

Chapter 1

She'd Always Wanted to Live in San Francisco

SELMA COHEN made the decision on the spot.

She hadn't even planned to visit. "What's this place?" she asked her son as they walked down Post Street, their bellies full of sashimi, their minds trying to forget the mediocre documentary they'd seen at the film festival.

"An old folks' home," Robert said. "Jewish."

Two hours later Selma had signed the paperwork, and two weeks after that, she had moved in.

Her other children demanded explanations.

Selma was wildly inconsistent in what she told them.

She'd always wanted to live in San Francisco.

There was lots of natural light.

She was tired of the East Coast.

The people seemed friendly.

It was three blocks from the best Japanese food she'd ever had.

She enjoyed saying these things, enjoyed surprising her kids, enjoyed changing her explanation.

But when she stopped to think about it, there really was no good reason. It was a lark. It was a whim. And when some part of herself wanted a better answer, she pushed the question away and remembered Robert's surprise when she asked to see the room, and then his happy grin when he realized she was serious.

Chapter 2

Overheard

SELMA COHEN was trying to make sense of what she had heard.

“If he upsets you,” the woman in the plum-colored blouse had said, “stay away from him. Steer clear.” Her tone was maternal, her accent European. The woman receiving the advice looked down and said something Selma couldn’t hear. “But we can’t change them,” the adviser said. “This is what they enjoy. They enjoy taunting each other.” Again the other woman said something inaudible. “Well then,” her friend said, exhaling, “you can always turn down your hearing aids.”

At that point Selma had walked away. She wanted to stay and hear more, but was concerned they might notice her eavesdropping. As a new resident, she didn’t want to make the wrong impression.

OUTSIDE, walking through the wisps of morning fog, Selma picked up the shards of the conversation and turned them over. Two people taunting each other. Selma pictured a husband and wife, voices rising, fingers pointing, performing their ancient marital dispute in front of a captive audience of fellow residents.

Selma found the store she was looking for and asked to see the rice cookers. There was a whole wall of them, and the clerk started telling her about them, their features and capacities, but Selma just pointed to one that looked about the right size and paid for it.

There was a little food stand next door and though she wasn’t really hungry, Selma ordered some pork dumplings and a cup of tea. She pictured the husband as short and plump and bald except for a little bit of hair on the sides. The wife had a teased sandy-colored bouffant and nodded as her husband spewed. When he finally paused, she turned to another resident, shook her head, and muttered something. The husband demanded to know what she just said. “Nothing,” the wife said.

A strange eagerness filled Selma. She wanted to observe the actual feuding couple, to see how they compared with the one she imagined. She wanted to know all about the woman in the plum blouse, who seemed so poised and self-assured. Did other residents also seek her out for advice? She wanted to know about the quiet woman, too, and what else upset her. The dumplings were greasy and salty and delicious – exactly the kind of food she’d been told to avoid. She thought about her hearing, which was still excellent – but even if it wasn’t, and she needed hearing aids, she would never turn the volume down. She wanted to hear it all.

Chapter 3

Dice

BEN ROSENAU did not like Purim.

He also did not like many other holidays. Easter and Halloween struck him as overdone orgies of candy and cuteness orchestrated to enrich the shareholders of Nestle and Hershey. July Fourth had become an empty spectacle of mindless patriotism, and Veterans Day too offended him with its worship of those – he was one – who had served their country.

But Purim was a holiday Ben specially disliked, and for a different reason entirely. He shared his aversion to Purim with no one, and subtly changed the topic whenever the holiday was mentioned. The problem was, there were various Purim-related activities he was expected to take part in. The other residents knew Ben as someone who attended everything, and so his absence at the hamantashen making workshop, the Purim talk by the retired rabbi, and the megillah reading would all raise eyebrows. And this year they had added another Purim activity: an intergenerational something-or-other, in which they were to decorate or fabricate or adorn felt or papier-mache or some other craft substance, together with children from a nearby Jewish preschool. Ben made a mental note to be out of the building for that event.

SELMA COHEN in particular would wonder why Ben was missing. Since Selma's arrival five weeks ago she and Ben had frequently found themselves in each other's company. Ben liked Selma. He liked her from that first lunch. Bernie Schein had been shooting his mouth off about Arizona and the immigration law, and the half dozen others at the table, aware of Bernie's diet of talk radio, had laughed it off as another of his second-hand rants. Adele had simply turned down her hearing aids. But Selma took Bernie on, asking him which of his ancestors had come over on the Mayflower and were their immigration papers in order when they did.

Sitting across the table, Ben saw in Selma's clear grey eyes a spirit that had met life head on and had not lost.

For Ben, going to the lectures and the yoga and the watercolor classes had been a discipline and an act of will. It was also a calculation: a way to negotiate old age with dignity. Ben soon realized that this was not the case with Selma. There was nothing she had to overcome to arrive prompt and cheerful and ready to try her hand at calligraphy or chrysanthemum arranging or sand painting. She was like a bright-eyed kindergartener who couldn't wait for school to start each morning.

IPHONES, SMART PHONES, tablets, Kindles, Ipads, Ipods, laptops, digital cameras: theirs was the first generation of old people that had to confront this onslaught of gadgetry. The residents

fell into roughly two camps. Some, like Ben, couldn't be bothered. He owned no computer, had never used the Internet. He wouldn't even let his daughter buy him a cellphone. "Dad, what if you're walking down the street, and you fall?"

"Then I fall. Old people have been falling down for thousands of years. Without cellphones."

But there was a contingent of technophiles. Their leader was Mel Kaplowitz, who was always upgrading and encouraging others to upgrade or, if they didn't yet own, to "buy already; think of all the money you've saved by waiting this long to buy." Mel had once managed a camera store, and was a good explainer, if a bit overzealous. "For ten bucks a month, I can set you up with a data plan on your phone. Don't you want to be able to check your stocks without having to go all the way up to your room?"

Selma not only owned a computer, she also had an Iphone. This Ben learned one afternoon when they were sitting at a little table in the lobby recovering from a class called Gentle Yoga for Spinal Health. It hadn't been that gentle. Selma had gotten two bottles of mineral water from the guy at the desk. Residents could have unlimited mineral water, it was one of the perks of living there. They were talking about spines, more specifically about the ailments of their less fortunate friends: slipped discs, stenosis, curvature of the spine. "We're living too long," Ben said, smiling. "No one should live past eighty." This was something Ben liked to say – to deflect pity and to stifle morbid conversation. His daughter, Susan, every time she heard him say it, would laugh – nervously Ben thought – and reply, "Well, Dad, I'm glad you're still around." It had become a conversational set piece between them.

"We're living too long. No one should live past eighty." Ben would also say these words to each new resident, both as an announcement of his irreverence, and his way of saying, Don't bore me with a litany of your ailments. I don't want to hear them.

Selma, upon hearing the words, smiled, tilted her head, and looking straight at Ben, said, "Well, I'm seventy-nine. I turn eighty tomorrow."

This caught Ben off guard. His cheeks reddened, his ears got hot, and he began to stammer something. But before the words had formed, he saw Selma reach into her sweatpants and pull out her buzzing Iphone. She looked at the phone but to Ben's puzzlement didn't answer it.

"A bill collector?" he asked. He had heard of caller ID.

"No," Selma laughed, "a text message."

In fact it was a photo, and Selma tilted the phone so Ben could see. A teenage boy in a blue tuxedo had his arm around a girl in a low-cut sleeveless lavender dress. The boy was a light-skinned African American, about Obama's color, Ben thought. The girl looked white.

"My grandson Joshua in Connecticut," Selma said. "And his girlfriend." Selma went on to show Ben pictures of her other grandchildren; nine in all, of varying hues and ethnic mixes, Asian, black, Latino – Selma called them "my own rainbow coalition." Ben admired her comfort with it all, even as he braced himself for her inevitable question. He would answer it as he always did. And he would smile and look away and wait for her to change

the subject. He did not even know how many there were by now, and as he looked at one after another of Selma's brood beaming out at him from that tiny screen, he felt again that awful faint fantasy stirring in him – that one day, he would get a call or a visit; one of them would somehow find him, seek him out, and ask him to tell his side of the story. *Then* he would be glad to have lived so long. Then, having been heard, he would be ready to die. Then –

Then he saw a hand waving a gadget in Selma's face.

"*You* like Scrabble, Selma, don't you? I can set you up with an app and you can play Scrabble on your Iphone. You can even play with your grandkid who won that spelling bee. Tell me her name again, Selma, I'm not as good with names as I used to be. But I do remember she's in Boston, am I right, am I right, Boston?"

Ben looked up. Mel Kaplowitz, today wearing a red pinstripe shirt and matching bow tie, Mel Kaplowitz, with his stupid little goatee, Mel Kaplowitz, his own Iphone bursting with not just photos but *videos* of his seven grandchildren, five of them local, grandchildren whom he emailed, grandchildren on whom he lavished Ipods and laptops, grandchildren whose baseball games and piano recitals he attended and videotaped and inflicted on the world. Grandchildren who visited him and hugged him.

Albert Einstein was wrong. God does play dice with the universe. The game begins when you have sex with your wife. How many sperm desperately spraying out of you like birdshot? They shouldn't call it sex. They should call it roulette. "Let's make love." "Not tonight, Joan, I'm not feeling lucky. I'm feeling like tonight we might conceive a son who will become a fanatic."

BEN SLIPPED AWAY while Mel Kaplowitz was still working on Selma. He found Eddie at the desk and gave him five bucks to get his car out of the garage. Driving across town, Ben had the following series of thoughts: "I am not a bitter man. It is not my nature to begrudge anyone their happiness. I can do better. I *will* do better." He turned on NPR. There were new numbers from Japan. Not hundreds but thousands dead and thousands more missing. Entire towns wiped out. "I don't have any problems," Ben said out loud. "No problems at all."

The air was clean and cold at Baker Beach, the sky cloudless, and the sand squeaked under his sneakers. The wind chilled his ears but was not unbearable. It would pick up in an hour or two toward sunset. "I can still walk at the beach," Ben thought. "Still drive here, still breathe this air. Still remember. Ninety-one, and I can still remember."

He was thirteen when they started building the Golden Gate Bridge. He and his brother Lou would walk from Sunset District, walk the edge of the city: Playland, the Cliff House, the Sutro Baths, the Presidio, Baker Beach. Kids thought nothing of walking for hours in those days, and their parents let them. Parents back then did not *parent*; the verb was still far off in the future. And so Ben and Louie wandered and rambled and explored, walking all the way to Chinatown, to the Mission District, one day they got as far as Daly City. Was it better to have been a kid back then? It was a harsher, less protected childhood.

There were fights, and neighborhoods you learned to avoid, and when the longshoremen started agitating, Ben's father had told him to stay away from the docks. But you felt in charge of your destiny. You felt the city was yours.

Ben tried to remember what the beach had looked like before the bridge. A distant memory surfaced – a picnic, sandwiches, checkered blankets and he and Lou collecting bottlecaps – but that could have been Ocean Beach as easily as Baker Beach. How old had he been? Four or five, and Lou might have been six or seven. Ben could retrieve little else about that day except the delight of being with his brother and the ecstasy of uncovering bottlecaps buried in the sand.

He walked on, slowly, not taking his knees or hips for granted. He enjoyed the emptiness of the beach and the moist air on his face. Ben had the thought that this might be his last walk at Baker Beach. "I'll never stop loving life," he said aloud, and he listened more closely to the water lapping at the sand and tried to memorize the way the midwinter sun struck the headlands on the other side of the strait, the shadows in the hills, and the trio of pelicans swooping above the water.

Out of the corner of his eye Ben saw a freighter, coming in from the Pacific, heading toward the bridge, carrying what? Toasters? Televisions? Mel Kaplowitz's next computer?

Twenty steps more and Ben stopped, turned toward the water, and breathed deeply. "Joan," he said aloud. "Joan." He was aware of the wind again, and a half dozen sandpipers scurrying on the beach. "Joan." As he spoke his wife's name, he remembered the boat ride under the bridge fourteen years ago, he had been fine but the rabbi had gotten sick and couldn't finish the kaddish. Well. Better to visit her here than Colma, some green-rolling-hill suburban fantasy of eternity. And better, he thought, gazing at the water, better cancer than a tsunami.

"Joan, I talked to Susan today." Even now Ben felt compelled to begin with good news. "She sounded happy. Showed a couple houses this week. Thinks the market may be picking up. And she taught her first yoga class yesterday," Ben said brightly. "At the place she always goes. Her teacher is away and they asked Susan to fill in. It went well. She said it went well. *Very well.*" And then Ben was sobbing, and he couldn't stop, couldn't push it away, any of it, that terrible sequence replaying itself against his will, Joan's hand on his arm, trying to restrain him as he shouted, "It's a question, Joan, I'm asking my son a question, that's all I'm doing, is asking a simple question." And Joan's grip tightening on his arm and her voice pleading: "You're yelling, Ben, you're asking but you're also yelling."

SOBBING IS HARD WORK when you're 91 years old, particularly when you're standing on sand, and no lecture or workshop had prepared Ben for this. He lost his balance and though he was able to break his fall with his hands, he landed face down. Pain shot through his wrists and forearms, his spine seized up; his legs felt like dead weight, and when he touched his forehead, he felt coarse sand and a little blood. The crisis if anything sharpened Ben's mind. He needed to get up, and began inventorying the possibilities, limb by limb and muscle by muscle. He found that by rolling gingerly onto an elbow he could at least lift his head some

and begin calling for help. "I can't get up!" he shouted. "I'm an old man and I can't get up! Please! Someone!"

The woman who heard him was a jogger and quite strong. She was able, from behind, to help ease Ben up to a sitting position. As she lifted him, Ben asked if she had a cell phone, but when she came face to face with him he realized the foolishness of his question. The woman was naked.

"You were running on the beach," Ben said to her. "You were running, and you heard me."

"I heard you."

She was perhaps fifty, his daughter's age, and made no effort to cover herself. She was short, muscular, grey frizzy hair held back with a white sweatband, an intense face streaked with perspiration, and across her breasts, a tattoo. Ben wanted to get up. "Sit," she said. "Catch your breath. How long ago did you fall?"

"Not long." Ben couldn't help looking at her tattoo. "That's Hebrew on your chest," he said. "You're Jewish."

She helped him up. It was a dance of awkward kindness, limbs and torsos and grimaces and grunts, and for Ben, averted eyes. Once he nearly fell, and wound up clutching her thigh. Then slowly he righted himself and at last they began walking in the direction of the parking lot, her arm around his waist, steadying him. "All right, you've done enough now," Ben said. "Thank you." But she stuck with him. Ben, with some pain, took off his jacket and draped it over her. It was long enough to let him look at her again. "My Hebrew isn't very good," Ben said. "Your tattoo: tell me what it says."

"*Eem ain ani li mi li*. If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I?"

DRIVING WAS DIFFICULT but Ben had been through worse. At a stop light he caught a glimpse of himself in the rear-view mirror. They would ask about the scrape on his forehead. Could he get away with telling them it was a rash? At least nothing was broken, no arm, no leg, no hip. He had fallen on sand, not concrete, thank god. And an angel had heard his call, an angel with a tattoo.

THERE WAS A PARTICULAR SMELL to that old stationwagon, more intense on hot days, and Joan had her window open and was singing, and in the backseat Susan was asleep and Danny was looking out the window, and then at the top of the hill everyone got out of the car and they were gazing out at an alpine landscape with little farmhouses here and there, and then President Obama saluted and walked up to the kids and they bowed their heads slightly so he could hang medals on each of them, and Ben looked at the medals and they were blank, and he wanted to ask Obama something but he was already gone; and they were all back in the car, but now it felt more like Yosemite, and then someone was knocking on the side of the car and Ben heard a man's voice, "Ben, are you in there? Are you okay?" and then a quieter, woman's voice: "I don't think he's in there." Ben heard himself call back, "I'm fine,

I'm fine, I'll be out in a minute." And as he climbed out of the tunnel of sleep, he remembered a final detail – the medal Obama had put around his own neck, inscribed with the words "The Greatest Generation," and the word "Greatest" had an asterisk after it, but no footnote, no explanation.

Ben was used to morning stiffness but this was different. Arms, legs, elbows, knees, neck and ribs registered not just soreness but pain, mostly 3's and 4's on a scale of 1 to 10, thought Ben, imagining the interrogation of a medical professional. The worst was his collarbone – that was a 6 – and Ben gingerly felt around it. There was no obvious break. He opened the door a crack, and told Selma and Mel he'd overslept and would meet them downstairs. Selma told him she'd saved him some food from lunch.

Showering, Ben tried to put his thoughts in order, but was thwarted by the insistent messages from nerves and organs. "My body is a house of brittle bones," he said aloud. "What doesn't kill me, makes me groan." Where had he heard that little ditty? He couldn't remember. For the scrape on his forehead Ben decided on a large bandaid and an alibi of having bumped his head on the edge of the medicine cabinet, something he had actually done a few months before.

BEN WAS DRESSED and halfway down the hall when he stopped, returned to his room, made a phone call, and then left his room a second time. Downstairs he endured questions about his forehead – should he have it looked at? – and his medications – did they need adjusting? Mel Kaplowitz shook his head. "A cellphone, Ben, every senior needs a cellphone. Don't get it for yourself. Get it for *our* sake." He paused and in a quieter voice said: "We were all worried about you, Ben." And looking at Mel's face, Ben saw both genuine caring and the naked fear of death.

Ben sat down at a table where Selma and three others were playing Scrabble, and took a bite of the egg salad sandwich she had made for him. "We missed you at the talk this morning," Leah said. "You would have liked it, Ben. *Brimming* with ideas." It had been a new rabbi, and he got high marks, even from the retired lawyer, Al Mink. "Talked slow for us old fogeys but he didn't dumb it down. Very impressive."

"A good looking man," was Carole's assessment. "Thick black hair. Well dressed. What my granddaughter would call *hot*."

Selma glanced up from the game. "How's the sandwich, Ben?" she asked, not so much because she wanted to know but because she sensed Ben had drifted.

"Great, Selma, wonderful, perfect, thank you." And understanding that Selma was trying to bring him back to the group, Ben leaned toward her and asked her what the rabbi had talked about. The four of them recapitulated the lecture.

In the Purim story, Haman – the evil advisor to the king – loves not just *having* power but wielding it in a way that paralyzes the population. How does Haman decide on what day he will kill off the Jews? By a throw of the dice – that's what the Hebrew word Purim means: "dice." This is the hallmark of every tyrant – the capricious exercise of violent state power against a cowed population. So when you think Haman, think Stalin, think

Joseph McCarthy, think Idi Amin. And this year is probably the most extraordinary Purim in our lives: because *this* year, in *this* season of Purim, people are rising up against Haman. In Egypt, in Tunisia, in Libya, in Syria. All over the Arab world, people are rising up – against Mubarak, against Qaddafi, against Assad, challenging not just a single Haman, but *all the Hamans at once!*; challenging the very *phenomenon* of Haman; challenging *Hamanism*. So, this spring, what we're actually witnessing is the entire Arab world in the streets celebrating the Jewish holiday of Purim!

There was a crescendo of overlapping voices as they pieced the rabbi's thesis back together, hands and heads in motion as they built to the climax. But Ben had stopped listening. He was back in Israel, seventeen years ago, asking his son a question, and feeling his wife's hand on his arm as she tried to restrain him.

"SIR, ARE YOU Mr. Rosenau?"

Startled, Ben looked up and saw an Asian man in a uniform holding a package. He accepted it blankly and only after the man had left did Ben remember. Ben deflected their inquiries about the package, excused himself and a few minutes later returned, tapped Selma on the shoulder from behind, and with a flourish presented her with a vase full of red roses. "Happy birthday, Selma," Ben said triumphantly. "Happy eightieth!"

"It's not my birthday, Ben!" Selma laughed. "My birthday's in July!" She paused. Selma saw a puzzled look run across Ben's face, her own mouth fell open an instant, and then she remembered. "Oh, I was kidding you yesterday, Ben! I'm already eighty-four! But oh, these are just beautiful! Thank you, Ben!" Selma got to her feet, took both of Ben's hands and kissed him on the cheek. She held on to his hands as she explained to the others what had happened, turning it into an anecdote, embellishing it with details that were flattering to Ben if not strictly true. "And now roses," Selma concluded. "This man is a prince!" During this monologue Selma had kept some of her attention on Ben's hands, which were cold; she had also stolen glances at his eyes, which looked on the brink of tears. "And now," Selma told the others, "I need a moment alone with my prince."

THE DINING ROOM was empty except for two pink-uniformed women setting up tables for supper. Selma led Ben to a booth in the corner, by a window, and set down the two bottles of mineral water she had picked up. "Ben," she said, leaning across the table to him. "I have never been able to control my mouth." Even when she spoke softly, there was an intensity to her words. "Please forgive me, Ben. Embarrassing you is the last thing I would ever want to do. You are too good to embarrass." She took Ben's hand again.

Ben looked from Selma's face to the table and saw the embrace of their two hands, his darker than hers but both hands the hands of old people, with etched skin and age spots and veins that looked like a network of underground rivers rising to the surface. He thought of Joan, and the long final days of her illness when her thin hands clung to his. The urge to cry had subsided but his eyes were still full and now, looking again at Selma's face, a few tears rolled down.

"I haven't seen my son in seventeen years," he said. "He's in Israel. He broke off contact." Ben looked into Selma's eyes. They picked up the fading afternoon light which made the grey luminous and made them seem like the eyes of a younger person. "He was a good kid," Ben said. "Danny was a good kid."

He told her of his son's youth, baseball and basketball and trumpet lessons and JCC summer camp and a newspaper route, a good student, then college at UC Santa Barbara, and the summer after his sophomore year, the trip to Israel. It was supposed to be three weeks, but Danny stayed. In letters and on the phone he was vague about his plans and whereabouts; when pressed he said, "Just let me live my life."

Then Danny was at a yeshiva over there. He seemed happy if distant; Joan and Ben worried but wanted to be supportive as he explored his heritage. Two years later came the news that he was helping to found an observant community, which Joan imagined would be something like a kibbutz. Ben feared it was an ultra-orthodox settlement on the West Bank. Ben was right. There were visits, strained, and discussions, impossible. Danny would talk about "the dying embers of American Judaism," about "the obligation of righteous Jews to return to the land of their forefathers." Susan visited, at their urging of her parents – a last-ditch effort to reach him, which Danny saw right through and which marked the end of the siblings' relationship. There was a wedding, which Joan and Ben learned of after the fact. And there was the final visit.

Danny and Inbal had six kids by then, and lived in a small prefabricated home, one of a few dozen in the settlement, which was surrounded on three sides by Arab villages. "Why would anyone leave San Francisco for *this*?" Ben couldn't help saying to Joan, who shushed him and said, "Let's not judge, Ben. Judging doesn't help." And the house smelled.

The grandchildren spoke a little English, but Danny carefully watched over all Ben and Joan's interactions with them, as if afraid to let the strangers pollute his children. He refused to let them accept presents from their grandparents, refused to let Joan read aloud to them. About all this Ben held his tongue, stealing secret glances at Joan.

At night, lying next to Joan in a room two of the kids had vacated for them, Ben whispered one idea after another. He could pull Inbal aside and tell her how wonderful Joan was with children. Or they could pass a note to Inbal, reasoning with her, asking her to imagine a day in the future when she herself had grandchildren. Maybe there was someone in the community they could enlist as an intermediary – an older woman perhaps. Or that rabbi they'd talked to in San Francisco – if they could get to a phone where they wouldn't be overheard, they could call him for advice, maybe he would know some Jewish way to pierce Danny's armor.

Joan reached for Ben's hand and unclenched it.

"Does she know I dropped bombs on the Nazis?" Ben's whisper had the force of a shout. "Has Danny even told her that?"

Joan put her arms around her husband. Arafat and Rabin had shaken hands, she reminded him. Soon there would be a Palestinian state. The settlement would be

dismantled and Danny would have to move the family – if not to America, at least to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. Things would get better.

“Yitzhak Rabin is a hero,” Ben told Joan. “If that happens, then he’ll be a saint.”

On Ben and Joan’s last night, Purim was celebrated at one of the settlement’s communal buildings, and it promised at least to give some relief from the suffocation they’d felt in Danny’s home. There was music and decorations and hamantashen, and one of Danny’s friends, also an American, reached out to Ben and made friendly conversation. Then came the parade of the children, all in costume, all dressed as characters in the Purim story. Half a dozen each of Esther and Vashti and the King and Mordechai. And then came the Hamans, including his five-year-old grandson Avram, all wearing identical masks. Ben doubted his eyes. He asked Danny’s friend if he was seeing what he thought he was seeing, and the friend confirmed that yes, the photograph on the mask of Haman was that of Yitzhak Rabin, who, Danny told him later that night, “wants to destroy the Jews, just like Haman.”

BEN LOOKED AT SELMA. He didn’t know if he could go any further. He was astonished he had told as much as he had. No one had ever listened to him like that, with such stillness, with such steady eyes – eyes which asked nothing of him and accepted everything from him. Joan would look away whenever the conversation even approached Israel or religion or grandchildren. Ben had learned to read Joan’s face and steer clear of those danger zones, both in the presence of others and when they were alone. It was the only way forward, and seemed a small price to pay for what he had done. After Joan’s death Ben continued to observe the taboo – to avoid, to sidestep, to divert. Why, he now wondered, had he done that all these years? Out of loyalty to Joan? Out of respect for what she had suffered? Or was it simply a habit he had failed to break?

The last trace of sun was gone, leaving the dining room shadowless and drained of color. In this light Selma’s eyes seemed less young. Ben wondered if anything had happened in her long life that Selma would not talk about, any minefields she had trained herself to avoid. Perhaps not. Perhaps she had squarely faced all that life had dished out. If he had been married to Selma instead of Joan, and things had gone as they had with Danny, Selma would have insisted on talking about it, working it through, and the marriage might have recovered. Even thinking this thought seemed disloyal to Joan’s memory, and Ben rebuked himself for it. There was nothing to blame Joan for. It was he who had brought this on them, and he had no business telling the story to a near-stranger. Ben pushed down on the floor with sore legs, preparing to stand. But the damn story wanted out of his body, like that kidney stone five years ago.

AMONG OBSERVANT JEWS it’s customary to get roaring drunk on Purim – in fact, it’s a mitzvah, a commandment. Ben had had a paper cup of the sweet red wine. He did not know how much Danny had had to drink. That may or may not have been a factor. Ben had gotten out of bed in the middle of the night, gone to the toilet, and then, seeing a light on in the living

room, went in and found his son sitting on the couch. That reminded Ben of Danny's teenage years, the times they had sat up together at night, watching television – Carson, Letterman – laughing, chatting during the commercials. Ben sat down at the far end of the couch. He did not want confrontation. He did not say anything. All he wanted was a few minutes together.

The silence did not last. Danny wanted to know why his father couldn't respect his choices. Ben said it was late. Danny repeated the question. Ben got up and headed for bed. His son stood and blocked his way. "I asked you a question." Danny's tone was not outwardly belligerent. It was quiet – a quiet yet abrasive voice of interrogation that he must have picked up at the yeshiva. "How can you not answer my question?"

"Choices," Ben muttered. He was shaking. Words were forming in his throat. He shouldn't say them. He said them. "Your choices. Is that why we won the war? So you could make these choices? So you could put that mask on your son's face?"

He was yelling now – the words coming not out of his throat but all the way up from his guts, bellowing out and shaking the tinny walls of the flimsy house. "Is that why my friends died? So you could become a fascist?"

Danny pointed a finger in his father's face. "And why did the six million die? So that people like you could raise your children to violate every commandment and doom the Jewish people to extinction?" Danny's voice was as loud as his father's. "The war didn't end in 1945. The war never ends. You just got tired and stopped fighting."

Inbal heard the ruckus and came in, and then Joan, and as the fight raged on, one child after another, crying, clinging to their mother and to each other, until a full circle of witnesses surrounded Danny and Ben.

Danny asked his father if he had actually done the numbers, and did he have any idea, if assimilation continued at current rates, how many Jews would be left in a hundred years?

Ben asked his son why he had to move halfway across the world to find an enemy to pick a fight with, and build houses on their land, and did *he* have any idea what it's like to look out the window of the plane you're flying and see an enemy – a real enemy – gunning at you?

Joan put her hand on Ben's arm and tried to pull him back. Ben told her he was simply asking his son a question. And when Joan squeezed more tightly on his arm, Ben flung her hand aside.

"She fell down, Selma. Joan fell. I didn't mean for that to happen. It was a reflex, Selma. And my son, my son – you know what my son did, Selma? He looked down at his mother on the floor, and then at me, and he said: 'What kind of man are you to treat my mother like that?'"

"And I said, 'How dare you! No son of mine talks that way to me.'"

"And he said, 'Then I'm not your son.'"

"And I should have shut my mouth, Selma. But I didn't. You know what I said? I said, 'Okay, you're not my son.'"

“And the children are hearing all this, and Joan is looking up at them – she’s still on the floor, too stunned to get up, and I know what’s going through her head: *This is how our grandchildren will remember us. This is who we are to them now. They’ll never see us again, and this is how they’ll remember us for the rest of their lives.*”

TELLING THE STORY to Selma, seventeen years later, in the darkening booth, weeping, Ben felt it all again: the animal rage at his son, the horror at who his son had become, the curdling shame at what he, Ben, had in that moment let himself become, the infinite grief at what his outburst had cost Joan – her grandchildren – and the impotence, the utter impotence, to change any of it. He did not want to feel these things. None of them. Indeed, he had constructed his days so as to avoid feeling these things, to accept his fate without complaint, to count his blessings, and, insofar as he was able, to be decent to the people around him. It seemed a miracle to Ben that one of those people, the woman sitting across from him, could have listened to him without walking away in disgust. He looked again at her eyes. She hadn’t spoken once during his long story. Now at last she broke her silence, and, taking Ben’s hand, did something else that surprised him. She thanked him for telling her the story.