

Israeli Ace

by Robert Wexelblatt

“Hey there, Harold.”

It was Joel and Riva Cohn. Harold turned, not altogether pleased to be found, and nodded an acknowledgment.

“Okay if we slide in with you?” whispered Joel. “Where’s Julie?”

Before Harold could answer, Riva had swished up against him.

“Well, Judy got a gorgeous day,” she announced as if Harold might have neglected to notice the weather or were unsure on whose daughter’s bat mitzvah the sunshine had been bestowed. Riva presented her cheek to be nearly kissed. “Mmm, *really* gorgeous,” she hummed. Riva’s face smelled of powder and perfume, the odor of sanctity. Julie favored Shalimar, which came in a bottle shaped like the Taj Mahal. Riva’s scent was a little different, but not different enough to matter. As he pulled away from her Riva was already rubbernecking, taking roll. The consequence was that Harold’s nose grazed her hair, which was stiff as a guard rail. “So where *is* Julie?” she demanded.

He’d done a little buttock-walk down the pew, right up against the wall, so as to preserve what remained of his space. He had been relishing sitting alone. It made him feel as if he were either a widower or a teenager again. You see things differently when you’re on your own, he had been musing, and it was because he was feeling this not unpleasant disconnection that he answered Riva brusquely. “Stomach’s acting up.”

“Oh, that’s *awful*. She must feel *terrible* about missing this, of all days. I mean, well *you* know how she slaved with Judy over practically every detail.” Riva was not looking at Harold. Her wide eyes were sweeping the front of the synagogue the way searchlights seek prisoners. “Judy and Julie,” she hummed to herself, and it occurred to Harold that Riva might be jealous of his wife’s friendship with Judy.

“She sure was feeling awful when I left,” he said to make up for his earlier bluntness and conceal the sudden insight which made him feel sympathetic to Riva.

“Perfect day for tennis, eh?” Joel whispered to him behind Riva’s head. Harold smiled and nodded, still thinking about Riva’s jealousy and wondering what other passions he had overlooked in their circle.

A young couple bustled in behind them. Harold glanced around.

The man had a baby face under prematurely thinning hair and seemed anxious about something. The woman, petite and fierce with severely curled black hair, was urging a little boy in front of her. She was shoving her child. “Get up here and *sit down*.” Harold could feel the kid messing about on the floor just behind his feet and there was a palpable bump against the back of the pew that made Joel turn all the way around. His face changed quickly from indignation to good cheer. It was the synagogue, after all, and children are to be welcomed into the community of worshippers. *Jewish children are our future*. This was one of the rabbi’s favorite tautologies. Harold imagined the father shrugging and making an ambiguous face at Joel: *What can you do? You know how they are*. Wives. Children.

Another whisper: “Look, Jordan, if you don’t calm down we’re going to have to go outside. You don’t want Daddy to have to go outside, do you?” Harold could tell from the strain in the man’s voice that he was leaning down, coaxing, but the mother overrode him like a merciless editor. “Jordan! Cut that nonsense and get your bum up here. *Right now*. God’ll be here in a minute.”

Harold grinned. *God’ll be here in a minute*, as if the synagogue were a cathedral, as if Jehovah were going to burst in to kick butt and take names. How had they put it back in Hebrew school? *A Christian church is God’s house and the people have to be invited in, while our synagogue is the house of the Jewish people and we invite God in*. This in a smug, entre-nous voice.

“Jordan, shh! Quiet now. Or else.” The matron’s whisper could have sawn through oak. Harold raised his eyes to the ceiling, so white and modern, angular; the whole building was aggressively post-Holocaust, decorated with an expressionistic sculpture of Jacob wrestling the angel, hangings so colorful they hurt the eyes, not one but two huge brass menorahs. They looked like melting candelabra. Harold unpacked another of his non-biodegradable memories. Julie was tearing a wailing Beth from his arms in Sears, that same Beth who was now a level-headed actuary in San Jose, California. *You, you couldn’t train a cocker spaniel*, Julie had barked at him, a reproach that had lodged in his memory for twenty-three years. This was due to her words’ rhythm, he now judged, that double you, as much as their cruelty—or their accuracy. He probably couldn’t have trained a cocker spaniel, smacking its nose with a rolled up newspaper, yelling to make the puppy cower with big terrified eyes. No, he had turned out the same as the gentle fellow behind him, the same as his own father, whom he could still see arriving home, helplessly baffled by the bill-of-particulars his mother had drawn up

against him and his sister. *Jewish husbands make the best slaves.* It was one of his mother's favorite sayings and the day of the cocker spaniel remark in the mall Harold had gone into Sears and spitefully typed it on all the typewriters. Where are the typewriters of yesteryear?

Riva used the same peculiarly penetrating whisper the young matron had. In fact, Harold could hear identical whispers all around him. Riva was whispering to Joel about Judy's dress. That was how he and Julie would have communicated too had she been there; she would have evaluated everything for him in exactly the same synagogue whisper, the pre-service whisper. Once the rituals were over, he realized, people always resumed speaking normally. Decorum. And yet this whisper achieved little in the way of concealment and could hardly be said to be decorous. Though obviously an adult form of behavior, one he had engaged in countless times himself, all this whispering struck Harold now as childish, the inverse of Jordan's bored fooling about on the floor. At least the kid didn't know enough to be insincere. If this is *our* house, why the whispering? They had been right in Hebrew school. Nothing to do with sanctity or God, everything to do with social propriety. And it seemed to Harold, who was having all these peculiar thoughts simply because he was on his own, that the really distinctive religious attitude of Jews was to whisper at each other so God wouldn't hear, then to argue out loud with God, and then, at the last minute, submit. The Chosen People. Abraham haggling to save Sodom. To bargain with God was hopeful and hopeless at the same time, but so human. He'd always liked Abraham for putting up that argument. Was a Jew at prayer like a clerk asking for a raise he knows in advance he isn't going to get and so he slinks back to the office and whines to all the other clerks, who whisper complaints to top his? What thoughts he was having!

The place was filling up quickly with more and more whisperers. Fred's brother stood at the back giving everybody a white, specially printed commemorative booklet in sham-Hebrew script. Julie had been out until one a.m. last Tuesday working out the final editorial touches with Judy. *Sarah's Bat Mitzvah* it said in swirling arabesques. The first names of all the family were printed at the bottom. *Brought to you by.*

Joel leaned forward and whispered to him around Riva. "So, you left her puking or what?"

Riva hissed at him then swiveled from the waist, like a mannequin. Her bottom made a small swishing noise on the smooth wood. "What is it? Twenty-four-hour bug?"

"Chicken fat on Chinese noodles."

"Ech. They put MSG in everything, even when they say they don't."

"Not MSG, he said *schmaltz*," corrected Joel then thought better of picking a fight. "Nice flowers. What kind are those, the orange ones?"

"Mums, they're mums." It was as if she were saying Joel was a moron. "Carnations, lilies, and about a ton of baby's breath."

Riva was a haughty gardener, and Joel wisely gave her every opportunity to show off. It occurred to Harold that Riva's nose must be out of joint because she, the expert on horticulture, hadn't been consulted on the flowers.

"Is God here yet?" whined Jordan at full volume.

"Sit still. It hasn't even started."

"I'm bored."

The whisper rose to a crescendo. "*Shb. You're embarrassing us.*"

"Someday you'll be up there, Jor."

The child yawned loudly.

"Want me to take him outside?" begged the father.

There was a slight pause as the question hung in the sanctified air. "No. I do *not*." The absence of the contraction was chilling.

Julie had been fine when she went to bed but had awakened at dawn with the bad stomach.

"Those noodles! I knew they were soaked in fat," she gasped, heading for the bathroom.

Julie was not a vegetarian on principle but because she was incapable of digesting animal fat. This did not prevent her from adopting the current food theology. Fat is sin. The evening before they had played a little bridge with the Feldmans and ordered out. Julie had stuck to her usual rice and vegetables, but she was tempted by the noodles.

"Chicken fat?" Harold had said from his side of the bed, rubbing his eyes. The noodles had been greasy. In fact, he had warned his wife but it would have been foolish to remind her of it. Instead he padded down the hall to Beth's old bathroom to pee. When he returned Julie was falling back into bed, staggering under the weight of her inadvertent alimentary sin.

"Christ. I'll never make it. I'm not even going to try. Judy'll just have to forgive me."

Harold was by the bureau reviewing his cufflinks. "You're not *going*?" he said stupidly.

"You think I could? You know I'll have the goddamned runs until tomorrow. Believe me—"

"Poor baby."

“—I’d drag myself if I thought...I’m just sick that I’ll miss—”

“Judy’ll understand. Of course she will. She knows your stomach.”

“You’ll explain? Promise?” Julie whimpered.

“You don’t want me to stay with you?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Okay. So you’ll see the pictures.”

Julie groaned, heaved up, and rubbed her tummy. “They’re doing a video, of course.”

“All right, so you’ll look at the video and make extra-loud compliments. Can I at least get you something before I go? Pepto? Maybe a cup of tea? A little toast?”

Julie made a dramatically miserable noise as she rolled back off the bed and reeled toward the bathroom, too sick to swear.

At last Rabbi Aaronson burst in from his chamber fiddling with his

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all life. L'chaim."**

prayer shawl and strutted around the pulpit like a prosperous man arriving late to his own birthday party. A large man, pink of countenance and shinningly bald, Aaronson was adept, much revered, constantly being invited to speak in places like Poland and New

Zealand and yet, Harold sometimes thought, a little too vital, a dab over-sure of himself. “I wish I could be as joyful as you, Rabbi,” he had said to him at the Shiva of Howie Schultz’s mother. “We Jews have to affirm life,” Aaronson had replied with cheerful pomposity then surprised Harold by throwing an avuncular arm around his neck. “It’s because they wanted to kill us all,” he said into his ear, as if it were a stock tip. “You understand? Look, life’s full of wonders. Howie’s mother died at eighty-six. Isn’t that a triumph? Every Jew is a universe, Howard. When we drink it’s not mud in your eye or bottoms up, it’s to life. Not just *our* life, *all* life. *L'chaim*.” And he had released Harold to drain a glass of Howie’s Chivas Regal. Harold thought of saying, “My name’s Harold,” but didn’t.

Rabbi Aaronson was taking his time, though the service was already running late. He chatted casually with those members of the family privileged to participate, reminding them of their cues. These were seated not, as was customary, in the first few rows but on folding chairs specially set up on the dais. This was only one of Judy’s innovations, but then, to judge from the booklet, she had virtually rewritten the Sabbath service itself. As for Sarah, whom he had seen earlier running around greeting all of her school

friends, she was now sitting stiffly behind the pulpit in her new white dress, knees pressed together tight. Harold could imagine what was in her mind. *If I stay very still I'll remember everything*. The rabbi’s nonchalance must have exasperated her, for she was scowling in his direction. As for her mother, Judy was everywhere, greeting, pointing proudly toward her daughter, still arranging a chair here, a lily there. No, there was no doubt whose affair this was. *Produced by*.

At last the rabbi motioned to Sarah’s father. Fred stood up and made his way to the pulpit, the proud patriarch. Harold was shocked by the height of Fred’s forehead shining there in the spotlight and instinctively felt for his own hair line. Fred gripped the podium like a motorcycle’s handlebars, arms straight, fists firm, elbows slightly bent, then looked around with a grin of studied benevolence until the whispering petered out. This was the Father’s Speech promised in the program. Fred’s new Italian suit made him look pretty trim, and there was no doubt he was at home with public speaking; but Harold was thinking of the two tumultuous weeks Fred had crashed in his basement after the breakup with Shirley. That epoch had marked the true beginning of their friendship. As a well-regarded college administrator, fair scholar, husband, father, as a winning athlete, taker of intriguing vacations, and a chef of exotic delicacies, Fred had not particularly appealed to Harold. He began to appreciate Fred only after his life collapsed; that is, when he became vulnerable. A friend in need. A friend *only* in need. Or, best of all, a friend who has been humiliated, as Shirley had thoroughly humiliated Fred. There had been a painful yet heroic year when Fred was at his best, when life was something through which he trekked like a desert. To Harold, Fred may have been attractive when he was a problem, but Julie preferred him as a solution, which is to say a safely remarried one. Julie would have liked the set of him that morning. He was once more invulnerable, and he delivered a fine speech too, at least as good as any he spouted to raw freshmen. He greeted everyone, many by name, thanked them for coming, interpreted the yarmulkes and prayer shawls and the scrolls for the Gentile guests, explained the significance of the event, though all this was exhaustively covered in the booklet, with footnotes. He then talked glowingly of his family and its “strength,” flattered the rabbi, thanked his daughter’s tutor, and wound up by directing some seriously sententious stuff to Sarah, who looked back at him with her even teeth and unblinking eyes.

Next it was Judy’s turn. She spoke about the role of women in Jewish history, noted the overdue progress signified by a *bat* mitzvah, told a suitably expurgated version of the story of the original Sarah, praising the



steadfastness of her for whom her daughter had been named. Then she pulled a neatly folded prayer shawl from a shelf under the pulpit and draped it over her daughter's shoulders. It was a very fancy shawl. "This was made for Sarah by my late beloved mother, Hannah Shulberg," Judy concluded tearfully. Cancer, Harold recalled. They didn't get it all.

An uncle spoke and also an aunt, one from each side of the family, both also making a fuss about family life, a major theme, of tradition and, once again, the enormous *strength* of this particular family. The uncle was even moved to call it "an impregnable bulwark." But the rabbi's was the most fulsome speech of all, family-wise. The only one who looked really at ease up there, he went on and on describing the pleasure of getting to know "Judy and Fred and their terrific kids," extolling "this model Jewish family and their devotion to our traditions as we see here this day." Amen. Hallelujah. There was no mention of the fact that the four children on the dais were actually the products of various couplings. His, hers, and theirs. Lev was from Judy's first marriage to Solomon the philandering periodontist, Rebecca and Scott the products of Fred's to the castrating Shirley. Only little Sarah, named for the woman who cracked up when told she'd be having a baby at ninety, was actually theirs, the fruit of their lives' second acts, the precocious earnest of their new, self-conscious happiness. No matter. The rabbi spoke jocularly of the bat mitzvah girl, calling her alternately *Her Nibs*, *Your Highness*, *our little Princess*. True, *Sarah* does mean *princess*. The congregation seemed amused by this teasing, taking it as another proof of Aaronson's good nature; but, thinking of his own bar mitzvah and what he had then felt to be the condescension of adults, Harold suffered on the child's behalf. Thirteen-year-old skin is thin. But he needn't have worried. Sarah actually glowed under this kidding, self-possessed and suddenly confident, and Harold realized that Aaronson was cleverly loosening her up.

Like a fussy field marshal disposing troops for a battle, Judy had planned the day in each detail, from the florists and caterers to the garments of her family, the musicians and the service itself. Fred paid through the nose. Harold knew the drill. Ostentation elbowing spirituality to the side. He had seen it often enough and if it disturbed him today this was simply because he was alone, temporarily without a family to dress and feed, daughter calculating death-rates in California, wife groaning on the can. Had either been there he would not be having such unseasonable thoughts.

Finally the service got under way. Most of it was familiar, de-

spite Judy's feminist redactions. People rose and sat on cue, chanted the old verses. The ark opened electronically and the honored relatives stumbled through the prayers over the Torah. The scroll was carried from the ark by two siblings. The rabbi rubbed his hands together and Sarah made ready for the moment of truth, hefting the heavy silver pointer.

As he was turning to sit for the reading that "would seal the bond of Sarah's union with the Jewish people," as Judy put it in her speech while pointedly lamenting that *her* generation of Jewish girls had been unable to do likewise, Harold's sight was arrested by two people behind him. The first was Jordan. He was curled up on the wooden pew, thumb in his mouth so that he looked like a hooked worm; his miniature blue suit was wrinkled and his tie unclipped. The second was an indistinct face in the last row. There was something familiar about it, familiar and compelling.

It was not until everyone stood for Kaddish that Harold was able to catch sight of the man again. He couldn't help staring, though when reciting Kaddish Harold always concentrated. It was always for his father that he repeated the ancient words, but today, when everything seemed to be askew, he turned. Jordan's parents glanced up from their prayer books, and looked at him with disapproval.

The fellow seemed to be both comfortable and awkward in a rumpled grey suit, an odd effect. Salt-and-pepper hair fell limply over one side of his forehead. Two deep lines running from his nose to either side of his mouth made him look like a philosophical chipmunk. Harold wondered if these lines were owing to excess of laughter or bitterness, because the face struck him as capable of expressing a full measure of either. It was an intelligent face. With a beard it would have been that of a Jewish sage; nowadays it was the countenance of a professor. He had an air of being lost and inattentive, bored as Jordan. But inside this face was another one, a face Harold felt sure he had known when it was smooth. Like himself, the fellow was fiftyish and apparently alone, huddled in the corner of the last row. The standard-issue yarmulke lay ridiculously bunched up over what was probably a bald spot. A wife would have made him smooth it down properly. As he turned and mechanically resumed the prayer for the dead Harold reached up and touched his own head for reassurance. Then, with one last glance over his shoulder, he noted that the stranger was not saying the *Y'skadal*.

The reception line moved sluggishly and Harold was obligated to go through it between Riva and Joel. No more whispers now as Riva trumpeted "She was really wonderful" into his left ear above the din. He couldn't be sure if she meant the child or Judy. "You staying for the luncheon?"

Harold would have liked to go home. He could deliver his check and a big Mazeltov to Sarah, tell Judy and Fred about Julie with full pathos, then go home to nurse his sick wife and watch a game on TV. But that would not have pleased Julie. No, she would want a thorough rundown on the luncheon, a review with plenty of details. *How was the food? Who sat where?* Besides, he wanted to find the man with the familiar face.

"I'll stay a little while maybe," he said to Riva, looking over her head.

"Huh?"

"Maybe a little while," he yelled.

Joel took his arm. "You hear this one? A Nazi, a Bolshevik, and a Jew all die and go to Heaven on the same day. God's there to greet them and says he's so glad to see them that he'll grant each one a wish."

Harold was still trying to find the face and thoughtlessly delivered Joe's punch line for him. "Yeah, yeah. In that case I'll have a nice glass tea."

"Oh, you heard it," said Joe, hurt.

La Bibliothèque restaurant featured long oak tables, French provincial food, and high bookcases stocked with leather tomes nobody read. Fred and Judy had some sort of relationship with the owner so they had gotten a good rate. "Not inappropriate," Harold had joked when Julie told him about it. "What?" she said. He shrugged. "The people of the Book?"

So La Bibliothèque, which only did dinners, was theirs from noon to four but Judy still had to find her own caterer. You'd have thought it was the Cuban Missile Crisis. Harold was amused when, after two weeks of anguished phone calls, Julie told him that they had settled on Camille Kardon, whom everybody used, and that the bill of fare was to be the customary dolled-up chicken, stuffed mushrooms, etcetera. Today he felt all this fruitless striving after originality in mitzvahs of both genders was misplaced, could only be achieved at exorbitant rates. He was in a conservative mood. Wasn't the essence as well as the consolation of ritual its predictability? What is customary becomes in time traditional and it is tradition that gives weight to what would otherwise be wasteful ostentation. As he looked around La Bibliothèque, though, he wondered ruefully if ostentation and waste had themselves become part of the tradition.

A buffet was set up at one end of the place, a bandstand and dance floor at the other. A long bar stretched in front of the bay window at the side. Three young bartenders were backlit, like archangels. A crass old pro named Blumfeld doubled as wailing clarinetist and relentless emcee. Harold had seen him at least a dozen times before. Even his tuxedo looked brash.

He opened with the *bora*, of course, which Harold skipped in favor of the bar. He watched the joyous double round, young people going fast on the inside, their elders working up an appetite more sedately on the outside, and everybody laughing and looking around as if to say, “Hey! Look at us! We’re doing the *bora*!”

After that Blumfeld began to call the principals up one by one, insisting on rounds of applause for uncles and aunts and cousins whose dignity he scraped away with the well-honed edge of his amplified voice. As for the blooming crowd of thirteen-year-olds, they disdained Blumfeld at first. Harold could see them whispering things like “What a dork!” but Blumfeld was practiced; the man knew his job. He won them over when he summoned Sarah to the bandstand, flicked a switch on a tape recorder for a backbeat, and, grabbing her hand, performed a tasteless rap song about her. His accompanying gyrations were so comical, so utterly self-mocking and inept, that the kids were stupefied, won over by fascinated distaste.

*This babe Sarah
can twist and shout,
studied the Torah
and never zoned out,
talked a fine speech
thanking the ‘rents,
walked a fine walk
to get her presents.
The boys all like
to see her arrive,
hip-hops so fine
and that’s no jive.
A perfect bat mitzvah
and a knockout too,
let’s hear it for Sarah,
one grown-up Jew!*

After that they’d have pinned the tail on any number of donkeys at Blumfeld’s command. As it was, he lined them up for a giggly game of Simon Says while the winded adults headed for their tables or the bar. Harold, having liberated himself from Joel and Riva, resumed his quest for that man in the last row.

He found him in a corner talking to Wiener. Wiener, an obstetri-

cian, was also the perennial head of the local Allied Jewish Appeal so the topic was, of course, Israel. Zionomania was Wiener’s *idée fixe*. Harold stood a little aside to listen.

“You mean you’ve never been? Not once?” Wiener was saying incredulously. “You telling me you never *wanted* to go?”

“Once.”

“Ah ha, and when was that?”

“May of ‘67,” said the man with an expression Harold judged to be about equally bitter and droll, “when I was dodging the draft over here.”

“There! You see?”

“See what?”

Wiener nodded twice. “You obviously wanted to fight for your people, didn’t you?”

“Yes. I’d have done that.”

“So, why didn’t you?”

“Family problems. And then the war was over too quickly.”

“Quick and neat. A miracle.”

“You think it was neat?”

“Well it sure as hell wasn’t a quagmire like Vietnam, was it?”

The man sighed; it sounded like exasperation.

Wiener, raising a finger, was about to start in again when Harold, coming up behind him, interrupted.

“Pardon me,” he said.

The man turned his face toward Harold. Wiener spun around, spilling his drink over his shirt. “Shit,” he said, flicking furiously with his hand as if it were acid and glaring from his chest to Harold, who ignored him and the unspoken reproach. Harold liked Israel more than he did Wiener.

“I’m sure I know you,” he said to the stranger.

The man looked at him hard for a moment with furrowed brow and then smiled. “Used to. I think we went to Hebrew school together. Harold Shamberg, right?”

Then it hit him. “Good Lord! It’s Billy, Billy...”

“Billy Wasserman.”

They shook hands while Wiener, obviously the odd man out, grabbed a napkin from the closest table and angrily excused himself.

“God, how long’s it been?”

Wasserman squinted over Harold’s shoulder. “Children are such tyrants.”

“Pardon me?”

Wasserman nodded toward the dance floor. All Harold saw was a gang of adolescents of various sizes gyrating to Blumfeld's pathetic rendition of a rock tune.

"Never mind me. I hardly slept last night. Motel. There was this couple in the next room."

Harold shrugged. "So. How do we catch up on thirty-five years?"

"We don't. Grown-ups exchange résumés. You want mine? Got a law degree. Married twice, two kids from the first, zero from the second. Two divorces. Worked for the FBI a few years, spent a half-dozen more in private practice. Now I teach criminal law at Columbia."

"You and Fred—?"

"Colleagues and semi-pals. I happened to mention I was going to be in town for a conference on Friday and he asked me to stick around for this. Poor guy. It bothers him to neglect me. Or maybe not. Anyway I haven't been to one of these things in a century or two, so I thought okay, Fred's a sweet guy, I'll go."

"You'll sit with me, we'll catch up."

Wasserman looked at Harold and his face sagged with irony. "Why all this eagerness to *catch up*?"

Harold felt a little unsteady under Wasserman's challenge. Why indeed? "I don't know. It's what you do, isn't it?"

"No doubt a lot of people do it. But why?"

"Look—"

"No, I'm not trying to be insulting. I'm really curious. I mean you run into somebody you haven't seen in a couple of lifetimes and probably won't see again. Why catch up? I mean, is it like shaking hands or what?"

Normally Harold would have taken this Socratic pickiness as rudeness. In fact, had Julie been there the conversation would have ended on the spot. But Julie wasn't there. "All right," he said, "let's talk about something else then. Why don't you tell me some exciting FBI stories?"

"Wait. I haven't heard *your* résumé."

"Still on my first wife, a grown daughter in California. Nice, tidy, boring career with Sandoz. I play tennis and go to schul. The end."

"You go all the time? Not just the high holidays?"

"Tennis is twice a week, synagogue once. Julie's a big shot in Hadasah and everything."

"Then maybe you can tell me."

"What?"

"When did all the S's turn into T's?"

"Huh?"

"In the Hebrew, in the *prayers*. In our day it was S's, now they're T's. Is it some sort of local dialect or what?"

Harold laughed.

"You're right. I'd forgotten. How long's it been since you've were in a synagogue?"

"Well, almost since the last time I saw you. Since '67, actually, when my father blew his brains out."

"Your father—?"

Wasserman smiled. "You wanted to catch up."

This sudden intimacy overwhelmed Harold. "I'm sorry," he said lamely.

"He thought the country was going to dissolve in a race war, that it wouldn't survive Vietnam, that the Arabs were going to sweep all the Jews up like lint and dump them in the Mediterranean. So he blew his brains out. I suppose it made sense to him at the time."

"It was because of Israel that the S's became T's, I think. Hebrew came back to life."

"Like Church Latin and the real thing?"

"Something like that, I suppose. Anyway, the S's were declared to be T's."

Wasserman laughed. "Well, it pisses me off. I mean here I am, this non-practicing Jew, which is always the most conservative kind because he thinks, well, it's a 6000-year-old religion. Then one day he goes to a bat mitzvah and all the S's have turned into T's. Some joke."

Harold smiled. "Remember what old Littauer used to say?"

"Rabbi Littauer? Gosh, I haven't thought about him in ages."

"He used to say when you meet an atheist always be sure to ask him which God he doesn't believe in."

"And so you come every week because you found one you *do* believe in, is that it? Or is it just the Brotherhood and the Hadassah and the wife?"

Harold shrugged. "They're incompatible? Or is *that* the God you don't believe in?"

"Oh, the family god." Wasserman took a step closer to Harold as Blumfeld got the crowd singing *Dayenu*. "You know the prayers, T's and all. You chant the songs. I watched you. I'll bet you know all the verses to *Dayenu* and *An Only Kid*. You feel easy at a Seder. You *recline*. Me, I'm never at home. That's the sort of Jew I am."

"Not like me, right? You think I'm a hypocrite?"

“Heaven forbid I should think *anything* about you. We were sent to Hebrew school together; it was something our parents wanted. Assimilate, but not too much. With you it took, with me it didn’t. That’s all. Wiener over there wanted to prove it took with me too because as a teenager I had some atavistic wish to go fight Egyptians when they didn’t need me and my father did. No, I admire you. I just don’t envy you.”

Harold pulled out a chair. “Come, let’s sit down and finish these drinks and then—”

“Then we’ll get a couple more. Or is your wife waiting for you somewhere?” Wasserman looked around as if he’d recognize Julie.

“Sick at home. Chinese food.”

“Traf fat or MSG?”

Harold nodded with an involuntary smile. “Chicken fat.”

“What they say is true. No Chinese restaurant ever went bust in a Jewish neighborhood.”

Harold tried for a witticism. “You’re a lawyer. You ought to know the dietary laws don’t apply to Asian cuisine.”

They laughed and then sat and drank and Harold felt apart from all these people who made up so much of his life. He was not unhappy to feel apart. Fred was making the rounds. When he got to them he beamed as if the one thing lacking to make his day quite perfect was that the two of them should have known each other in Hebrew school. He clasped Wasserman’s hand and thanked him for coming.

“So why aren’t you mingling? No women to push you around? Say, Harold, I’ll bet you don’t know how important Herr Doktor Professor Wilhelm von Wasserman here is, do you?”

“How important?” asked Harold dutifully.

Fred leaned down and cupped his hand to whisper loud enough for Wasserman to hear. “Scuttlebutt is he’s on deck for the bench, Superior Court no less.”

“Don’t listen to him,” laughed Wasserman, reddening.

“No, no. You just wait. That’s going to be a superior rear end he’s sitting on.” Again Fred was intent on flattering Wasserman. “Why not,” he said straightening up. “We could always use another one of us on the high bench.”

Wasserman didn’t reply and Fred made his way to the next table, his hand already stretched toward the next shoulder.

The two men fell silent for a while, as if they were both embarrassed by Fred. Wasserman rubbed his fingers on the starched table cloth.

In silence they finished their drinks, which were mostly melted ice, and watched the other guests enjoying themselves. Where he would normally have seen tradition and joy Harold saw, as if against his will, forced smiles and stale custom. “Quite a interesting floor show,” Wasserman said with a Mephistophelian air. Women kissed the air next to each other’s cheeks, appraised their respective dresses and hair. The men talked in a kind of shorthand, telegraphing business tips and sports news, recycling their stock of jokes. Blumfeld’s band began to pump out a medley of old swing tunes and the more elderly took the cue to occupy the dance floor while the kids stampeded for the buffet. The restaurant was already beginning to look like a battlefield. It was all as it always was and Harold, looking at it through Wasserman’s eyes, felt almost ashamed, as a half-educated native might while showing his naked tribe to an anthropologist.

“I don’t remember anything Littauer told us, but I sure remember that pilot,” Wasserman said suddenly. Harold realized he must have been thinking of Hebrew school the whole time.

“What pilot?”

“You don’t remember him? Well of course we couldn’t have been more than eight or nine at the most, but he made an impression on me. I often think of him, in fact.”

“What pilot? I honestly don’t remember.”

“A hero of the War for Independence. I suppose he must have been sent out to whip up the generosity of Diaspora, guys like Wiener. Send your money, plant more trees, lobby more Congressmen. Even though we despise you. Even though you’re so deluded that you actually believe the Gentiles will accept you. Assimilation’s expensive and we’re the taxmen. Imagine, a Jewish fighter pilot, not a violinist for once, not a sociologist or a doctor for a change, but a real *ace*. *Our* ace. At least they told us he was an ace, which meant he’d shot down at least five planes. You honestly don’t remember him?”

Harold’s flailing memory finally snagged on something. They had been in a close, overheated classroom. It was probably wintertime because heat and boredom steamed from the radiator. Then the rabbi came in. “Did Littauer tell us he was an ace?”

“Littauer, Shittauer. All I remember about the famous rabbi was his saying about six million times not to marry a shiksa.”

Harold was embarrassed by the “Shittauer,” also the “six million” and especially the “shiksa.”

“How about I get us another,” he said, tapping the side of his empty

glass.

“Good man. Vodka tonic for me. I’ll try to organize some hors d’oeuvres.”

Harold made his way to the bar. People stopped him. They either wanted to ask about or to commiserate over Julie. The women said “Ooh” and kissed his cheek, the men patted him on the shoulder. It was as if he had been widowed overnight. It was the etiquette of mourning, its emptiest forms, only slightly mitigated.

The pilot, the pilot, he thought, trying to remember. The pilot had been important to Wasserman who still thought about him; he had made a lasting impression on him and Harold was drawn to Wasserman, this apostate, this near-judge. Two wives, no doubt a pair of shiksas to spite mom and dad and the rabbi, just the sort of women he himself had always been attracted to and frightened of as if they meant him harm with their knee socks, would poison him with their casseroles, impale him on their sharp noses and humiliate him with their hard blue eyes. Were Jewish girls ever cheerleaders, stewardesses? Plenty of actresses, but how many strippers?

And what of the pilot, the Israeli pilot? Wasserman didn’t call him an Israeli pilot. Why didn’t he call him that—an *Israeli* hero, an *Israeli* ace? Could Wasserman be one of those cracked anti-Zionist types?

Harold secured the drinks and made his way back to Wasserman, dodging nubile adolescents in stockinged feet whose dresses seemed to be unraveling before his eyes. The far end of the table was now occupied by the Katims and the Rosenbergs, an animated foursome. Harold would ordinarily have been delighted to sit with them, to schmooze with Richie and kid with Emily, talk a little tennis with Sam. He’d have enjoyed hearing Anna’s commentary on the affair, a treasure to lug home to Julie. For them he would have drawn out the story of the fatty Chinese noodles, provoking sympathy and chuckles. So it was with some surprise at himself that, before the others caught sight of him, he motioned to Wasserman to join him in a corner, which Wasserman promptly did, balancing a little plate piled high with stuffed mushrooms.

“These aren’t bad,” he said, offering the plate to Harold after relieving him of his vodka.

“Thanks. Okay, so what about the pilot? I remember a little, not much.”

“Oh, the pilot, my ideal Jew.”

“Ideal?”

“Remember? He was a shrimp, hardly taller than we were, pale

as a Yeshiva kid, gray, no, more *white*—you know, bleached out, like an old convict. He looked terrified, permanently scared out of his pants, even of us. And I’ll tell you something else. I don’t think he could speak Hebrew. I heard him mumble a few words to the rabbi. He was so quiet I couldn’t be sure but I’m pretty sure he spoke Yiddish or maybe German. And he was jumpy. I mean this guy had shot down five planes and he couldn’t even look us in the eye. He just stood there in the middle of this circle of awed American kids, his little hands jumping all over the place. You could see that for him it was an act of courage in itself, just standing there. All alone. I saw part of the tattoo on his wrist. He was on display like a monkey from another dimension. No brawny, browned kibbutznik in shorts and a little blue cap dancing around an orange grove, just this absolutely terrified mousy guy, some Galician survivor in a too-big gray suit, shaking all over like one of those rodents at the bottom of the food chain.”

“And we were supposed to admire him?”

“We were supposed to admire *something*, not him, not that brave displaced European scared out of his wits, so completely out of place in our fabulous turquoise and gold temple. Part of nothing, belonging nowhere, bewildered by his life, his heroics, the speed of death in the sky, the weight of death on the ground. I don’t know, Shamberg. That couldn’t be what we were *supposed* to admire, now was it?”