

Marshall Jon Fisher

Patriarch

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Nat closed the old wooden door on the carnival of voices in the hall. Through the wood the separate sounds of his classmates became one muddled rumble accentuated by staccato leaps of excitement and joy. He leaned against the door and surveyed the room where he had completed his first semester of college. It was like any other, one twin bed and one wooden desk against either side, art prints and posters from the Coop at Harvard Square on the walls. How long he had anticipated college, and now a semester's memories hung in the cell-like room. Outside the window snow fell, swirling in the dark wind as if it had always been there.

He moved to his desk and sat down. From a drawer he took a stack of paper covered with his handwriting, smoothed the pile and laid it on the top of the desk. He closed the drawer. Selected his Waterman fountain pen from another drawer (a graduation gift he'd hardly used all year) and twirled it between his fingers, snapping the burgundy cap on and off as he read the top line:

Dear Isabelle,

He put down the pen and leaned forward on his elbows, fingers forming a sheath around his nose. He sat still as though asleep, but his eyes were wide open. He stared at the notes tacked to

the wall above the desk, but his eyes were open merely for the fact of not being closed. He saw nothing.

Bumps and shouts brought his eyes into focus. Something ricocheted off the doors and walls along the hall. Screams of unchecked adrenalin. Final exams were over, and a game of tackle football had erupted in the warm, carpeted dormitory hall.

Voices he recognized rose and fell, drifting through the closed door as though across years, faded and spotty.

"Go for it, Weavsey!"

"He scores! He scores!"

"Hey, let's take it outside."

"It's snowing, you maniac."

"Snow football!"

"Somebody get the Natster!"

Nat placed his fingers against his temples and lightly pressed. The paper in front of him grew, its edges melted and sharpened again.

"Hey, time out schmuck, I'm getting the Gnat!"

The sound of his name blended with the other sounds, was just another shout echoing through the walls. He twirled the pen between three fingers, tightened and released the muscles on his forehead, and began to read.

The door shot open like a window in a storm, bedlam blowing into the calm room. Nat's roommate of four months, Pete Weaver, stood in the doorway silhouetted in the bright hall light like an angel or some ominous messenger in a film.

"Gnat-man!"

"Peter." Nat twisted his body toward the other boy, leaning his left elbow on the back of the chair. The first week of school he'd thought he'd been sentenced to share a ten-by-twenty-foot room with a mindless ass. Weaver had done nothing the entire orientation week but play drinking games, throw up, and chase after women. Nat had gone to the university-sanctioned parties, worn a name tag, planned his curriculum. Before long, though, they'd found a common ground despite their contrasting personalities and had forged a comfortable friendship. Weaver was actually quite bright despite a penchant for pleasure and immediate gratification, and Nat had even come to enjoy getting drunk once in a while. They'd learned to smoke pot together, and shared tales of infatuation and imagined conquest.

"Nat King Pole!"

"Yes, Peter. I'm here."

"Let's go, buddy. We're heading for the Field. Last night of the semester. Snow football. Tackle!"

"Maybe a little later, Pete."

"What? What the hell can you be working on now, dude? Finals are over. We're free, man!"

"It's a letter, that's all. I just want to get it finished."

"A letter?" Weaver grinned. "It's got to be to a woman. You cheating on Jeannie, you dog?" He came towards the desk, straining his eyes to read the sheet of paper, which Nat started to hide before Weaver reached the desk and pulled it from under his elbow. "Isabelle? You're writing a letter to your sister? You're going to see her soon enough, aren't you?"

"Not for over a week, since I'm going to Jeannie's, and there's just something I need to tell her. It's no big deal, really."

"So pick up the phone. The gridiron awaits."

"I'll be out in a little while. You guys get started."

"Jesus, Nat. You'd think you'd done enough writing in the last week."

"Well, you know me, Weavse. Boring Nat."

"Nah, you just want to be, for some reason. If you knew what was good for you, you'd know you were born to be a quarterback, not an intellectual."

"Oh, I see. And what were you born to be, Weavse?"

"I'm the intellectual in this cell. Don't you know that by now?"

"Oh, yeah. I keep forgetting."

"Sure. That's why chicks flock to me, you know. And you probably thought it was my oversized genitalia."

"I admit, I assumed..."

"We'll see you on the Field of Honor. Even if we have to come up here and drag you out."

"Okay, Weavse." And Weaver was gone, the door slammed behind him. Footsteps thundered down the hall, filtered out the door at the far end—

"Let's go for it!"

"No guts no glory!"

"Wahhhooo!"

—and cut off like a shot as the heavy door to the stairs swung shut. From a carnival Nat's room became a cavern. The entire dorm was suddenly his alone. He looked out the window at the snow still falling and heard the faded remnant of a shout ripple up from the field adjoining the building.

Again he turned his attention to the pages in front of him, regarding them as though he had no idea what might be revealed there. Turning the pages over, he scanned his own words but could barely remember having written them. They had fallen from his head to the paper as fast as he could write them, and the paper was now saturated with nearly illegible swoops and hooks of ink. Continuing to twirl the pen in miniature acrobatics as he had throughout his conversation with Weaver, he tensed his face slightly into what might have been a frown and began to read.

Dear Isabelle,

You're probably wondering already why I'm bothering to write you when we'll be together in a few days. Actually, it will be more like a week and a half. That girl I told you about, Jeannie, has invited me to come to her house. It's a farm up in New Hampshire, and ought to be beautiful in the snow. I figured Hartford could wait another week; our break is a nice long one. Anyway, I can tell you all about Jeannie (probably what you're more eager to hear) when I see you. What I'm going to say in this letter I think I have to write.

It's about the family, our family, and so of course about you and me too. And maybe it's not even as big a deal as I'm making it out to be--maybe you'll wonder why I didn't just wait and tell you when I got home. But something has happened in the last month or so that's shaken me up a bit, and it concerns you too, and so I feel I have to tell you about it.

You remember when Dad came up to see me a couple weeks ago?

I don't know what he told you, probably that I was having some sort of problem that I needed to talk to him in person about. That was sort of true, but not exactly. I mean, I'd just been home for Thanksgiving the week before--I could've talked with him then, right? No, this was something much more, and if it was a problem (though that word is far too vague and impotent) then it was his as much as mine.

But I'm skipping way ahead. This is going to take a bit of introduction, I'm afraid. You're always saying I'm too quiet, Izzy, but now you're going to have to suffer a rare outburst of verbiage, probably enough to make you long for my great silences.

We were brought up, you and I, on a steady diet of Rationalism, were we not? (You can see I'm starting at the beginning, little sister, but try to stay with me and not run off to your Prince records, or whatever it is silly high school girls are listening to these days.) Reared by our father, the science teacher, we learned that all knowledge worth knowing can be gained through rational thought, or even better, through experimentation. A phenomenologist to the core, old Dad, he instilled in us a sense of devout agnosticism, if not outright atheism. Our Gods were Newton and Einstein, Bohr and Curie, those giants who followed their intellects and their reason above all dogma. Darwin's struggle against the Creationist

hegemony was our folklore, the famous speech by Huxley just one story in the bible of our childhood. Remember when Dad was invited to that church to debate the minister on the question of Evolution vs. Creationism? He was our hero that night, a knight in the army of reason, riding into the lair of the enemy, the believing sheep, pushing light against darkness. We cheered for him, and were proud.

And with this credo of reason came an atmosphere of openness. Nothing was so secret that it couldn't be discussed freely at virtually any time. What was sex, after all, but another function of those wonderful and amazing machines we call our bodies? Nothing to be ashamed or embarrassed about. No questions were off limits--for all of them science held the answer. The mysteries of our world remained mysteries only as long as we refused to apply the scientific method to them. No doubt Dad tried to instill these same precepts in his ninth-grade Biology students, but for them it was a teacher talking for forty-five minutes a day. For us it was a way of life, a formula for rational living. There was no area of inquiry which we couldn't discuss with Dad in an open, rational way.

Except one.

Do you know what I'm referring to already, Iz? Probably, because there is only one possibility. Do you remember ever hearing Dad even once mention his father, our grandfather? The

single bit of information we were given about him at any point in our lives was that he had died when Dad was about ten, and that Dad had grown up fatherless. That's all. Did you ever hear anything else? What he did for a living? What he was like? Even his name, for God's sake (excuse me: for Einstein's sake)? We, the children in America's most free and open family, were for some reason denied the name of our paternal grandfather. Once, sensing that it was a topic Dad didn't want to touch, I asked Mom about it, but she said that she knew nothing more than we did. That Dad preferred to stick with the bare fact of his father's early demise and grew angry if anyone pressed him further. She hadn't pushed him for more information since the early days of their marriage. For years I was dying to approach Grandmom about it, but figured that if Dad couldn't even talk about it, how could his mother, a more secretive person to begin with? Still, I kept meaning to gingerly approach the subject with her, and then she died, almost three years ago now.

Has it bothered you too? I don't know, maybe it's because I'm the son, and so much like Dad. You take after Mom--smart but detached, not so damn serious about everything. But I'm almost a goddamn genetic replica of Dad, and he sure doesn't take after his mother, so he must be a lot like our grandfather was. And that means I'm a direct genetic consequence of that man. And for years it killed me that I'd never be able to know

who he was.

So I decided to try to find out for myself, if no one would tell me. I became obsessed with finding any bit of information about him, this mysterious Mr. Green. I pictured him as a projection of Dad grown old, or even sometimes as myself sixty years from now (you can begin to see what this had become to me). But where could I begin?

First I went to the public library, where they have the Hartford Courant on microfilm. I checked the obituaries, every damn day from 1944 to 1948, giving Dad two years leeway in either direction regarding his story. But no Greens had perished in Hartford in the mid to late forties. So then what? There was no other way but to ask members of the family. I went over to Aunt Silvia and Uncle Ernie's (this past August, when I said I was going over to say goodbye before I left for college) and delicately tried to find out something. But nada. They both just mumbled the same vague story, that he died when Dad was a little boy. I asked what he died of, and they said they weren't sure, or didn't remember, as though it didn't really matter. And then quickly changed the subject. I left for school the next week wondering why the Courant published obituaries for every Hartfordite who died except my grandfather.

Once I got here, of course, things were pretty hectic for a while. I was somewhat overwhelmed by the independence and the

social freedoms and pressures. My mind was consumed with orienting myself to a drastically new environment: beer, marijuana (yes, my innocent waif of a sister, an occasional puff of forbidden substance has been known to pass even the most incorrupt lips), sex (more of this in person (to further titillate your anticipation of my homecoming)), and a roommate all had to be absorbed into my system (and by the way, Weaver turned out to be okay, despite an immoderate proclivity for hedonism). But after I'd assimilated these changes to my lifestyle the question of our grandfather once again seeped into my daily consciousness like a job you need to get done but have procrastinated; it hangs over you day after day, and to free your mind you simply have to do it.

I tried Mom's side of the family here in Boston, figuring that they were far enough removed from the issue to tell me what they might know. I went to Aunt Beth and Uncle Al's, but either they knew nothing or weren't telling. But they must have at least known his name! I didn't ask for it in so many words (maybe I should have), but you'd think that would be the first thing they'd tell me. And if for some reason everyone really doesn't know anything about the man, why in hell don't they care? I mean Jesus, Izzy, they all act as though nothing's strange about the whole thing. Of course nothing could be less than perfect in our wonderful, happy, well-formed extended

family. All is as it should be, right?

Anyway, I seemed to have run into a dead end. I couldn't think of anywhere else to go for information, and mid-terms were approaching, so I let the whole matter slip into the back of my mind, beneath Calculus, German, intramural football, and Jeannie (not necessarily in that order should Jeannie inquire).

Then I was home for Thanksgiving. And seeing all the family, and Hartford, started it all up again, the feeling that I *had* to know. You remember I spent a lot of time--two whole days, in fact--over at John's house? Well, I wasn't at John's. Friday I was back at the library, buried again in old microfilms of the Courant. All day I sat there reading through the newspapers of 1946. Not with much hope--it certainly wasn't the likeliest way to get personal family information--but just hoping that by immersing myself in the daily life of Hartford when Dad was ten I would somehow catch on to some spark, some clue that would help me. All day I sat there, and found nothing. It was fascinating, though. The men were home from the bloodiest war in history. It was a new world, Izzy. The war was over and things would never be the same. They would be better--a ubiquitous optimism filled the stories, the columns, even the ads. *It's a Wonderful Life* was just out, starring James Stewart, "America's Favorite Feller," and Donna Reed, "Jimmy's Favorite Girl." Dress shirts cost five bucks. The

newspaper itself cost three cents, the same as it had in 1900 (I checked for fun)--inflation wasn't an idea in people's heads. Hartford was so different then--the downtown area was a place to live, a fine place to grow up. You could actually walk around your neighborhood at night, or play ball in the streets. People knew each other, they lived in real communities. Even to this day when the name of some Jewish Hartford family comes up, Mom and Dad probably know someone at least related to them.

Anyway, I sat there all day in front of that microfilm machine and imbibed the world of 1946 Hartford, but made no progress in my personal search. Until I was just about ready to give it up and head home, starved for dinner. Imagine me, Isabelle, hunched over the machine, straining my eyes, bloodshot after a full day of reading newstype, to scan one more roll of forty-year old history. Try to see me as my eyes happen to stumble over a headline, a seemingly unextraordinary bit of local news:

Sisson Avenue Merchant Felled by Falling Awning

Nothing special, right? Just another article to pass over. But for some reason I read this one. It must have been that my eyes had caught the first line of the story, for when I read it again I felt blood rush to my head and my fingers squeezed the sides of the machine till they hurt.

Sisson Avenue Merchant Felled by Falling Awning

Mr. Nat Green, owner of Klingmann's Bakery on Sisson Drive,

Can you see me, Izzy, as I read these words? Never before had I read those two names in conjunction without their signifying me. It was as though I were reading of myself in another lifetime. It was seconds before I realized that this was another Nat Green, but only a microsecond after that that I knew who it was. The Jewish community in Hartford was not so large; if there had been another Nat Green, or even other Greens, I would have heard about it from someone.

I sat there for several minutes, afraid to read the rest of the story, transfixed by the shapes that formed my name, here in a 1946 newspaper. Of course, finally I did read it. In fact, I still have it--the xerox I made is right here on my desk at this moment. Here is what it says:

Sisson Avenue Merchant Felled by Falling Awning

Mr. Nat Green, owner of Klingmann's Bakery on Sisson Avenue, was struck down yesterday by a falling pole which had been supporting the awning over the sidewalk in front of his establishment. According to Captain Thomas Foley of the Police Department, the collapse of the awning was due

to an unusual buildup in snow which had collected on top of the canvas during the storms of last week.

"What we had here, I suppose, is a combination of two heavy storms right after each other, with no melting at all in between. Add to that an old awning and stiff winds. It's really a shame," said Capt. Foley.

There was only one witness to the accident, which occurred yesterday morning at approximately 6:45 a.m. "I had just been talking with Nat not two minutes before," said Mrs. Julia Eisenstein of 35 Holcombe Street, a librarian at the public library. "He was sweeping snow from last night off his sidewalk. The next minute I'm walking away when I turn around--Nat had shouted something after me. I turn and see him standing there smiling, waving his broom happily. Then the whole thing just came down on him like an avalanche. He just disappeared in front of me."

Mr. Green is being treated at Hartford Hospital for injuries to the head. There is no word yet regarding his condition.

Was that it? A freak accident, and he'd really died, like Dad had so briefly explained? But it couldn't be--why then the silence? Why the shrugs, the refusal to admit that there is a

hole in our history, so obvious and so ignored that when you take a minute to look at it the whole thing seems ludicrous? For Christ's sake, there's no shame in an accident--why act like he was an axe murderer or something?

Dinner could wait. I inched my way through the next day's newspaper, reading every goddamn printed word, front page to classifieds. No follow-up article. I read and re-read the obituaries, which I had already gone through before, but he definitely wasn't there. (Yet he had to have died--Jews don't name their children after people still living.) Then the day after that, and the day after that. Nothing. After one single-column article that left no conclusion to the incident, the Courant had decided the story was no longer newsworthy. Again and again I went back to the death notices, each time extending my search to further after the accident--two weeks, three weeks, two months. I even read through the ones with similar names, in case there'd been a misprint. But Nat Green had not died.

"Jesus, Green, you still at it?" The sound of a voice struck him like a signal from far away (for a microsecond he'd thought it was a voice from forty years ago, a soft cry on a cold and empty snowswept street). He jumped. "Wha..."

"You'd think you were writing the first draft of the goddamn Bible, not a letter to your

little sister." When had the door opened? Weaver stood in the doorway, dripping with melting snow. He peeled off his outermost layer, an oversized denim jacket with fleece lining, and also the next layer, a huge gray sweatshirt, and dropped them in the hall. He also pulled off his shoes—worn out high-top basketball shoes saturated with snow—and left them in the hall too.

"Game's not over, is it?"

Weaver bent over and knocked clumps of snow from the bottom of his jeans, and entered the room. "No way," he said, throwing his body onto his bed with a flourish. Nat closed his pen and turned his chair to face him. "We're still going strong. I just remembered I told Stefanie I'd come over tonight. Like an hour ago tonight. Thought I'd better give her a call. No need to lose a night of ecstasy because of a football game."

"Where have your values gone?" said Nat.

"Don't get me wrong—given the ultimatum, I'd have to think several times before abandoning my buddies and the gridiron. But fortunately I don't have to make that choice. I can have both."

"Disgusting but true. I might even go further and propose that the two are not mutually independent."

"Fascinating. Please carry on the exploration of your thesis."

"One leads to the other," said Nat. "It is the very fact of your heroics on the athletic field that make possible the facile and frequent satiations of your considerable lust."

"Remarkable. The phallus being served by the brawn, you mean."

"Why not? Certainly not by the brain in this case."

"I see. Unfortunately I have neither the time nor inclination to continue this discourse. Please feel free to carry on without me while I place my call." He rolled over and stretched

out an arm to grab the telephone from the floor between the two beds. He dialed, and then pulled off one more layer of sweatshirt, leaving only a long-sleeved tee shirt. He leaned his large, taut body back against his pillow and smiled to himself. *He will be happy*, thought Nat as he watched him. *He will be one of the happy ones.*

"Hi, Stef? Listen, I'm sorry about...." Nat turned back to his desk and let Weaver's palaver fade from his consciousness. He read the last sentence over:

But Nat Green had not died.

Could that have been only a few weeks ago in the library? Fall had turned to winter, the semester had ended, nothing was the same.

He turned over the stack of paper, put the pen on top of it, and left the room. He walked down to the end of the hall, where a window overlooked the field. Dark figures darted across the fresh snow, chased each other like ants on a wall, collided in piles and separated again.

"Look like more fun than writing a letter?" Nat turned to see Weaver back out in the hall, bent over to relace his shoes.

"I'll be out there in a little while," Nat walked back toward their room. He stopped by his roommate and watched him pull the layers of clothing back on.

"Everything settled in your personal life?"

"No problem. She's reading a good book. I said I'd be there by midnight."

"But it's almost eleven-thirty now."

"So I'll be a few minutes late. I'll apologize."

"As easy as that."

"As easy as that. Now why don't you get your football togs on? You don't know what

you're missing. This is life," said Weaver, pulling a wool cap over his busy blonde hair.

"Feeling that cold on your face. The sting as the frozen ball hits your fingers."

"Okay, Thoreau, I'll join you soon."

"You do that." Weaver clapped his hands together once, hard. "Cowabunga!" He ran down the hall and burst through the swinging door. Nat heard his footsteps resonate in the staircase, fading flight by flight. When they stopped and he heard the door to the building downstairs open and then swing shut, he went back into his room and closed the door.

2

The pile of papers and the burgundy fountain pen sat on his desk in a glow of light. He approached gingerly and sat in front of them as though before a foreign text. *Where was I?* Oh yes, deep in the library on a late afternoon in late November, daylight in the windows replaced by vespertine shadows, oncoming darkness.

What could I do, Izzy? The old newspapers weren't going to give me anything more. My eyes stung from the small print in the artificial light, my back ached from bending over the screen. It wasn't turning out to be much of a relaxing vacation from school. But I couldn't stop now. I returned the stacks of microfilm that had grown beside me all day and left the library.

The cold air slapped my face and filled me with new energy. I ran to the car, letting my legs unwind from the hours of sitting, and took off. It was almost six, and I had to get to the hospital.

The secretary was just closing the office of archives when I ran in. I chattered away like a madman, explaining that I was doing a project for school, a history of my family, and I just needed to check on one distant cousin (who would believe it was my own grandfather?) who had apparently been admitted to the hospital in late 1946. I knew it was an inconvenience, but I was going back to school on Sunday, had spent all day in the library, and this was the final bit of information I needed. An implausible tale, I admit, but she must have figured it was too unlikely to be untrue, for she said she'd look it up for me if it didn't take too long. "Name?" she said, and I said "Nat Green," confused whether she'd meant mine or the patient's, not knowing which I'd given. "Do you know approximately when he was admitted?" "December 27, 1946." "I guess you really have been in the library." "Yes ma'am." "Well, I'll have to go into the old files in the storage room." "I'm sorry, this must be a terrible inconvenience, it's just that . . ." "No, no, it's all right honey. My husband's working late tonight anyway. An extra fifteen minutes here won't make any difference to me."

She disappeared and returned in a few minutes with a drawer

of files in her arms and dropped them onto her desk. "Here's '46. Kind of neat, going into the old files like this. You know we've got them all the way back to the turn of the century? Now what was that name ... Green?" In a minute she had extracted a tattered yellow folder and placed it delicately on the desk in front of me. "Now I'm just going to put away a few things, get ready to leave while you look at that, all right?" and she left me alone with the record of our grandfather.

The folder had darkened with the dust of forty years, and the edges were soft and frayed. The tab extruding from the side read in faded blue-black ink from a fountain-pen nib: "Green, Nat." Carefully I opened the folder and read the admission sheet. His date of birth: 2/2/09. Place of birth: Russia. And then the facts that settled what I already knew. Name of spouse: Rachel Green. Grandmom. Age of spouse: 36. Children: Benjamin Green. Dad. Age of children: 10.

Heart pounding, I skipped ahead, past less significant facts, to the injury. Patient had suffered a severe concussion from falling beam. Had been admitted to the hospital unconscious. Remained in a post-traumatic coma for two days before regaining consciousness. After steady improvement and positive response to therapy, patient was released ten days later into his wife's care. Was expected to be able to return to work within a couple of weeks.

And that was it. No record of return visits, or further complications. Could that really be it, after I had thought I'd found a real clue, an explanation for all the mystery? The secretary came back into the room and began collecting things into her pocketbook. "Find what you're looking for?" "I don't know," I said. "There's nothing about a return visit, any later examinations, no report of long-range recovery." She took the folder from me and glanced in it. "Well, you know back then they didn't keep very comprehensive records. Without computers, it was a lot more difficult. Anyway, it looks as though he recovered and there may not have been any other visits. I really have no idea, but probably treatments were less comprehensive back then, too. Will this help your project?" I told her yes; I thanked her for staying late. And I walked back out into the cold evening and drove home having learned something, having found out mainly that I had so much more to find out.

Nat tilted his chair on its back two legs, his sneakers against the desk for leverage. He closed his eyes, wrapped his arms around himself and squeezed, stretched. The phone was ringing. How many? He kept his eyes closed and let it ring. Probably for Weaver anyway. Six, seven, eight. Silence. He leaned forward, rubbed his temples. *Don't stop.* It was late. His mind began to wander: sleep, Jeannie's house tomorrow, picked up at 10:00, four-hour ride, snow football, food, sleep. he shook his head violently, like a wet dog. *Finish.*

I had only one other lead. At home I got out the phone book and looked up a real dark horse. The odds were low, but there it was, a diamond just waiting in a haystack for me for forty years: Eisenstein, J. 35 Holcombe Street.

The next afternoon, saying I was going to John's house again, I drove out to Holcombe Street, in Dad's old neighborhood in the north end of town and pulled up at a gas station pay phone. An elderly woman's voice answered--I swear it could have been Grandmom herself.

"Could I speak with Mrs. Eisenstein please?"

"Yes, speaking."

"Julia Eisenstein?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Mrs. Eisenstein, this is B--, I mean, I'm not sure how to begin, I'm sorry--I don't want to unnerve you," I stopped and took a breath. "I think you were friends with my grandfather."

"Who is this?"

"My name's Nat Green. Same as his."

"Oh my God."

Silence. "Mrs. Eisenstein? Are you all right? I didn't mean to shock--"

"It's all right. It's just when you said your name, and your voice is just like"

"So you did know him?"

"Yes, of course I did. But how did you know about me? I didn't think your father was old enough to remember me."

"He didn't tell me. I found out myself. It's a long story, Mrs. Eisenstein. I wanted to come see you, and tell you. And I was hoping you could tell me some things too."

I heard her breathe several breaths before she said, "I don't see why not. You are Nat's grandson, after all. Though I probably don't know nearly as much as you'll want to know."

She said to come on over, so after stopping for some flowers I pulled up in front of her home, an old brick apartment building on a still-quiet street.

"Well, well," she said as she took the flowers from me. She was old, Izzy, real old, but she still moved well. Reminded me a lot of Grandmom, of all the energy she had before she got sick. And the apartment--well, it was so much the same as Grandmom's it was eerie. Everything about it was from at least thirty years ago, but kept in perfect condition. The light coming in the window was diffused, it was soft and rolled over the objects of the room like a camel-hair brush: the green sofa, the old oak coffee table, portable T.V. with rabbit-ear antennae spread wide, the long white drapes pulled back with a sash--they all glowed.

She motioned me to the sofa and went to fetch tea. There was

just enough free space to squeeze behind the coffee table and sit on the couch. On the table a photo album was opened to the middle. There, pasted onto the paper with glue, was the strangest picture of myself I'd ever seen. It could've been taken the day before, but there I was, as though dressed up for a costume party, in an antique coat and tie, standing grinning with a cute young woman in a party dress.

"That's your grandfather," she said as she put a cup of tea in front of me. She sat next to me with her own cup. "That's Nat and me when we were just kids. '29 or '30, that must've been." Her bony, frail fingers lingered over the photo, as if she could feel the young couple's flesh. "And you think it's not strange for me to see you here right now?"

"I didn't mean to upset you, Mrs. Eisenstein...."

"Call me Julia. And you're not upsetting me. I've seen a lot in my life. You'd think people would realize that old people have seen more than they, not less. Not much upsets me anymore. I just said it's strange, that's all. Yes, Nat and I were quite an item for a while there. Before he went and married Rachel."

"My grandmother."

"Yes, of course. Well, and I married Sidney, didn't I? Still, it could easily have been me you called Grandma."

"Tell me about him."

"Nat? Well, what would you like to know?"

"Everything. I don't know anything."

"No, I guess you don't. Well, you must know something, or you wouldn't be here, would you? Why don't you tell me what you do know, and maybe I can fill in some of the rest."

So I told her everything I've just told you, and believe me, it felt good to be able to say it all out loud--that there was something wrong here, that there was something to be found out, information withheld from us that ought not to be. I could tell she understood, just from the way she felt sitting there next to me, and from the way she said his name.

"My God," she said, "I'd forgotten all about that article in the Courant. Probably the only time I was in the newspaper." She took some tea, looked out the window as though for weather. "One day can make such a sharp difference, can't it. Do you know that yet, Nat? (So strange to call you by your name, doesn't seem right that another should have that name, even you.) One moment, one strange moment, and your life veers off on another course. One for me was the moment Nat told me he was going to marry Rachel. I'd always just assumed that one day Nat and I would marry, even though he had been dating her too, and I was being courted by Sidney. You see, I thought we were just each having our bit of fun, playing the field so to speak, and that sooner or later we'd find our way back to each other. But

I guess your grandmother was more than I'd bargained for."

"She was something, all right."

"Hmm. Anyway, after that I didn't see too much of Nat, at least not when Rachel was around. She never trusted me once they were married, though she and I had been good friends as schoolgirls. Even after I went and married Sidney, I think she was afraid of Nat and me together. Then Sidney died, of course, we were all only thirty-one at the time, and me alone again. It's funny, you're young and making decisions and plans, but you have no way of knowing how those decisions will affect your life. Who knew at our weddings that Sidney would get the brain tumor and that that would happen to Nat? Rachel and I both ended up alone, though at least she had her boy, your father. I think the last time I spoke to her was at Sidney's and my wedding. We just didn't stay in touch after Nat left."

"Left? What do you mean left?"

"Well now, we're skipping ahead. You said you wanted to know everything, and I'm just the senile old lady to give it to you. God knows, I've been cooped up in this apartment for almost fifty years alone, my husband gone, my best friend gone, you think I don't have a lot to say? Who was there to tell about Nat? The only people who'd care, it wouldn't have been right to tell, not if their own parents didn't want it. but now that you've come here on your own to ask, well, it feels good to

talk. Only problem is where to start."

But start she did, Isabelle, she just jumped right in and started telling me all about our grandfather, and I wish you'd been there, because I'm dead tired now but absolutely have to get it all down before I go to sleep, but you see, don't you, that first I had to discover it all myself.

Anyway, she talked. This vaporous, paper-thin body which had grown and shrunk and breathed for nearly eighty years, who might have been my old lover in a yellowing photograph had I come along a sliver of an eon earlier, talked. And what I, next to her, heard was that Nat had been young and strong and quick-witted; he loved parties and joking with the girls (particularly Julia, above all Julia, though later Rachel too); and he was a poet as well--he would scribble short verses for her on napkins from the bakery where he worked (funny ones in Yiddish, romantic ones in English).

It hadn't been easy for him, sent over the ocean to the New World by parents beaten down by pogroms, cared for by distant cousins in the new Hartford Jewish community. He'd begun to work for the baker, Klingmann, when he was fifteen. Without money for college, he began to work full-time after high school. By the time Nat was twenty-three, Klingmann would be dead and Nat would own the bakery himself. And so a new baker was made. And Julia never knew him to complain that he hadn't the

opportunity to go to college and become something better, that he was a poor orphan and had to spend all his energies just to drag himself up to the modest level of living at which others could begin. He always seemed content to make his living with the bakery, to provide for his wife and ensure that his son could begin at that level and improve his own life accordingly. He baked his bread and cakes, and jotted down his verses (by this time for Rachel, not Julia, or for the small weekly newspaper that served the Jewish community). Did she have any of the poems? No, they hadn't seemed important at the time, she must have kept them for a while, but now they were gone. She'd saved much, but much also was gone.

After their marriages in 1932 she didn't speak much with Nat for a year or so. There were probably still some hard feelings on her part, and they were both getting used to their new lives. But gradually the oddity of being married to different people faded, and a new friendship grew. Still, she saw Nat only when she stopped in the shop. But this was nearly every day, if only a quick visit to say hello and exchange a joke or two. They were friends, and though they did not socialize as two couples, there wasn't much Julia didn't know about the life together of Nat and Rachel. Of course there wasn't much that anyone in the Jewish section of Hartford didn't know about anyone else.

And things for Nat and Rachel were good. He was known throughout the community as a model young husband: handsome, hard-working, easy-going and devoted to his family. She was the envy of many young Jewish women (besides Julia) for having landed him. In '36, when Nat was 27, they had a son, Benjamin. And Nat proved to be as enthusiastic and loving a father as he had been a husband. Ben became the focus of his life; he would give his son everything he hadn't had--comfort, encouragement, the financial security to use his talents for higher purposes than just putting food on the table. Ben would play baseball after school instead of working for ten cents an hour; he would go to college (Harvard? Yale was closer to home); when he wanted a slice of warm bread, he would buy it (or better yet, stop by his old father's shop for a hunk of fresh, steaming challah, for surely he would settle close to home, close to his father and mother).

For ten years the model family grew. (Though only in age, not number. Why no more children? well, there were some things that didn't travel the neighborhood grapevine, except in the form of rumor: certainly the Greens would want another son, and a daughter. What was one child, even one as bright as Ben? There was talk of several early miscarriages, but only talk. The fact was that the years went by, and still there was only Ben. Julia never doubted that it was simply chance, one of the

few imperfections in a happy life.)

"And then came the accident," said Julia.

"Yes, yes," I said. "Tell me about it. Tell me everything."

"The awning fell. Snow had built up in the canvas, I believe."

"Yes, I know. It was in the article. He was hit by the pole."

"Yes. I was there. But you know that too, that's why you're here. I was there, and so you're here. Funny." She stopped talking, smiled and leaned back on the sofa, resting. She closed her eyes and suddenly looked so old, so fragile that I thought she was going to--I don't want to sound callous, but I was afraid she'd expire right there, leaving me on the brink of discovery. She had lost all her color, all the energy with which she'd been painting the distant past for me. But then just as suddenly she opened her eyes and her color returned, as though her heart had taken a brief respite after so many decades of service, and was now ready to resume its duty.

"It's like I said," she murmured. "One moment comes along, rushing at you like a leaf on a roaring river, and after it's gone nothing is ever the same. You wish you could go back to the time before that leaf reached you, but of course you can't."

"The accident was one of those moments," I said. I'd known

it, I swear I'd known it as soon as I'd seen the headline and my own name beneath it.

"Of course it was," Julia said sadly. "Of course." she sipped her tea. "It was a cold morning, sometime around Christmas I think. I was taking my early-morning walk, that I took every day before going to work at the library. I took that job after Sidney died, when it seemed clear I was going to remain alone (there just weren't any single Jewish men of the right age around, and I had no intention of marrying an old widower just for the sake of having someone to serve dinner to). Anyway, every morning at six-thirty I'd take a nice walk around the neighborhood. I was still a young woman then, and the cold didn't bother me one bit, and this was one of those cold crisp mornings after a snowstorm that I loved. No one was in the streets but I--it was like walking through uncharted regions."

(Yes, yes, I murmured, edging forward in my seat, willing her to get on to the event, yes, on with it!)

"And, as I did most mornings, I stopped in at the bakery where Nat would be there unfailingly, getting his store ready to open by seven o'clock, six days a week (Saturdays he would be up just as early to go to synagogue with the other men; I don't know if that man slept late one day in his life). That day he was sweeping the snow off the sidewalk in front of his store. We stood out in the cold, clear air and chatted for a few

minutes. Maybe he invited me in to warm up and have a slice of warm bread, I don't remember. What I do remember is how cheerful he was, as usual, as though nothing could please him more than to be sweeping snow off his sidewalk, to be working on a cold beautiful morning, passing the time of day with his one-time sweetheart, whom he could have married (maybe should have but how can you ever know these things) but didn't, to be starting another working day.

"We finally said good morning, wished each other a nice day I suppose, and I walked away, headed towards Holcombe Street for some breakfast before I went to work. I crossed the street and then turned around, for he had called my name. I'll never forget the mental picture I have of him at that moment: laughing, waving his broom, snow all around him. Laughing because he was calling out the punch line of some joke he had just told me. Don't ask me what the joke was--it's enough that an old brain can retain as many details as mine has.

"The next instant Nat just disappeared. I guess the snow on top of the awning picked that moment to overwhelm the old structure. He was there, laughing, and then there was just canvas and metal in an enormous pile. I don't remember any sound. Just like in a silent movie. He was gone. I screamed and ran back to him, but I couldn't lift the poles off him. I suppose people heard my scream, and soon men had come, and the

police, and they were able to free Nat and get him to the hospital."

She stopped talking, and I just waited for her to get her breath and continue, but she seemed lost in thought. Finally she spoke again.

"Oh, I'll never forget the sound of his voice calling my name, the sound that made me turn and see it happen. You see, it was the last time he spoke my name before...."

"Then he did die after all!"

"No, dear, he didn't die. It was just the last time he spoke my name in a certain way. You see, Nat was never the same after the accident. Like I said, a moment comes and goes and things are changed for ever."

"Tell me."

"I am, dear, I am. Remember, I'm old now. Then I was young and beautiful and strong, but now I'm weak and it's difficult. Would you get me my tissues from the kitchen?"

I ran into the other room and brought back her box of Kleenex, which she held in her lap like a kitten.

"They let him out of the hospital in a week or so, I believe. He seemed fine. Everyone said how lucky he was, that God must have been watching over him that day (the idiots--as if God couldn't have stopped the awning from collapsing if He gave the slightest hoot about poor Nat Green). So he seemed to have

recovered from his concussion, and the doctors said he could return to work as soon as he felt strong enough.

"And that's where it first showed up. The old Nat would have been jumping at the bit to get back to work. But the days went by, and then the weeks, and still the bakery on Sisson Avenue remained closed. He never even showed up at synagogue. For over a month no one saw Nat outside of his apartment. At first some went in there to bring gifts or wish him their best, but after the first few days no one saw him at all.

"The first we heard of him was from Esther Weiss, who lived next door (all Rachel told anyone who asked was that he was still recuperating from the accident, but we all knew the doctors had given him their okay to work). Esther said she could hear violent arguments through the walls at all hours of the night. Mostly it was Nat she heard, ranting and raving about God knows what. Sometimes she could even hear the sound of things crashing. Imagine our shock--this had been the happiest couple we knew.

"Finally Nat did venture out of the house. He made a half-hearted attempt to start up the bakery again, but rarely got there before ten or eleven o'clock. By three or four he was closed up again. It was as though he just couldn't stand it inside of his shop anymore. On the rare occasions I found him there (not in the mornings anymore, but on my days off or

sometimes at lunch) he treated me like a vague acquaintance. We'd pass a few minutes together (less and less each time), trade awkward pleasantries, and all the while his mind would seem to be elsewhere, like he was looking right past me off into the distance. God knows what was going through his head, what visions and disturbances had been riled up by that falling pole.

"More often than not now you could find Nat at Costello's bar on Main Street. Or at least so said some of the few Jewish men who would stop in there for a drink after work. (The Jews were never a people to go in much for drink, you know.) They drew a picture of Nat Green (do you realize how shocking this was to us) sitting at the corner of the bar every afternoon, engaged in ferocious debates with Italians and Irishmen over every conceivable topic. For us to imagine Nat getting hot over politics while his wife and son ate dinner alone was almost too much to believe.

"Then there would be brief periods where he would return to normal. I'd be taking my morning walk and there would be Nat, like in the old days, getting his shop ready to open. He'd even give me a knowing smile and a friendly greeting. He'd be seen walking with Rachel and Ben on a Saturday afternoon like no awning had ever decided to give in to the weight and collapse on his poor head.

"But then, just when it seemed he'd become his old self,

he'd snap back to the new, dark Nat, who neglected his family and drank in the bars and let his bakery go untended until everyone was used to getting their bread at Henry Mayer's.

"I remember the last time I spoke to Nat. I was in the bakery on my lunch hour one day. He'd been in a good mood for several days, opening the shop early and staying late. Unfortunately, most of his customers had already switched their business over to Mayer's, but he acted as if things were back to normal, baking away and filling his windows with beautiful loaves.

"But today he was a bit sour, like he was trying to decide whether or not to swing back to his meaner self. I don't know what we were talking about, but I remember suddenly asking him what was wrong, why was he acting so strangely, what on earth was bothering him. And I remember exactly what he said to me, this gentle, kind man with whom I'd danced and picnicked, to whom life had always seemed so good. He stared at me as if I were a stranger, with a fire burning in his eyes, and said, 'What's wrong? You think I don't have better things to do with my life than to waste my days in a goddamn bakery, killing time with a Jewish old maid like you?'

"I'm sorry to talk like that, but that's what he said. I promise you those were his exact words. And don't think I wasn't shaken. I was barely able to make it out of the store

before I burst into tears. But I did. I walked out of that bakery without a word, wondering what horrors were occurring in Rachel's little apartment."

"And when was this?" I asked, afraid to break the spell, or to upset her, but needing to know more. She took a tissue out of the box and blew her nose into it meticulously.

"Oh, the following spring, I suppose."

"After the accident. Spring of '47."

"Yes, I think so."

"And that was the last time you saw him?"

"Well, the last time we spoke. I saw him a few times more, from a distance, before he left. But I certainly wasn't going to speak to him until he apologized. You see, I too didn't understand at the time what was happening, that it wasn't his fault. Of course we all knew it was the blow to the head that had changed him, but still you felt that it was he, Nat, being rude and obnoxious and irresponsible. You could feel sorry for him, but you couldn't help but be angry at the same time."

"But Julia," I said. "I know you must be exhausted by now, but we still haven't gotten to the most important part. What do you mean when you say he left? Where did he go?"

"What an excitable young man you are. But naturally you want to know. Will you have some more tea?"

"No, thank you."

"Well, I believe I will," and she started to get up, but I stopped her, ran to the kitchen for the teapot and brought it back with me. I poured her a cup, and myself one as well. She sipped, breathed deeply, sipped.

"It was that summer, the summer of '47. By all accounts (and people knew, believe me, in those days you couldn't keep much private in this neighborhood) the Greens' family life was a mess. Nat completely neglected his wife and son to spend his afternoons and nights in bars, or just walking around town aimlessly. People would see him walking late at night in just a tee-shirt and would call out his name, but he'd just nod and keep walking.

"Rachel begged him to go back to the doctors for help, but he refused. She tried to get his friends to convince him, but he just wasn't listening. He talked vaguely in the bars of travelling, of heading out west, of being trapped in this dirty town. Like I've said, he was simply a different human being.

"Well, come that July, he was gone. One day we just sort of realized that he wasn't here anymore. And someone found out from Rachel that he had indeed left. Without a word, he just packed and left, leaving his wife and ten-year old son like they were old furniture."

"And that's it?" I cried. "Is that the end of it?"

"No, no, dear, I'm afraid not. For four years that was the

end of it. Four long years: Rachel became used to the idea of being a widow of a sort, raising a boy and approaching middle age alone; and the boy, Benjamin (your father) grew from ten to fourteen--important years for a boy to be without his father. And then, on another summer day four years after he left he was back."

"He came back! Cured? Was he back to normal?"

"I don't know. I really can't say. Some people said he was, others disagreed. He came back to Hartford and presented himself at his old home, where his wife and son must have stared at him with some astonishment. Now remember that much of this is second and third hand information. No one really knows what happened when Nat Green faced his wife through the doorway of their apartment four years after abandoning her without reason (do you understand that that simply wasn't done in those days--a young man, a young Jewish man just didn't pick up and leave his family, not for anything). All we know for sure is that she turned him away."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he had come back to beg forgiveness and to ask to be taken back as husband and father (so they said), and she refused. Did I mention that she had obtained a divorce two or three years after he'd left? And believe me, that was a rare thing for a Jewish wife to do in those days (for any wife, I

guess). Couples weren't divorcing themselves left and right a few months after marrying like they do nowadays. I tell you, I don't know if arranged marriages weren't the better way to go after all. But anyway, a divorce to the Jews in those days was as good as death, at least in a case like this one. From the day the papers were signed, his name was spoken no more on these streets. And Rachel was a tough cookie, make no mistake about that. She had just spent four years hardening her heart against him, four years trying to be tough enough to face a completely unanticipated lifetime alone, and here he was asking her to forgive and forget. You can understand, maybe, her feelings."

"But it wasn't his fault," I said. "He was a victim of a freak accident, traumatized by the blow to his head. He couldn't help himself!"

"You have to realize that we didn't understand these things as well then. The doctors had pronounced him recovered at the hospital. It seemed natural to blame him for being mean, or irresponsible."

"What about my Dad? He was fourteen when his father returned. What did he think?"

"I really don't know. I never heard about his reaction. I suppose you'd have to ask him."

"And you?" I asked. "Did you see him that time?"

She was silent for a moment. "Well, I didn't know if I

wanted to tell you about that, but I suppose I might as well. That night, the night of the same day that Nat arrived back in Hartford and was turned away by his wife, he showed up at my door. I opened the door and there he was, holding his hat in his hand, his duffel bag by his feet. 'Julia,' he smiled weakly, and I said nothing. 'Julia, it's me, Nat.' Nothing, I said. 'Julia, you've got to let me in, let me talk to you, explain. No one else will listen to me.' Nothing. 'I've got nowhere else to go, Julia, nowhere to stay even. Won't you even talk to me, Julia?' I shut the door. I haven't thought about this in many years, but it's true: I shut the door. You could defend me, I suppose, after all it wouldn't have looked very good to the community if I let this man stay with me, or even come in my apartment, me a single woman and he a deserter of his family, especially when everyone knew that we had once been sweethearts. Still, it couldn't have hurt to talk to him, to at least give him something to eat. But I shut the door. And don't think I haven't paid for it. All these years I've had to live with the fact that I shut the door on that man."

Jesus, Izzy, I could hardly believe what this story had become. Can you? I sat there watching this woman start to cry. After forty years I had made her remember again, and she was crying.

"I'm sorry," I said, I'm so sorry, I really didn't

mean...."

"No, no," she wiped her face dry. "You have a right to know. And there's no reason I shouldn't think again about these things. It's just very sad, isn't it?" She sipped more tea and wiped her nose again. "So you see that time in the bakery wasn't the last time Nat spoke to me. Only the last time I spoke to him."

"And what did he do? Did he stick around Hartford?"

"No, no. How could he, then, after that? I believe he left town again immediately, or at least I didn't see him again. He had already ceased to exist in street conversation after the divorce, like I told you, and now after a brief visit back from the dead, he was truly forgotten. It was worse than if he were dead; it was as though he had never existed."

"And it hasn't changed," I told her. "That's what it's like now in the family--like he never existed. Can you imagine that I've never heard his name spoken?"

"Yes, I can, I'm afraid. People can be very strange."

"And did you ever hear of him again? Do you know where he went, what he did?"

"Strangely enough, yes, though I may be the only person who does. Years after he left for good, I received a postcard from Nat. He was living in a small town up in Vermont. In fact, I must still have that card." She disappeared into the bedroom

and returned with a large cardboard box. "Haven't opened this thing in years." Inside were hundreds of letters and cards, stuffed in randomly. "I won't bore you by reading through most of these, though I suppose that now you've got me to open it I'll be busy for days going over them." She rummaged through the pile for several minutes until finally her hand emerged from deep within the box holding a single picture postcard. "I think this is it...yes." She read it silently and then handed it to me. The picture was of snow-covered hills. *Vermont*, it said. I turned it over and looked at the handwriting, which so closely mimicked my own tiny scrawl that it could have been my own signature at the bottom. This is what the card said:

6/16/58

Dear Julia,

After hard years of travel, I find myself settled here in Vermont. It is very beautiful, and a good place to be alone.

I don't remember what I did or said to you, but I know it must have been quite bad. Here's hoping a late apology will be of some good. In any case, you are the only one I can bring myself to write to.

Don't feel obligated to write back--I just wanted to say hello.

with love,
Nat

"Did he ever write again," I asked her. "Did you write back?"

"No and no," she said. "I meant to, several times I sat down to write him, but I suppose I was ashamed of having turned him away years before. After a time you just want to be rid of

the whole ugly thing. People make new lives. Your father and grandmother by this time had reconstructed their lives to have no husband or father. To them he was dead. And as for me, it wouldn't do for a nice Jewish widow to be corresponding with someone else's dead husband."

"So that's finally it," I said. "You don't know what happened after that? You don't know if he's still in Vermont, or if he's even still alive?"

"That's it. I don't know anything after that. I don't know if he's still alive." She closed her eyes, smiled, opened them again. "I suppose he'd be an old man, old just like me."

The windows were dark; sometime while we'd been talking the afternoon glow had left us to our artificial lamps. I told her that she couldn't imagine how helpful she had been; what she'd told me meant a lot to me and I only hoped it hadn't been too tiring for her. On the contrary, she had enjoyed it. It meant a lot to her too. There comes a time, she said, when you're old, when you have to start thinking about certain things you've hidden in the back of your head. And I'd reminded her to reread some old letters. Now that she'd retired from the library, she spent far too much time watching inane television shows.

"It's crazy, isn't it," I said, as we rose and walked to the door.

"One single moment," she said. "Then nothing's the same."

I suppose it's no less logical than anything else in this life." She laughed. "You'll see, you'll become a great philosopher too when you reach seventy."

We shook hands and I turned to leave. "Say hello from Julia," she said. I stopped and looked at her again, tried to see her as a young woman, almost could but could not, and I left, descending the brick steps to the cold street and my car.

3

Nat dropped the pages on his desk, rubbed his eyes and stared for a moment about the room. He got up and walked out, down the hall to the window at the far end. He leaned his forehead against the glass, felt the winter pulsate cold against his skin. Snow was falling hard now, small flakes that would pile high through the night. Down below the football game continued, lit by a lamp along a path that curved through the campus.

A moment comes and goes. An egg is fertilized, a life conceived. A car spins out of control, tumbles across the median just as you happen to be passing. A telephone rings. Too much snow accumulates on a piece of canvas. *Nothing is ever the same.* A touchdown scored, someone (Roberts? Eddie?) spiked the ball into a snowdrift. Slaps on the back. Kickoff.

Nat walked past quiet wooden doors to the other end of the hall, stooped for some water from the fountain, and returned to his room. Each sound he made—footsteps on the hall rug,

clicking of doorknobs opening and closing, the scraping of his chair across the floor—seemed to echo through the entire building. He sat at his desk, grasped the papers there as though they were the blueprints for some plan he had to memorize and then destroy. He began to read again, trying to recognize the words as his own.

The next day was Sunday, and as you know I returned to school. I guess you had no idea that my Thanksgiving vacation had been more than a few restful days at home with the family. I'm sorry, Isabelle, but I just couldn't tell you yet. I had to finish the story myself before I could share it with you. Hey, I'm spending my last night here killing myself to finish this letter to you so I can get it in the mail before I go to Jeannie's--how many brat sisters who idolize their older brother get such gratification?

I only had a couple of weeks of classes left before finals, but there was no way I could wait that long. On Tuesday I took the day off from class, borrowed Pete's car (leading him first to believe that his vehicle was in some way to play a fulcral role in the procurement of sex--the only pursuit for which he would instantly offer the use of his BMW), and drove to Vermont.

I wasn't sure what I'd do when I got there, but I figured it was worth a day's trip. I drove the four hours to Woodstock, the town of the return address on Julia's postcard. When I got there I pulled into a gas station and tried my first plan. I

looked in the phone book, but there were no Greens. On to plan B: I asked the gas station attendant to direct me to the address I'd copied from the postcard. I figured there was little chance he'd kept the same address for thirty years, but maybe someone there would know something about him.

I found the house, a small white cottage on a pretty road just outside of town, but as I expected the name on the mailbox was no longer Green. I went to the door and knocked, and a young woman in an apron carrying a baby answered. I apologized for bothering her, but did she by any chance know anything about the man who had once lived here, Nat Green? I was a friend of his family's, trying to look him up. She asked me in out of the cold (snow was everywhere up there, thick and untamed), and then told me she had no idea, there had probably been several owners between them. Was this long ago? Probably, yes. I wasn't sure when he'd moved out. She was sorry, maybe the realtor in town could help.

I drove back into town on the rolling, hilly road, the Green Mountains looming off in the distance to the north. I stopped first at a luncheonette on Main Street. Three elderly men sat at a table near the front, arguing snowstorms. "I'm telling you, damn it, seventy-eight was the worst I've ever seen." "Worst you *remember*, Mulligan. You were around in thirty-two, I believe. Worst blizzard of them all. Couldn't

leave the house for two weeks." "Hell, I was hauling firewood twenty miles while you were stuck in the house." "Don't romanticize the past. Seventy-eight beat 'em all."

I passed them on my way to a free table, then stopped. It was worth a shot. I stood awkwardly in front of them. Excuse me, but I was wondering whether by some chance any of them might be able to help me. Sure, son, if we can. Did anyone happen to know a man named Nat Green, seventy-seven years old? Or maybe did they remember him from a long time ago, maybe thirty years, when he lived out on Farm Road?

"Sure," said one man in a thick flannel shirt, flecks of soup in his white whiskers. "Had a bakery right over on Winthrop for years, right?"

"That's him," I said. "Do you know where he is now?"

Lord, I don't know," said the man. "That bakery closed a good ten years ago. I don't believe old Green was in the best of health. Wouldn't be surprised if he were no longer with us. He a friend of yours, son?"

"Friend of the family," I said. "I'm trying to look him up. So you think he left town?"

"No idea," said the man. "Sure hasn't been around Main Street for ten years or so."

"Now wait a minute, Sam," said another man. "Didn't he go to a rest home or something? I seem to remember when the bakery

closed, Green had some kind of heart attack or something, and he just closed up shop and checked into that rest home out in Barnard. Isn't that right?"

The first man shrugged. "Could be. Maybe he's still there. I just have no such memory. Not that that means jack-spit these days."

They told me how to get to Barnard, and I ran back to the car without eating. Half an hour through the frozen hills, and I found the rest home, a miniature version of a New England college campus. Brick buildings spread out around empty fields. I parked in a lot that sloped down to a frozen lake. Entered the main building and approached the woman behind the desk. In a reception room off to her left, two families huddled separately, each around a grandparent in a wheelchair. In another corner an old man sat alone in his wheelchair, watching the two groups and nodding. My pulse quickened; he was so aged, wrinkled and bent over, that he could have resembled anyone.

The woman asked if she could help me. I was looking for a man named Nat Green. Had he ever lived here, might he still be here?

"My goodness," said the woman, anyone's mother, astonished. "He most certainly is. Though in eight years I don't remember that dear old man having a single visitor. Could he be expecting you?"

He was there. He was living right there. I was about to meet Dad's dad.

"I don't think so," I said. "We've never met."

"But you're a friend of his?"

"A relation. We're related, we've just never met. I've gone to some trouble to find him, in fact."

"Well, I'll just bet he's going to be delighted to see you. I think he's probably reading in his room about now. I'd better tell him you're here before you go in. After three heart attacks it's probably not a good idea to surprise him. Now you are...."

"I'm, ah...just a relation. Can you just say a relative is here?"

"You just wait here one minute," and she walked briskly down the hall and out of sight. For five minutes I watched the families in the reception room, the old man watching the families, the snow out in the parking lot. Then she came back and told me to follow her. "He's a little confused, so be prepared. I think he can't figure who you are. We didn't think he had any family left at all." She led me down a long corridor and stopped by a door near the end. Opening it, she knocked softly and said, "Mr. Green? Here's your guest." She motioned me in and I entered past her, heard her close the door behind me and looked at the bed and there he was.

I would have walked right past him on the street. He could have been anyone, Iz, any shrunken, wrinkled, poor old man on the street. But when I looked at him closely (and that's what we did those first few seconds--size each other up) I could see that shade of familiarity, just a whisper of recognition, but unmistakable. He must have seen it even more so in me.

"God in heaven," he said.

"Uh, hello. I...."

"My God in heaven, I don't believe it. Mr. Nat Green, if I'm not mistaken."

Did he mean himself or me? "Yes," I said. "I mean, I am...."

"Don't think I don't know you, Nat Green. Let me help you out. I'm Nat Green too, but I suppose you know that."

"Yes."

"And you're my grandson Nat."

"Yes, I am. But how did you know?"

"I know more than you think. Kind of strange to name a Jewish boy after a still living grandfather, but I suppose no stranger than anything else. Quite flattering, I guess. Well, soon I'll be gone and then it'll make more sense."

"I don't know what to say," I said. "I found you."

"Yes you did, son. It never occurred to me that you might think to try. Surprised that I know who you are?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, I'll tell you how I know about you, and your sister Isabelle, my grandchildren. Never saw pictures, though. Just facts. You know who you look like, don't you?"

"You. I saw pictures."

"Your daddy showed you pictures of me?"

"No." His smile faded. "I'm sorry. Julia Eisenstein showed me. Just a few days ago."

"Oh my dear...is Julie still living, there on Holcombe Street? Yes, I guess she must be." His eyes saddened. "Nat-- it's so strange to call you that--maybe you should tell me now how you got here. And please, slow. You're speaking to an old Jewish baker with three coronaries behind him. I used to be just like you, but that must have been another life, I think." He propped himself weakly up in the bed. And I started to talk. I told him everything I could think of, Izzy, about our childhood, trying to lighten the harshness of his extirpation from family memory, and as I spoke he would nod and smile, as if he already knew everything and I were merely repeating what he had taught me. When I mentioned Grandmom dying, he just nodded again, and looked so goddamn sad I didn't know what to do.

"It's all right," he said, "I knew. Please go on." I told him how I had decided to find him, and all about my afternoon in Julia Eisenstein's apartment, and finally how I'd tracked him

down there.

"You're a regular Sherlock Holmes," he said. "You got a girlfriend?"

"Well, sort of, I guess so."

"Jewish?"

"Uh, yes," I lied.

"Though I guess that doesn't matter much anymore. After a life like mine, I still care whether she's Jewish."

"That's all right."

"Tell me, you must be wondering how I knew about you."

"Of course."

"Well, now let me tell you my story, how about that? First though, why don't you see if that nice girl out front will find me something to drink?" I left, came back with a glass of seltzer. He nodded and drank slowly, coughing a bit afterwards. "So you know up until I left the second time. Maybe even more than I do--I have little or no memory of the awful things I did or said when I was sick. Believe me, the years '47 to '57 are not much more than a blur in my mind. I remember the accident, of course--not the accident itself, but the general picture after I came to, that is to say I remember having had an accident. After that I just remember rage, irritability, needing to get out, away from everything. So I ran. I took the trains out west--a cushioned seat till I ran out of money, then

the hard floor of a freight till I managed to scrape a few dollars together. Ha, I must've been the only Jewish bum riding the freights. One bum used to call me the Rabbi, thought I was some sort of holy man cause I one time found an old Bible and spent some days reading through it before I decided those days were over for me.

The door burst open and again Weaver stood in the doorway, this time like a wounded soldier fresh from the battlefield. Melting snow dripped from most of his body, and a section of sweatpants, a square at the knee, was gone. In its place was cut skin covered with blood. He stood for a minute, displaying the carnage of his valor.

"Fucking ripped up my knee," he said proudly. "Engle-butt took me down on the sideline, and under the snow was the asphalt footpath. Lost some skin. But not before I gained twenty or thirty yards." Pumping breath in and out of his chest, he stripped off clothing as he headed for his bed, climaxing his passage into the room with a Flosberry Flop onto the mattress. "Thought I'd better call it a night. Stef's waiting for me; I must be late."

Nat looked at his watch. "Not for you—just a bit over an hour."

"Good. I'll just shower and go."

"Better yet, skip the shower. Treat the girl to a display of your manly appearance. Truly a sight of unparalleled testicularity."

Weaver thought about it. "No, I think ambrosial is preferable tonight. Shave, cologne. Hey, they really need you out there now. Short a man. Not that you could replace me. You being a quarterback and me a runner, I mean."

"I'll be out there soon. If they don't stop playing."

"They're still going strong." Weaver had stripped off all his clothes and stood naked before his full-length mirror, examining the injury to his knee. "Shit, I really took a piece off, didn't I."

"Thank God it wasn't your face."

"Ha ha, yeah. Hey, shit, Green, are you still writing that goddamn letter? You've got to be kidding me."

"I'm just about done. It's a long one."

"You're not kidding it's a long one," Weaver bent forward to view himself. "Jesus, that's got to be one hell of a letter. Well, I'm in the shower. Hope there're no women in the hall," and throwing a towel around his neck he walked out of the room.

And Nat was back at a rest home in Vermont. In fact, he had never left.

"Well, I bounced around the west coast for a while, and believe me I worked some odd jobs: loading trucks, unloading trucks, an aircraft assembly line, even worked for a baker in San Francisco, can you believe it? He fired me because I kept telling him how to do things better than he was doing them. I had other jobs I've forgotten, I'm sure. Sounds like fun, maybe, to a young man like you, but believe me it wasn't. It was just the rage that kept kicking me along--rage at what I have no idea, just blind rage at the world--from city to city, up to Alaska where I was a longshoreman one summer, back down to California, all over the midwest.

"Sometime during all this I suddenly felt the rage leave

me, like a fever going down. And without thinking I ran straight back to Hartford, to your grandmother, only to find out that she had divorced me. I had no wife. My son had no father. When she turned me away (you already know that story accurately enough, there's no point telling it again) I went to New York City, where the rage returned in all its force. It had only been the eye of the storm, you see. Again I lit out across the country, going through jobs, places, women (please let me skip over that part--you are my grandson. Let it suffice to say that my anger burned against them as it did everything else). And then, there I was, somewhere out in Oregon, I believe, when the anger left me for the last time.

"A friend I'd been working with at a restaurant was driving back east, so I came with him. I knew I couldn't go back to my family, I'd given up that hope long before. There are certain things, I suppose, that can't be forgotten. How could my son just pretend that I hadn't been absent for so many years? How could Rachel pretend I'd never hit her--and I did, I tell you now, my grandson, I don't remember much, but I do remember striking your grandmother late one night after coming home drunk and listening to her scold me (go ask Julia Eisenstein if she can imagine Nat Green hitting anyone, much less a woman. I can't imagine it myself, yet I know it's true).

"Anyway, I did go to Hartford at first. Sort of snooped

around for a while. I don't think anyone recognized me, I'd changed so much--lost most of my hair and grown a beard, and I hadn't used to wear an old trench coat, torn pants and boots when I had my bakery on Sisson Avenue. I sat in a park one day and watched Rachel, my wife, whom I'd wedded with smiles and laughter and wine all around, walk home with a girlfriend. I saw my son, grown now to a young man but still my son, greet her happily in the street and then run off the opposite way bouncing a basketball. You think I didn't want to run after him and grab him, hug him and tell him everything? Tell him that I was still his father and that if you looked at the whole thing a certain way it wasn't my fault?"

"But you could have," I nearly screamed at him, "you could have, Grandpop (and it wasn't even strange to use the word, for I'd been using it in my head ever since I'd read the article in the old Courant). It would've been all right--everything could have been all right!"

He smiled, shook his head. "No, no, I'm afraid not. He'd gone through his childhood, his adolescence, without a father. You think there's not anger there? No resentment? No, how could he have forgiven me, whether or not it was my fault? Sometimes we have to just accept the way our lives have gone, whether we like it or not."

I shook my head, but he continued: "Anyway, I accepted.

Can you understand that I accepted my fate, and boarded a bus, this time headed north. Wasn't sure where I was headed, where a middle-aged Jew like me (I was nearly fifty at this time) could go to lead a quiet life. Somehow wandered into Woodstock, and went to work for the baker, an older fellow sympathetic for some reason. Didn't ask me lots of questions, and he could tell I knew the business. Well, he was ready to retire in a few years anyway, so as luck would have it (you see I accepted all my luck, good and bad) I was once again a baker, once again the town baker.

"And for twenty years my life was not all that different from how it had been before that God-forsaken awning decided to take a swan dive onto my kep. All day I tended my store, and the rest of the time I tended to my family. The difference being that now since I could not be with my family, I tended to them from afar. Which is to say that I followed them from my hiding place in the mountains. I subscribed to the Hartford Courant, as well as to the Hartford Jewish Times (under another name, of course), and watched like a hawk for any mention of the name Green. I was rewarded with news of my son's honors at college, his engagement and then marriage to your mother (she sounds like a wonderful girl, your mother). When Benjamin was in college I subscribed to the campus newspaper, and saw his name when once in a blue moon he got put into the basketball

game. Later I followed his progress in the class notes section of the Alumni magazine. So yes, I was quite aware of the birth of his children, my grandchildren: Nat and Isabelle. And after that, of course I followed you and your sister in the same way: landmarks in small print were all I had. I was with you in spirit at your Bar-Mitzvah, and I saw when you were going off to college. And sure enough, for four months now your campus paper has arrived here faithfully each week. Unfortunately, you didn't play a sport, so I couldn't follow you that way."

"Just intramural football," I said. "You could have followed the standings, if you knew. We were the Fighting Spermatozoa, I'm afraid."

He just looked at me.

"And I'm joining the staff of the paper next semester, so you can read my articles then."

"Absolutely. You sure you'll have time, with your studies and all?"

"I'm sure, Grandpop."

"Hey, you going to let an old man finish his story or not?"

"There's more?"

"Just the heart attacks, I suppose, but that's my favorite part. Drive the nurses here crazy. I guess it's eight years now since the first. Had to give up the store and move in here, where I've been ever since. Two more attacks, a tin pacemaker

in my chest, and now we're up to date. I guess I won't bore a young man with doctors' prognoses."

We talked for quite a while, Izzy, as you can imagine. I tried to fill in all the holes in his knowledge of us, our lives, everything that had happened to his family since he'd left it. He had so many questions, some I could answer and some I couldn't, and I did my best until he ran out of them and I could see that he was worn out by my visit. I told him I'd come again soon, and then I asked him what I'd wanted to all day:

"Can I bring my father?"

He just looked at me like he didn't know which way to shake his head. "I don't know, Nat. Perhaps it's too late for that. He probably thinks I'm dead by now."

"Well, he shouldn't."

He sighed. "I suppose I'll leave that up to you," he said.

Nat smoothed the edges of the pages he'd been reading and put them firmly down on the desk. He opened the pen he'd been clicking open and shut. Tilting the paper to a comfortable angle, he gripped the pen tightly and put the nib to the paper just under the old ink.

So then I went to the bed and I hugged my grandfather, and he felt so light and frail and I could feel the bones that had swept snow off the sidewalk forty years ago when he'd looked forward to no more than a good day's work and a quiet evening at

home with his wife and son.

4

Weaver re-entered the room, dripping wet with the towel now wrapped around his waist. "Ta da," he sang. "Now a quick shave and the transformation is complete." He went to the sink in the corner of the room, found a new disposable blade and a can of shaving cream, and lathered his face. "I must say, you're a quiet one tonight," he said. "Not that you're normally boisterous, but one can't help but sense something going on in that mysterious orb we all call Nat's head." Admiring the homogenous spread of cream on his cheeks and neck, he began to etch away at it with the razor. "A good shave," he said, "is like a good lay."

"No it's not," said Nat.

"You're right. It's far better. Though I don't see how you would be in a particularly advantageous position to adjudicate."

"I won't...."

"Dignify that comment with a reply? Good for you, Nat, good for you. Anyway, where is good Jeannie tonight?"

"Probably asleep. We're leaving early tomorrow."

"Oh, Nat," he shook his head. "Ah well, to each his own style." He put down his blade and splashed water on his cheeks, sucking in air as the cold water froze his cuts, and examined his face in the mirror as he wiped it dry. "Goddamn if I didn't get even better-looking today."

He pulled on boxer shorts and a pair of clean jeans. "Well, roommate, we might not meet again before you leave in the morning."

"Have a good break, Peter." Nat shook the thick palm extended his way. Their hands parted and Weaver continued dressing. "It's gone by fast, huh?" said Nat.

"Sure has, buddy. Seems like we were just introducing ourselves."

"I guess we won't be young and stupid for too long." "Well, don't sound so down about it. Just means we've got to enjoy it while we can." Weaver finished dressing and checked himself out in the mirror. Pulled on his coat, slapped Nat on the back, and walked to the door. "I'll see you in a few weeks."

"Okay, Pete."

"And hey, I was just kidding before about the shaving and screwing. You shave sometimes." And he was gone.

Again the writing paper stared from the desk. Nat hunched over it and felt his stomach rumble. How long since dinner? *Write*. The weight of a freezing football resisting the motion of his arm, soft snow breaking a fall. *Write. Finish*.

So I'd found him, Isabelle. I found our grandfather. But now what? What would Dad think if I told him what I'd done? How would he react to finding his father still alive after all these years, and to finding that I'd discovered his lie?

But I had no choice. Of course I had to tell him. So the day after my trip to Vermont, I called Dad. But I couldn't seem to tell him on the phone, so I just said that he had to come see

me that weekend, that I couldn't explain why until I saw him. And of course Dad didn't ask for an explanation; on Saturday he came.

We took a drive along the Charles, and finally I parked the car and started talking. I told him everything, Izzy, every damn detail, slowly, from beginning to end like I've done here for you. And he didn't utter a word the entire time, just listened to my story with a sad and serious face I don't think I've ever seen on him before. He waited till I'd finished, then said,

"Of course I knew he hadn't died, Nat. Not back then."

But had he known that he was still alive?

"No, I didn't know anything. I chose to know nothing. I simply closed my mind to the entire affair long ago. I'm sorry, I guess I cheated you out of knowledge you deserved to have. I'm sorry." He held his head in one hand, massaging it like when he has a headache. I told him I wanted to take him up there, to the home, if he would go. He didn't say anything, we watched the frozen Charles. We've never felt awkward around Dad, have we? Never embarrassed, because we always knew he understood us, and we him. Well, I felt awkward now. I felt embarrassed. I wished for a moment I hadn't told him, just let the scars remain intact. Then finally he looked up and said All right, and I started the engine and headed for I-93 north.

We hardly spoke the entire trip up. Just watched the snow on the side of the highway grow higher and thicker as we climbed north. When we drove through Barnard it was already mid-afternoon, the sun beginning its low winter descent. God knows what was going through his mind as we parked at the home and walked into the reception area. The same woman was there and recognized me.

"Two this time," she said. "If he's not careful, Mr. Green is going to turn out to be our most popular resident."

"Could you just tell him his grandson is here again," I said to her, and then to Dad, "I'd better go first and prepare him." He nodded.

I followed her to the room I'd been in a few days before, and there was my namesake just as he'd been then.

"You brought your father," he said before I could even say hello.

"How did you know?"

"I didn't. I just figured. So where is he?"

"He's coming. I wanted to tell you first."

"No need. I figured." He smiled triumphantly, then stopped and said softly, as though to himself, "I'm going to see my son."

I went back outside and found Dad standing in the hall. I led him to the door, then let him enter ahead of me.

How am I going to tell this? How am I going to describe for you the face of that tired old man in the bed, or the odd soft way that our father slowly moved toward him? I can't--I can only tell you that the older man was smiling and crying, and maybe so was the younger (I could only see his back), who stopped before the bed and stood there hunched over a bit. And then I had to leave. I was a stranger--there was between them something that predated my existence by so long that though I was the direct result of that something it was still from another world than mine. I closed the door behind me and walked up and down the hall a few times, finally settling down on the floor against the wall, arms around my knees.

Dad was still silent as we drove back to Boston. I couldn't believe he wasn't going to talk to me about it. It was dark; for a while I thought he was asleep, then I thought maybe he was crying, but when I actually glanced over he was just watching road.

I couldn't stand it. "Dad," I said, "I have to ask you something. I know you don't seem like you want to talk, but there's one thing I've been dying to know since I started this whole thing."

"What's that, Nat?"

"My name. Feeling the way you did, why on earth did you give me his name?"

"As you know, Nat, the Jewish people name their children after the dead."

"I know, but --"

"And that's what I wanted, don't you see. I wanted a normal tragic death for my father, so I could just be a normal tragic fatherless son. I named my son after his poor grandfather who died so young. I know I should thank you for reuniting me with my long-lost father. And I'm sorry, Nat. I've always tried to be honest with you. But sometimes logic and reason don't work. They don't explain things. I'm sorry. Is it all right?"

"Of course, Dad. I'm sorry."

"No, no." He shook his head vaguely and leaned it against the window.

And that was it. We left the country hills and descended back to the suburbs of the city, where we were able to begin again to talk of other things, and where he said goodbye to me for the second time in a week and drove back to you in Hartford.

And that's it, Isabelle. That's it, except for one last thing. The reason, probably, why I had to write this to you instead of just telling you.

Three days ago I had a phone call while I was studying for my last final. From a lawyer up in Vermont. He was sorry to have to tell me, but my grandfather was dead. There had been a

fourth heart attack, and he hadn't made it. My grandfather had given him, his lawyer, my phone number just a week before the attack. I was the only known relation. Could I come up to hear the will? He had already been cremated, according to his wishes.

Once again I made the long drive up to the mountains. I met the lawyer in his offices and he read me the will. I, Nat Elias Green, leave the entire sum of my assets (which wasn't much, Iz, a couple thousand dollars after seventy-seven years) to my grandchildren, Nat and Isabelle Green.

And that's the end. We had a grandfather, Isabelle, and he knew of us though we not of him, and he watched us grow from far away for he couldn't come close, and he watched also his wife and son grow old, saw her die and him reach middle age without him, but could never approach, could never come near, and all because some snow built up and caused some metal and canvas to fall to the ground forty years ago.

No, I guess on second thought it's not the death that made me write you instead of telling you in person. It's the whole story, the whole absurd sad story that made me sit here for three days in front of this paper instead of studying chemistry, because there was something about the whole thing that forced me to put it in ink on the paper, that made me want to write it to you, made me have to write it.

See you in a week, little sister.

Love,

B---

He closed the pen and slammed it down on the thick stack of papers, pressing down with his fingers until they turned white. He stood up and walked quickly, randomly about the room, did half-pushups against walls, twisting exercises, straightened posters, bounced a basketball four times, walked down the hall to the window and looked out, fogging the glass with his mouth. Still they played. Against each other the two teams collided, the energy of youth surging in the late hour. Their screams reached the glass against his forehead.

He walked back to the desk and put the pages in order without reading a word. Stuffed them into a large manilla envelope and sealed it. He addressed it and placed it carefully on the corner of the desktop.

He found a thick sweatshirt and pulled it on over the tee-shirt he was wearing. Sweat pants over his jeans. High top basketball shoes, almost ready to throw out. A thick denim jacket over the sweatshirt, and a wool hat. Grabbed a pair of gloves and left the room, ran down the hall and out the door. Down the three flights two steps at a time and then out the double doors at the bottom, where an icy wind hit his face and snowflakes quickly sprinkled his clothes.

"Natster!" someone cried as he ran onto the field. Snow entered his shoes, filled every cavity of air. "Even teams again!" He joined the side that was short a man, and they huddled. His friends were dark figures against the sparse light from the streetlamp, ghosts against the dimly reflecting snow. He stood crouched, a few feet behind the line of scrimmage and waited for the snap of the ball. When it came, cold but familiar to his hands, he sprinted out to his right, away from the boy rushing in at him. He couldn't see more than a few feet in front of him, no

one to throw to, so he ran forward. Eluded one man and churned ahead through the knee-deep snowfall, lifting his legs high and pumping his arms for locomotion. He ran and ran, joyous in the open field with his face raw and stinging like mad, until he got trapped in a crowd and two defensemen hit him, dragging him off his feet. He hit the snow hard, his whole body sinking deep into it, and he felt the snow fill his ears and mouth and nose and eyes, and he laughed insanely, letting loose a wild howl through the snow melting against his skin.

Nat Green carried his bags up the dark staircase of the house he grew up in and down the hall to the room at the end. His room was preserved exactly as it had been before he'd left for college four months before. His mother had cleaned and tidied but thrown nothing out and resisted every urge to redecorate. The twin bed in the corner covered tightly with the same bedspread he'd always known, his desk opposite, posters on the walls of sports figures, two trophies from junior high school still standing in the bookcase—these objects were his childhood, and they remained for the time being intact.

He dropped his bags by the closet and sat at his desk, thumbing through assorted junk mail that his parents had saved for him. Opened a drawer and found old textbook covers made from brown grocery bags, labeled for various subjects and then covered with doodling and graffiti. Pictures of the wanderings of his mind during boring high school classes. Everything

smelled old and familiar.

He put the bookcovers back, closed the drawer and walked out of the room. At the other end of the hall he knocked on a door, heard his sister yell to come in, and entered. She lay on her bed, reading under a lamp that hung on the wall. Everything was pinks and yellows and flowers, except for the Bob Dylan poster he'd mailed her from the Coop.

"Hey there," he smiled and came to her. She sat up and accepted his hug. "What's up, Isabelle Green?"

"Not much, Nat Green. What odd names we have. Was your train late?"

"Yeah, Dad had to wait a while at the station. Enjoying your vacation?"

"It's okay. How was your week with your woman?"

"Just fine. I won't bore you with graphic details."

"That's all right, I don't care. Anyway, I'll get it all out of you in the next few weeks.

Hey, I couldn't believe that letter you sent me. Could that all be true?"

"I'm afraid so."

"What are you going to do? Did you tell Dad that he died?"

"I just told him in the car."

"Jesus, what'd he say?"

"Nothing. I can't understand him. It's like the fact that his father was actually discovered alive makes no difference. Things are still the same as they always were, as if he'd died all those years ago. Dad's usually so logical and intelligent, and this all just seems so stupid."

"I'll tell you one thing, he's been pretty weird since he went up to see you that weekend. Real quiet."

"Well, I'm glad he had some reaction."

"Hey, don't be too hard on Dad—you know, it hasn't been that easy a life for him. He worked hard to make it on his own—I can see why he'd have mixed reactions to all this."

"I know, I know, but it still makes no sense. It was all because of a silly accident—it was nobody's fault. He of all people should have seen it that way." Nat held a stuffed kitten in his hands, turning it over and over, squeezing.

"Hey, cut it out—you're hurting Tiffany."

He threw the kitten at her. "I'm starved. Come down and get a snack with me."

"Okay. Did Mom and Dad go to bed?"

"Yeah, they were pretty tired. They thought you were asleep too." They left her room and descended the dark staircase, walked by the den where someone had left a light on, and into the kitchen. He found the remains of a chocolate cake and split it into two pieces. They sat at the old kitchen table and ate.

"But Nat, you know what I'm still dying to know—what went on in that room while you waited outside? What did they have to say to each other after all those years?"

"Not much, I think. They were only in there a few minutes. Can you believe that? I figured he'd at least go back to see him, or even take him home."

"Maybe he meant to. Maybe he was planning on going back up there, and even bringing him back here like you say. He didn't have much of a chance—he died so soon after."

"He had enough of a chance." Nat gulped milk. "Hey, what's that?" He pointed to a burning candle sitting on a shelf above the stove.

"It's a Jahrzeit candle. Don't you remember, it's three years ago today that Grandmom died."

"Oh God, I forgot, that's right."

"Yeah, Dad took me out to the cemetery today to visit the grave. Pretty weird."

"I guess it was a hard time to hear about his father too. Not that anytime would've been good."

"I guess." Isabelle yawned. "I'm going to sleep, Nat. You coming up?"

"No, I'm going to finish this cake. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay. Goodnight, big brother Nat."

"Goodnight, Iz." Alone in the yellow light of the kitchen, he watched the candle on the shelf burn. Three years already. Four months already. Forty years.

After a while he put the dishes in the sink, returned the milk to the refrigerator, and turned out the light, leaving the kitchen in shadows from the candle. He walked toward the stairs and again noticed that the light was on in the den, so as he passed he put his head in the doorway for a second to take a look, then continued on.

At the base of the stairs he stopped and froze against the wall. His heart, still young, thumped allegro against his rib cage, marking time. He stood there, seeing in his mind a clearer image of what his eyes but not his brain had perceived in the den: his father, teacher of science and rational thought, hunched forward over a book at his desk, yarmulke set on his graying head, rocking ever so slightly, the sound of his voice just barely perceptible in the musical cadence of a chant, alone in the light of one small lamp, praying.