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Fiction:

**Julie
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**Jacob
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**Saborna
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**Emily
RUBIN**

**Jennifer
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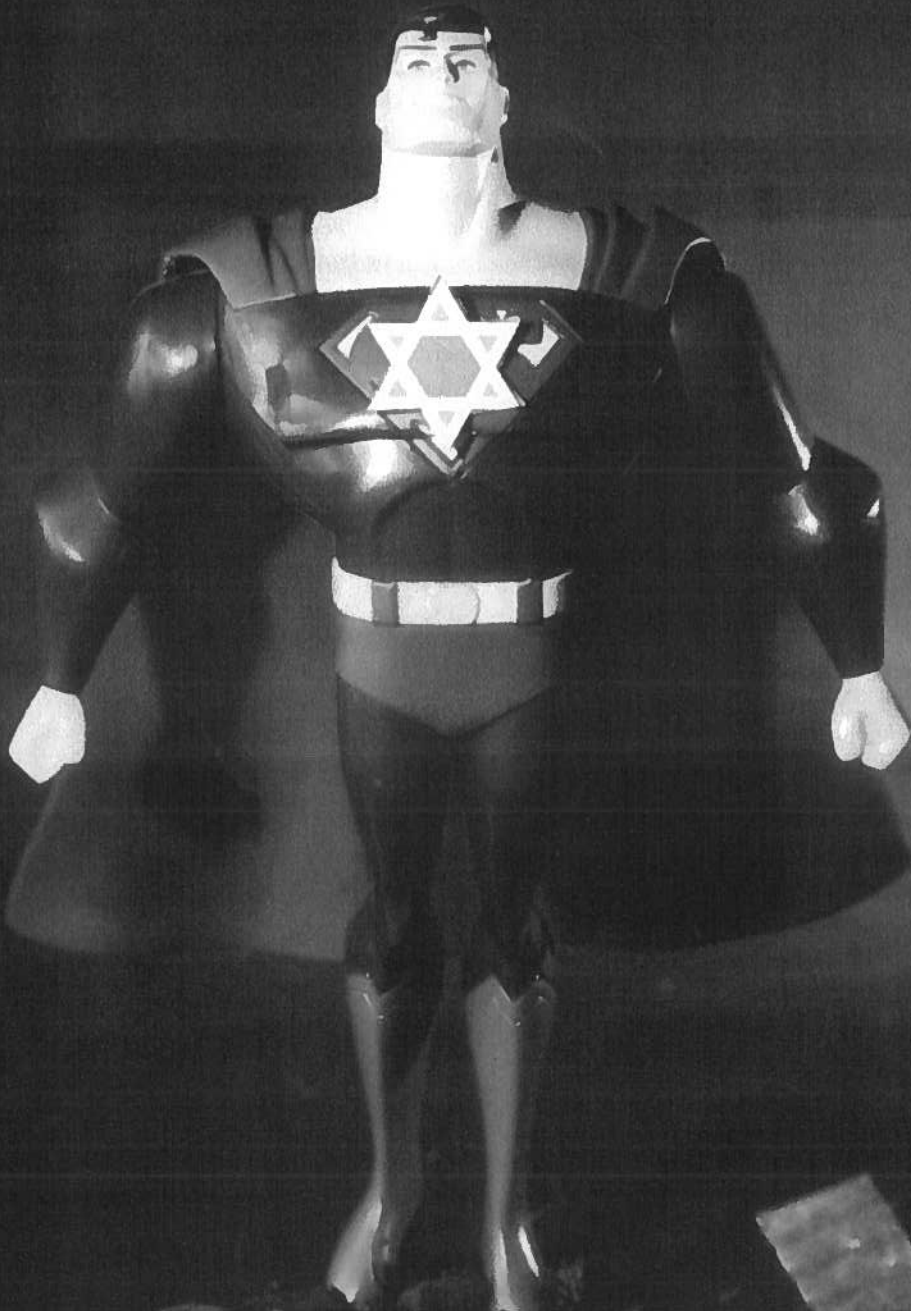
Memoir:

**Alice Moolton
SILVER**

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Days of Awe



by Emily Rubin

The summer nights on his terrace, which once smelled of honey and lilac, now smelled of burning—burning plastic, burning clothes, burning bodies. For weeks after it happened, people filed into Rabbi Alan Mintz's office, mostly members of the congregation: attentive, anxious mothers; bar mitzvah boys with prematurely furrowed brows; adulterous husbands; and even the older Holocaust survivors, who had once parted ways with Rabbi Mintz over his modern Torah teachings, emerged from dusty cracks and shuffled in to lament atrocities they had witnessed sixty years earlier. Then there was the hodgepodge collection of Jews who had been stranded in the city, walking numbly across the Brooklyn Bridge, past the Boerum Hill brownstones to 7th Avenue, where they were drawn to the front doors of Temple Harat Ayam. For the first time in Rabbi Mintz's tenure, oddly enough, people of other religious denominations floated in, ashen-faced and muddled, not quite sure of how they had come to be sitting in metal folding chairs outside of a rabbi's office.

One by one they filed into his office, their clothes and hair covered in gray-white soot. The rabbi had brought out a crate of bottled water and two baskets of oranges he had found in the Temple kitchen. They sat across from him, drinking water and peeling oranges, and asked the same questions: Who would do such a thing? Why would God allow this to happen? What will come next? Rabbi Mintz was forty-six years old, had been the Lead Rabbi at Harat Ayam for nine years, and, before that, had been the Assistant Rabbi for five. He was accustomed to scrutiny, to believers and to skeptics, and he had the gift of calm, which he regularly used to mesmerize agitated board members at budget meetings, and overly emotional congregants at funerals and brisses, weddings and naming ceremonies. But since the attack on the World Trade Center that morning, Rabbi Mintz couldn't muster the performance everyone was expecting. And needing. He didn't have answers for them. Instead, he had an urge to flee each time a member of the congregation ambled into his office, slow moving and bleary. He would stand up as they entered and shake out his legs before sitting back down, suppressing his desire to run.

* * *

Up until the collapse of the Trade Center, when the rabbi wasn't busy preparing sermons, or teaching his ethics class on Jews and Euthanasia, or holding bar mitzvah rehearsals, he had been preoccupied with a creeping red rash of mysterious origin. It had started on his lower back and was slowly advancing upwards. Doctor Kale called it *Pityriasis rosea*, a condition of unknown cause and duration: the scaly red patches

could last for weeks or even months. After September 11th—after the rabbi had counted the death toll among his congregants to ten, and was spending his lunch hours drafting funeral sermons and bereavement notes, sitting *shiva* with the widows and their children—his rash quickly took back seat to his growing list of more alarming symptoms: inability to sleep, stomach cramps, fears of going outside. His lip developed an involuntary quiver. His right eye twitched.

Images—from television as well as from the front pages of *The New York Times*—kept returning to him. Men plummeting from the top floors of the burning twin towers. The assembly line of firefighters with blackened faces, passing buckets of rubble from one hand to next, trying to clear the way for survivors. The police dogs, running in circles and barking at the scent of human bodies. The billows of smoke and the flames licking the sides of the buildings before they toppled to the ground. American flags were everywhere: in Middle Eastern grocery shops, on the rear windows of taxis, fluttering from the overhangs of gas stations and bookstores. Swirling pieces of charred paper, from which he could decipher a bank statement and a memo on Cantor Fitzgerald letterhead, floated onto the swings at the Lincoln playground in Park Slope.

* * *

It was during the High Holy Days, just days after the attack on the Trade Center, when Rabbi Mintz first felt a far-away, echoed sensation in his interactions. It started with the pressure to say something meaningful to all of the expectant faces leaning toward him, as he stood behind the Bimah, resting the silver Torah pointer against the sacred scroll. He started his Days of Awe sermon with the question that the congregants had been posing to him. "Why?" he whispered into the microphone, hearing his voice reverberate against the stained glass window of Moses cradling the Ten Commandments. He repeated himself and then went blank, until he came up with the only thing he could think to say, "Why shouldn't this have happened?" He stammered and asked the congregants to bow their heads for a silent moment of prayer for the victims of the Trade Center. Then he looked out at the sea of bowed heads, the different shades of hair—black, auburn, gold, streaks of gray—the yarmulkes and bald spots, the asymmetrical buns and wigs tilted to one side. He noticed the morning light streaking through Moses' arms and legs, and the rays falling sharply across the sanctuary, illuminating a young family seated in the corner, the father whispering to the children. The rabbi did not know what to say next. His sermon notes crumpled in his sweating hand; he could not continue.

He walked to the side of the lecture platform and bent down to ask Evan Goldman, the Assistant Rabbi who was seated by the emergency exit, to take over. Then, amidst murmurs and glances of the congregants, Rabbi Mintz slipped through the door, down the hall to the temple kitchen, and out the back door of the building. He walked the two blocks from Garfield Place to Prospect Park, and he spent the remainder of the afternoon on a park bench, shredding an overstuffed pretzel he bought from a park vendor and tossing the shreds to the cast of pigeons at his feet.

* * *

The next morning, he returned to the temple and resumed his work, acting as though nothing unusual had happened the day before. He leaned back in his swivel chair and shuffled the papers on his desk. Across from him sat Elaine, the sixth panicked visitor of the day, a buxom college girl with sunny hair, whose parents and grandparents were members of the congregation. He nodded to her, motioning for her to speak, and as she sank into the armchair and gripped the armrests, he saw that her eyes were bulbous and red, swollen from crying.

"Rabbi Mintz," Elaine said, in a confiding, conspiratorial tone, "I'm afraid of what the terrorists will do next." She leaned forward and he could smell her breath, sweet and tangy, from mint and cigarettes. "I'm thinking about taking a leave of absence from school."

The rabbi felt the itching from his rash just under his armpit. He pictured the rash as an army of tiny red bumps, marching from his back across his chest and down to his waist, taking a detour along the way to decimate the pale, soft skin south of his armpit.

"What would that accomplish, Elaine?" he asked. Under the soft lamplight, in her fleecy red sweater, she seemed ripe and fertile. She was full-faced and smooth-skinned: a child-woman in her prime.

"I want to take a year off and make *Aliyah*. I want to go to Israel to discover what it means to be Jewish. I have an uncle in Tel Aviv who's invited me."

He listened and nodded, trying to remember when she had turned from a scrawny, flat-chested bat mitzvah girl to a voluptuous young woman. He thought of his own daughter who was now seven years old—would Esther also make such a remarkable transition? Would he notice the changes as they occurred or would it happen in such small increments that one day he would wake up and take note of her breasts for the first time?

He cleared his throat. "Elaine, this is not a good time to go to Israel, believe me. In fact, it's a terrible idea. Don't you know about the suicide bombers?"

Going to Israel now? You've got to be nuts to do it." The Rabbi clasped his hands together and looked up at the ceiling.

He shook his head. He had so many puzzling women in his life. There was Esther, who was known to take money from classmates for eating ants and other insects. His wife Frannie, a psychologist-turned-housewife, who was painting green stenciled leaves on their bedroom ceiling. (The walls, he could understand—but the ceiling?) Gladys, his mother, in the Great Swan nursing home with other Alzheimer patients, fighting the nurses nightly over taking medication. And now this Elaine was sitting across from him, full of faith and poor judgment and an innocent, sexual charm, waiting for answers. He pictured Frannie as he had seen her that morning at the kitchen table before leaving for Temple: her glasses askew, ponytail limping down her back, applesauce and egg smeared on her sweatshirt from the twins' breakfasts, and those tight, navy leggings which bulged at the thighs. He focused his gaze on Elaine's lower lip and leaned back in his seat.

Elaine looked down at her hands and clicked her nails together. Her cheeks were flushed. She waited for the Rabbi to speak.

"Forgive me, Elaine," he said slowly, tracing a knot in the dark maple desk with his thumbnail, "but have you considered what it means to take an absence? What does being 'absent' actually mean to you?"

Elaine tilted her head so that her golden hair fell to one side and said she wasn't sure what the rabbi meant. After several minutes of silence between them, the rabbi said loudly, "Think about it, Elaine," and Elaine blinked her eyes. She picked up her backpack, looked at him for a second, and then whispered goodbye.

* * *

As with his conversation with Elaine, in the weeks since September 11th, the rabbi had become increasingly distracted and unhelpful when his congregants sought him out. He balked when he saw one of them rushing toward him, with their reverent eyes, as if he was an extension of God, a powerful interventionist. What they didn't see was that he was undergoing a transformation. He was losing his ability to coddle. He was turning into a truth-teller. When Cary Cohen stopped him in the hallway to ask a question about the upcoming dinner for Jewish Singles, the rabbi told him to use more deodorant, it would be in his best interest—which was something he had been wanting to say since Cary began attending the weekly *Minyan* service two years before. He told old Mrs. Stein to stop eavesdropping on her daughter-in-law, who lived below her

and ran a daycare center for extra income, which Mrs. Stein felt emasculated her son, insulting his ability to provide. "What do you expect from the *goyim*?" she told the rabbi, and he looked at the soft, wrinkled flesh supporting the strand of pearls around her neck and said, "What do you expect from a man who's been pampered his entire life?" He told his fourteen-year-old niece, Amy, who showed up to babysit at six in the evening in cut-offs and a tight t-shirt that she was dressing too provocatively, that she didn't want to come across as a bitch in heat, did she?

At home in the evenings, he and Frannie sat in front of the television after the children were asleep, watching the news reports, the body counts, the cries for war, the recurring footage of the planes crashing into the twin towers, digging permanently into his brain. The rabbi watched, transfixed, absorbing the images like a child watching a horror film for the first time. He felt the searing heat of his rash, as his back itched and burned beneath his cotton clothes. A few feet away, Frannie held a tissue to her mouth and whimpered throughout the newscasts, her eyes darting between the TV screen and her husband sprawled silently on the couch. Each night, after the news ended, they had the same relentless argument. She asked him how he felt and he didn't answer. He couldn't answer. With a tone bordering on hysteria and her frosted nails clutching tissue shreds, she accused him of withholding, withdrawing from her.

"I ask you a question, and you don't answer? What kind of way is that for a rabbi to communicate?"

* * *

But Alan had nothing to say. All he could think of was how incapable he was of understanding what was happening in the world, the violence and threats and nothing made sense, and where was God in all of the madness? Where was his God? After a while, he would look at Frannie as she cried, and suggest that they go upstairs to sleep, that it was late, that they would talk later.

* * *

It seemed that the rabbi was reliving the emotional seizure he'd experienced two years earlier, after officiating at a SIDS burial. That funeral had been the most difficult for him up until the most recent spate of funerals. That night, two years ago, when he returned home, the rabbi passed by the stroller in his foyer and a sippy cup abandoned on the floor, the family photos lining the wall in the hallway, and he felt nothing—no panic, no relief—he was empty, a hollow shell. He thought of

the father of the dead child, weeping into a blue cloth napkin as he dropped a fistful of dirt onto the tiny pine casket. And the mother, white-faced, wearing dark sunglasses and gripping her stomach. Then, with the dead baby, and now, with the dead investment bankers, the fireman and the restaurant chef, he was eluded by his own language—the words of bereavement he had printed on his memo pad grew meaningless to him as he looked out at the clusters of mournful faces surrounding the burial sites. That night of the SIDS funeral, the Rabbi lay down in bed and retreated inside to a small, dark place where he could be alone, much as he was doing now.

* * *

The reports of Rabbi Mintz's inappropriate comments and nervous twitches began floating into the Temple Board, a few at a time. Initially, these hand-scrawled notes, written by his most committed congregants, expressed concern over Rabbi Mintz's obvious need for rest, that he was overly exhausted, that caring for the 500 families at Harat Ayam was taking its toll on him. Then the notes took on a more formal, report-like tone, which in turn transformed into appeals to the Board to inquire into possible disciplinary action. By the end of September, Shabbat services began to noticeably shrink. Congregants stopped coming by his office during his posted "Open Rabbi" hours. Only Mrs. Kolotkin, the butcher's wife, continued to visit him. One late afternoon, as he was packing up to leave his office, he heard a knock on the door and he looked up. Mrs. Kolotkin, wearing a loud flowered dress, stepped in. She peered over her glasses and eyed the Rabbi's rolled-up sleeves. It was Sunday, Sabbath was over, and he was wearing a denim shirt.

"Rabbi, what's on your arm? You have a skin condition?" she asked.

He looked down at his arm and saw that the rash had spread from his bicep, weak as it was, to his forearm. It was raised and glistening under the orange, incoming light of the setting sky.

"Why, this must be a physical manifestation of my psychic pain, Mrs. Kolotkin," he said with a smile, watching the droop of her eyes transform into hard, metal pools.

"Rabbis aren't supposed to say things like that," she warned, shaking her head, "this is exactly what the Sisterhood has been talking about."

* * *

The Rabbi stood in the sunlight and listened to the click clack of her shoes as she walked down the hall. He knew something significant was happening to him. He used to be a man of insight and patience. Before his rash and the terrorism, before he began making cold and unaffected remarks to his congregants, he had been a gentle man, a generous listener. A good listener, his grandmother used to say, when she confided in the eight-year-old boy, telling him about his grandfather's infidelities and feeding him pieces of dry, sweet kichel, the pastry flaking apart in his hand if he held it too tightly.

Indeed, Rabbi Mintz had been patient his whole life. He had let life spread over him like that revolting red rash. As a boy, he spent entire seasons watching his two older brothers being unambiguously bad, stealing a neighbor's bike, then tape decks from cars, smoking marijuana and drinking whole cases of beer with trashy girls in the woods behind his house. He watched as his brothers systematically broke his parents down, and he vowed to make his parents' lives easier than his brothers had. So, early on, he decided to be good. A good boy. Taking out the trash. Playing cards at the senior citizen center with his mother on her volunteering day. Reading from the 'Gates of Prayer' book to his pretend congregation of stuffed animals and GI Joe figures.

As a child, Alan spent hours immersed in his rabbi fantasy. He thought of God as a superhero, on par with Batman and Superman and the Fantastic Four, a supernatural figure with extraordinary strengths that were executed when the world, and Jews specifically, were in terrible distress. As a rabbi, he decided, he'd be as close to that absolute almightiness as he could ever be. He didn't think of the practical issues of the profession, of a life lived beneath the magnifying glass of Jewish scrutiny, of weekends taken up with couples counseling and weddings and youth choir rehearsals, of an insufficient salary made up of temple dues paid by men and women far wealthier than he, of being responsible for 500 families who trusted and believed in him. Ultimately, he became a rabbi not because he'd had a divine calling—though he did, during a dream one night in high school, feel the unmistakable pull of God's gentle hand—but because he was drawn to the power of ancient traditions, the glory of serving from a position of moral rectitude, the magnetism of the mission. He had been a philosophy major in college and realized that there was no better place to challenge Kierkegaard's belief that the "finite mind can't fathom an infinite one" than in a house of worship, where the attendees were willing to stretch their minds merely because he asked them to do so. In his apprenticeship at Harat Ayam, Rabbi Mintz found that the congre-

gants lent their minds to him as easily as they lent him fifty cents for the local paper when he forgot his wallet.

In rabbinical school, Alan used to pray at night before sleep, and in his dreams he would find answers; he'd wake up dry-mouthed and clammy, to the sense that the divine source had visited him as he slept. But now, when he lay down to sleep and spoke to God, he found that he had only bitter words to say, as if he were confronting a lover who had betrayed him. "Why would you do this?" he asked God each night, "What do you want from us?" and his dreams brought him not answers or solace but piles of unused black body bags and women sobbing in the streets and posters of missing people and the smell of mass summer death—like creatures from a grotesque carnival crawling over him, he couldn't flee from these nightly visions. He woke up each morning exhausted, sickened, scratching his mottled skin, farther from God than he had ever been.

* * *

The morning after Mrs. Kolotkin's visit, the Rabbi received a letter from the Temple Board. After reading the first few lines, which began Dear Rabbi Mintz, On behalf of the Board, I am writing to inform you of recent developments regarding the terms of your employment, Rabbi Mintz heard the sudden shrieking of skidding car brakes and, holding the letter limply in his hand, he peered out the window behind his desk at the corner of Garfield and 7th Avenue. He watched a policeman pull over a silver Saab that had sped through the red light at the intersection. On the opposite corner, he saw a young boy, maybe three or four years old, being pulled by the arm by his mother, walk past the open Korean fruit stand and grab an orange off the rack. Behind the boy, he watched a bald, black man in a stained shearling jacket, much like the one Frannie had given him for Chanukah last year, sift through a municipal trash can with one hand, reaching out to his shopping cart full of soda cans and beer bottles with the other. It was mesmerizing, the way life unfolded, random acts blossoming at the same time. He stared out the window at this fragile corner of the world, watching the traffic light blink in slow motion, from green, to yellow, to red.

* * *

He stood there for some time, and as he watched the traffic lights, he thought about the old days with Frannie, before Harat Ayam, when he and Frannie lived in Central Massachusetts. Frannie nurtured her fledgling therapy practice in Marlborough, while he served as police chaplain in Worcester, a place little-

known as a haven for Jewish criminals. These were the years before they had crossed the divide into parenthood, when they had the leisure of making love after dinner several nights a week and spending hours on the couch, reading and talking. While folding laundry, he would listen as Frannie revealed the confidences of her clients: a woman who had a diet of raw meat; a mother who didn't love her son; a young college couple with great sexual ambitions. He gave her advice on counseling her clients and she would comment on his even, calm demeanor, how he would be a gift to the mental health profession, should he wish to change careers.

For those few years, he spent his days mediating between hostile inmates at the county jail, settling arguments over cigarettes, tattoos and television passes. He talked with them about the boundlessness of God, and living a life of faith rather than one of compromise; how a spiritual life leads to actions and decisions which unfold organically instead of through premeditated plans. He was kind to the men, especially the surly, menacing ones. He knew that God was a living force in the world, delivering the right amount of guidance and intervention, just as much as people could handle. He saw that prayer did work, much of the time, bringing confidence-building summer jobs to men newly on probation, bringing their children out of comas, bringing a new appreciation of girlfriends and mothers, bringing a determination to survive against the odds. But this was before September 11th, before his struggles with the language of truth, before he began questioning his faith in God, before that quiet structure inside of him was destroyed along with the twin towers.

* * *

The rabbi heard a knock on his door, which was already open, and he turned to face Shel Burnham. Shel was the Temple treasurer and husband of Corky, who was in a book group with Frannie. The two of them had no children, and treated Temple affairs as their family business. Shel asked, "May I come in, Rabbi?" Although physically active, Shel had a limp and carried a cane with a duckbill handle, which, the Rabbi thought, enabled him to easily enlist the trust of others. The rabbi was about to mention that he had been daydreaming at the window, when he thought the better of it, since Shel was probably on a reconnaissance mission from the Temple Board, bringing news about the Rabbi's tenuous position at Harat Ayam. Instead he simply said, "Come in," and gestured for Shel to sit down. The rabbi sat down across from him. Shel was the type of man who held every thought in his face; if he had a skin condition on any of his extremities, the Rabbi thought, its presence would be

hammered into the worry lines of his forehead. Sure enough, when Shel eased himself into the chair, the Rabbi looked into his face and saw that he had stopped by, on orders from the Board, to have a chat about the Rabbi's 'situation.' The rabbi exhaled. A prickly itch was growing on his right rashy shoulder. He rolled his shoulders in small circles, stretched out his arms in front of him, and waited for Shel to start.

"How are you, Rabbi?" Shel asked, shifting his weight in the chair.

"You know, Shel, I have my good days and my bad ones, just like you. What can I do for you?"

Shel scratched his chin, as if to spite the rabbi and his skin problem, and then he coughed. After an awkward minute, he told the Rabbi what he was already expecting to hear: The Board has met. The Board doesn't understand this recent shift in the good Rabbi's behavior. The Board would like to help. Ultimately, the Board has voted: the Rabbi is on extended probation, his last warning, a final thread. He must strictly adhere to the rabbinical responsibilities and rules of conduct as outlined in the policy book, or risk losing his position, his apartment, and all Temple scholarships for his children. The Board has spoken. He must shape up or ship out. After Shel delivered the five minute verdict, the Rabbi nodded his head and



cleared his throat, but said nothing. Shel walked to the door and turned to the Rabbi. "If you want to talk, if there's anything I can do," he offered, "I play handball at the Haven Club two nights a week, if you'd like to join me sometime."

The Rabbi spent the remainder of the day in a haze, numbly going about his business. Frankly, it was a relief that he had finally been reproached; he needed someone to be stern with him, openly acknowledge his rabbinical breaches, relieve him of his burdens. For the rest of the day, he went through the motions of his job: visiting Hebrew school classes, signing off on the monthly library expenditure sheet, taking a stroll around the building with the groundskeeper, who wanted to plant azaleas in the Spring. By six-thirty, the temple was quiet except for the thwittch thwittch of the janitor's mop in the hallway. There were no more people to see, no more memos from the Temple Board, no more phone messages to return. He was spent. The rabbi left his office, leaving the door swinging open behind him.

He walked up the steep, brick stoop of his Park Slope brownstone with his jangle of keys, unlocking the deadbolt and turning the knob at the same time. At the top of the stoop, he looked down and saw that the pot of geraniums under the outside intercom was still covered with soot from September 11th. The plant had been sheltered from the rain by the wide arch over the door. He bent down to wipe his finger across a leaf and felt the brittle frond drop into his palm. He lifted the dead leaf to his nose and breathed in its smell: burnt ash, bitter decay. He stood for a moment on the stoop, looking across the street toward the bungle of apartments and the idle, dwarfed trees.

Frannie and the children were already sitting at the dinner table. They eyed him strangely, as though they had been talking about him before he arrived. For the past few days, he knew Frannie had been getting phone calls at home inquiring about his health, both mental and physical. She kept a list of the calls by the phone on a pad of paper which had, as its heading, Notes From A Jewish Mother, a gift from the Temple Sisterhood. Women congregants had been approaching her after services, shaking her hand and giving her knowing looks about husbands who had gone astray, as if apologizing for the rabbi's delinquencies. He had been shrugging off Frannie's tears and raised eyebrows all week. He didn't know if he'd ever be capable of explaining his feelings to her, and if he could, he'd most likely get lost in the mire, sinking the depths, inconsolable.

"Everyone," he sat down at the end of the table and raised his arms, "I have something to say." He smiled wildly at his daughter and the twin boys. With

little light bulbs in their heads, the children turned on their bright and open eyes. Frannie smiled expectantly.

"We're completely fucked," he shouted, "Everything, everything, everything!"

Frannie jumped up from the table and told the children to go to the family room to watch TV, but they didn't move. They stared at their father, waiting for more.

"Who wants to watch Charlie Brown at the Superbowl?" Frannie yelled from the other room. The rabbi could hear the click of the VCR and the TV being turned on. He looked at the children.

"I do!" he shouted after Frannie.

"Frannie, darling, let me ask you something," he yelled across the dining room. "Have you thought about wearing a bra with a little more support?" He cupped his hands under his breasts and raised his eyebrows. "Don't we all need a little support?" he whispered to his children, who began giggling and spouting water from their mouths.

* * *

The next morning, the rabbi woke with the sun. Frannie was in a solid slumber, after a wrathful evening of crying and forced apologies. He kissed her on the forehead and lifted a soft clump of her hair to his nose. It was a smell he loved: lavender and sweet roses and the yeasty scent of motherhood. He picked up a book of Rumi's mystical poetry that sat on Frannie's night table, and opened to a random page. He read: "Do not despair, my soul, for hope has manifested itself; the hope of every soul has arrived from the unseen." The rabbi sat and thought about this for a while, watching the sky turn from the palest blue to bright azure. He heard the children stirring in the next room. He thought about God and truth and September 11th, that maybe truth was about people's worst fears. Maybe if God was the truth, then he showed himself in those massive fields of smoke pouring out of the World Trade Center. The rabbi turned to look at Frannie, and felt a trembling in his heart and his hands. He closed his eyes. He heard the children laughing and jumping on the beds, the boxsprings creaking and heaving. Frannie opened her eyes and yawned, and reached one arm out to him. He grasped her hand and held it to his heart, and wondered what would come next. ■