
BENEATH THE TREES

Erica Eisdorfer

1920

Dear Rachel,

I hope you are doing well. The buildings here are so high it hurts your neck to look up at them. I have a bed and a job in a vegetable market. The pay is poor but maybe I can find something else. I miss you and will send you the money to come here as soon as they allow it.

I go to Shul on Friday nights and say the prayers. There's lots of opportunity to be pious, so don't worry about it.

Your husband,

Sol Gottesman

At first, America was fathomless. Sol wandered from street to street, mouth open, sweaty with fear. In an alcove in the back of a family's flat, he rented a bed which he shared with another man, Galician not Hungarian, but they could speak Yiddish to each other. Not that their paths crossed much. The man worked during the nights at the fish market which Sol knew because he could smell it on the sheets..

Mrs. Harchik who rented the bed—she had four children and a husband in the front room—told Sol about a man who would give him some work. She gave him directions to the store, a real market, not a pushcart, either, and he found it though he got yelled at seven times, or seventy, when asking directions. The grocery man did give him work—unloading farm wagons of the great boxes of cabbages and onions until Sol thought his arms would break.

In the beginning he stayed inside at night. He was paying for the room, after all; he didn't want to waste his money. Also he was tired from the lifting.

He sat on his bed and missed Rachel. My luck that we should be newlyweds and then right away separated by an ocean for five years. Fucking quotas! "Don't curse," he heard her say inside his head, and closed his eyes to see hers, that unlikely blue, as they hardened, as she scolded. He sat like this for some weeks, after work, on his bed, but after a while he got restless and wanted to see what all the fuss was about—the bustle, the swirl of the streets.

"Carp! The best carp!"

"Look at these needles, none sharper!"

"Wanna pickle? Come on, try this pickle, you'll never go anywhere else for your pickles."

He got lost, always. "Excuse me, can you tell me which way to Third Avenue?"

"You're on Third Avenue, schmuck!"

One day, walking in the streets, Sol realized he'd been embarrassed for every second he'd been in America so far.

He was curious about the theater. He couldn't understand the idea of a play—people stand on a stage? They talk to the audience? No? To themselves? They dress up sometimes? It sounded absurd. Sometimes Sol would watch as a show let out. The smiles! The knee slapping! He vowed he'd go inside next week and then next week and then next, but he felt shy of waiting alone in line.

The truth was, he yearned for some companionship though he'd never been the most sociable fellow. Mr. Harchik was no use; he came home, ate and slept. The only time Sol ever heard him speak was when he was banging Mrs. Harchik and then he spoke in Lithuanian and Sol couldn't understand what he was saying, though he could imagine.

Sitting at a diner with a cup of coffee, Sol noticed that often a man would slip through a door in the back of the room. He waited and watched. Sure enough, he could smell beer through the door. He knocked. An eye looked out of a slot and then the door swung open. That was all it took, was wanting it.

He thought about that, while sipping his single sudsy beer, the one per evening he could afford. You can't say that I have no balls. I'm here, right? I'm in this city, right? I'm breaking the law, drinking this beer, right? Thinking like that made him feel better.

At the bar, the regulars ignored him. He listened while they talked to each other.

"That Nathan Hoffman, that son of a bitch, told me I could have a week and what do I get? Three lousy days, is all."

"Drink to me, boys—I'm getting married tomorrow!"

"My brother, he says he got a letter from the government saying five years he has to wait for his wife. Five years!"

Sol closed his eyes.

"Oy, poor guy."

"Are you kidding? He was dancing in the street!"

One night, as Sol nursed his drink, the door slammed open and in came two men, a short fat one and a tall handsome one. They both wore makeup on their faces. Sol gaped; the regulars laughed.

"What, is Aaron drunk again?"

"Oy," howled the short man, "I'm going to kill him. So, I hire him, and why? Because my wife told me to. 'Oh,'" he continued, mincing, "'oh, he's such a nice boy, such a good boy.' Good boy, my fat tuchus, he's a fucking lout!"

The handsome man held his hand up, stop. "Irv," he said to the little man, "Calm, calm." His voice, thought Sol, was magnificent, like the voice of God in your head.

"We have a show in half an hour. We gotta work fast."

The little man nodded. "Okay," he said, loud, "who wants to make an extra dollar-fifty? Easy work, no problem."

One of the regulars yelled, "Me," but when he stood up, he tripped.

"You're drunk, you idiot," said the little man. "Who else?"

"Make it two-fifty," said the handsome man.

"What's it for?" Sol asked his neighbor at the table. "What's the job?"

"You," yelled the short man, and before Sol could look around to see who had taken the job, he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"What?" said Sol to the short man. "What's the job?" he said again.

"Don't worry about it, you're gonna enjoy yourself," said the short man. "I'm Irv Brachman, the proud owner of the Palisade, that dump across the street. Look Maurice," he said to the handsome man, "look at his hair, the same as Aaron's. And tall like him too. No one will know the difference. You're a good man, a real good man, I can tell." Mr. Brachman took Sol's arm and

pulled him towards the door. "Come along, come along, we don't have all the time in the world. Shmuel," he called to the barman, "put this man's drink on my tab. See? See how you're gonna be treated? Exactly like a king."

"But what's the job?" said Sol again as they escorted him across the street to the theatre.

The men took him to a little room which was littered, to Sol's horror, with rouges, eye pencils. "Can you put this on?" said the handsome man and when Sol just stared he said, "Never mind, I'll help you just this one time, just to show you."

Maurice stuck his forefinger in a pot of black and scraped it over Sol's eyebrows. It felt like glue.

"Sir," said Sol, "I don't have to go on the stage, do I? I never was in a show."

"Yeah but you've seen 'em, haven't you?"

Sol was silent.

"You've never seen a show?" Maurice seemed impressed, "Jesus, you really are a greenhorn. Well, never mind, never mind. Listen, when I say 'Not my brother!' you come out on the stage and say, 'Yes, it is I, Yankel!' And then you grab the girl. You can do that, can't you?"

"A girl?" said Sol. "I'm a married man."

Maurice paused in painting Sol's face to look amused. "Who isn't?" he said. "Just grab her is all, and the audience will get it. Just grab her good."

"That's all for two-fifty?"

"That's it," nodded Maurice, "Just grab her."

Sol stood on the side of the stage breathing fast. When the aeroplanes flew over us in our trenches, that wasn't worse than this. I'm not careful, I'm gonna piss my pants. He waited where Maurice said to wait and when he heard his cue (later he learned the word "cue,") he went out and said his line as loud as he could and then grabbed the arm of the girl on the stage.

He was amazed by what happened then. A roar, a din, a thunderclap—it was the audience, laughing and cheering. The racket increased. "Leggo," said the girl through her teeth "stop squeezing me." Sol dropped her arm like it was stolen goods and the audience laughed even louder.

Later, Irv counted out Sol's money. "You're a natural," he said as he folded it and kissed it and handed it over, "You're coming back tomorrow, right?"

Sol was already shaking his head no when Maurice said, "Of course he's coming back. Waddya think, he's gonna leave us high and dry? You've gotta come back," he said seriously, his arm around Sol's shoulder. "Now, you're in the family."

Sol considered this. He could use a little family, he thought. What could it hurt, for a week or two. "Two-fifty every night?"

Ike guffawed. "What, are we, like Midas? That was for saving our asses. You're part of the regular company, you get a dollar a show, same as the rest of us."

Now, Sol spent his days at the market, his evenings at the theatre. He said his line, took his money, collapsed in Mrs. Harchik's alcove. When he told her where he was and why he needed her to let him in so late she sniffed, but then he heard her tell her neighbor that her boarder was an actor, like she was talking about a new dress she had bought.

The trouble was that Sol hated the theater. He liked the people fine, it was the work he had no use for. He felt only scorn when he watched the actors on the stage.

"They laugh at you," he said to Maurice, "and you don't care?"

Maurice looked up from his eggs and put on an expression like, You poor shmoe.

“We want them to laugh,” he explained carefully, “that’s what we want them to do. They laugh, they come back. They cry, they come back. It’s when they don’t laugh or cry that we worry.”

Sol only shook his head. It seemed unmanly to him, all this emotion. When Gilde, the actress with the arm, asked him about his wife—was she pretty, when could she come over—he pretended he hadn’t heard. “It’s none of her business,” he thought, “about my wife.” Rachel had sent him a photograph of herself and he kept it in his pocket and gazed at it like a boy, but that was only in private. The truth was that more and more he had to struggle to remember her voice. When the letter came about the baby—it was due in the new year—he hardly felt excited. Maybe a son, maybe a daughter—either way, it’ll be five years old before I see its face.

One day, at the grocery store, he cut his cheek on a piece of wire. The men crowded to look at him bleed. “Oy, that’ll be a scar.” “Your wife will scream when she sees it.” “No more pretty boy for the play, actor-boy.”

“What’s that?” said Mr. Grossman, the owner, “about the theatre?”

“Sure, didn’t you know? Sol here’s a actor at the Palisade!”

That night Sol could see Mr. Grossman in the audience. The next day, as he was hoisting carrots, Mr. Grossman pulled him aside. “I was at the play last night,” he said, “I saw you.”

Sol tried to smile.

“I showed Mrs. Grossman your bandage,” he pointed to Sol’s face, “and I told her you got that at my shop and she said I should take it easy on you.” He smiled. “Come, I’ll give you a little easier work so you can stay pretty.” He showed Sol upstairs and gave him a white apron and showed him how to work the scales. “So, if I have an actor working for me, maybe the yentas will buy a little more?”

No more money, thought Sol, but the work was a hundred times easier than schlepping cabbages. That night, as he blacked his brows, he made a plan. So I’ll save. What I make here, I’ll put it in a box, I’ll forget it’s there. Then when she comes—when she comes with the baby—we’ll have a nice place to live, not a corner of somebody else’s apartment, but our own, with a window, so she can see the street. This was a good plan. A man’s plan. He exhaled a sharp breath—firm intent—and straightened his back. In the mirror, Maurice, putting rouge on his cheeks with a forefinger, eyed him and chuckled.

“You’re ready, huh,” he said, smiling, “You ready for what’s coming?”

Sol nodded, once, a brief acknowledgement. What he was ready for, not ready for—that was his business.

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1937

Sol was white from the flour. Flour in his nostrils, on his lashes, under his nails. Remembering winters at home he thought: I look like a stump that is so covered up with snow that you cannot tell whether it is a stump or a man. I am a man, he thought, but I could be a snow-covered stump after all. He sighed and unhooked the big mixing bowl from its base and dumped the contents onto the big table that stood in the middle of the bakery’s back room. Then he punched the dough, punched it and punched it until it was right. The fashioning of bagels was as easy as making a circle.

He wondered how he’d feel if this was his living. As it was—which was piece work—he was glad to get it. Thrilled, even. At first, his family had fared better than many. He’d had the grocery store and the theater—two jobs, when others didn’t have one. And Bella too: His daughter, though young, was a favorite at the Palisade. At sixteen she could still play a child, she could play a

moll, she could do anything—but mostly, Sol acknowledged, mostly she could make them laugh.

Rachel had high hopes for Bella, Sol knew that. He heard Rachel tell Bella stories about her future— the fame, the treasure— while Bella sat on a stool and peeled the potatoes for supper.

“You give her dreams,” he said to Rachel once. “She could be disappointed.” The way Rachel looked back at him—those hard black specks in that blue—shut him up. He shrugged. It was just the two of them for such a long time. So now they have their schemes, their plans. What’s the real harm? He remembered his own mother back in the old country: If that Rachel was a man, she’d said, she would be a general.

When things got bad, Sol went to his jobs like he was going to rob a bank, like the jobs were secrets. The headlines held despair, like it was news. Sol felt like he had something big on his back. I am not a dreamer. I see what really happens in the world. I see the lines of men waiting for any shred of work. I see the children waiting for soup. I see those boxes of apples and their sellers. I see what’ll happen to me and that it’ll happen.

And of course he was right. The goods on the grocery store shelves dwindled. No more did Mr. Grossman stock paprika (too expensive to import) and then no strawberries (spoil too quickly) and then no red meat (no one could afford it). The men who unloaded the trucks began to melt away, first those without families, then those who could not afford to support their children on the few hours Mr. Grossman could let them have and hoped to find something better. Finally Mr. Grossman came to Sol. He was crying and his nose dripped into his moustache.

“I am more sorry than I can say,” he sobbed, his belly (smaller than it used to be, thought Sol) shaking. “I must say good-bye to you. You have been a good employee for many years and I am sorry to let you go. But if I am to stay open, I must diminish and perform the work myself. My son will help me.”

“Your son, is he not at school?” Sol asked before he thought not to. More tears, more snot.

“There is no money,” said Grossman. “Perhaps he can return to his studies once things improve.”

Sol nodded. Mr. Grossman had been a professor in Budapest,]. To take his kid out of school, thought Sol, had to hurt.

Luckily Sol still had his job at the Palisade. “How can it be,” Sol asked Rachel, “that men starve on the street and yet the theater does not close?”

Rachel shrugged a shoulder. “People need a laugh,” she said, “like they need food. That’s why.”

Sol didn’t really understand her, but he thanked God. He spent his days wandering the streets, looking for something to do, anything that could line his pockets or if not line them, then at least patch the holes in them. And at night he and Bella would walk together to the Palisade. One evening, when they arrived for their shifts, they found the cast and crew sitting in a circle, Mr. Brachman talking to them, gently, sadly. More tears, more snot. They had to let people go—Sol, others. But not Bella! They wanted to keep Bella! She had become the darling of the Palisade. And so though they had to cut back, and who didn’t these days, Bella could stay.

Sol and Rachel took in a boarder. Mr. Baum, nice enough, Galician, but he got drunk a lot, came to live with them. Mr. Baum loved Rachel’s cooking “even with barely a taste of meat,” she pointed out to Sol who mistrusted the man for no good reason. Mr. Baum slept in the back room with the boys. Hank, even at seven years old, wouldn’t share a bed with him (“He stinks, Ma”) and so Rachel made the boy a pallet on the floor. And of course whatever Hank did, Jake, now five, did and so Mr. Baum had the bed to himself.

Bella slept in the front room on the sofa. During the day, Hannah, Rachel’s younger sister, who had a night shift nursing at the hospital, took her turn in Sol and Rachel’s bed. But she was unhappy. “The boys wake me up,” she grumbled. “I might as well find a room of my own somewhere,” but Rachel begged her to stay. They needed the money.

So Sol worked piecemeal. He delivered packages, he unloaded bags of medical waste from Hannah’s hospital, he worked at a hardware store unbending nails for resale. And sometimes he might find some work at the bakery. It wasn’t a sure thing, but a

day or two a week he'd check by and the owner might ask him to take a shift. Mr. Suker trained him with the easy stuff and then left him alone.

As the bagels boiled, he went to the front of the store to open it for the morning. He put the trays of rolls in their cases as well as the single puny tray of pastries. Sol knew that Suker regretted the loss of the pastries the most. When Suker had shown him around, he'd said sadly, "we used to sell kolaches and ruglach, dozens of them every day. And my Dobos torte—seven layers." Sol remembered that the man had looked at him pointedly, so Sol had nodded as if he too remembered the beautiful cake.

To him, Sol thought, pastry is like poetry. Sol understood that. He himself had developed a fondness for English poetry and when there had been money, he had bought enough books of it—used, but still—to fill half a shelf of the cabinet in the front room. When Hank was little, Sol would read to him, haltingly because of the English, from Wordsworth and Donne. If he did not know a word, he could ask Bella or Hannah. But soon Hank had had enough. "I like baseball," said the boy, "I wanna hit like Hank Greenberg."

Hank was in love with Hank Greenberg. Rachel had heard the boys yell "Greenberg!" at him when they wanted his attention. Rachel had laughed uproariously when she told Sol. Sol had shrugged. "Greenberg," he said. "That's better than Gottesman!"

Hank's fondest wish was to travel to Detroit by bus to see Hank Greenberg play in his home stadium. "I can stay with Aunt Lotta," he had explained, "and watch the game and then take the bus back."

"And the bus fare?" Sol remembered saying to him, "where will you find it?"

He had watched his son's innocence crack a little, oh, bus fare, I had forgotten: like that.

Today Suker was late. Sol shrugged, turned the sign on the door to "open." A man appeared in front of the glass and opened the door and came into the shop. Sol could see that he was a servant from a wealthy family uptown. Sometimes they came with special orders. Sol had never taken an order but he knew that Suker would let him go on the spot if he lost the business.

"I need to order a wedding cake," said the man. "For the Van der Zeelands." Sol nodded and took out the pad he'd seen Suker use.

"Address?"

The man, slender in a new black suit, tilted his head back and looked at Sol. Sol got the idea.

"Sorry," he said. "The cake?"

"Where is the owner?" said the man.

"He'll be here in a moment," said Sol. "Let me get the details."

"May 6th," said the man. "To feed 150. White, three tiers, pink roses. Say, do you even know what a wedding cake looks like?"

Sol almost laughed. I was a soldier, he thought, and I have real scars on my body. I sat in a trench with the drone of an aeroplane above me, and here is this schmuck standing here, scolding me about a wedding cake. Sol turned the pad over and drew a cake. He had always drawn well, even as a child. Once, in school, he'd won a prize for a drawing. The drawing of the cake made it look perfect, like anyone's fantasy of a cake—swags, rosebuds, even a tiny bride and groom on the top, a luxury, but perfectly traditional.

"That's it," said the man, nodding. "I am to pay you now," he said and took out a wallet.

Luckily for Sol, who had no idea what to charge for such a thing, Suker walked in. He looked at the order, nodded at Sol and took over. Sol went back to the bagels. He heard Suker wish the man a good day and heard the bell on the door tinkle as he walked out.

As Sol was taking the bagels out of the oven, he saw Hank in the doorway. Suker was standing behind the boy looking worried.

“Hank?” said Sol. “Did you come alone?” What could cause the little boy to walk ten blocks?

The boy nodded. “It’s Jake,” said Hank. “His fever. He’s not breathing so good. Mama says bring the doctor.”

Sol looked at Suker in alarm. Suker nodded and stepped aside.

At home, Rachel was sobbing. She showed Jake to the two men; he was red with fever and his breath rattled like beans in a can. He lay in his parents’ bed. Sol stood and watched. The doctor will not be able to help him. This little boy, this child of mine. Rachel will never get over it. Hank will wear the scars of his brother’s death forever. “My baby,” sobbed Rachel, “please.” The doctor needed room to do his job. Sol sat on the sofa and stared at the books of poetry in the case across from him. My brother also lost a child. But his child was born damaged, so the consequence was less. Instantly, Sol felt ashamed. Did that make the loss easier, he scolded himself, that the child was incomplete? Inside he thought, yes, yes it was easier than this will be. He put his head in his hands.

Hank stood near the window, looking out into the courtyard where he played ball every day. It smelled like piss down there, Sol thought, but Hank and his pals could barely break away from their games to eat. Bella sat next to Sol sobbing quietly. He put his hand on her hair and she cried louder. Mrs. Mariani and Mrs. Adelman bustled in the kitchen.

Sol rose from the sofa. “Tell Mama,” he said to Bella who looked up at him, her eyes streaming. “Tell her I went to shul.” Bella nodded.

At shul, Sol felt drunk. He said his prayers, he davened in front of the Torah, he tried to feel at home enough to beg, to plead. I am not as I should be. I am not grateful to you Oh God, I am only afraid. My boy, Sol cried silently, save my son. My little child with Rachel’s blue eyes. If you let him live, Oh God, I will give my life to him, to Hank, to Bella. I will not want anything but what it is they must have. I will become a machine only, I will have no desires for myself. I will open my chest and expose my heart as the heart of a man who lives only for those whom he has caused to come into the world. If you let him live, oh God, God of our Fathers, I will make myself like Abraham was to Isaac when he did not thrust the knife down but instead waited, prayed, received Your voice. I will live only for them.

The rebbe said, “You must change his name to fool the Angel of Death,” and then he held out his hand. Sol gave him 50 cents—he saw the rebbe shrug at how little it was, but it was all he had. Fool the Angel of Death? With a name?

“Chaim Yaakov Gottesman,” said the rebbe. “Chaim, for life. “

The apartment was empty. Sol found Hank in the courtyard with his ball. “Where is everyone?” said Sol, bewildered.

“They went to the hospital, Papa,” said the boy. “Mama said to tell you.”

Sol felt the blood wash over his eyes. “And you played ball?” Before he thought, he smacked the boy’s face hard. “Selfish,” he yelled, “while your brother dies, you play.”

Hank wept. Sol grabbed the boy’s wrist and together they trotted the three blocks to the hospital. Maybe, thought Sol, maybe they will give me a break on the price because Hannah works there. As soon as the thought formed, he felt ashamed. No one slaps me, he thought looking at Hank, for my bad thought. He stopped in the middle of the street and hugged the boy close to him. Hank said, “Papa,” then began to sob again.

Two weeks later, Jake lived. It took that long to find out whether he would. First he almost died, then he almost recovered, then he fell again into a fever, even worse than before. Rachel spent every day at the hospital. Bella stayed home from school to look after Hank. Sol continued to try to find work. Mr. Suker had some for him.

“How’s the boy, Sol,” he asked as Sol tied on the white apron.

“They removed a rib,” said Sol tasting the blood of the words on his tongue, “so his lungs would work.”

Suker looked horrified. He felt around his own ribcage with his fingers. Sol watched him do it and nodded.

“To make more room,” said Sol. “There’s a scar like a ravine on his back.” Sol hadn’t known the word “ravine” before. In Yiddish, of course, but not English. Hank had found it for him in a book. “They pack it with gauze,” he continued, “and then, when they pull it out, it stinks.”

Suker shook his head. “A miracle,” he said. “The missus?”

“She’s okay,” said Sol. Then he said, “Mr. Suker, can you pay me today? I worked two half-days last week and two this week. I got bills.”

“Yes,” said Suker. “Hey, do me a favor and come back later to help me close the shop. Teddy wanted off. I’ll give you your wages then.”

Sol went right from the bakery to the hospital to see Jake. He liked it there, now that Jake was in the recovery room. Rachel went in the morning and stayed most of the day, jolly, so relieved she couldn’t stop smiling. She’d made friends with the other mothers of the kids who shared the big room with Jake; an Italian woman whose daughter had two broken legs from falling under a pushcart, an Irish woman whose son was born with a club-foot that had been fixed.

“It’s better in here,” Rachel said to Sol, indicating the room, the parents, the children. “In the other one, we cried, we thought our kids were dying. In here, they’ll get better, so we’re happy.”

Rachel and Hank were with Jake. “Papa,” said Jake, “there’s flour in your hair.”

Rachel laughed and kissed Jake, pinched his cheek until he squawked, “Ma, stop!”

Hank had a piece of paper and a pencil. He drew a picture of Jake’s back with its giant scar and showed it to him. “Can I have it?” said Jake and Hank nodded.

Rachel looked at Sol. “Solly,” she said, “something wonderful.”

“We could use it,” he said.

She nodded, but he could see the tears streaming down. “What’s wonderful that makes you cry?” he said. “Jake?”

“No, not Jake,” she said. “Bella. Mr. Brachman called a cousin in California, a big macher in the moving pictures. He asked if he might have some work for a young girl and the cousin said yes, they had a need for a girl who could speak Yiddish and English, so Bella could do it. So the man said that because he was his cousin and because he needed the girl anyway, he’d send the money for the train. She wants to go. You should see her, she’s so happy.” Rachel’s eyes welled. “My baby. Will we ever see her again?”

Sol stared at Rachel. When had this happened? Why did things happen in his family and he wasn’t a part of it? “Alone,” he said fiercely, “you’d let her go alone all the way across the country?”

Rachel said, “Of course not! Hannah will go too. She wants to. She almost smiled, even.” Rachel looked at Sol and raised an eyebrow. They had a joke about Hannah smiling.

Sol shook his head. “She’s too young,” he started.

Rachel’s eyes got hard, the way they did when she wanted something. He knew that look. “She’s not that young,” she said. “They get older earlier in this country, anyway.”

Sol thought he knew Rachel’s feelings. She was ambitious. But what could a woman be, he thought, but a mother? Rachel was an ambitious mother, especially for Bella. Sol wasn’t sure Rachel knew this about herself, but he knew it. He remembered his prayer to God in the shul, on the day that Jake went into the hospital, how he’d vowed to give himself completely to his children, flay open his chest for them, expose his heart.

“So the train’s all paid for,” he said, conciliating as usual.

“And they’ll be taken care of when they get there,” she said, smoothing Jake’s blanket over his legs “so they’re not high and dry.”

She'd made sure of the details, he could see. He wondered how long the plans had been cooking without him catching a whiff. There was a commotion in the hall.

"Children," said a nurse in white trotting into the big room. She was smiling, excited. "We have a wonderful surprise. Everyone must go onto the roof. We can take the elevators. We have to hurry now. It's a big surprise. You'll want to see it, children."

Jake could sit but not walk. Sol picked him up gingerly and lifted him into the wheelchair. The boy gasped, his face white.

"Solly," whispered Rachel. She motioned with her chin at the Italian mother so Sol went over and helped her lift her daughter into the chair. And then the Irish mother. It's like a trip around the world in here, thought Sol. The mothers thanked him and praised him. He saw Hank watch him proudly, that's my Papa—that look.

The halls were full. There were lines at the elevators. Everyone was excited; no one knew what the surprise was but it was exciting to speculate. A special airplane? A rainbow? Hank wanted to push Jake in the wheelchair and the younger boy bossed him: faster, slower. Rachel laughed loudly when Hank pretended that if Jake didn't shut up, he conk him on top of his head. Sol worried: will the scar open, will those ribs loose inside him move in ways they ought not?

On the roof they found a space amidst the wheelchairs. The roof was crowded with nurses, doctors, patients, families. They all milled around and joked about the surprise break, the beauty of the spring day, the delicious sun.

Then Hank yelled, "Look!" and pointed west. Heads turned together, like we're dancing, thought Sol. There, coming towards them, was the great zeppelin, the silver blimp, the Hindenburg herself.

Sol heard the collective gasp. He had himself been part of the noise. He could not gaze away from the blimp, silver, sparkling, unbelievably immense. We're silent, thought Sol, because it is as if we see God's face. He made himself look away for half a moment, to look at his family. Rachel's eyes, the pupils lost in the blue, gazed unblinking; Jake and Hank were speechless. Everyone on the roof held their breaths as the giant airship, as long as our apartment building is tall, thought Sol, chugged quietly over them. We turn in unison, like a school of minnows, like starlings wheeling in the sky. I have never been so happy. My heart is full.

After the Hindenburg Jake was tired. They said good-night to him, Rachel kissed him and told him she'd come back in the morning after Hank went to school. Jake thumbed his nose at Hank.

"Too bad, you still hafta go," said the younger boy.

Hank's brow furrowed. "It's a good thing you're sick or I'd sock you one," yelled Hank. He ran out of the room, furious.

On the way down to the first floor Sol said to Rachel, "Hank must learn to be a man."

"He's mad, is all," said Rachel, "because today Jake got a piece of cake from a lady."

Sol understood. Rachel had said to Jake, laughing, "It's a good thing you lost a rib so we could see that miracle in the sky," and Jake had looked proud. "I'm the one that saw it first," protested Hank. Sol felt Hank's envy rising off the boy's skin.

In front of the hospital, Hank sat on the stoop. He was pale and his lips were white. Rachel rushed to him. "Hankele," she said, "what?"

Hank gasped for air. "It was him," he said hoarsely. He pointed down the street. Sol looked but could see nothing, or rather everything: hats, skirts, a dog on a leash.

"It was him," said Hank, hyperventilating. "Hank Greenberg!"

Rachel said, "Hank Greenberg? Who plays the baseball? You saw him? What was he doing here?"

Sol said, "Perhaps it was not him."

But Hank could not be mollified. "It was him," he said, his voice hoarse from not crying. "I saw him. He was signing autographs. I went up to him..."

Sol and Rachel waited.

The boy's mouth worked and then finally, in a giant sob, "But Jake has my paper!" He put his face on his knees and wept. Rachel rubbed his back. After a while, Sol said to him, "Sonny, come to the bakery with me. Maybe there'll be a piece of cake for you." "I don't want cake," came the muffled response, but the boy got up, straightened his cap and came along.

Sol and Hank entered the bakery through the back door. There was Mr. Suker, sitting in a chair right in the middle of the back room. His head was in his hands. He looks, thought Sol, like Hank looked on the hospital stoop.

"Mr. Suker," said Sol, "are you okay?"

Suker looked up. Sol couldn't tell whether he was drunk or whether he'd been crying. He stood and motioned them into the front room. There, on a cart with wheels, was the Van der Zeeland's wedding cake. It was perfection.

"Wow," said Hank.

"It's a beauty," said Sol remembering Suker's story about the Dobos torte. "What a job you did, Mr. Suker."

Suker laughed but he didn't sound happy. "Gottesman," he said. "I don't have your wages."

Sol looked at Suker, horrified. Suker looked back at him and shrugged. "Times are bad," he said. "I'm sorry."

Sol opened his mouth to say what he thought but Suker held up his hand. "How about you take this cake instead?"

Sol stared. Maybe Suker had gone crazy. "I got bills," said Sol, "I got bills to pay."

"They sent a boy," said Suker, still talking about the cake. "They said there was an accident, they don't want it, I should go ahead and keep it. What am I going to do with a wedding cake for 150 people?"

Sol almost said, "Will it pay my rent for me?" but then he saw Hank's face. It was turned towards him and it was alright. Sol punched down his anger like it was dough. He took a deep breath and smiled at his son. "What did I tell you," he said to Hank as casually as he could. "Did I not tell you that I'd get you a piece of cake?"

The boy barked with laughter and Sol did too and so did Mr. Suker, in relief maybe, thought. Sol. Sol said, "Let's bring it to Mama. Everyone shall have some."

Hank nodded, smiling, his mouth open. He licked his lips.

"We'll borrow the cart," Sol said to Suker, who nodded.

Hank smiled the whole ten blocks home. Children followed, people laughed and pointed as the giant white confection rolled down the sidewalk. When they got to their apartment building, Sol said to Hank, "Go get your Mama and tell her to bring a knife and the neighbors. But not the Katzes, because they're too kosher. Or the Steinmeltzes either."

Rachel walked out of the building with a mystified expression and a knife in her hand and burst into loud guffaws as soon as she laid eyes on the wedding cake. She laughed so hard that she began to cry and so Sol took the knife away from her and held it aloft. "L'chaim!" he yelled and then he cut a huge slice, lots of pink roses, and handed it to Hank. Hank gazed at it for a moment and then shoved half of it into his mouth at once. Everyone laughed. Rachel, recovered, took the knife back and cut slice after slice to hand out.

After the party the neighbors drifted away. Rachel and Sol sat together on the stoop with Hank between them.

"I told him my name," Hank said sleepily.

"Who?" said Rachel.

"Hank Greenberg," said the boy. "I said, 'Hey Mr. Greenberg, I'm Hank too.'"

Amazed, Sol looked at Rachel whose mouth was open in surprise.
“Did he say anything to you?”

“Yeah, sure,” said Hank. “He said, ‘Good name for a player, right?’” And so then I nodded and he put his hand right on top of my head.”

“Were you gonna tell us?” said Rachel.

“I just did tell you,” said Hank. Then he yawned. Rachel kissed him hard on his cheek and chuckled, shaking her head. “Oy,” she said, her arm around him. “This one. This boy.”

Sol sat smiling. He was full of cake and he felt good. The spring breeze rustled the leaves on the tree in front of their building and the papers in the gutters.

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1963

“It’s time for the show,” said Vicky, excited, jumping up and down on the porch. “Come on Grandpa, don’t you want to hear me sing?”

“Get up, Sol,” said Rachel from the doorway of the cottage. “The girls are making a show for us. Come in the house to listen.”

Sol sat up in his chair. I was dozing on the porch, he said to himself, having a vacation from our vacation. He could hear everyone inside, bustling around, getting ready for the children to perform. It was a little cooler today and the wind was up. The trees blew around the cottage. The smell of pines reminded Sol of his childhood.

They were on vacation in the Catskills at the Mountain View Lodge and Resort, compliments of Bella. Bella had flown in all the way from California with her kids, Debby and Vicky. Jake, now a surgeon, had made the trip up from New Jersey with his wife Elaine, who was hugely pregnant.

“Nothing’s going to keep me from going,” Elaine had said to Rachel one night before the vacation, when the couple was over for dinner. “If I go into labor, Jake can deliver. What’s the good of having a doctor in the family if he’s not going to take care of us when we need him? Think of the money we’ll save. “

Rachel had laughed loudly. Rachel loved Elaine. “It’s the perfect match,” she said when Jake announced his engagement. Sol felt a little intimidated by Elaine, to tell the truth. She was so smart, so opinionated. But, if Rachel was happy—well, it was good to have the mother-in-law happy, especially if that mother-in-law was Rachel. And especially, thought Sol, standing up slowly from his chair, after what Hank had done, marrying a Japanese girl and then having a baby, all the way over there on the other side of the world. Rachel had howled about that one.

“Your first grandson,” she sobbed to Sol, “and what’s his name?”

“Yaso,” Sol had told her.

“And what’s that? What’s that supposed to be, a name?” she said, mad now. That was Rachel: tears, then steam coming out of her ears. Even after all these years he couldn’t keep up.

“Hank says it means, ‘eight ten’” said Sol, “because in Japanese, nine sounds like ‘sorrow.’ So they skip sorrow, do you see?” He’d meant it to be conciliatory, but she’d taken it badly.

“And that makes sense to you?” she yelled. “Eight Ten is a name for a grandson?”

Sol had shut his mouth. He rather liked the name and how Hank had come by it. He remembered the letter. ‘It’s after Uncle Isaac,’ wrote Hank. ‘We made the I into a Y. I hope that’s suitable. Noriko wanted to name him according to tradition and I thought Y and I were pretty close.’ Sol had appreciated the gesture. Rachel had rolled her eyes.

Inside, the chairs were in rows. Bella was applying lipstick to little Vicky’s pouty mouth. Debby was sitting on the arm of the sofa, waiting patiently for her turn to be made up.

“All right,” said Bella. “Please take your seats, everyone! The show is about to begin!”

Sol sat in the back row. Rachel sat in front of him next to Elaine. She was clapping already.

I remember, thought Sol, how it was in the Palisade. When we were on stage, he remembered, it was hard to see the audience. The lights shone in our eyes. It made it easier. I’m not sure I could have done it if I’d seen the faces looking at me. Sometimes Sol couldn’t believe he’d done such a thing as acted on a stage. How did it happen, he thought, that I did that job? How is it that you fall into the things you do in your life?

Vicky skipped to a spot in front of the chairs. She smiled and curtsied. She was seven years old, blond and curly. She held a bottle in her hand. Sol recognized it as a bottle of Breck Shampoo; he sold that brand in his grocery store. Vicky’s dress had something underneath that made it stick out straight above her rosy knees; Sol didn’t know what made it do that but he could tell that the women thought it was adorable. That was they word used—adorable, over and over.

Vicky curtsied and began to sing in what Sol thought was a loud voice for such a little girl. She held the shampoo bottle up to her mouth and sang into it as if it were a microphone.

“Oh the shark, Babe, has such teeth dear,

And it shows them, pearly white.”

The song had several verses. She crooned and belted, all the while holding onto the Breck bottle, sometimes with both hands, sometimes with only one and the other arm outstretched. Bella and Rachel laughed so hard they cried; Sol could see black streaks on Bella’s cheeks from her eye makeup. Elaine held her belly, leaned into Rachel’s side. Sol, worried, looked at Vicky, but she didn’t seem to mind the laughter. She seemed to like it.

When the song was over, the women clapped and cheered. Rachel leaned forward and pulled the little girl into her arms and kissed and kissed. Still holding the child captive, she turned to Sol and said, “Who does this one remind you of, huh? Who does she make you think of exactly? Like a copy, a real copy.”

“Oh,” gasped Elaine, “if I don’t go into labor after that performance, it might never happen. I thought I was going to pee pee.”

Bella, who had snatched Vicky away from Rachel to give her a hug, guffawed. “What do you think, Vicky honey,” she said, “you almost made your auntie pee pee!”

Vicky wriggled away from her mother’s hug. “Did I sound pretty Mama?” she said. “Did I sing it good?”

Sol heard Debby say, “‘Well’, not ‘good,’” from her seat on the arm of the sofa.

“Oh yes, Mamale,” said Bella to Vicky, kissing her hard, “you’re a star!”

After a moment, Bella turned and looked at Debby. “Okay, honey,” she said. “Are you ready? Now you’re all in for a treat,” Bella said loudly, “Debby is going to say us a poem, right Deb?”

“Doesn’t she like to sing?” said Rachel.

“Oh,” said Bella, smiling at Debby, “Debby has a lovely voice. But she wants to recite a poem for us. Come on honey.”

Sol watched the older girl stand obediently and walk to the front of the room. She must be ten years old, or so, he calculated.

She had that gangly look that girls get, all shin-bones. And they all wear pants now, thought Sol. Everyone wears pants.

“Do you need to clean your glasses, Sweetheart?” said Bella. “Clean them so we can see your pretty eyes.”

“Those glasses make you look so smart!” said Elaine.

“Debby’s very smart,” said Vicky. “She gets all A’s.”

“That’s my smart girl,” said Bella as Debby cleaned her glasses on her shirt tail. “Ready now?”

Debby nodded. She stood straight and looked at her audience. Sol could see that she was used to his.

“This is a poem by William Wordsworth,” she said very clearly. I know that name, thought Sol. There is a poem by William Wordsworth in one of my books. He sat up a little straighter.

“I wandered lonely as a cloud,” recited Debby. She looked straight at her mother, who smiled and nodded as she spoke. Sol was pleased; she spoke loudly and clearly and he could understand all the words she said.

“That floats on high o’er vales and hills.

When all at once, I saw a crowd...”

Suddenly Elaine put her hands on her belly. “Umph,” she said.

“What,” said Rachel, turning towards Elaine. “What?”

“Nothing,” whispered Elaine loudly. “Just a kick. Shh.” She motioned with her chin to Debby, who had stopped in mid-sentence. “Sorry honey,” said Elaine to Debby, another loud whisper.

What a thoughtless woman, thought Sol, to interrupt the child.

“Go ahead, hon,” said Bella.

Debby opened her mouth and then closed it. “I can’t remember from there,” she said.

“So start from the beginning,” said Rachel, comfortably. “It’s so beautiful! We’ll all hear it again.”

“Okay,” said Debby. Sol watched her take a breath and then say the poem through.

Everyone clapped when she finished. Sol saw Rachel hoist herself out of her chair to give Debby a kiss.

“Do you want to be a poet?” said Jake to Debby.

Debby smiled and shrugged.

“Maybe she’s a poet and she don’t know it,” said Elaine.

Everyone laughed.

After lunch, Sol went to sit on the porch again. He was wide awake. Bella had taken Vicky and Rachel to town in the car. Elaine was at the Bingo table. Jake was playing tennis with a friend he’d run into at dinner the night before.

“He’s in med school too,” said Jake. “Down at Duke. Good school.”

“What’s he in?” said Elaine.

“Psychiatry,” said Jake. “Too scary for me.”

“What,” said Elaine, “a scalpel’s not scary?”

Sol looked to see if Rachel understood what they were talking about, but she was talking to Bella.

The wind was up. The pines whipped around, sixty feet into the air, the very tops blowing fiercely while down at ground level, only a slight breeze cooled Sol’s cheek. My God, thought Sol, I remember it so clearly, those days of my childhood. He closed his eyes. He remembered the night before his wedding—the warmth of the evening, the wind. He recalled lying in his bed next to his brother Isaac—long dead in the camps—thinking about Rachel and watching through his window as the trees swayed, the larches and the giant hornbeam.

Five months earlier, Sol had suffered a heart attack. It was a Tuesday morning at the grocery store, nothing unusual. The vegetable delivery man was a little later than was his custom and Sol remembered looking out the door for the truck. Sol liked the vegetable man, a very tall black man with huge shoulders. His name was Anthony. Sol’s soft spot for vegetable men had never waned, not even when suddenly they sent a big Negro to do the job instead of the wiry Italian kids who’d always done it before. At first, Sol was afraid to be friendly with him, but Anthony was constantly courteous and worked at the unloading as hard as Sol remembered he himself had done when he was new, not yet an American citizen. Sol got in the habit of making a sandwich for Anthony—he liked salami with mustard and nothing else, on a hard roll—and Anthony would always thank him and shake his hand. It made Sol feel good to think that the two of them could be friends—the young Negro and the old Jew. That’s how he put it to himself.

When Anthony walked into the store with his crate of onions, he found Sol sitting on the floor, slumped against a shelf of canned peaches and pears. Sol remembered looking up into the concerned face and saying, “I’m sorry about the sandwich,” and then he didn’t remember anything else until he woke in the hospital with Jake and Rachel sitting by the bed.

“A heart attack!” Rachel had wailed. “Solly!”

“Very mild,” Jake said, holding Sol’s hand for what Sol thought was probably the first time in twenty-five years. “A very mild heart attack. You’ll be home in a couple of days, Pop, maybe a week. They’ll give you some blood thinner, you’ll take it easy, you’ll be good as new.”

“You know,” Jake said later, on a break from his hospital rounds, “you could retire, one of these days, you know. You’ve worked hard all your life, saved. You’re 67 years old. What are you waiting for?”

“Yes,” Sol said slowly, “but what would I do instead?”

“Sit! Take it easy! Read like you always wanted to so much.”

Sol looked over at Rachel’s empty chair. She was in the restroom.

“I’ll tell you what,” he said to Jake after a moment. “You stay at home with Mama all day. I’ll come here and do your job for you.”

Jake laughed, a big loud laugh like Rachel’s. “Okay, okay,” he said. “You should do what you want to do. You’ll be okay soon. Just don’t lift anything too heavy.”

“What’s funny,” said Rachel, coming out of the little bathroom, still adjusting her stockings. Sol understood her: If there was something funny, she wanted to laugh too. “What?” she said, already smiling.

It was a scare, but Jake was right, Sol felt fine in a couple of weeks. He already had a high school student working for him after school and Rachel made him hire another young man—Gabe, from Puerto Rico—to do the lifting, to close the store.

I’m glad I didn’t die, thought Sol as the fragrance of the pines floated on the breeze. I’m glad I’m here.

The door slammed and out came Debby. She stopped suddenly when she saw her grandfather.

“Hello,” he said.

“Hi.”

“That’s a very nice poem you said,” he said to her. “I remember that poem.”

She nodded.

“Would you like to sit down?”

Sol could sense her reluctance. I don’t blame her, he thought. To her, I’m only an old man, one she doesn’t know very well. She knows how she’s supposed to feel about me—she should love me, she should respect me. But she doesn’t know me.

She sat down on a chair next to him and together they watched the trees blow a little.

“Nice, huh,” said Sol.

“Yes,” she said, nodding. She seemed to mean it.

Suddenly Sol had a thought. He rose from his chair and said, “I’m going for a walk in the woods. Would you like to go too?”

Debby looked up at him. “Okay,” she said doubtfully.

“It’s a beautiful day,” Sol said by way of explanation.

“But Grandpa,” said Debby.

Oh, he thought, she thinks of my heart. “Don’t worry,” he said. “We’ll go slow. The doctors say the exercise is good for me.”

Together they walked down the steps of the cottage and across the road. Thirty feet to the right was an opening in the woods with a wood-burned sign that proclaimed it “Mountain View Nature Walk #3.”

The walk was very easy. The path was wide and well-kept—no pinecones, no roots sticking up. A couple of teenagers holding hands met them coming the other way; the path was wide enough to fit all four of them.

“This is a wide path,” said Sol, slightly disappointed.

“Yeah,” said Debby. “It’s manicured.”

Sol looked at her and nodded. She’s smart, he thought.

“Do you walk in the woods with your parents?” he said before he thought.

Debby looked at him, eyes wide behind her glasses. “With my mother?” she said

Sol smiled. “No,” he said. “Bella wouldn’t, I suppose.”

“My mother has never stepped off concrete in her life,” said Debby. “She says she’s a city girl, no two ways about it.”

“But you?” said Sol.

“I like to hike,” said Debby. “Sometimes I go hiking with my friend.”

“You know,” said Sol, “where your mother was born, there wasn’t a paved road to be seen. Not for miles.” Then he remembered something and chuckled. “I remember,” he said, “when your mother came to this country for the first time. She was...maybe she was five years old. I tried to buy her an ice-cream soda, but she told me she wouldn’t drink it.”

“But Mama loves ice cream!” said Debby.

“Well she had not seen it before,” said Sol, explaining. “And she thought I was trying to make her drink muddy water!” He chuckled again.

Debby stopped walking so he did too. He could tell the story amazed her.

“Is that a true story?” she said.

He nodded. “Yes,” he said. “It was 1926.”

“She never told me that story,” said Debby. They commenced their walk.

“Maybe she doesn’t remember,” said Sol, “but I do.”

They walked in silence for a while. Sol was enjoying himself very much. He felt good. He wasn’t winded at all. The sun shone through the tall trees and onto Debby’s hair. She had rich dark brown hair.

“Grandpa?” she said suddenly.

He looked at her to show her he was listening.

“Do you believe in God?” she asked, very serious.

He wondered what to say. He thought for a moment before he answered.

“Yes,” he said.

She looked at him. She seemed to want more. Sol liked her. He liked that she was serious. He liked that she had agreed to go on a walk with him, an old man. She is my flesh and blood, he thought. She is what I will leave here on this earth.

“There was a time,” he said, “after the war, you know?”

She nodded but he couldn’t be sure she understood.

“After the war, I wasn’t sure what I thought,” he said. “My brother Isaac, his family, two girls about your age.” He shrugged.

“What happened to them?” she said very slowly.

Sol sighed. He looked down at the smooth floor of the path. “They were killed,” he said. “Many were killed.”

“The same war Zosia was in?” said Debby suddenly. Sol understood: she had made the connection.

“Yes,” he said. “Zosia came through it but others did not.”

“And so?” Debby prompted him.

He had to think for a moment to know what to say. “Well,” he said, “it made me doubt. It made me wonder if God had forgotten us.”

She nodded but Sol could tell by her brow, her eyes that she wanted to know more.

“But,” he said and he saw how she looked quickly up into his face, “but,” he repeated, “please look around.” They had come to a bridge over a stream. The stream was very pretty, bubbling merrily along. The sun shone onto the water, glinting it like diamonds. The breeze blew the trees around gently.

Debby looked around. They stood together. It was lovely.

“Yes,” she said nodding. “I see.”

He wondered if he should put his arm around her, give her a hug, but he was too shy.

Suddenly, she gave a cry. “My purse!”

Sol looked over the railing in the direction she was pointing. He could just see it; a bright pink plastic toy purse floating on the merry stream, away from them. It must have fallen from the railing.

“Oh no!” Debby was crying and running, over the bridge and along the side of the stream. He trotted as quickly as he could to her side. She was standing and pointing to her bag which had become hung by its strap on a branch sticking up out of the water.

“It’s stuck,” said Sol. “It’s not going anywhere. We’ll get it.”

Debby looked hopeful. “Oh, I hope hope hope we can get it,” she said. Her hands were clasped and she was bobbing up and down in agitation. “How do we do it? It’s really important. I just absolutely can not lose it.”

“Is there something important inside it?” he asked, as he tried to think of how to get it. It was a cheap plastic purse. He sold purses like that in his store—purses and trucks and jump ropes for last minute birthday presents. He could give her another one if she liked it so much.

“Very important,” she said. “Diamond earrings. That my father gave me.”

Sol was taken aback. “Diamonds?”

“Yes,” she said. She hopped on one foot with impatience. She thinks I will know what to do, thought Sol. She trusts that I can fix this.

“Yes,” she said. “Earrings. My father gave me a pair and Vicky a pair.”

“Why don’t you wear them?” said Sol. “That would be safest. Safer than in a purse.”

“My ears aren’t pierced,” she said. “But I love them anyway.”

“He gave you earrings when your ears aren’t pierced?” said Sol. ‘Pierced’ was a new word. “Pierced ears,” he whispered to himself to try out the sound.

“He forgot,” said Debby. “He forgot that my ears aren’t pierced. Vicky’s are; Mama let her get her ears pierced but I didn’t want to do mine. But Daddy forgot. And so he got us both pierced earrings. So I can’t wear mine.” She was working at trying to break a long slender branch from a bush, but it was very green and wouldn’t come.

“He forgot,” said Sol. He nodded to himself. The one child, he thought, and then the other. He remembered Isaac, how he made their mother laugh, their father smile. He sat down and took off his shoes.

“Grandpa?” said Debby.

“So I’ll get a little wet,” he said.

The stream was shallow but it was chilly and the bottom was quite rocky. Sol picked his way carefully, step by step, towards the bag. It had become lodged about fifteen feet from the bank. He stepped slowly, one foot and then another, feeling for spaces between the stones as he shuffled along. The water climbed to his knees and then his thighs but it stopped there. When he reached the purse, he leaned over to pluck it from the branch and then he held it aloft, in triumph.

“Oh Grandpa,” cried Debby, her hands clasped. Her face was alight with relief. Sol felt unaccountably moved. As if I’m a hero, he thought.

Sol was perhaps two feet from the stream bank when he stepped on the piece of glass. At least he thought it might be glass— a

shard of beer bottle, perhaps. It seemed too sharp to be a rock. Whatever it was sliced deeply into the arch of his foot so that he gasped and stumbled.

“Grandpa?” said Debby. “Did something happen?”

“Maybe,” said Sol. He stopped where he was in the stream. He wasn’t sure how to proceed. The rocky stream bed made it impossible for him to hop to the bank, but he was pretty sure he couldn’t use the torn foot. It hurt quite a bit and he was worried about it.

Too bad, he thought. Her joy is diminished. He wished it had not happened.

“I will throw the bag,” he said loudly and she nodded and caught it neatly.

Leaning forward, he was able to use the larger rocks as handholds, and in this way he limped to the bank. Once on dry land, he quickly sat. Together he and Debby examined his foot.

“Oh, Grandpa!” said Debby, upset. “Does it hurt very much?”

“Not so much,” he said though it had begun to throb.

“But it won’t stop bleeding,” she said.

Sol looked and saw that she was right. The blood pumped out of the sliced arch. “It’s my blood thinner,” he said. “It’s okay. It’s a little pink pill. I take it for my heart and it makes the blood hard to clot.”

“I wish we had a washrag,” said Debby looking around as if there might be a linen closet nearby. “We need to clean the wound. You’re always supposed to clean wounds.” She sounded definite. Sol looked at her. He was pleased that her confidence seemed to be returning after the scare.

“There’s plenty of water,” said Sol motioning to the stream. He wanted to make her smile but he could see that her mind was now on her work.

“Yes,” she said, “but there’s nothing to carry it in...wait!” She had had an idea. She opened her purse and took out the earrings—attached to a card, it looked like—which she put into her pants pocket. Then she showed him the purse.

“Empty, see? And it’s plastic.” She stepped towards the stream, filled the purse with water, and then poured it gently over his foot. Sol could see the cut clearly for a moment before it began to bleed again. She filled her purse again and repeated and then again and then again. She was very intent upon her work.

Sol wasn’t sure it was helping but he admired her resolve. She was very careful, very gentle, very businesslike. Sol said, “Perhaps you will be a nurse,” to her and she looked at him and smiled politely and then went back to her task of filling the purse, pouring it over his foot.

After a while, Sol took his handkerchief out of his pocket. “Perhaps,” he said, “if we put pressure on the cut, it will stop its bleeding?” He said it as if he were asking a question, asking her opinion. She nodded and took the handkerchief and tied it around his foot. “How does it feel?” she asked him when she’d finished.

“Much better,” said Sol. “I think that now I could walk back.”

Debby helped him to his feet and held his arm while he hobbled back towards the cottage. Halfway there, she spied a stout branch on the ground which she yanked out of the undergrowth and handed to Sol for a staff. He tried it and it worked well. “Good idea,” he said. “Thank you.” He could see that she was proud of herself.

It took a while to get to the mouth of the path, but they did it together. From the opening they could see the family gathered on the porch. “Debby,” said Sol trying the unfamiliar name of his granddaughter, “you were like a real doctor, helping me back there.” She looked up at him seriously.

“This was a good walk,” she said.

He nodded.

They left the path and walked toward the cottage.

“There they are,” Sol heard Vicky yell. “I see them.”

Sol could see the adults look around and understand that something was amiss. Jake and Bella came running, Rachel started down the steps. They swarmed around him. He couldn’t see Debby anymore. Jake took his stick and threw it away into the brush on the side of the road, and he and Bella each took one of Sol’s arms and helped him to the cottage and up the stairs.

Rachel was fluttering around, what happened, oh my god, what happened. Sol waved her away. “It’s nothing, a cut,” he said. “Debby helped me.”

“Debby helped you?” said Vicky.

Jake fetched his doctor’s bag from inside the house and untied the handkerchief on Sol’s foot. Debby and Vicky stepped forward to watch. Everyone gathered around.

“Well,” said Jake, examining, “it looks okay. I think a good bandage will do the trick. No point stitching up the arch anyhow—too much generalized movement.”

“It bled a lot,” Debby reported. “It wouldn’t stop.”

“So much blood?” Rachel fluttered.

“He’s fine, Ma,” said Bella. “He’s fine now, see? Jake’ll fix him right up.”

“Lot of bleeding, huh,” said Jake dabbing ointment, “It’s the Warfarin.”

“The medicine did this?” said Rachel. “Is it wrong?”

“No, Ma,” said Jake. “It supposed to do that. But it must’ve been a little scary, right Pop?”

Who says “scary” to a grown man? I was a soldier. I had a gun.

“He wasn’t scared,” said Debby suddenly. “He got my purse.”

Everyone looked at Debby at once. She blanched. They will blame her, thought Sol. They will blame her for my accident, which was no one’s fault, which was just an accident.

“Debby helped me,” Sol repeated. “She washed the blood away. She washed until the blood stopped.” He looked at Debby and gestured toward her with his open hand, not a hand held out, not quite.

“Water from the stream?” said Jake. “Well, you’re probably in more danger from all that washing than from anything else. Lots of bacteria in that water.”

“Bacteria!” gasped Rachel. “Oh my God!”

“She didn’t mean any harm!” said Bella. “She’s just a little girl.”

“Of course not,” said Elaine. “Nobody blames her.”

Sol looked up at Debby, who stood pale, paralyzed by her mistake. Her eyes behind her glasses were stricken. He saw her mouth

the words, I'm sorry. Oh my heart, thought Sol, my poor heart which has opened to this child, who has my blood in her veins, this child who tries. Horrified, he realized that his eyes had tears in them. Quickly he looked down at his knees, but it was too late. Elaine stepped toward Sol. Gently, she moved Debby to the side. "Don't worry, Pop," she said comfortingly. Her huge belly bumped his ear. "Jake will make it better," she said in a soothing tone. "That bacteria won't know what hit it."

Suddenly, Sol felt fury wash over him like water. Before he could think, he raised his hands into the air, made fists and brought them down hard on the arms of the Adirondack chair.

"You talk this way to a soldier?" he bellowed. "A soldier with scars?"

A gasp, silence—it just made Sol madder.

"She saved my LIFE," he bellowed.

His volume was tremendous. The strength of his own voice impressed him. Elaine jerked her hand from his shoulder as if it were red hot. Jake sat back from where he'd been kneeling in front of Sol.

"Whoa there, Pop," he said. "Let's don't get upset."

"Don't 'let's' me," growled Sol. "I'm fine. All of you go away."

Sol saw Jake look at Rachel. Some sort of silent message passed between them. Rachel raised her eyebrows, shrugged one shoulder.

"Let's give him some space," said Jake loudly. "He'll be okay."

The women went inside. Sol could hear their whispers. He didn't care what they thought. His eyes were closed. Perhaps he dozed for a moment.

When he opened his eyes, Debby was sitting in the chair next to him, reading. She looked at him speculatively for a moment, saw what she needed to see, then turned back to her book.

"I'm okay," he muttered—to her? To himself? He wasn't sure and it didn't matter. He scanned the horizon, where the great trees met the sky, and closed his eyes again to better feel the breeze.

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