The Hand Before the Eye
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Excerpt

"Just as the hand, held before the eye, can hide the tallest mountain, so the routine of everyday life can keep us from seeing the vast radiance of and the secret wonders that fill the world."
—18th Century, Hasidic

Chapter 1: Jewing

Lawyer Farbman had no time. Always, he calculated the shortest route: from home to office, seat to door, from a to b. He engineered his way through the noise and soot of Forty-Second Street, avoiding the human debris like a missile sensing obstacles. All the while his mind raced ahead, charting critical paths through the day, the week, the year.

With only hours to catch a plane and two day's worth of work to do before then, Farbman had been forced to take his banker, Worrad, out for one of the leisurely, expense-account lunches the man demanded along with first-run theater tickets and four-hundred-dollar cases of single malt scotch delivered discreetly to his Pound Ridge home at Christmas. It wasn't the usual baksheesh but a real problem. The examiners had come in. Farbman sat, so stunned he stopped glancing at his watch, incredulous at the annihilating message delivered between the throat clearings.

It was regrettable but there hadn't been a payment on his firm's credit line in over two years. Even the interest wasn't current. But they wouldn't just yank the rug out? They would. Farbman's cherished tenet, that when you are in deep you tell the bank what to do, had somehow escaped his friend at the Chase.

Muscles constricting behind his vest, Farbman considered whether the same sentence would have been passed on a Hoyt or a Kellogg, if a club tie and braces would have made a difference. One week to produce six months of vigorish and a major reduction in the balance. With no concession for the funeral Farbman had explained he had to attend the next day in Mt. Pisgah, Illinois. Mt. Pisgah, Illinois, for Chrissakes, not Queens. It would take two days.

Farbman signaled for the check. "There has to be something..."

Worrad dusted off the last sip of his Manhattan and stood. "Do a Chinese cleanup."

"How? You've got everything we own. No other bank would lend us a dime."

Worrad shrugged and, explaining he had an appointment, exited as the waiter returned to inform Farbman his credit card had been rejected.

Returning to his office, anxious as he was, Farbman had a determined beat to his stride which gave him an attractive purposefulness. He paused and accepted the photocopied handout from an earnest young Hasid only because he had been unbalanced by the bold question, "Are you Jewish?" In fact, Farbman thought his straight blond hair and blue eyes would have protected him from such an intrusion. The barely legible message, "The Meaning of Havdalah," of the Lubovitcher Rebbe-the mystic pope to the Jews of Eastern Parkway-with local Sabbath candle lighting times, was shoved into his coat pocket. There it made its presence felt and prompted him, as he ascended in the Art Deco elevator cage, to try, for a moment before his floor, to riddle his Jewishness.

Certainly Farbman was a Jew. He knew some dialect jokes which he told poorly. He had been circumcised, become bar mitzvah; had joined a temple, supported the U.J.A., married a shiksa. But what about ritual observance? The proselytizing Hasidim with the van downstairs were inviting Jewish passersby to put on tefillin, to wrap the leather phylacteries around arm and head as the orthodox did every morning of their lives, and Farbman admitted he wasn't even sure what tefillin were, what was in the little boxes attached to the straps. The closest he had come to them was a display case in the lobby of his Reform temple, and an ugly black tangle in a Baggie that had belonged to his grandfather.

Did an abbreviated, English-version seder count? A political lecture or a book review from the rabbi on his annual High Holy Day appearance? How would those pasty-faced diamond merchants in their beards and earlocks and old world clothes account him? Would they, like their infamous persecutors, take his ethnicity as a genetic fact, as binding and as no more or less significant than eye color and the size of his feet? Farbman rejected such a notion: Jewishness was a philosophic decision, not programmed into strands of DNA. Yet his swarthy, kinky-haired doctor friend, Harold, who had put on tefillin, insisted that he was what a real Jew looked like. Sitting behind the wheel of his targa Porsche one day, Harold had twisted the mirror so Farbman could look at his blondness, his prominent cheekbones. "You are an aberrant form; the result of some Cossack rape."

The elevator doors opened to Farbman's floor, to reality. He was too busy for such musings. His life, even without the Damoclean threat of his bankers, was deadlines: court filings, statutes of limitation, and trial dates organized around constantly changing calendars cross-checked by all too fallible humans and machines and supported by the indefinite, uncertain cash flow of contingent fee cases. The spending always outstripped the judicial alchemy that turned lost limbs and mangled bodies into cash. Farbman's entire operation was tied to the banks by the about-to-be-severed umbilical cord of interwoven, overdue notes.

Marucci, his partner, was waiting for him, sitting behind Farbman's desk, chewing his fingers. Farbman broke the bad news. "Jesus God." Marucci blanched. "What are we going to do?"

"Shake the trees," Farbman said. "Get the new bills out today. What's for trial or settlement, besides Alvarez? What about the kid with the hand off?"

Marucci shook his head. "It got carried. The die manufacturer's expert had a scheduling problem. What's-his-name, the cervical quad, should be reached in two or three weeks, but right now Alvarez is it. There's been some talk of 'nuisance value' on the incomplete abortion. Maybe I can squeeze a little more."

Alvarez was the unpromising double leg-off. Farbman had sued every deep pocket they could think of but had yet to dream up a viable theory of liability against any of them. The problem was that Alvarez was simply a drunk who had wandered into a warehouse one night and fallen asleep under a truck that, the next morning, had backed over him. Alvarez hobbled in once a week or so to hit them up for an "advance," a few bucks to keep him in wine.

"He'll be in this afternoon," said Marucci. "I'll see if I can at least get him in shape for his courtroom debut."

"Look, I know this funeral is really badly timed, and I'm going to cancel it," said Farbman.

"No you're not. You can't change anything here anyway. Go. Relax a little. Get laid maybe."

"At a funeral, Marucci? In Mt. Pisgah, Illinois?"

"Where else will you find the time?"

"Not that I couldn't use it." Farbman remembered the reality of his life with Ann Marie.

Marucci put a hand on Farbman's shoulder. "Don't look so grim. It's just the pressure."

"I don't know," said Farbman.

There was a moment of silence for Farbman's dead sex life.

"Okay, let's get some money in here." Farbman waved good-bye to Marucci and buzzed his secretary, instructing her to keep the most pestering calls off his back. "Especially Ida and Janet, and their suicide threats."

"Ida called while you were at lunch. She says Janet's right on the edge. Ida's hidden her medication. She gives her one allergy pill at a time."

"Spare me."

Ida was the seventy-five-year-old mother of the obese, regressed fifty-year-old Janet Sodowick, a divorce client who telephoned or had her family telephone a dozen times a day or more when she was off her medication. Since an attorney could not withdraw from a matrimonial case once the retainer was spent, Farbman was stuck with Janet and the rest of her relay team: a widowed mother and two maiden sisters-fat, wheezing

viragos with identical faces of thick, white make-up and hair thinned by years of chemicals to bleached-out wisps and strands.

Farbman was trying to cajole money in an intense but affectedly casual dialogue with his speaker phone when his door opened without a knock. His nineteen-year-old secretary, Joy, stuck her trendy mane of striped hair inside. Held frozen in place by Farbman's opened palm, she whispered: "Ida's on oh three and your daughter's on oh eight."

"Arnie, do what you can for me. My kid's on the other line. I'll get back to you Monday."

He pushed the appropriate button and asked worriedly: "Jennifer, you okay?"

"Guess what, Daddy?"

"Jennifer, are you all right?"

"Yes, Daddy. Now guess what."

"I can't. Listen, Jennifer, your dad's really busy right now-so if you want me to know, you've got to just tell me."

"Mom took me and Jason to the doctor, to Harold, and we've got something, I forgot, what but we can't touch anyone and we don't have to go to school tomorrow."

"Jennifer, put Mom on right now."

"Daddy, it's like bugs or something."

"Jennifer, where is your mother?"

"I'll get her. When are you coming home, Daddy?"

"Jennifer, get Mom," ordered Farbman, putting as much authority as he could into his voice while staying well short of the tone he used to terrorize his associates. He heard the crash of the receiver being dropped on hand-cut Mexican tile and his daughter calling shrilly for her mother.

Joy opened the door again. "Come in," said Farbman. "I'm just holding."

Farbman was of several minds about his secretary. Did she know she was making a pubic spectacle of herself in her tight jeans and pumps? Was it for him? If it were some faddish new abandon in dress codes, it had no place in a law office, and he would have one of the older secretaries speak to her. On the other hand, if it were intended for him alone...

Farbman thrust his palm toward Joy again as his wife began to speak. Indifferent to the gesture, his secretary blurted: "Ida says she must talk to you. Janet slashed her wrists." She turned to leave the room.

"Wait!" Farbman yelled. "Sorry, hold on, Hon, will you? No. Just a minute.... Two seconds.... Will you please find out, as I asked you, whether she has actually cut them or is just threatening?... Ann Marie? What's going on with the kids?"

"They have scabies."

"Am I supposed to know what that is?"

"Listen, save that tone for your staff."

"Okay. The question is withdrawn. I'll reframe it. What is scabies? Would you please tell me if you know?"

"I want to strangle you when you talk to me like that."

"Look, all I want to know is the state of my children's health, for Chrissake. Can't we for once just focus on the topic instead of getting lost in another battle about how we discuss it?"

"You're too much. Scabies is like lice. It's a parasite that gets under the skin and lays eggs that keep hatching and spreading all over the body. That's what those red curvy lines are that the kids have been scratching for the past week."

"My God! Is it contagious?"

"Harold says it's highly contagious, at least through direct physical contact-which means we're safe from each other-if not from the children."

Her reminder poked him sharply in the gut. He had self-righteously endured about three years of enforced celibacy, three years of sexless sniping. It had begun so far back he could not even recall the first prideful withdrawal, or which of them had decided that that time the other would have to make the effort.

"But it's contagious even during months of incubation so you can be spreading the disease as a carrier and not even know you have it."

"Oh, my God. So you and I could have it, too?" Farbman was suddenly aware that he was itching under his sleeves, then under his socks.

"Yup. To get rid of it you use the same stuff you use on crabs. Just cover the body from head to foot, every crack and crease. Leave it on for ten hours-but no more or it soaks in too deep."

"What stuff for crabs?"

"You never had crabs?"

"No, I haven't had crabs. You've really got some image of me."

"Well, I have."

Farbman paused to let the idea register.

"What are you saying to me? You picked up crabs in your convent school dormitory?"

"No, in a Fort Lauderdale motel room on a spring break with four other girls from Sorrows."

Joy appeared suddenly again in an ersatz fur jacket, carrying her purse and more papers for Farbman. She did not wait for him to interrupt his call. "Here's your letters. Ida's still on hold. She says Janet really cut them. Mr. Hagan called. He says he's going to the judge in the morning unless you call him within a half hour and agree that Mr. Lardiano can take the children to ski Copper Mountain. Marilyn says she can't finish the bills because the computer's broke and should she type them. Mr. Alvarez-the double leg-off-is waiting out there for you. Here are your other messages. Oh, and your father just called. Says he needs your help with a legal problem. I've got to run, it's five ten and someone's been waiting for me." She turned to leave, then added: "Oh yeah. I made your reservations to Chicago. You pick up your ticket at the airport."

Ann Marie finished up: "Look, I'm staying home with the children tomorrow and taking the treatment. Harold says it's optional for you and me. But we could keep reinfecting each other. You can decide what you want to do when you get back from the funeral. The kids are screaming."

"Wait," said Farbman.

"Can't. Have a good trip. Give my condolences to Michael and his father."

Farbman punched Ida's blinking light. Her whining, hectoring voice actually caused his ears to hurt.

"She didn't get the check again and that louse is driving in a new Porsche automobile with the woman-"

"Ida, did she cut her wrists or didn't she?"

"The girl is absolutely suicidal. I swear she'll kill herself if she isn't divorced in a month."

"She didn't cut them, did she, Ida?"

"She had the razor in her hands."

"Good-bye, Ida. In her hands is not cutting."

As Farbman returned his father's call, Joy's words reverberated. Your father needs your help with a legal problem. Farbman had been waiting his entire life for such recognition. Like any Jewish son he understood that he could never please the man. That he would never overcome the stigma of being a failed pre-med. But after a decade of journeyman lawyering Farbman figured his father might have judged him competent enough to stop turning all of his well-paying work over to others. Now, it appeared his moment had arrived.

Farbman's father was a dentist who owned, in various partnerships, a dental laboratory and a half dozen commercial real estate parcels including a medical building, three gas stations, a strip mall, and a free-standing Pizza Hut. These enterprises not only generated transactional work-the paper drafting for leases and acquisitions, the applications and approval processes-but choice litigation. Over the years Farbman's father had been embroiled in construction disputes, claims of professional negligence against engineers and architects, zoning and planning board appeals, partnership breakups, and actions for breach of contract-stuff that Farbman handled for others-and every last bit of it he had sent to competing lawyers.

Megan, his father's spinster office manager, asked after Ann Marie and his children.

"Everyone's just great, just great," said Farbman.

"Your father's with a patient, but I know he wants to speak to you."

Farbman was placed on hold and forced to endure easy-listening music. Eventually, his father came on line. "Hi. Thanks for calling. Bite, honey. Again."

"Hi. I just got your message. I'm hurrying to get to Michael's mother's funeral."

"I heard. Terrible. Bite. Again. Again. Release. When will you be back?"

In the background Farbman heard the spine-shuddering whine of the drill. "Right away. I've got a lot of office pressure at the moment."

"Side to side now. Open. Could you stop by the house on your way to the airport? I need a legal opinion on something and I'd rather not wait if you can do it. Spit, dear."

Noting the sun dying over New Jersey, an elated Farbman checked his watch and realized the Masada limo had been waiting twenty minutes already. He told his father he was on his way. He grabbed his coat and bolted for the door, almost colliding in the reception area with his only hope, the hopeless, red-rimmed Alvarez.

"We go to court for money, jess?"

Farbman nodded as he put a couple of bills into the man's hand, thinking to himself, Alvarez, you really don't have a leg to stand on.

As Farbman pushed through the revolving door, a blast of arctic wind almost knocked him over. He flipped up the collar on his overcoat and waved when he spotted the Lincoln parked behind the IRT entrance at the corner. The flow of people moving behind the police barricade toward the subway was obstructed by a grotesquely fat woman wearing dancer warm-ups over blue jeans and a mantilla of filthy blanket pieces over her head and shoulders. She held her left arm in a circle as if cradling a basket. With her right arm she seemed to be strewing imaginary petals before the processionary crowd that divided around her.

"Saturdays," she cried, "Sundays, here. Wednesdays. Here, Mondays."

Farbman, holding his breath against her effluvium, squeezed around her and through the crowd, into the well-padded back seat of the Town Car. He shuddered, chilled from just that brief exposure to the cold. Farbman remarked to the driver, who gave his name as Ariel, how early it was to be so dark, and he thought about how much Ann Marie hated the winter.

"It's not only the cold and the dark of it, but the silence," she would say. "Listen: Nothing. No bugs, no birds, no sound." Then she would inevitably rhapsodize about summer and most especially about the humid, barefoot summers of her Ohio childhood, about her memories of riding the neighbor's horse, of tubing down the river, the cicadas perpetually droning in the background, and when the seventeen-year locusts emerged and blanketed everything-fields, trees, lawn, house-so you couldn't take a step outside without crunching them underfoot, her Jack Russell terrier scooting about, devouring them by the mouthful. This, while the boy Farbman in Brooklyn, on another planet, was discovering a thousand and one uses for concrete and asphalt; roller skating and hopscotching, playing stickball and stoopball, biking in the alleys. Then the two of them collegiately meeting in late adolescence and finding pleasure in the slap and thump of the tumescent muscular Jew against her bony Irish back.

Harold, when he wasn't just being dismissive, calling Ann Marie "the white woman," suggested Farbman's attraction was more a matter of oedipal inevitability than natural selection, and Farbman-joking she was better than oedipal, she was table grade-could accept the hypothesis without needing to spend a sports car's worth of hours on somebody's couch testing it out.

But he often wondered what could have drawn a girl reared on white bread to the eater of lox and chicken schmaltz? Was there some analogous Electral charge produced by the chortling drunk in grass-green golf pants she called Dad? Perhaps it was the satisfaction she received by more direct expressions of Jewish orality.

Or used to receive. Sex was so far back in their connubial history they no longer even discussed it. Instead, each day they carped and verbally ambushed each other. That morning Farbman couldn't find the dark suit he wanted to wear at the funeral and was

told it was still at the cleaners. And his favorite gray sport shirt was still in the laundry. When he pointed out to Ann Marie that it was more than a week for both of them, she said Opal had had a problem with her son and missed a day going to his school and there was not time for the woman to get the laundry in with all the other housework. "You said we can afford help two days a week and that's it. If you don't like the way I direct Opal, you do it from now on. In fact, why don't you take over managing the household, and I'll criticize you."

Farbman would love to have written off his wife's irritability to the temperature drop and an inadequate number of lumens hitting her retina, but she was just as miserable at their beach house during the summer solstice. He closed his eyes and saw Ann Marie standing at the sink, rinsing and stacking bowls and pots from dinner on a dish towel, her wine glass topped off with the remains of the bottle she had drunk by herself. She was singing a snatch of something he couldn't quite make out except for the words "curtain" and "lady" and "night."

Something glittered in her hair, which, when he stepped closer, was revealed to be an iridescent green insect.

"Hey," he said, "there's something in your hair, a bug I think," and she replied, "The little green guy? He's been with me since I got back from my walk."

Farbman smiled. "I'll get him, just hold still."

"No. Just leave him." Ann Marie backed away, raising her dripping hands in defense against him. "He's grown attached to me. I take him around."

"Are you nuts?" said Farbman, still smiling. "Let me get it off."

He reached again and Ann Marie slapped his hand, hard. "I told you 'no' and I mean it. Leave him alone, just leave him alone," she shouted, then started crying. "He appreciates me. That means something to me. And stop looking at me like I'm crazy and get away."

Out the limo window, Farbman saw a man crawling into his tiny, cardboard home-one of a dozen lining the sidewalk of the Midtown Tunnel entrance. What we have all come to, Farbman thought. And what trouble had his father come to that he needed his son's help? Farbman's mind ricocheted among the possibilities: mob threats on a construction job, tax fraud, a malpractice suit. The limo dispatcher called to report that there was plenty of room on later flights but no cheap fares left so he'd have to pay full coach. Farbman said he hoped he could avoid that, and Ariel, who had been as suicidally aggressive as the name Masada Limo promised, honking and weaving his way through the lethargic Expressway traffic, immediately pulled on to the shoulder to end run the next clot of cars. Farbman, hearing the accelerating wheels on the gravel, relaxed and made a mental note to add a ten to his normal gratuity.

He returned to speculating on his father's predicament for a while, then clicked on the little gooseneck lamp over his shoulder and read a law journal until they reached the winding suburban streets of his parents' neighborhood. He instructed Ariel to wait in front of the Tudor house where Farbman had once lived but where he was now required to ring the bell.

Dr. Farbman opened the door, took his son's hand, and squeezed it firmly with fingers conditioned by forty years of manual labor. "I see you're still too good for a taxi. Wish I had your money. Don't take your coat off. I want you to come out in the yard. But say hello to your mother first."

Farbman walked into the kitchen, kissed his mother, and failed his personal test of adulthood by immediately opening the refrigerator, as he did every time he entered his parents' home. He told his mother that Ann Marie and the children were wonderful and that he couldn't stay for dinner, then slid open the patio door to join his father. It must be serious business if they had to speak outside. Did he think the house was bugged? Farbman followed his father across the floodlit lawn to the spot where Farbman's childhood swing set once stood. It probably wasn't professional negligence since the dentist could just turn the claim over to his insurance carrier. Unless it involved a complaint to the State Board... His father gestured toward the neighbor's property. "You see this?"

"What?"

"The big tree limb here."

"Yes."

"So, what do you think?"

"What do I think about what?"

"Can I just cut it or do I have to ask McDonough first? I know it's his tree but I'd prefer not to deal with the anti-Semitic bastard at all."

For a long moment Farbman just stood there, dumb, unwilling to comprehend; then he mumbled that he'd have to research it. His father shook his head in disbelief. "This is so complicated?"

Farbman said he was late for his plane, and walked off hurriedly to the car, making a big thing of looking at his watch, which told him he'd already missed it.

Approaching death ... thought Farbman as the plane turned onto final approach for the landing at O'Hare. Approaching death from the sky, eating almonds. Then he made a game of it. Traveling through the dark, over endless flat land, he thought: Approaching death in debt, in a rented car.

Michael's mother and father were holocaust survivors. While they were in the camps, Michael and his brother had lived with gentiles. Somehow the family was reunited after the war and found their way to a poultry farm in Illinois. Farbman had warm memories from his college days of Michael's big bosomed mother and her lavish dinners. He knew from Michael that she had died at home, her body returned once again to the skeletal weight of the camps.

At the Mt. Pisgah Motor Inn-fifteen wooden units with a small square swimming pool fenced off in the asphalt lot-Farbman found a green linoleum floor and a blinding, buzzing florescent light. The inhospitality of the place contrasted starkly with his past visits: Michael's mother pressing food on him, insisting he sample three desserts and always "mit shlag." Then, sitting on her clumsy furniture, draped with antimacassars, she'd put Mozart on her Victrola and, when a bored Michael left the room, tell stories about her girlhood before the war, when her worries were music lessons and homework and boys, and what it was like when things began to change. Farbman, climbing into his sagging bed, recalled how he would follow her up to the guest room so she could personally demonstrate the light switch, open the window, give him a towel and an extra blanket-even tuck him in if he'd asked. Imagining he had, he slipped into the cowl of sleep.

Farbman slept through the alarm on his runner's watch. When he finally got to the funeral home there was a line of cars waiting to park. He tried to steer to a spot near the entrance, away from the rest of the traffic, but an attendant trotted over to send him back with the others. Farbman pointed out the obvious bottleneck the attendant was creating, but the man couldn't be reasoned with. "All right," said Farbman "it's your funeral."

Taking a pointed, too small yarmulke from the usher, Farbman tried to balance it on his head, feeling like a child as he entered the overflowing chapel. The funeral home was clearly unprepared for the number of mourners. Conscious of his blondness among the dark Jewish faces of Eastern Europe, Farbman gave his condolences to Michael and his family. Then he stood against the wall among the farmers and tradesmen who nodded in recognition or solemnly clasped their rough peasant hands.

The rabbi said Michael's mother was a woman who lived, who was, her past. Forced to leave her family in hiding, she had survived to bring them forth to thrive. She was, he said, independent, courageous. A Jew who was nagged always by the question of her family's and her people's sufferings but who, nonetheless, lived always devoutly, honestly, courageously.

"Our ranks," he said, "are depleted."

Waiting in the car for the funeral procession to unsnarl, Farbman was transfixed by the sight of a long-legged woman with pronounced cheekbones and a full sensuous mouth, exiting the funeral home. Michael, smiling, led her straight to Farbman, and introduced her through the window.

"This is my cousin Leah, the ectress," Michael crudely mimicked the Yiddish dialect. "Can you give her a ride to the cemetery?"

Farbman was already leaning over to open the door. "Of course, Michael. Can I take anyone else?" he added for Leah's benefit as she slid in.

"Hello, I'm Leah Stein." Cool, firm grip. A mouth that made Farbman's blood course. "And it's 'aspiring' actress at the moment. I pay the bills with voice-over."

The voice that supported the body was deeply pitched and slightly raspy. Farbman found it so intoxicating that his brain seemed to dull as she spoke.

"Where are you from?"

She told him that she'd driven from Chicago the day before and stayed at Michael's parents' home.

"How was it?"

"Heavy scene with the rabbi till real late. Did you stay here last night?"

"Yes."

"Don't tell me you stayed at the Anthony Perkins Memorial Motel? Next to Mickey D's?"

"You're not kidding. I wouldn't even consider a shower until morning."

They both laughed. The shared humor felt good, but Farbman wondered if he could trust it, whether her openness was a reaction to her bereavement or to him.

"What kind of scene with the rabbi?" he asked, engaging the gears and taking his place in the procession.

"He came by to discuss the eulogy and started right in on the survival stuff."

"Is that so bad?"

"It is for kids whose parents, like mine, never let them forget it." She turned to look out the window. "We just didn't want that crap. We don't see them as heroic, you see, just people who'd simply been altered forever by their pasts. 'Scarred' doesn't do it. Maybe 'raped,' like someone who was raped as a child, who could never take full pleasure in life again."

"But isn't it still a giant, unignorable fact?"

"Of course; it's just not the part of our parents that we care to dwell on, or even remember."

"I thought the rabbi came across as someone who knew and cared about your aunt."

"Well, he didn't."

"Are you going to stay with the family for a while?"

"You know," Leah said, "I actually had planned to be down this weekend anyway, for a sort of retreat in the state park. With an Hasidic rabbi coming all the way from the Pacific Northwest, of all places. It will be my first orthodox shabbos. I mean my mother lit candles and stuff, but we never really got into it."

"I never did, either. But a day of rest sounds like a great idea." The picture of himself in some lonely rustic setting with this woman made Farbman delirious.

"Well, Heschel and Buber say the idea is not so much to rest, but to try not to impose oneself on a world of things. To create a place in time, outside the temporal world, for one day. To experience the joy of that spiritual, timeless place. You can't mourn on the Sabbath, so my aunt's death will be an additional burden to deal with."

"Who is this rabbi?"

"His name is Sholem-Avram Sholem. He was invited to visit by a local Reform congregation. The woods was his idea. A compromise, I guess-a neutral meeting ground. Sholem is a famous mystic who sat at the right hand of the Lubovitcher Rebbe and who was sent out by the Rebbe years ago to proselytize. You know anything about the Lubovitchers?"

Farbman, catching a dubious look on her face, groped in his pockets for the Rebbe's 'Thought of the Week.' Producing the paper for Leah, he thought: At last, manifest proof of God's existence.

"I'm no expert," Farbman said, "but I've always been fascinated by Lubovitch."

"Far out," said Leah, reading about Havdalah, which Farbman had not read far enough to learn was the concluding service on the Sabbath. "You'd like Rabbi Sholem. He's a remarkable man."

"You've met him before?"

"Just once, years ago, at a Reform Jewish summer camp. Instead of serving up the usual Ethical Culture-type moral instruction, Sholem became our spiritual leader-our rebbe as the expression goes. He just appeared one day in his shtetl costume and, without introducing himself, led us outdoors where he had arranged a circle of chairs." The husky laugh again. "Beware of his circles."

"I'll remember that," said Farbman as he pulled into the cemetery.

The cemetery was demarcated from the flat desolate landscape by a six-foot, chain-link fence. Farbman and Leah stood behind Michael and his family, who stood under a canopy over the open grave. Nearby the indifferent grave diggers lounged and gawked. A little farther away a backhoe chugged as it dug another grave. It beeped as it backed, louder than the rabbi's words, and ground its gears when it moved forward. But the stunning, echoing sound of the first shovelful of dirt on the coffin cut through all the noise. Farbman felt Leah grasp his arm. She cried softly next to him as the shovel was passed from Michael to his brother. Farbman's pulse thudded in his ears. He tried to draw comfort from the bewildering Hebrew, to ignore Leah's casual appropriation of his supporting shoulder and his discomfiture at the guilty awareness that they stood as a couple. The yarmulke blew off his head, and Leah was forced to release Farbman's arm as he went to retrieve it. She did not take it again, and they did not speak as they left the cemetery.

At the farmhouse, Farbman paused on the porch to pour the ablution water from the pitcher over Leah's hands, then his own. Inside, as they lifted their paper plates with each forkful of smoked fish and potato salad, Leah continued her description of Rabbi Sholem's camp visit while Farbman stared into her eyes.

"Remember the circle?" Leah continued.

"Beware," said Farbman.

"Right," she smiled, and explained how Sholem, addressing everyone, including the counselors and other rabbis as "kinderloch," had astonished them by announcing that they were going to pray; or rather, that he was going to pray and that everyone else should feel free but not obliged. "He sat down, took off his glasses, and closed his eyes." Leah mimed the removal of the glasses and pressed her fingers to her eyes. "Then, he opened them again. He asked us to ignore what he called 'idiosyncrasies'-his tendency to rock back and forth and to pray aloud. 'Pay no attention,' he said. In a few minutes he began to dovin, to chant and to rock, back and forth."

Mesmerized by her full, sharply defined lips and enveloping voice, Farbman began to marshal his explanations to Ann Marie for a delayed return.

Leah continued. "Well, the kids exchanged looks and squirmed and smiled and whispered and felt very uncomfortable. In what I remember as a very brief time, the undertone of whispering and squirming began to recede and his chanting began to dominate and to possess me. I felt a lump in my throat. Another girl was the first to start crying, but she was soon followed by everyone else. Rabbis, counselors, kids.

"When everyone was weeping and sobbing, Sholem opened his eyes and looked at the havoc he'd wrought. Then, he smiled, and grabbed the hands of the two people closest to him and shouted 'Kinderloch, let's dance!' And he broke into some wild Hasidic melody, leading the entire camp, singing and dancing and holding hands, through the woods and fields."

"How soon do we leave?" asked Farbman.

"Any time," said Leah, "just so we're settled in before sundown."

Farbman got Ann Marie on the telephone and easily convinced her that he ought to spend another day with Michael and maybe in a little religious retreat himself.

"Stay as long as you like," she offered. "We wouldn't talk this much if you were home."

He felt more guilty giving the same explanation to the children. Jason, however, was enthusiastic: "Great, Dad. I'm going on a trip, too, with my Hebrew School class tomorrow. To Ellis Island, and then to the lower East Side to see where your grandparents came in and how they lived and everything."

"Okay," said Farbman, "we'll compare notes when I get back."

Farbman had no difficulty getting a room in the state lodge on that cold Friday night. The place was dead. The only guests were the Reform congregants who appeared unsettled at having had to travel to the woods as a precondition to their religious experience. They chatted sociably among themselves as they entered the room in which the chairs had already been placed in a circle.

Rabbi Sholem appeared in the doorway: huge and forbidding in his black clothes and beard-exactly as Farbman had expected him to look.

"Gut Shabbos, kinderloch," he greeted them. Quickly appraising the people, he took their hands and separated couples from each other, putting Farbman just far enough from Leah that he couldn't see her.

There were immediate, anxious efforts to regain control: "We are so glad you could come," began one of the wives. "Why don't you tell us a little about yourself," suggested a physician.

Sholem said, "No, kinderloch," in a paternal tone, although he was no older than most of those in the group. "Let's sing a song."

"We don't know Hebrew," they protested. "We don't know any Hebrew songs."

"You all know the hymn 'Goin' Home?'" Sholem inquired, without a trace of irony. When they nodded yes, he began to sing and everyone joined him.

Go-in home.

Go-in home.

Go-in home to God.

Farbman noticed that Sholem's mournful voice subsumed the others and colored the melody with Hebraic lamentation, with the hint even of a wail. It imparted an immediacy that made Farbman's mind run to images of grief, to the graveside at the burial of Michael's mother. He started to wish her well, and the realization struck that she was gone. Beginning to cry, he wondered whether his kind, directionless thoughts were what was meant by "prayer."

When the song ended Farbman could hear snuffling and nose blowing. He looked up into Sholem's eyes, and it seemed that the rabbi spoke directly to him.

"I recently discussed prayer with another clergyman who told me that when he prayed he saw 'a gray shape, sort of rectangular or oblong.'" Sholem laughed as he described it, and by the shake of his head acknowledged with what sadness he viewed the silly idea. "When I pray," said Sholem smiling, "I see a white-bearded old man on a throne, probably the angel Gabriel."

Several people shook their heads angrily, and a Honda dealer and his friend, a liquor wholesaler, rolled their eyes. Sholem took note but continued, unperturbed. With songs and food and talk, he had his "kinderloch" recall the odors of their mothers' kitchens.

Farbman smelled potato latkes and kreplach and noodle kugel. Hidden melodies were drawn out of him-tastes and sounds that returned to him the simple pleasures of childhood, the feeling of having his loving Eastern European grandparents just in the other room.

Rabbi Sholem called it the game of "Jewing." It was the mystification of the ordinary. "When you play this game," Sholem said, "you transform the familiar, and you, the player, and others around you, experience life in a way that enriches and nourishes the players. You do this by hallowing the everyday."

Instead of criticizing Reform practices for their deviations from traditional ritual, or for the incorporation of Christian ceremony, the rabbi focused on the apparent lack of satisfaction in the Reform congregants. His objection to the organ in the temple was not that it was Protestant but that it was depressing.

"If you want music," he suggested, "why not a brass ensemble, or a string quartet?" He began to hum possible arrangements of familiar liturgical tunes as they might be played by such instruments.

Farbman asked why Sholem played the specific game that he called "Jewing." Did the rabbi think there was some qualitative difference among the possibilities of mystic experience promised by the Buddha, Saint John of the Cross, or the Baal Shem Tov? He did not. Sholem spoke only of "the fact of particularization." Farbman had been acculturated as he was. The smells of his mother's kitchen. Farbman could not intellectually justify the fun of this game, and Rabbi Sholem didn't want to: he went out of his way to discourage profound talk.

As it grew late and people began to drift off to their rooms, Sholem intercepted and embraced each one. He would whisper in an ear or perhaps kiss a cheek, Farbman couldn't be sure; but all of them, even the eye-rollers and head-shakers, hugged back and one of them-the eye-rolling Honda dealer-to Farbman's astonishment, jammed his face in Sholem's frock and wept like a child.

Farbman continued to focus on sensory perceptions and discovered that this engrossing play kept him in the moment and, wonderfully, that the immediacy of his experience brought release from anxiety. His breathing deepened and he relaxed into a timeless present.

So involved was Farbman in the game that he only gradually became aware that everyone, including Leah, had gone, leaving him alone with the rabbi. Together they walked through the chill dark to their cabins. Haunted by images of Ann Marie, Farbman struggled with guilt, suddenly recognizing that, like himself, she was who she was; not the object he had made her, but another person, another source of holiness. "All this is nice," said Farbman to the rabbi, "but what about right behavior? What about sin?"

The rabbi paused and looked up at the endless constellations. "Above us and with us right now there is past and future, all we have done and all we will do. You must do today what you do on Yom Kippur, that sacred day of atonement-be here, in the present, acting in this world. Saying the word differently, you must strive for 'at-one-ment,' to be at one with that past and future."

The grinning shaman hugged Farbman hard into his black coat and turned him loose.

"For true repentance there must be change. Remember when it comes-the flash, the insight-that it's only the beginning. To become a baal teshuvah takes more."

"A what 'chuva'?"

"Never mind. That's for another day. Shabbat shalom," he said and went inside.

Farbman awoke and was out the door with the first light. For hours he walked over the dead land, through cold gray woods, over hoar-frosted fields, branches snapping underfoot. When was the last time he'd seen the sky from horizon to horizon? When had he breathed such air? He felt his body open, his mind unfurl. He wandered without aim or direction.

Following bright glints of sunlight Farbman came to a lake. By its edge stood the hulking black figure of Sholem and next to him, Leah. Farbman's feet smashed through the snow crust as he approached to greet them. They smiled at each other and said, "Gut Shabbos," their breath visible spirits. Leah searched Farbman's eyes, and he flushed.

Flanked by his two friends, Farbman felt the cold empty woods as he walked. He felt his body feel the cold and the ancient pine woods, and the flow of affection from the people

next to him. They were connected to him, as he realized he was to the barren oak and birch, to the birds wheeling overhead, to his wife and his family, even to the family in Europe he'd never met, distanced by death and years.

Farbman returned alone to his cabin and sat on a wooden chair by the window in the warming sun. A deer appeared briefly at the wood's edge, then disappeared. Farbman did not know the time and did not care. He was hungry but did not want to leave his little patch of sunlight. He hoped the deer would return.

A knock: Leah with some bread and cheese, the meal she was afraid he would miss. "You're a life saver," said Farbman. There was only one chair so they pulled the bed by the window to eat in the sun.

While they ate they shared nothing but silence and shy smiles, Leah leaning back luxuriating in the heat that poured through the window. Their eyes met and locked. Leah made a low purring noise and lifted her sweater over her head. She wore long cotton knit underwear, buttoned down the front. It was white with a pattern of tiny indistinct violets and it clung to her torso outlining her breasts.

As he reached for her she leapt at him. She sucked the breath out of him as they crushed, made crumbs of the bread, yanked at their clothes. They kissed, bit, licked, and scratched, spun around like magnetic toy dogs. He threw her legs over his shoulders and she grasped him by the scrotum and, grunting, pulled him repeatedly into her.

In his mind's eye they stood now at the burial over the open grave while the rabbi and the mourners intoned Kaddish and they pumped in the rhythm of the prayer. He was, by turns, a Yeshiva student sneaking out of his dirt-floored study hall in Poland for a tryst with a forbidden thick-muscled farm girl and, flipping her to her knees, a Polish peasant catching and subduing an aloof Jewess in the leaves. Farbman took her like an animal in rut, held her in place with a fistful of hair, the slippery fingers of his other hand kneading and thrumming, while she screamed and clawed at his buttocks.

They laughed and sweated and the room stank to heaven with their juices and their come. Then Leah noticed the dusk and exclaimed, "The Havdalah service," and they covered themselves to rejoin the others.

For his last transformation, Rabbi Sholem, the shaman, illusionist, and champion game player-eschewing the wine, the candles and the aromatic herbs-performed the concluding service of the Sabbath with a transporting can of Coke, a ladies' compact, and a match. Farbman had never felt more at peace.

That night Farbman dreamed of Michael's mother's funeral, but it was Alvarez in the grave. He was in an open coffin only half-filled, his prostheses misplaced. The backhoe began to move, to fill the grave, while Farbman shouted, "Wait, let's find his legs." But as the machine backed and beeped its warning, Alvarez opened his eyes and cried for help. Farbman clambered into the grave and pulled him out by his arms just as the dirt

avalanched in. "You must stop sleeping in such dangerous places," Farbman admonished. "Suppose you hadn't heard the horn."

Farbman awoke with itching bumps and welts on his hands and chest and groin. He thought first of the worn-out mattresses he'd been using, and then he remembered the scabies. He sat on the edge of the bed scratching and cursing his luck while considering what he would say to Leah.

He didn't realize what the dream meant until he was half-way through his shave. He raced to get Marucci on the phone.

"If that truck had had a standard back-up warning on it Alvarez might still have his legs." Huzzahs. Money in the bank.

Before he could call Leah, he found a note from her shoved under the door. Sorry to leave without goodbye. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.

Farbman resolved to do just that. Next week he would make his own Shabbat, create his own timeless world, perhaps renew his vows with Ann Marie.

But driving back to his plane, Farbman remembered he would have to get the cervical quad ready for trial the following Monday. He would lose a day to the scabies cure. And he had promised to go to Jason's Saturday soccer game. Maybe the week after....

Sitting that night on his son's bed, he asked Jason about the excursion to Ellis Island, his connection with his heritage.

"It was great, Dad. The bus broke down and we missed the boat, but they gave each kid two dollars and they told us to pretend we were immigrants and to bargain with the shopkeepers like it was all the money we had. Then we went to this awesome delicatessen, Katz's, and there was this old sign on the wall that said 'Send a salami to your boy in the army.'"

Farbman kissed and hugged his child good-night and, after a moment's reflection, said, "I'm glad it was fun."