked a good deal like the old time silent movie star, John Gilbert, only he was not silent and a bit more swarthy. "You and your woman are about to experience a minor calamity," he told us. "Regard it as an inconvenience not as an indignity."

It's a good thing all our funds were in the hotel safe. He took back everything we bought and all Beth's antique jewelry, plus a number of pairs of clean jockey shorts I had rolled into balls in the bureau drawer.

After he left she called her insurance broker in New York and then we called the front desk and they called the police. When they arrived, Beth told them our story and I was right off accused of dealing in contraband pieces of the national cultural patrimony and deported to Rome. She's staying on to aid in the search for the varlet; frankly, I wouldn't be surprised if she also had the hots for this *ganef* as he was very cute, and spoke reasonably good English.

A friendly English woman on the plane to Rome invited me to be her guest for a few days at her villa in Ponza, and it's a pretty enough spot, not so well touristed as Elba, and smaller, and greener, and poorer, the wine very pale yellow and tart. As there's a water shortage here during the summer months, I drink bitters and soda with all my meals and await word from Beth. I've spoken with Masha a couple of times, but I haven't really told her what's going on. She seems to be faring very well with this woman from Honduras to assist her and Michael.

A few yards from the café where I write you this aerogram is a churchyard with gravestones and tiny mausoleums the size of doghouses. One of the stones is inscribed with the name Carlo Furillo. Used to be a pretty good right fielder on the Dodgers with that name, but he was from Scranton, or Wilkes Barre, I think.

I also met a Hungarian poet who strings lake pearls for the people arriving by ferry from the mainland. He's from Szeged and came here the summer before last after jumping ship in Genoa. He says a man could make his fortune even now in Hungary importing electric shavers. Can you imagine? The current is DC. In Morocco everything was AC/DC, as I tried to explain.

About the English lady, who is my hostess, she is called Connie and very plain and seemingly refined. Between the sheets let me tell you she's a pole vaulter, a future Olympic medalist. Never married, but we are expecting her niece from Gloucestershire, Vicky, said to be a "dramaturg" with an avant garde theater group in Bristol. Wish me well. I feel like I already have a poker up my ass lately. Could be my prostate acting up again.

A.A. Barney.

A third letter was datelined Weimar in the DDR and arrived, actually weeks after I knew he was back home.

"*Boychickle*," he wrote, "I have seen the Future and the toilets flush, but what a dull place this is otherwise. You can keep Bert Brecht and his shampoo ensemble. Got here with Vicky Dramaturg under "The Law Of The Return" by which ex-Commies such as she and I can go as far East as they want to get their hearts broken.

Not that I had many illusions to begin with. The women all wear lederhosen instead of silk panties, and at night you can hear the sound of pickaxes. Excellent dairy products, however, milk, cheese, butter, a heart attack, but the air is so rich with strontium 90 people sound like Geiger counters when they breathe. Vicky says she can't find Tampax anywhere. I'll call when I get back. But I am expecting to catch hell from your mom and Beth who never got to me in Ponza. Beth went on to Jerusalem and fell in love with Roman glass. Plans to live there and make jewelry.

P.S. Vicky says the Yogurt here is excellent for the complexion. I'd die before I give my face a shmeat job but I'm bringing back some herbal teas for your mother, and an extract of fetal tissues from Romania said to be an excellent restorative for aging complexions.

As I mentioned, I learned of Barney being stateside again from Masha even before I received this third letter. I tried calling him again but he always seemed to be in the City. At last he called me on the Saturday of Labor Day weekend from Barnegat. He'd picked up Vicky at the airport in Philadelphia and was heading north. Barney wanted to know what exit to get off the Garden State Parkway to visit me in Deal.

They arrived after dark in Barney's battered Austin Healey, with Vicky not much more than a big bushel of dark red hair swirling about her head in the front seat. She was very tiny otherwise, like Edith Piaf, with a raw contralto voice when she spoke, like the oracle of Delphi, hoarse from prophesying.

After we were introduced Barney explained they would only be staying overnight and leave in the morning for Valley Stream again. Vicky was in the States to invite the acting coach Sanford Meisner with her to Bristol to work for her company on a revamped musical production of *Waiting For Lefty*, set in Cardiff during a coal strike.

While Vicky showered and changed for dinner, Barney said, "Amazingly for one so small we're compatible, considering that I'm so large and old Left and she's tiny and relatively new to this world. We agree on nothing except that she is not orgasmic, consequently we never fight. I told her she would probably like my nephew better than me."

"All that red hair certainly is striking," I said.

"You ain't seen the half of it," he smirked. "Vicky calls it a Celtic Afro... Well this is a convenience for me, for both of us, in fact," he said, "but I had to get away from aunty who was starting to get mushy about planting me in her garden in Kent or Sussex, I forgot which, and

when I started talking Goethe and Schiller to her I had Vicky in the bathtub, as we used to put it, hugger mugger.”

“What now?” I said.

“What do you mean now?” he asked. “Vicky claims she would like to do Romeo and Juliet on roller skates.”

“Won’t Masha be needing your help?” I interrupted him.

“Taken care of,” he said. “I’ll be back by late afternoon. Then I’ve got to see a doctor. I must have caught something from a sheep I ate in Morocco. It’s in my ass and growing... When do your folks arrive?” he asked me.

I said not before the end of the weekend. Did he feel squared away with Beth?

“Well she’d like me to marry her and move to Palestine with her,” Barney said, “but I can’t do the *Eretz Yisroel* trip in good conscience. I wish them well, but it’s not for me. So I’m afraid it’s goodbye baby which should relieve your mother some...”

“Maybe,” I said. “I never thought she’d really want to be in the North Woods with dad.”

“If they weren’t so tacky,” Barney said, “she’d settle for the Catskills, and ball a busboy or two.”

“Watch your tongue!” I told him sternly.

“Aw kiddo,” he said. “Have a heart. It’s to die for with your Mom and me. Always has been...but the reason why we all used to take vacations together was surely self-evident to you from time to time.

“Well, I don’t want to hear about any of it anyway,” I said.

“I’m not saying that everything that went on was plums,” Barney said. “Life is rich and various. We used to eat each other’s hearts out.”

“Jesus,” I said.

“Not the Messiah again?” he asked me.

Then Vicky appeared in the living room inside a luscious green satin gown that seemed too large for her shoulders to hold up. She looked like a pink worm squirming out of a big green apple. “I couldn’t get your shower to work properly,” she announced, “so I took a long hot soak in the tub.”

“Isn’t she marvelous?” Barney asked me. “Don’t you like to hear her limey gab?”

I’d made huge crab and shrimp salad for the three of us, had decent French bread, and a bottle of my dad’s dry white Zeller Katz wine.

We ate on the screened-in porch at a circular card table I brought up from the game room.

Barney’s conversation at dinner was mostly about Morocco which he said was a “steal, anyway you look at it, if you’re a tourist.”

Vicky who identified herself as an “international socialist” had very little sympathy for this backward kingdom in the desert, but she didn’t like to hear bad things about any part of the Third World. She spoke with a broad clipped South African accent, though she was born in Durham. And she had the annoying habit of always correcting Barney. If he said “Rabat,” she told him he meant “Tangiers.” If he said “Tangiers” she insisted that must be “Agadir.”

Nothing seemed to escape Vicky’s notice. Once she excused herself to go to the loo and chose to walk through my room to the bathroom I shared with the master bedroom. When she returned again some minutes later, she told me I seemed to be getting an awful lot of work done.

“How do you know?” I asked.

“I saw that big pile of manuscript on your desk,” she said.

For some reason I felt put out. “You didn’t happen to read any of it, did you?” I asked.

“That would be very rude,” she said, and seemed to sulk awhile, and excused herself early for bed, claiming jet lag. “Don’t take all night,” she told Barney.

When we were alone he said, “She doesn’t mind intruders. She even likes being woken up with a doo wa diddle in the middle of a dream. Claims it’s very provocative. That is to say sex-provoking.”

“Don’t let me stop you,” I said.

“Plenty of time for romance,” Barney said. “Right now I need your advice on something.”

I wondered aloud what that could be.

“Well it’s like this,” he said, and paused. “how long have we known each other?” he asked me.

“Ever since I was born,” I said, “more or less.”

“Exactly! And in all that time,” he went on, “have you ever known me to tell a little white lie?”

“Nope, I said, “when you lie they’re usually great big Baron Munchausen whoppers.”

“Exactly.”

“SO?” I asked.

“It’s like,” he stopped himself again, “I’ve been thinking a lot about death lately...My own, of course...”

“It happens,” I reminded him.

“Don’t get me wrong I’m not anymore afraid than the next guy,” he said, “but I do want to do it right. I’m thinking of making an appointment to see your dad to write a will, just jot down a few bequests...”

“You mean money?” I asked.

“That too,” he said, “but there also are some personal items...”

“Such as?”

“Well,” he said, “for one thing I don’t want to be buried out in Farmingdale with Minna...Loyalty aside, I never liked her family that much. In fact,” he added, “I don’t think I want to be buried in a Jewish cemetery at all.”

“Cremation,” I asked.

“Maybe,” he said, “I just don’t know. But if there really is an inferno down below I sure as hell don’t want to start with one up here.”

“You must be kidding,” I said.

“Sure I am,” he told me. “I honestly don’t know what I think about crematoriums,” he frowned. “It’s like so Auschwitz, if you know what I mean...”

“I think so,” I said. “I suppose.”

“I was wondering,” he said, “if you thought your dad might respond...”

“Respond?”

“...If you were to put me into the ground out here somewhere,” he said, “down by your little pond in your own back yard.”

“Me?” I asked.

“Anybody would do, I suppose,” he said, “so long as this was the place. I’ve always loved it down here by the sea.”

Barney looked very solemn and serene and lonely when he glanced up at me. I still couldn’t tell if he was putting me on.

I told him I thought backyard burial was probably illegal, against the Monmouth County sanitary code.

“Probably,” he said. “But who would have to know?”

“Just like that?” I asked again. “Me?”

“You people have been my best friends for life,” he said. “I can’t really think of any better place.”

“That’s very flattering,” I told him, “but you’re not going to die right now, and, besides, you know Dad he....”

“That’s what I figured, too,” he said. “What’s a life without a grave. I ask you?”

“If you ever were cremated,” I pointed out, “we could sprinkle you among the azaleas and think of your every spring when they came into bloom.”

“I must give some thought to that,” Barney said. He looked indeed very morose.

“Ash and coffee grounds,” I said, “are supposed to be the two best things for azaleas. You could make Mom real happy.”

“I never much liked azalea shrubs,” he said. “No bouquet. Just a lot of color. I’ll think about it though...It really was just a thought. It would comfort me maybe...”



He yawned expansively, stretching his arms out wide. “Never mind for now. Duty calls,” he said. “We’ll talk over breakfast.”

Barney got up and started toward his bedroom.

Suddenly he stopped and spun about again. “Don’t get me wrong,” he said. “I don’t want to die. Not now! Not for a long time!”

“I know that *tattileh*,” I said, softly. “I just told you that.”

“It was just my thinking,” he said, “just a little wiggle in the brain, but I guess you’re telling me your father would never buy a backyard burial.”

“If the shoe were on the other foot, Barney,” I asked, “would you?”

“I don’t happen to own no Shore property,” he said.

“Be honest,” I told him. “Think about Dad in Valley Stream.”

“Too lower middle class. I suppose not,” he said. “But you know I wasn’t thinking monuments. Maybe just a little statue in topiary I’ve rigged up. Something growing above my head. Kind of a self-portrait. But it would need constant trimming...”

“You’re kidding.”

“I just thought it would be easier on your mom, too,” he grinned.

“Is that really the reason? Sort of like the family pet?”

“Household spirit,” he shrugged. “I don’t really know why. I just thought of it. I thought I’d ask. Believe me I don’t want to die. Not tonight anyway...”

He turned and with a little skip started down the hall again toward his bedroom.

Then he turned again. “That topiary thing, you know. It’s me in profile,” he explained. ‘But it could pass for anybody. Edison or Mr. George Washington. Maybe even your mom’s dad. He was kinda heavy as I recall...”

“I never met the man,” I said.

“Awful man,” he said. “I doubt if she’d care to be reminded of him. Kept a mistress in the same tenement and died in her arms. Awful...” He shook his head solemnly. “Well think about it,” he said, “and so will I. Worst can happen is your dad says no.”

“That never stopped you before,” I said.

“I’ll think about it, too,” Barney winked. “It would mean a lot to me. Aside from Masha, you people are the only family I ever had.”

“And what does she say?” I asked.

“Her mom’s in Farmingdale,” Barney reminded me. “That would be more convenient.”

“And you definitely don’t want to be there?”

“It’s just not me,” he said. “But I’ll think about it and so should you. And Masha.”

“And my dad,” I reminded him.

“Maybe he wouldn’t have to know,” Barney said. “No I guess not. No getting around Irv like that...”

“I think not,” I said. “Total candor is our best policy.”

“I’ll think about it,” he said, “and so should you.”

“Sure I will,” I told him.

“Sure,” he said.

## **ADDIE**

When I got married that first time, my wife and I lived in a small cramped one bedroom “flat with a view” on Riverside Drive. Addie was a painter and there really wasn’t a whole lot of extra space once we moved our double bed and a chest, and a dining table and sofa, and some folding chairs, into the living room.

To pay the rent I now had a job in a suit downtown. I came home in the evenings to write at the dining room table and later make love. Eating wasn’t that important to either of us that we spent much time preparing food. My wife was also interested in using the space for her painting more than anything else, so we were more or less working side by side a lot of the time until late in the evenings when we’d tumble into bed, taking our chances on lust between us, until such time as I had to get up in the morning and head downtown again.

A lot of those evenings, about as often as once a week for a while, Barney would call on us. He just happened to be in the neighborhood, he said, and he didn’t want to barge in on the newlyweds, but he just thought we’d like a friendly visit.

At first, we were agreeable to these interruptions in our routine because Addie knew how fond I was of Barney and because he always brought a good bottle of wine, and sometimes cold cuts, or cake, or Chinese food in little paper cartons. But, if he stayed longer than an hour, Addie was apt to grow very impatient, and she would begin to pace back and forth in front of her canvasses which she would also never allow him to see.

Addie painted cloudscapes, and the hard-edged weather of bright fall and early spring over imaginary countrysides and cityscapes. When she was working, she would rarely allow me to see what she was making, either, so Barney should not have taken insult from that alone, and I

don't really think he did. After a while, he started ringing up to drop by during hours when he knew I was at work, business hours, and then Addie would be even more diffident, though polite at first, making up excuses why she didn't want to have visitors.

Physically Addie was a handsome young woman in those days, though reputedly cold. In school where we'd met legend had it from the other girls who were her rivals that she "menstruated icicles." She could also be quite passionate in her responses, if one knew how to reach her. As her husband, I prided myself that I did. So, at first, I thought Barney had eyes for her, too, and I was both flattered and a little appalled. Having known me since my *pisher* days, Uncle Barney certainly had no right to have those kinds of feelings right now about my young and talented wife.

In order that there would be no hard feelings between us, I decided to have Barney meet me for lunch one day so we might talk, and I could set him straight on what was and what was not permissible with me and Addie.

"I'm interested in painters," he told me, with a napkin tucked beneath his chin, when we met at the Old Timers Bar on 40<sup>th</sup> Street that day in May. "Period," he added.

"Well Addie's very shy about her work," I pointed out.

"I don't think she even likes me," Barney said ruefully, his head downcast.

"O come on. It's not like that..."

"She's always giving me the fish eye when I come to see you," he said.

"You're just very different you two," I said.

"Most women like to be flattered," he pointed out.

"I thought you weren't interested in her in that way," I said.

“Generosity,” Barney said, “is important too. Who wants brush offs?”

I told him he should probably lay off with the visits a while, especially when I was at work, as they made Addie and me a little jittery toward each other.

“You mean,” he said, “I’m not welcome anymore.”

“Of course you are,” I assured him. “Especially when I’m about...but why not make appointments?”

“I see a shrink in your neighborhood,” he said. “Sometimes I need human company afterwards.”

“I never knew that,” I said. “Anything wrong?”

“It’s because I’m so goddamn content with myself all the time,” he told me.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “You don’t seem like the shrinkage type...What happened to Vicky and Beth and the others.”

“I too have feelings,” was all Barney said.

“Well call first,” I said, “and if I’m not home don’t ask Addie.”

“If that’s the way you want it,” he said. “The same old keep off the lawn crap. Just like the suburbs. I thought you were going to be an artist,” he said.

“I am. With a new bride.”

“And please keep off the grass,” Barney teased. He could be really infuriating when he didn’t want to get the point.

When I put the check on my expense account, Barney told me, “You’re getting to be a real bourgeois kiddo. What with that looker wife and the locked flat...”

“We’re trying to get somewhere with our lives and work,” I explained.

“WELL I hope it works out in bed, too,” he said.

He got up and shook hands and left me there. Barney and I were really and truly on the outs now, it seemed, and I felt badly for asserting my proprietary rights, and defending my wife’s honor. But not so I wanted to change my mind about anything.

Barney didn’t call for a while. But he did start sending me books: *The Sun Also Rises* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and Chaucer, every book he could ever find about women with repressed appetites and sexual ambitions, and I’d read all of them before, it seems, in college. *Anna Karenina* and *Forever Amber*, *Fanny Hill*, *The Pearl*. The usual paperback *schmutz*. One day he enclosed a note. “Women are much less direct about their feelings than the male of the species. I guesst you knew that, too, kiddo. Among terns the male is always dominant during mating.”

When I made the mistake of showing the note and a few of the books to Addie, she said, “I don’t care if you like him. I don’t want him coming around here anymore.”

I got angry at her for being so harsh toward a friend, and we had an argument which we quickly made up. A few weeks later, Barney called one night when I was out and she said he told her he wanted to buy one of her paintings. She was to name her price, within reason.

Addie was furious. “He’s never even seen any of my work,” she ranted.

“What did you tell him?” I asked.

“I’m not a prostitute,” she announced.

I asked her the same question a second time.

“I said I would talk to you,” Addie said.

“Why me?” I asked. “It’s your painting.”

“I figured we might need the money,” she said, indignantly.

“You’d do that for me?” I asked.

“O shut up, will you?” she said. “I’m not your mother.”

That night I slept on the couch.

A couple of days later Barney called and said we ought to have lunch. His treat this time.

I agreed to meet him at the Grand Ticino downtown.

“I know you think otherwise, but she sort of has eyes for me all the time,” he told me, as though in expiation for his bad behavior. “You don’t happen to see it, but I do. When you’re not looking.”

“O come on Barney,” I said. “You’re old enough to be her father.”

“Don’t I now that?” he replied. “I’m not saying it’s intentional. I think Addie’s just that way involuntarily, I suppose. So I was trying to clear things up between us as best I could, and then I guess things got a little out of order.”

“I’ll say,” I told him.

“Sometimes,” he observed as he bit at his lower lip, “you can convert that sort of thing to more friendly feelings. I mean,” he explained, “you buy a painting, pass a compliment, try to be friendly and avuncular.”

“Well I wouldn’t if I were you,” I said. “For my sake. We’re not having such an easy time of it...”

“O yeah?” He half seemed to grin.

“I don’t want to talk about any of that,” I told him, and there was silence between us until I left the restaurant before dessert.

A few days later Mr. and Mrs. Ronald Fishback received a check in the mail for \$500 from Uncle Barney, with a brief note saying, “a belated wedding gift. Sorry.”

“It’s a bribe,” Addie pointed out.

“So what?” I said. “Maybe he is feeling really badly.”

“O sure,” she said. I wasn’t quite sure what she meant by that. And why she was so reluctant to go to my parents’ house a month later for Barney’s 60<sup>th</sup> birthday party.”

“I really have to go,” I insisted.

“Then go without me,” Addie said.

“Please, please come,” I said. “He’ll behave.”

At last she agreed to accompany me, if we left at a reasonable time and went to a late movie.

My mom ran a catered affair for Barney with caviar and champagne. A lot of their mutual old friends came, and Masha and her husband sent flowers and regrets from Florida, where they were then living. I was pretty sure that many of the women who came escorted by their husbands or boyfriends had been Barney’s *inamoratas* at one time or another.

He was, in fact, just about the only seemingly unattached person at the party and, buoyed by champagne bubbles, in a bright red blazer, he floated from person to person like some big gaudy butterfly.

Every woman he encountered, save for Addie, received kisses and hugs, and the men big *abrazos*. Barney even kissed the pretty serving woman and the sleek young Creole fellow who tended bar.

At one point, after the buffet was cleared, my father toasted his old friend and wished



him long life, having long since made up their previous differences. As the evening wore on, Barney's good spirits prevailed and even Addie no longer seemed so impatient to leave.

After the cake was brought in, and Barney blew out all the candles, my mom coaxed him to sing. She would accompany him on the piano. Barney chose the ballad "If I Loved You" from *Allegro* for which he had to lift his voice up to the tenor range. As he stood next to the piano, with his big chest expanding and contracting while he vocalized, I had the realization that those worshipful pale blue eyes were focused directly on Addie who also was not looking elsewhere, though her face was turning a wholesome red.

It was my turn now to suggest that we leave as soon as Barney finished his performance. But all I heard after looking at my watch was Barney "longing to tell you but afraid and shy," and "I let my golden chances pass me by"; when the song was finished to cheers it was now 11:30, too late to go to a flick.

"Let's leave anyway right now," I told Addie.

She agreed and said she would go to the bathroom and freshen up and get her coat from the long metal rack my mom had installed in her bedroom.

I said goodnight to my dad and mom, told them it was a lovely party, went into the kitchen to compliment the help, and then went off in search of Barney, who had disappeared, to say many happy returns and good night.

When I entered the bedroom, he and Addie seemed to be down on their knees at the foot of Mom's bed, engaged in a hunt for something, on all fours, with their arms reaching under the counterpane skirts. Addie's tight silk dress was hiked up her thighs so a bit of her pantyhose was showing, I noticed.

They immediately scrambled back to a sitting position, and she coolly announced, “I told you I didn’t want to be here...”

“So I know,” I said.

“I was just helping Barney find something.”

“Was it that hard to find?” I asked her.

“Kiddo,” he warned.

“Why didn’t he bring one of his own?” I demanded.

“You just don’t really want to understand,” she said. I’m going to the john.”

She fled.

From the floor where he sat Barney looked aghast, as if he’d just spilled hot soup on his lap. Wearily, he got up and brushed himself off and straightened his pale silk tie. “Nothing really happened in here,” he said. “Swear on a Bible!”

“I swear junior nothing really was happening. She was just helping me.”

“I wouldn’t even let it,” he added. “Don’t you know that?”

“What are you saying?” I asked.

“*Boychick*,” he said. “Don’t. For your sake as well as mine.”

Without another word I turned and left the room and waited impatiently for Addie in the hall while she retrieved her coat. It was a very long while after that before Barney and I spoke to each other again.

He no longer came for visits, no longer asked me to lunch. With great self-contempt, Addie and I used his money to buy a color TV. Then, after awhile, I met him again by accident in the Village, and it was not easy to keep my heart hardened against Barney Goldman any

longer. I think that may be because Addie and I were separating. When we met again I was older, a little sad, and bitter. Barney's heart seemed to go out to me. "When we fuck up that's when we fuck up," he shrugged. "No getting around it. It's what we do...and it's better you didn't prolong the agony" was his comment on my forthcoming divorce. "You're young and you have a life ahead of you," he said. "You'll have other better relationships..."

"She was my wife," I reminded Barney.

"Don't exaggerate," he told me.

Against my better judgment I went into a café and we took espresso together, and, once again, Barney swore, though I knew not why, that nothing really was going on between Addie and himself when I'd barged in.

But, then he added, "Aren't you glad there were no children..."

"I'm not," I told him. "Really!"

Seated a few tables away was Leonard Bernstein with a group of handsome young men, his silvery mane of wavy grey hair the sole dramatic highlight in so much plush Italian *Messogiorno* gloom.

Pointing him out, Barney said, "There's a peacock we would do well never to imitate. Imagine being his child...or wife," he grinned.

From what I knew of Bernstein, I had to agree with Barney, though I was not sure of the relevance of his comment. When we parted it was a long while before we spoke again.

When Addie and I finally were divorced I took her out to lunch near Foley Square to a Korean restaurant. She would be having her first one-woman show at a Madison Avenue gallery in a couple of months and was feeling very optimistic.

I was trying to feel disengaged, though compassionate, a well-wisher.

Over dessert she assured me, as she had not the evening of my mom's party, that nothing out of the ordinary had been happening between Barney and herself when I walked in on them.

"So? What did occur?" I demanded, more sharply than I'd intended.

Her beautiful pale face shaped like a delicate teardrop darkened.

"Barney," she said "was showing me how he painted on his hands and knees on the floor like Pollock and de Kooning not like I did with an easel, and he was laying out his huge imaginary canvas and splashing it with an array of dry pigments and glazes when he dropped one of his fillings...a little piece of gold from his tooth...and he was very concerned so I got down to help him look for it...right at the foot of your mom's bed."

"I guess he was in a lot of pain," she added, "and maybe that's why he looked so funny, so uncommunicative."

"And that's really all?" I asked.

"In so far as I can recall," Addie said, glancing away quickly.

"I wish it hadn't happened for one instant," she told me then, but now she wasn't looking at me. "It really wasn't anybody's fault. And certainly not Barney's," she whispered, and reached for a Kleenex in her purse and blew her pretty red and runny nose.

So that our last words together as husband and wife, instead of clearing things up, only deepened the soggy, painful mysteries of who had betrayed who and the loss that followed for both of us, and for Barney, I suppose.

## **PART VI**

## THE RIGHT TO WRITE BADLY

In the early 70s, I quit the newspaper business and started to freelance for magazines. I had a little success, making a name for myself in the quality middlebrow quarterlies with essays on various social questions: unemployment, race, the Social Welfare system. I thought of moving back to New York City to be closer to certain of my editors.

I published two fast books on Watts and lawyers and made a little paperback money, began to think I should probably be more ambitious. A novel I wrote got badly pummeled and the assignments dropped off, so I went to work for another newspaper for a while and then in TV news, hated it, and switched, through connections I had with a former agent, to become a freelance treatment writer for the movies.

Whenever I published anything of note, a book or even a serious article, essay, or story, I always made sure to send copies to my parents, to Barney, and to Masha.

Always Barney was the only one to write back with comments. He had so much more time on his hands than these other people in my life and he kept telling me he ought to write up his own story someday.

“It’s a natural to be a best-seller,” he said. “Kiddo did I ever tell you how I seduced Norma Shearer and Sylvia Sidney the same weekend?”

“Barney,” I wrote back, “your *métier* is getting messier and messier. I doubt if I know a messier *métier*.”

“Together we could have been another Thalberg,” he told me, “but in that case you would be long dead as I almost am.”

When I published *Watts*, Barney wrote to ask me if I'd ever had consenting sexual relations with a black woman. He had on many occasions observed, he wrote, contrary to popular superstition, but just like everybody else, that black women could only enjoy the act of love-making after receiving certain assurances he was really not prepared to give to any women who participated with him in life's adventures. He wondered if that was perhaps just another spin-off from the humiliations of slavery.

When I wrote a long appreciative essay on James Baldwin, Barney told me that he thought to be a black American was even worse in some ways than Baldwin would allow because "one couldn't always live under the shadow of a promissory apocalypse."

"If everything goes sky high there would be escape of sorts there," he wrote me. "Just suppose it doesn't, and we all remain inward-looking and selfish enough to let things stay pretty much as they are. Sullen and oppressed and self-destructive—day after day, wouldn't that be the worst fate of all for them and us?" he asked me.

I always read Barney's letters with care, though I rarely answered back. I didn't even think I was supposed to. Barney was Barney, egging me on by sounding off. After the novel failed, I got a letter I had to respond to. He wrote: "You keep gathering up all these experiences. Like Markham's *Man With the Hoe*. That's a lot of hooley. What in the world are you ever going to do with all these experiences? You have enough to write *War & Peace*, if you just let two and two come together. You're not yet a great writer, nor are you a terribly bad writer. You're also better than me, and your mom and dad, but then we just don't want to write at all, do we? You want to be great, I suppose, but you're just a little stingy about why you know and how you know things. Did you think I fixed that raffle for you in that *shul* in Rego Park so you

could make small talk about big subjects? Write with your full heart,” Barney said. “Take chances! Make an even bigger fool of yourself!”

I was discouraged enough to take advice I did not understand. In my spare time, I started writing fiction about a character in a young man’s life who was very much like Barney.

“Thanks for the memories and the kick in the ass,” I wrote to him. “It’s gotten me to thinking about something autobiographical and free.”

“Just don’t hurt your mother,” he wrote back.

I took a sabbatical from newspapering and moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, and then to Tucson, Arizona. I taught night classes in journalism at Pima Community College, and dated some of my attractive students, wrote a lot in all the heat about bitter wet winters in Brooklyn, and, in the glare, about the overcast skies of Sheepshead Bay in fall.

My flat was located one street behind the farthest end of Speedway, the principal thoroughfare, near Craycroft, almost as removed from the old center of town as the Monthan Air Force Base. The street I lived on was straight, the houses adobe, low, set back on lawns of ocotillo and other cacti. Straight and flat, my shadeless street ran from an outdoor fruit stand at one end toward the empty scrub desert at the other, beyond which was an immense graveyard of aircraft of all sorts going as far back as the Second World War. The Department of Defense and others would sometimes scavenge there for spare parts unavailable elsewhere. I liked to stroll among these relics and imagine battles in the sky.

When I was writing at my desk, I also used to peer out between the vertical blinds at the hot blinding tarmac on which only a few cars ever seemed to move in the course of a morning. There were never any pedestrians, but, one day, I glanced up from my computer monitor



between sentences and saw coming toward me, down the middle of this seemingly deserted street, from quite some distance away, 3 Hassids dressed in long black coats and dark-brimmed homborg hats, walking slowly along, arm in arm, in all that glare.

A war party of the Mescalero Apaches would not have been more startling in that place at that time. They walked as though taking no notice whatsoever that their surroundings were pretty remote from Williamsburg and Borough Park. All three were middle-aged men and they went on slowly three abreast right past my windows with their elbows interlocked, kept on walking until they disappeared beyond my peripheral vision, presumably into the desert.

I ran outside into the noon sun to question my next-door neighbor who was drenching her chilis with water from a long green hose.

Had she just seen those 3 Hassids going by.

“Maybe,” she said. “But I wasn’t really looking. Been thinking of growing okra.”

I went back into my house. There was, of course, a small Jewish community in town of long standing. I called the *shammes* at the local synagogue, and asked if, indeed, there was also now a Hassidic community in Tucson. Or had I perhaps witnessed some sort of levitation?

“On the contrary,” he said. From time to time some did wander through from LA and San Diego, or after stopping over on the late train from Yuma. They were missionaries of a sort, “engaged in errands of mercy, or to bring certain lapsed Jews back to their religious roots. The so-called *Ba’al Tshuva*.”

“They even get one or two converts,” he said, “and then move on again.”

That this unlikely trio might enter the desert in bright glare and just disappear impelled me to write about a trip I’d made long ago with Addie to the Mojave Desert in a car very much

like Barney's old Plymouth that broke down outside Palmdale in one hundred degree heat, and how I sold the car to a Palmdale redneck in a pick-up truck for \$15 plus a ride in the truck to Bakersfield for Addie and I, and that impelled me, by free association, to think of Addie wistfully again. I ended up calling Barney, with whom I'd not communicated in quite some time.

After three rings at his Valley Stream number a computer voice interrupted to inform me the number had been temporarily disconnected. I was given a new number in Baja California. I dialed that number and reached a Mexican servant.

*"Si Señor Barney no esta,"* she said. *"No es aqui."*

Would he be back soon?

*"He no more in Mejico,"* she said. *"he stays all winter and yesterday he go back to Nueva York with La Senora."*

I asked for *La Señora's* name and phone number.

*"La Señora Guillermo,"* she said.

"Williams?" I corrected her.

*"Si como no. Willyam."* But she really did not know how to reach *La Señora*, or where she lived."

I went back to my desk, those pages stretching out endlessly in arid bleached white dunes as I scribbled in a mirageless desert about the pain of a forsaken first marriage and forgot all about getting in touch with Barney.

The novel I was working on turned out to be only a little more successful this time. I eventually cut it down to short story length by including only the first and last chapters and throwing out the longish middle section. The stuff I saved was my best work ever, I thought. I published it as a story in a California literary quarterly called *Madrone*, and, when it appeared in print, I sent the usual complimentary copy to Barney.

Three days later he called me on the phone.

“You are doing the fucking scenes with real *panache* nowadays,” he said. “You have got a definite flair for face to face and what I call Greco Roman wrestling.”

“What do you think of the rest of my story?” I demanded, impatiently.

“A painful fucking bore,” Barney said. “I would say so anyway. I told you not to hurt your mother. “I’m surprised at you.”

“Mom isn’t even in the story,” I said.

“You write about every woman in every story as though she were your mother,” Barney said. “Come and see me sometime and I’ll tell you about me and Bess Myerson at the American Hotel in Sag Harbor. Or the time I did the jig with beautiful Sloan Simpson, Mrs. Bill O’Dwyer, the Mayor’s wife...”

I didn’t think I liked being teased by Barney, so I reproached him with “Cut it out!” Then I softened my words by telling him about how I had tried to reach him when he was in Baja not too long ago.

“At Cousin Adele’s place o yes,” he said. “Lovely woman. Not much to look at but the body of a bathing beauty and she’s nearly 53...”

“Don’t exaggerate,” I said.

“You should write about women like Adele. She’s real cheery about her life and death and maybe even menopause sometimes,” he said. “The miracles that are being performed with some women. They now carry babies at 45 or even 50, I think.”

“Barney,” I interrupted. “Don’t tell me you’re going to be a father again!”

“Your mother always wanted more children,” he said. “But your dad was too stingy. She needed a helper... a mother’s helper. More than just a turkey baster.”

“Why now?” I asked. “Why talk to me about all this?”

“Because it’s all you ever want to know about really,” Barney said.

“That isn’t true,” I told him.

“You’ve been holding your breath ever since you were a little kid,” he said. “Give yourself a break,” he added. “Find yourself a tootsie and get married again, maybe sell life insurance, or mutual funds. Or turn queer? How old are you now?”

I reminded Barney I was just about two years younger than his Masha, 45.

“Well,” he said, “you’re a little too old to be worried about your future. Who the hell do you want to be? Klaus Von Blowjob? Just write. Do it until you are happy with what you’ve done. If it’s still no good come and see me and I’ll tell you my story. It will be a guaranteed best-seller and we’ll split the proceeds...”

“Barney,” I interrupted again. “What did you think about those three Hassids in the desert?”

“The Jewish you,” he said, “Fake Phil Roth who is fake enough, God knows, but funny. You want to be trying some of that clammy *Señorita* stuff with refried beans and forget all the old folks at home.”

“That’s all I ever really tried to do,” I said.

“Well don’t try so hard. Just do it,” he said. “I love you as a son. I’ve loved a lot of people in my time, mostly women. They didn’t happen to want to be writers. You want to be a writer so write. It’s no big deal. Having babies is a real big deal. My Masha has done it now three times already. Write a lot more, and don’t send me nothing you don’t like, or I’ll tell you all about what I did that time with Addie,” he warned me.

“What do you mean, Addie?” I asked.

“I was critical,” he said, “and so was she, and so the night was spent and it was morning and afternoon of the second day,...and why don’t you mind your own business?” Barney said, “What I did with Addie was quite innocent, in its way. It was long after you left her. And really none of your business *boychickle*.”

## THE SORRIEST TIME OF ALL

Sometime during the Vietnam War, I heard from Masha that Barney had given up cigars for “health reasons” after his nephew, Rudolf, now an MD, found a spot of pleurisy on his lungs. He existed now, she said, on macrobiotic kosha, salt herrings, and cocoa almonds until his lungs would be clear again.

A year or so later she wrote to tell me that her dad had his own blood pressure cuff but refused medication other than chamomile teas. He was keeping increasingly to himself and was no longer, in her words, “so active.”

“He’s still amazingly fit, really,” she assured me, who had been out of touch with him for quite a while, “for a man who only exercises on the horizontal. But one doctor thought a bypass might help. He has the resources. I keep reminding him that there’s some risk of rejection involved in any surgical procedure of that nature at his age and he says there’s nothing wrong with me that a broken heart won’t cure. Honestly Ron, he talks like *Ish kabibble* to the social worker, too. I think he’s getting a little senile.

“The Women’s Movement,” she went on, “has definitely had its impact on confidence. His sense of ease. The women he sees are not always straight up and down like your mom or Minna was. They’re all dopers. Barney says he doesn’t touch the stuff himself but all the best people do. Maybe Barney doesn’t like New Age manners. Lately he’s been getting nothing but.... He took a nature writing course in New Hampshire and came down with shingles. Now he’s hiking a lot.”

I couldn’t really picture Barney Goldman, crowding 70, an outdoors person. But at the

close of one hot summer, I got a postcard in his handwriting from Maine where he was coolly climbing Katahdin. “Up down, up down,” he wrote.

Some weeks later along came a letter on his return to New York.

“Ronald Boychickle,

Climbing mountains is strenuous in a desultory way for an old goat like me. It occupies time when you’re with these outdoorsy women who would otherwise want to expend all their energies with you in the sack.

The latest is a fantasy come true. She could be all fantasy in fact, the wife of a renowned geneticist at the Rockefeller Institute who spends all his time in his lab. He’s being talked up as a possible Nobel Laureate and I take some satisfaction, in more ways than one, that I am boosting the cause of science by keeping Sally otherwise occupied.

At my age you live in dream time. We met Contra Dancing at the Y and it soon moved on as in this dream of life eternal from Contra Dancing to contraception. Your poor old Uncle Barney fell in love. The odd contradiction to all this is she was still fertile and the more we were together the more fertile she and I seemed to be and the more time Mark had at Rockefeller and the less demanding was Sally (who I sometimes call Adele) for some sort of real life together.

Love brought her my way, but her soul drew back. This lady is no longer a youngster herself. She has two grown kids at Brown and Harvard, and absolutely no celluloid to spare. Everything is consumed in palpitations or by one sort of exercise or another. We did Rio on the Elder Hostel together at Carnival last spring and the samba took my breath away. It was her idea that we try healthier pursuits such as scaling Katahdin with me when hubby was in Berkeley, or some such place, looking at a colleague’s fruit flies. Well the more we climbed the less was expected of Barney Billygoat elsewhere, though peradventure she got me interested in the tango music of a certain dead Argentine named Carlos Gardel and I performed as a paragon when called to do so. When we finally crested the summit in that peak experience (and I am not simply dragging tired metaphors across your nostrils), I felt at least, for once, this woman would come away from our protracted weekends loving me as well. But the odds were truly against it. She had a husband, I had pleurisy. I assure you she was *shluffing* just as late as I was, and both charley horsed to boot.

I’ve always liked intelligent outdoorsy broads with a couple of eggs to spare. Forgive my French. Minna never went in for the sun, she brooded a lot in dark spaces and sewed all those dark garments for herself, and read those Jakob Wasserman novels and I think so much gloom eventually just killed her. And your mom worries about her hair and her nails, I suppose, and you, a lot.

But this woman I’m now seeing is the same age as my late wife was when she passed and rides bareback in early March on the Georgia Sea Islands and, though some of her brown hair comes from a bottle, she sings like a third McCorkle sister and calls herself a “day tripper.” We drop acid from time to time. Don’t ask me why. I prefer rose hip tea.

In love I'm finally overmatched, and raw all over, thinking I might very much like to pay you a visit out where you are if I could bake in the sun and steep in one of those sulphur baths I read about near Stafford.

Would you be amenable? I promise not to discuss your literary shortcomings, and you—in turn—can aver *che sara sara* that you will not demand I read and criticize your latest slanders of your parents' marriage.

*Momser*, in her final moments Minna told me her most pleasurable times with me were when we sat in the living room together reading, side by side. She called that love and I think it was, in fact, of a sort. Believe me, I will not be opposed to parallel play if it will bring us all closer these last years.

So do let me know whether you have room or can recommend a good motel in the neighborhood. I'll bring along one of my collections. I'll visit Swap Meets. I'll manage to find my own solaces, though I'm pretty much off the stuff on a regular basis really. Creeping prostatitis.

I really do hope you'll say the prospect pleases you. I'm no longer dieting. Nothing I eat puts weight back on my frame. It may be I am dying at last, and slowly, from a number of causes, but so slowly you need not be alarmed. Nor Masha...I'm a lonely old fart a lot of the time and I just realized I've never seen you in your prime. That last fling brought me close to immortality. I need to be with you, my young friend. Let me know your pleasure.

As always,  
B.G."

Though I was writing something new, I was pleased to be a host to Barney and told him on the phone to make a reservation on the first plane. The rainy season and the awful summer heat were just ending. We'd have lovely weather. In the spare room I had a sofa bed and he was welcome to camp with me awhile. I had a pool. We could go across to Mexico together one day.

When I met Barney at the Pima County Airport, he seemed from a distance just like he always looked, but there was a little less of the same from the neck down. Up close his fair skin had coarsened and seemed scaly, and those quiet blue eyes bulged from a giant fuzzy mother-like face. "I need a pool quick," he said. "It is beastly out here. Did I ever tell you about Eleanor Holm, the swimmer, and your momma and me the summer after you were born?"



“I thought she was my father’s crush,” I said.

“That was later. Eleanor was like the Queen of the May on a hot July afternoon in the Pripet Marshes or Balaton,” he said. “Maybe I made her up. If your father was outclassed so was I, with Minna and your mom watching,” he added.

“So what happened.”

“She was born, she lived, she’ll die in due time.”

“Barney,” I warned him, knowing this to be the least of it, “she was very nice to me when I was little.”

“I’m not only not exaggerating,” he replied, “I’m also not going way overboard. But what’s the problem? You wouldn’t like some of the memories I keep to myself. With the geneticist’s wife I took big risks with very few assets.”

We were standing by my car in the baking heat with his one large Vuitton suitcase. Barney looked paunchless though not quite slim, like a paper bag that still had the shape of the contents it had once held. Barney’s nose and forehead were red, slick with sweat. I opened the door and cautioned him about the overheated seats. “It may be just what the doctor ordered,” he said, “for my lower back...”

“You have that, too?”

“At my age you get a little bit of everything,” Barney said, “a little bit at a time.”

He rose off the seat and I started the motor and flipped on the air conditioning. “What I need is an ice cold daiquiri with crushed ice,” he said, “you know where.”

Barney was trying so hard to stay in a good mood, despite undertows of discouragement, that he behaved with great deference toward my hospitality, and was good company for me. I needed somebody to pay attention to. He enjoyed Mexican food and we ate almost every night at inexpensive restaurants on the South Side. I drove him to Stafford and we both soaked and smoked a little weed which Barney called “*a shluffy Goyische high*,” while he was pummeled by stout Mormon matrons with hands raw from picking cotton. Afterwards, fully restored, his skin looked pink and smooth again for a little while.

Barney was extremely cordial to my one woman friend, Annette, when I ventured to introduce them, but never pushy or intrusive as he’d been so long ago with Addie, and when he met Kate, Annette’s roommate, went out of his way to bestow compliments on her. “You remind me of the ways women used to be,” he said, and, lest she take insult, added, “Serendipitous to the extreme.”

He wanted to rent his own car for excursions, but I said use mine when we’re not together. I needed the time at my desk.

“At my age thrift is foolishness,” he shrugged. “So I’ll be foolish for my boy.”

Just as previously Barney had needed very little time passing to sexualize any encounter, now he seemed standoffish, reticent, distant in the company of anybody to whom I introduced him. He did not come on to either Annette or Kate in my presence, or with Evangeline, my nifty Cajun landlady, but was correct and reserved, and easy to be with. He rarely went out alone in the car. Because he was taking antibiotics for a urinary tract infection, most nights he went to bed right after dinner and that meant I had time to do my own work. On the evening I said I would be staying over at Annette’s place, Barney asked me why didn’t I invite my “little

tomatillo” to our place so she and I wouldn’t have the kids on our hands and he’d get a good night’s rest in the motel down the block.

“We don’t actually have sex together, Barney,” I explained. “It’s not like that with us. Mostly we just talk and cuddle and sleep together sometimes.”

His great brow rose, “Nothing more?”

“Nothing more,” I repeated.

“That’s a new one on me,” Barney said. “But I could get used to it, I suppose, like brother and sister. Is she queer?”

I ignored him. Ominous as Barney’s new placidity in public seemed, I did not choose to see it as necessarily and immediately calamitous for me, or him. I thought he was just beginning to behave like the flaccid old gent he may have been by then. Before I went off that night to sleep at Annette’s, I inquired about his continuing efforts in New York, New York on behalf of pure science.

“Aren’t you still seeing Sally?” I asked.

“Now which one would she be?” he demanded.

“The geneticist’s wife.”

“You mean Laura whom we call Adele,” he said. “Don’t you know I never use real names in the mail or on the phone for security reasons?” he explained, “a legacy from my CP days.”

“Very well,” I said. “Sally is Adele is Laura?”

“That’s one of the reasons why I faxed myself out here to Tucson,” Barney said. “The genius found out through a colleague I was his wife’s other lamentable interest. It seems he’s so

valuable to the scientific enterprise he's watched closely by the FBI and the CIA, and as there was some suspicion I might be an agent of the KGB, so this Administrative colleague sort of took him aside and said, You are precious but not your Mrs. if she keeps this up they'll be splicing up your genes for you in Moscow.

“So there was a little row and we fizzled out. No terrible accusation, mind you, just no more phone calls, and the naked photos we took together returned, the credit card bills for the inn we stayed at in Maine she begged me to pay them for both of us with one of my checks in the interests of the National Security.”

I said I was sorry.

“It only hurts the first time,” he said. “Don't get carried away again Barney.”

His admonitions to himself made me even sadder for him. At Annette's, I talked about finding somebody female and matronly to hold Barney's hand, and then when we were all tucked into bed the phone rang. Barney was calling. He'd been having funny twinges around his heart. He thought he should get to a hospital.

I got dressed and drove him there. The resident found nothing unusual after an EKG, and suggested tranquilizers. Barney had me stop at an all-night supermarket and purchase chamomile tea.

I didn't return to Annette's house that night. When Barney got up in the morning he really seemed quite fit and spruce. He'd been on an early morning swim and he seemed quite pleased with himself for “diving in bare-assed and avoiding all those scorpions down there in the chlorine.”

“Kate would be so easy,” he told me over breakfast at the Tortilla Factory later, “but I’ve had her type before. Thirty-five and single and looking for company. She’ll get out of control and then show remorse and who will suffer? Annette, of course. I never allow myself to break up people’s living arrangements. You should make love with Annette, by the way.”

“I told you it isn’t like that,” I explained again.

“Doesn’t it drive you crazy,” he asked, “Lying next to a woman all night long and nothing doing?”

I said I was pretty used to it by now with Annette.

“I could never get used to that in a lifetime,” Barney said. “It’s a good thing I’m a little over the hill. “Don’t you love her?”

I didn’t answer.

As our days together dragged on, I was more and more aware that I was, as Barney had once observed, holding my breath again, and impatient to get back to work, knowing that Barney was beginning to drag on me a little. There was that time when we visited “The Desert Museum,” for example, that he almost passed out from fatigue halfway through the tour. Barney was quick to blame the way he staggered toward the car park on “his old Navy legs.”

He asked me to wrap my arm around his waist for support.

“Imagine if this happened with Kate in my arms?” he asked me. “The poor woman would move so quickly from being distraught to reproachfulness that you’d have to find yourself a new girlfriend...”

“Who? Kate?” I asked. “You mean Annette...Kate’s a celibate, too,” I told him.

“I can’t believe it,” Barney said. “The ugly beast inside us never goes away. You know, no matter how old you are, or what’s happening to you...”

“You seem to be behaving yourself lately,” I pointed out.

“I dream so much about sex,” Barney said, “The real thing when it happens seems less and less vivid.”

That evening we stayed home and I grilled a couple of steaks. Barney said he’d just missed being a genius at birth “by a hair.” In this case the miss was tantamount to a recipe for failure, the “confecting of this simple adolescent dumpling.” Then he went off to bed early again.

About 10 he cried out in his sleep while I was at my desk in the living room.

A few minutes later he came into the room wearing just his pajama top. “I had a wet dream,” he said, with a grin. “I haven’t had one of them since Barenger High.”

“Was it any good?” I asked.

“I’m still weak in the knees,” he told me, with that mouthy grin, “and this time it ain’t the Navy’s fault.”

I thought I would not be out of line congratulating him.

“The older I get the more I dream,” he replied. “I seem to be in this continuous film strip recalling every woman I’ve ever been with from the very first kiss.”

“Who got that?” I asked.

“Miss Carmichael from the Dean’s Office at Barenger,” he replied.

I closed down the computer and asked him to tell me about Miss Carmichael.

Barney said there really wasn't much to tell. He was always big for his age, even at fourteen, and he'd matured early. He was always cutting classes, and he never had proper excuses so he was caught and made to serve "detention."

Miss Carmichael ran the detention room. It was an unseasonably hot day in late September around the time of the Jewish holidays. Miss Carmichael and he were alone together. She said she was so hot she couldn't stand it much longer and removed her shawl. Barney said she was a gentle person, and when he reached for her she said, "You have a wonderful singing voice, young man, and should make something of yourself." But she didn't stop him from also making something with her.

"You mean you molested her?" I asked.

"We more or less were so hot we molested each other," he told me. Messed around and messed around with our hands in all the right places until finally she locked the door and dragged me into the Dean's office where we did it on the rug under the desk in the slot between the drawers where a person stows his legs when he's seated."

"That sounds like the Barney Goldman I once knew," I told him then.

"All my stories are internally consistent," he said. "If you don't believe me, ask your mother. I told her all about it at the time..."

But Mom had long since forbidden me to mention Barney's name to her. At my father's insistence, they were not on speaking terms again, hadn't been for a few months, or longer. Barney must have forgotten, or was still dreaming of other days.

"Bite my tongue but that would be something wouldn't it?" he said. "If your mom and I could still talk. If she was here now with the two of us? You know what," he said, "Miss

Carmichael had a scoliosis, and wore some kind of foundation garment. First time ever and I had to encounter that. You have the vibrance of the young DeLucca, she told me, but I was such a know-it-all I thought she was calling me Palooka, and I never went back for more.

“You can say the meal was good, but not the service,” he grinned weakly.

Barney stayed some time with me in the living room and we watched a minor league ball game from Bakersfield for a while, and then he got up solemnly and went off to bed again. “I wonder who I’ll have tonight,” he confided to me.

In the morning he asked for a set of clean sheets. He said he was taking a bus across the border to Nogales tomorrow. It had been so many years since he’d seen Mexico. He’d stay overnight and enjoy some *mariscos* and come back and buy me a big steak dinner at Little Abner’s, and then fly East again.

“I could drive you to the border,” I said.

Barney said he’d made arrangements for this air-conditioned first-class bus tour and he would rather be on his own down there, if I didn’t really mind.

The next morning I dropped him off downtown near the Congress Hotel. I had an appointment with my accountant, and then with a local editor to write a short money piece on the vanishing Sonoran tortoise. I thought I could probably catch Annette at the little Mexican place she usually went for lunch.

Annette was a photographer, employed by the University’s astronomy department. She was acrimoniously divorced from the former provost of Brigham Young University in Utah and had two little kids whom she was compelled to raise as Mormons, though she herself was from an Italian Catholic family, and was considering the Buddhist path.



Ours was truly the sort of friendship that fucking might have turned acrimonious, I liked to believe; we were such devout practitioners of other forms of mutual aid. Nothing really serious, I always told myself, as both our present situations demanded. I didn't want to live with her and her two sons, and I doubt if she wanted me in that way with sex. We simply knew how to be good to each other, and I respected her as an artist, liked her clean looks, and was pleased that she enjoyed reading my manuscripts.

Once, some months back, I'd shown her some of the abandoned novel for which Barney had served as my fictional protagonist.

Annette said it reminded her of some of her father's old friends in Scranton, only they did other things such as get drunk and bugger each other and hunt with rifles.

"I think what fascinates you," she said, "is how unlike your father the Barney character really was, and yet for many years they remained friends. In a sort of mixed up fruit jello together. That was another time," she went on, "when people trusted one another. A little hard to believe in today's world. We all want to be fully human nowadays. But, I suppose when you were little, people used to share their lives more, one doing one thing and one another, just like you write at home and I take star photographs."

"Did Barney really used to jolly up the women?" she giggled.

I don't think I read more into her question than passing amusement with a figure from my life, and it went between us as one of those things people overlook about each other saying because there are so many other things they need to do together and share.

Annette's life was highly regularized and scheduled. Now showing up at lunchtime at Maria's Cantina that late September noon was really as unlike her as photographing the Pima

Indians picking saguaro blossoms from Arizona Highways. I waited a while, and then I called her office at the University and when there was no answer, and her machine wasn't even recording messages, I called her house in the foothills.

It was well after two in the afternoon. Sad-eyed Kate answered and said, "Not so loud, Ronald! I'm just about to hang up. We've been looking all over for you."

"I want to speak with Annette if she's there in her darkroom," I said.

"Annette's in Mexico," Kate said. "Barney had another big scare in a cat house and when he couldn't get you he called here and Annette dropped lunch and rushed down to find him a doctor."

"Is he going to be alright?" I asked.

"Well you're too late to comfort the dying," she said. "The Mexican doctor says he'll live to be a hundred if he stays away from that sort of female company..."

"What does he think happened?"

"Obviously more than enough for the Motel Dolorosa on the road to Caborca," Kate said. "Barney should probably go and get checked out again in New York. The doctor calls it 'coronary hysteria.' I think he probably just isn't used to pay as you go, with Mezcal."

When Barney returned with Kate driving him I thanked her with a kiss and took him straight to the hospital again and again they did an EKG. All was perfectly normal.

"It couldn't have been nicer down there on the first go," Barney informed me, "though Mexican beds leave something to be desired, if you have disc problems, but on the second go I felt called upon to bring the woman out of her stupor, and that's when my chest pains began...It could have been the cigar I had after breakfast."

“I was under the impression,” I said, “that you no longer indulged.”

“You break wind and it lingers,” he said. “I had one Tabasco Fino supremo. It’s not a solemn commitment.”

“Well I hope you’re more careful in the future,” I said.

“You really ought to give Annette a lot more loving,” Barney replied. “She’s no dyke from the way she held me in her arms and comforted me in that brothel until I was calm and could depart.”

I winced and called my friend’s number.

She answered with a sleepy napping voice.

“Uncle Barney says he bumped into you in Nogales.”

“More than once, as a matter of fact.” She giggled. “He’s a really big-hearted guy, but he probably should be more careful. The whores were scared and then furious.”

“Well thanks for coming to his assistance,” I said.

“Honestly, Ron,” she said. “You take the cake!”

I went back into the room where Barney was packing his cases, preparatory to catching a night flight I’d just arranged for him back to New York City.

“You could go tomorrow,” I said, “and rest now.”

“You look as if you’ve come to the end of a perfectly lousy day, too,” he told me.

I said, “I thought you’d changed a few of your habits.”

“So had I,” he said.

“I guess some people can never get over adolescence,” I said.

“I like to think of myself as self-reliant,” Barney said. “The way things are that means movies and hookers, and I don’t happen to like either that much...”

“I think when you get back to New York you should call your doctor right away,” I said, “and Masha.”

“You make such a big deal out of nothing at all,” said Barney, “the mutual exchange of tenderness’s can be truly heart-wrenching.”

“Please get help,” I begged him.

Barney blinked, as though rebuked. “You have to admit,” he told me, “we can all be a lot more human about these necessities than we presently are.”

“Please!” I said. “You could drop dead!”

“I’m on the way out in more ways than one,” he told me, cold-eyed, then.

And by the time we got to the airport later in the evening all my rage at his carelessness had turned creamy and soft. I was just very sad that he’d come all the way to see me and all Barney could think of doing was fuck a Mexican hooker.

When the flight was called, he wanted to hustle abroad. I held him back. He was going from me and felt I didn’t know where...”

“I want to thank you in the name of the father and the son,” I said.

“Don’t thank me,” he grinned. “Thank your mother.”

“I do want to hear what your doctor says.”

“O I’ll be gone before you know it,” Barney said.

His face swollen with Valiums, in the terminal glare he looked pasty, scaly again.

“Never mind me,” he said. “Fuck Annette!”

And then he seemed to take off and careened against the walls as he limped down the terminal toward the jet-way tunnel to his plane.

“Go slow Barney you fuck,” I whispered, to his departing image on the retina of my recall. “Barney old pal you old fuck you!”

## THE STROKE

Ordinarily, women die less often from strokes than men. By dying as she did, some years before her husband, Mom's death was exceptional. It happened only a few months after Barney came to visit me in Tucson.

Mom wasn't overweight. She'd never been diagnosed as hypertensive. She was careful about her diet. She swallowed capsules of rose hip oil. She exercised, visited doctors regularly for check-ups.

At one point she complained that her feet were cold all the time. Then she experienced numbness in her feet, and hands, the right side of her face. Her doctor told her he believed this could have to do with the immune system. He said she suffered from a particular condition he called "Vasculitis." Mom said she considered herself lucky after the doctor informed her that a lot of people diagnosed with "Vasculitis" suffered from painful shingles.

"Ill-informed about such matters, I asked if all this could have to do with the dosages of estrogen she was also still taking.

Mom assured me the estrogen was for "a whole other system entirely."

"It sounds just like that tennis player, doesn't it?" she asked me, with a mischievous giggle.

Over the phone I asked her what tennis player did she have in mind?

"Vitas with the long blonde hair," she said.

"That's Gerulitis," I corrected her.

"Shingles, singles," she said. "I keep thinking of cedar shakes. Don't ask me how I know such things. Even now I never have time to read the papers. If it's not on Gabe Pressman,

I'm lost. When they told me," she added, "it had to do with getting older in all the other parts of my body, I thought of *Shangri-la*."

"From *The Lost Horizon*, you remember?" she went on, "I took you to see it with Ronald Coleman at the Patio..."

"I remember," I said.

Mom's first little stroke happened after Addie and I were divorced a few years. I was in California working for an eco-paper out of LA.

One night my dad called and told me to fly home immediately if I wanted to see Mom alive. By five-thirty that morning he'd changed his mind. Mom was doing just fine. I mustn't upset her by rushing home.

Half a year later it happened again when I was in Tucson and he had Masha call me. Hurry home right now, she insisted.

When I got to the Mount Sinai Hospital after a nightlong trip on the Red Eye, Mom was alert, seemed well out of danger, though there was just a little paralysis on her right side, her mental faculties were intact. She told me I definitely needed a haircut, and my trousers looked too baggy. I should find the time while I was home to go with Dad to Witty Brothers and get some new sport clothes.

"Witty Brothers has been out of business," I said, "maybe a decade or more."

"Anyplace you like," she said, "and tell your dad I'll reimburse him."

"There's no reason," she chided me only moments later, "why you should be so shlumpy-looking and you and your father haven't gotten along better. You're not alike, but neither are most real fathers and sons."

“It’s not a matter of our difference,” I reminded her.

“Buying pants together,” she said, “could be a beginning.”

My dad really had no time for me when Mom was ill, and I didn’t really mind. I didn’t need his help to buy clothing, or for anything else. I was in New York just to see my mother, but I can’t deny I hoped we would get along better this trip.

Dad was preoccupied, worried; he wasn’t being deliberately mean. He said this time we were very lucky where Mom was concerned, but there could still be aftershocks. The doctors were giving her anticoagulants, blood thinners, he called them, and appetite stimulants, as she wasn’t yet eating solid foods.

With his only sister, my Aunt Becky, almost always by his side, he seemed to be bearing up fairly well.

I found myself asking if he’d called “Uncle Barney” yet in Valley Stream.

“He’s way the hell out of town,” dad said.

“I know that,” I said.

“What I mean, he’s probably out of the country entirely,” dad said. “Off on holiday somewhere. You know Barney. He travels a lot. He’s still a big playboy.”

Alone later with Mom, who looked very girlish propped up in bed with a blue hospital band on the wrist of the arm connected to an IV, and no make-up, I asked if she would like me to call Masha in Baltimore and find out where Barney actually was.

“Who knows what he’s up to?” She shrugged as much as her IV would allow. “Barney’s always been Mr. Undependable.”

“So?” I asked her.



Finally she agreed there was no point in standing on ceremony. She would love to hear from that galoot if he was within easy reach.

I called Masha and she told me Barney was indeed at home in Valley Stream with one leg raised up high in the air from phlebitis.

Now I was stuck. My father must have known this, too, and he'd decided to keep Barney out of the picture, for the moment. I really couldn't go against the wishes of her devoted husband.

A week or so later, she had an aftershock that left her speech thick and slurry, the hearing impaired. When I touched her beneath her nose with some Lily of the Valley cologne, her favorite called *Muguet des Bois*, she didn't respond.

On my own I called Valley Stream.

Barney, of course, expressed regrets. "I'm feeling poorly," he said, "but that's really not the whole story." He said he didn't want to come to the hospital if my dad didn't want him there.

"Leave well enough alone," Dad told me.

"Well enough," I said, "is doing very poorly thank you."

"You don't know what you're talking about."

"That's what you said when I was out in California six months ago," I reminded him.

"I hope for different now," he said.

I called Barney again.

"I'll come sometime when your dad's back at the office," he said. "Maybe even tomorrow. I'll check with my Car Service."

When I went in to see Mom that day, she was clearly in some distress, and must have felt pretty isolated by the damage to her senses.

She said it felt to her like she'd gotten lost inside this maze, couldn't find a way out. There was a film across her eyes. When I asked if she was in pain, she replied, thickly, "Numb enough for two sonny."

I took her free hand and squeezed it and pressed it to my lips, and bent over her and whispered in her ear, "Barney's coming soon," and she smiled a little.

That night I called Masha again.

"Talk to your father," I said. "Tell him please not to hesitate."

"I'll do what I can."

"But you have to understand," she added. "Barney and your mom hurt Minna a lot."

"I know that sweetie."

"They made her feel inadequate even so," she went on. "It could have been a whole lot worse. Can't you even talk to your father?"

"He doesn't want to share anymore," I said.

"He never really did."

"My mom really loved your mom," I said, "deep down."

"Irv must be very distressed," she said.

I told her I thought my dad probably wanted to turn the clock back.

"They never really were such enemies," Masha said.

"Barney and Dad?" I asked her. "Who are you talking about?"

"You could put it that way," she said.

On the phone I nodded at Masha's voice.

"I don't really know anymore what it all means," she said.

"It's crazy," I told her.

"It's crazy the way they were," she said. "Even when I was little I never really understood. I'll talk to Barney."

The next morning Mom's vital signs were much improved and my father went into the office for a few hours. He said he'd be back to relieve me by 4 PM. I called Barney and told him to hurry on in.

He also said I really didn't have to call Masha. He'd been planning on coming. He'd be there before 11.

I went into Mom's private room and sat down beside her and read the Times as she seemed to be napping.

Around 10 she cried out as though in pain. The duty nurse came and she looked at Mom and went straightaway for the resident on call.

They gave her another sedative.

Barney arrived a few minutes later. He looked so somber I felt I had to assure him Mom seemed to be resting comfortably, but it didn't seem likely she could be aware of his being there right now.

Barney went into the room and bent way over and kissed Mom on the forehead. Then he asked me to come with him back out into the hallway again.

He reached into his jacket pocket and produced a little yellow and white cellophane-wrapped box of Adams' Chiclets chewing gum. "If she wakes again when I'm not here, give

her these,” he instructed me. “They were always an old favorite.”

“I don’t think she can chew,” I told him.

“She’ll know I was here by the Chiclets,” he said. “She’ll recognize... You shake them next to her ear. A familiar sound.”

“Chewing gum?” I said.

“I’d send flowers, or a nightgown sure I will,” he said, “but that’s really different. The Chiclets are something between us personal.”

He seemed just a little bleary, confused, sat down on a bench and then nervously got up again and paced. “You sure your dad won’t be coming back?”

He stayed maybe a half an hour and then left, teary-eyed. I was to call him or Masha with any news.

My mother lasted through the night. She had a real breakfast with cereal, and juice, and toast, as I recall, and let the nurse help her change into a fresh nightgown. Mom was always very fussy about her gowns. She favored silver and lime green silks with a lot of handiwork around the bosoms, and along the straps, but fitted snug to her hips. Before I went off to have breakfast with a friend, I told her she looked “delicious.”

When my father arrived around 11, they told him she’d passed on more than an hour ago. While they were doing up her hair, they said, her heart just stopped. They tried to bring her back, they said, “but she was alone and couldn’t hear any of them.”

Dad turned on me then. “Where were you?” he asked. “Why did you let her go?”

“How could she go just like that?” he asked the empty hallway.

It was the first time I had ever seen my father weep so shamelessly. He met me in the hall outside her vacant room (for they'd already removed her body), and seemed inconsolable. "I'm lost Junior," he announced. "Both of us. We really have lost the best woman there ever was."

I tried to hug him but he pushed me away and drew back. "You don't know what she put up with, for my sake and yours."

Sometime around then an aide told me flowers had arrived. I thought of Barney. The aide handed me a card. I'd guessed correctly. I decided not to say anything to my dad. The aide asked if Dad would like a quiet place to be for a little while, some tea.

"GET HER OUT OF MY SIGHT," Dad shouted at me where we were seated together on a bench in the hall like a pair of weary travelers.

I nodded to the woman that she should please leave us so I could look after my father.

My dad glared at me through bleary red eyes. "You are looking after me? Who says so?" he demanded.

"I just want to help you," I said.

"She desired lots of grandchildren from you," he reproached me.

I shrugged, knowing as much, although it was certainly true she had never pressured me to remarry.

"You weren't the love of her life, either," my dad said, bitterly. "But she cared for us both very much."

"Yes," I told him.

He was silent, as though mulling over the portent of my agreeing with him.

Then he asked, "Why did you have to go and tell Barney?"

I said I had done it for Mom's sake. I didn't say I'd asked Mom first and that she'd wanted me to. But I did apologize for the flowers, and the card. Barney, I said, was just being his extravagant self.

"He was rubbing it in," my father said.

"That was how it was with them," I said, vaguely.

"GET OUT OF MY SIGHT," Dad shouted. He got up and started running down the hall "I'M GOING TO FIND HER AGAIN."

As though he was harrowing Hell itself, Dad was running and stopping and looking into the various rooms. "Where is she?" his naked glances asked. "Take me to her!"

I followed, and so did some attendants, as he was making a considerable ruckus. "I want to see her right now," he said, "and you can't stop me."

At last a couple of large nurses had to restrain him. I didn't go with him then when they led him into a back room and had him lie out on a cot. I was feeling very hurt and lost myself, and suddenly quite exhausted. I went home to my parents' flat which wasn't very far away and showered and called Masha and told her the bad news.

"Poor Ron," she observed, "you're practically an orphan now like me."

She promised to come up for the funeral.

Then my Aunt Becky called and told me my father had been brought over to her place in a car and wasn't coming home right away. He would be staying with her in Stuyvesant Town and she and he would be making funeral arrangements and would make sure I knew when and where. My father didn't want to speak to me right now, she said. He was much too upset.

That evening Barney got in touch.

“If he feels this way now,” he told me, “I’m not even coming to the funeral.”

“Maybe I won’t go either,” I said.

“She was your mother,” he told me. “You must go!”

At the funeral I sat next to Masha and her husband. My father and his sister sat in an adjacent row, separated by the central aisle. We didn’t speak.

There was a good crowd of old friends and neighbors, like Max Krober, a widower now, and my dad’s clients. The young rabbi hardly knew Mom. He talked about women as the givers of life.

In the limousine afterwards that carried us to the cemetery in Westchester there was very little communication.

But, at her flat later, my aunt said, “Don’t be a stranger Ronald. He’s moody and upset right now. He’ll want to hear from you plenty later on.”

I went over to my father to say goodbye that first night, and he turned away from me. He seemed all shrunk up inside himself as though persuading himself that all the years of deprivation he’d inflicted on himself and her was all he really ever knew about love.

A few weeks later, when I was back in Tucson, I called on the telephone when I knew he would be at home.

“How are you doing?” I asked.

“Don’t give me that,” he complained. “I miss your mom.”

I hung up, vowing not be in touch unless he called me.

A month later he did to tell me about the stone he'd ordered as a memorial. It would be made of rosy granite.

"That sounds very nice," I said. "How are you doing?"

"I'm talking about stones for your beloved mother," he said. And hung up again.

I called back right away.

"Why did you hang up like that?"

"Why did you let her go?" he demanded. "Always so selfish..."

A few weeks later he sent me a check for \$5000 with no note, and when I called back to thank him Aunty Becky told me he was out walking in the park. He was thinking of moving to Florida, she said, and would like me to visit with him.

I flew East again with some of the money and stayed in a hotel. One day I dropped up to my father's office in the Graybar Building when I knew he would be there.

His secretary must have been in the Ladies Room because I walked right through the small reception area and in through the open doors of his office.

My father had his head bent over the desk so that waxy scalp showed through his thinning grey hair when he glanced up at me. He was scribbling something on a yellow legal pad with his big black Mont Blanc pen.

"I haven't got any more money for you than I gave already," he said. "I'm closing down the office. I'm sorry. I'll need everything I have for myself."

"I didn't come for money," I said.

"What do you want?" he asked me sharply.



I said I thought we should talk.

“Ask some other guy,” he said, and glanced down at his papers again.

“Why?” I asked. “I thought you wanted me here.”

“I loved her so much,” he said. “You’ll never understand what that means.”

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” I told him.

“Don’t I? Go make me a grandchild,” he said, “and maybe then we can talk.”

I flew out West again and there, right about then, I met Ellen who became my second wife. We produced a lovely little girl, Tildy. When I called my father, he said, flatly:

“Congratulations!” A few days later he sent along a check for \$50. I’m real poor right now,” he said, and asked us to send him a photo.

“She doesn’t look a bit like a Fishback,” he wrote the next time, enclosing a second \$50 bill.

He refused to visit us in Tucson and didn’t encourage Ellen and me to fly East with the baby.

He forgot the date of Tildy’s first birthday. When I chided him he sent a cheap Hallmark card and signed it “Irv.”

So we stopped communicating. I didn’t know he’d remarried and divorced with a woman fifteen years younger than he was in Florida before his prostate was diagnosed as pre-cancerous. Some months after he moved back to the City again for treatment from West Palm Beach, I received a telephone message on my machine to call a Mrs. Barbara Shapiro, “a friend of your father, at the St. Francis Hotel in San Francisco,” she told my tape.

I called back and Mrs. Shapiro was out. In a little while she called me again. She said she was a widow and had met my father at a party in New York. After a few lunches and dinners together he proposed marriage. She wanted to know why he was so desperately lonely? Didn't we ever talk?

"Not in a long, long while," I said. "He was very much in love with my mother," I added, "and I guess he misses her a lot now that he's no longer working and is divorced from his second wife."

"He's got many health problems," she said, "and very few real friends, and that troubles me a lot. I nursed my husband during his last illness. I don't think I could go through that again."

"For his sake I wish you would," I said.

"Won't you tell me what your differences were about?" she asked me.

I said we'd always been very different and when my mom died they all got worse.

"He never talks about her to me," she said. "It's strange. A Jewish man like that. He talks about you a little."

"I wish I could tell you more," I said. "I really can't. I'm surprised he even mentions my name. But I do wish him happiness, and you seem like a very nice person."

"That's my problem," she said. "I am a nice person and I don't even know if I can take this on."

"I wish you would," I told her.

"I know," she said.

We hung up simultaneously.

I expected eventually to hear from Dad about this new third marriage. It never took place. Nice Mrs. Shapiro backed out. He never again called, never asked to see me, never even asked for my help. He just packed all that history of misery inside himself until he was just about to perish.

That's when my aunt called to tell me he was in "intensive care." I'm not sure, even then, if she wasn't acting on her own initiative, that getting in touch with me wasn't really Dad's idea at all. I was now separated from Ellen and about to divorce a second time. I thought I wanted to make contact with whatever was left of my life in New York, and through Dad's dying that was happening, I thought.

After seeing Barney again at the hospital, I spoke with Masha on the phone and was not surprised when she recommended therapy for Tildy as soon as she reached adolescence.

"You don't want to lose out as Irv did," she advised.

I told my old friend that Tildy and I were doing fine. My problems were with adult women, grown-ups.

"Yes, I know," she said.

I asked her how Barney had been managing to take care of himself lately. "We don't really speak that much," she said. "I suppose it's my fault as well as his. I have three of my own, and I don't really need another child on my hands."

"I'm sorry," I said.

"Ari says I'm too severe with Barney," she told me. "It's just possible I am. He put me through all kinds of things when I was little."

“I know,” I said. “But I always thought he tried to be a good dad in his spare time.”

“Well even though I love the guy I just don’t have any spare time now to be his mommy,” Masha said.

My father left a very modest fortune. He bequeathed to me all that remained of his wealth, this small competence. A note appended to his will said he felt obliged for his late wife’s sake to fulfill a promise to her by making me his sole heir.

There really wasn’t that much. Mom’s old mink coats he’d kept in cold storage, some gold jewelry, and coins, a good diamond ring, a few stocks and CDs and municipal bonds, and some pieces of art, some “Socialist 30s” drawings by Henry Glintencamp and Jeff Levey that Barney must have urged his friends to buy years ago, and a couple of decent sketches by the contemporary Wolf Kahn.

In the safe deposit box was a lock of my light brown baby hair, a dues book for the C.P. dated 1937, and a bankbook in which he’d started listing regular small deposits “for baby girl grandchild Fishback.

I never found out what happened to all the real estate, and the rest of his wealth. Some went to Aunt Becky and his second wife. Some went to other lawyers and tax people. He spent a lot on fancy living toward the end. He gave a gift of some value to Masha about fifteen years ago, and endowed a study carrel at Brandeis University.

There was an autographed photo and thank you letter from Harry Truman I sold to a collector, and there was a photo of Barney and Dad on the bridle path in Prospect Park on horseback in English riding clothes.

There were sepia photos of Barney and Minna and Mom and Dad in rowboats in Loch Sheldrake and in Rockydale, and in formal clothes, at a testimonial dinner at some New York hotel ballroom.

A brief note from Mom on her lime green note paper still mildly fragrant with *Muguet* was attached to a manuscript in Barney's handwriting that I assumed Dad must have found ten years earlier, stashed in a drawer among her hosiery and fancy undergarments.

April 23, 1944

"Barney," she wrote, "Bear in mind please I have no privacy. I have a family."

Mom wrote no more, as though she'd been interrupted and never got back to answering his missive which was, indeed, fulsomely indiscreet:

For all the years I've been in love with you I have so little to show. You still sleep beside another. Sometimes in dreams we make love alone in a beautiful room above the sea lit up all yellow by the fading sun. Sometimes you are with him and I do not care to know what transpires.

I think of you at the moment of ecstasy crying out my name and the indescribable things you wish me to do to you. Sometimes you weep with gratitude and I weep, too, acknowledging stolen interludes.

Years ago when the children were still quite young we might have tried to live together. I pictured you pouring cornflakes into bowls and slicing bananas for all our gang. I pictured all the breakfasts we would never be having and waited insomniac for you to come to my bed at night with the duvet barely covering my naked chest.

You are wearing a long white dimity nightgown and I see your naked thighs as you climb warmly into bed beside me. Such momentary invitations, delicious to me once, are now invitations to profound melancholy. I reach out to you, whispering the dream words of a paramour, on my side, next to you, into your husband's ear, and then I know we are not the only ones who live intensely apart this way. Perhaps he or my wife also have a friend they have loved, and saw only when their desperation was licensed by convenience. In a world of marriages and deaths what does it matter to me that there are all these other star-crossed intimacies?

Last night having dreamed I had forgotten your name I cried out in my sleep, "Tell me where you are and how I shall find you again."

The dog in me was restless and my wife turned over in a dream and asked if it was time to wake the child for school.

I think what we are doing is essentially selfish, even malicious. I hope we are both someday forgiven. I am not in the least bit sorry love as always....”

It’s almost my curse to know in advance that I will betray any woman I ever loved and she will betray me.

I suppose my chief legacy from Barney is I no longer expect faithfulness from others; nor am I that way myself.

When Barney dies, if he has not already, I fantasize he’ll be leaving me something else, too, some souvenir or keepsake trifle: a gold watch, or cufflinks, his diaries, if he ever sat still to write any, a little token cash Masha may be needing.

I have all these different fantasies about Barney even now, and I’ve learned to keep them as such, make no effort to reach him, or find out anything about him anymore. Loving Masha as I do even now, from afar, I haven’t even spoken to her in quite some time; I feel it would be an intrusion to ask about her father. But sometimes that old rum scoundrel still talks to me, counsels me, scolds, cajoles. I feel odd wishing him dead. He lives so vividly on inside me. I keep hearing his voice.

“Nice get you nice,” as he used to say. “Upsy Daisy *Boychick*.”

After my dad’s funeral Barney came along to the *shiva* at Aunt Becky’s place: “Your father was so smart in book learning in Newark and, later, in Stuyvesant High School he should have gone on to be the Mayor of the City of New York,” he told me for the second time then.

“What about you?” I asked. “What should you have been?”

“Maybe I could have run a liquor store,” he said. “I wouldn’t have minded a saloon or a restaurant like that place I took you to once in Ozone Park. Remember?”

“You told them then you were a big deal doctor,” I recalled.

“Doctor? I’ve said a lot of things in my time,” Barney said. “When I lost my voice in the Sixties who was I then?”

“But you never were much of a drinker yourself,” I reminded him.

“I was even less of a *shtarke*,” he told me.

Barney pouted a second and drew on the wet brown tailing of his cigar. “Such a merry chase we give ourselves,” he told me. “In this life it’s a wonder if we ever find ourselves at all. But your father he could be single-minded. He should have been the Mayor alright.”

“Is that why you and Mom behaved the way you did?” I asked.

Barney seemed unsurprised by my question, as though he’d been waiting all these years for me to ask.

He took my hand and held it in his soft mitt-like grip.

“Your mother and I honestly loved each other,” he said.

“People are easily distracted by their own honesty,” he went on. “Your father never let himself be. We should be grateful to him for that at least,” he added. “It gave us precious privacy, and never mind my life. I don’t really count. My love was just part of the background music, another distraction, kiddo, for your mom, for you, for me too maybe, though not for Irv. He didn’t trust it, and I trusted it maybe too much.”

“Is that what you want for your epitaph?” I asked him.

“Epitaphs are always a big mistake,” he said. “I never died, said Joe Hill. Well I’m not totally dead yet either kiddo. Just you wait and see!”