THE RUINED HOUSE

A Novel

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TRANSLATED FROM THE HEbrew BY Hillel Halkin

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One clear morning, on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of Elul, the year 5760, counting from the creation of the world, which happened to fall on Wednesday, September 6, 2000, the gates of heaven were opened above the great city of New York, and behold: all seven celestial spheres were revealed, right above the West 4th Street subway station, layered one on top of another like the rungs of a ladder reaching skyward from the earth. Errant souls flitted there like shadows, one alone bright to the point of transparency: the figure of an ancient priest, his head wrapped in a linen turban and a golden fire pan in his hand. No human eye beheld this nor did anyone grasp the enormity of the moment, a time of grace, in which not a prayer would have gone unanswered—no one but an old homeless man who lay on a bench, filthy and bloated with hunger, shrouded in his tatters, wishing himself dead. He passed instantly, without pain. A blissful smile lingered on his face, the smile of a reprobate, his penance completed, granted eternal rest.

At that exact hour, not far away, in a trendy café in the lobby of the Levitt Building, which looked out onto Washington Square Park, Andrew P. Cohen, professor of comparative culture at New York University, sat preparing the opening lecture of his course “The Critique of Culture, or the Culture of Critique?: An Introduction to Comparative Thought.” It was required for students majoring in comparative culture, and Cohen taught it every fall.
Cohen specialized in elegantly naming his courses, which attracted students from every department and were always fully enrolled. It was more than just their names, though. His courses were well conceived and well rounded. For all their incisiveness, their main strength lay in the aesthetic harmony of their superbly formulated interpretative models, which were easy to understand and absorb. In general, "elegant" was the adjective most commonly applied to anything bearing the imprint of Professor Andrew P. Cohen. The entirety of him merited it: his dress and appearance, his speech and body language, his ideas and their expression—all had a refined, aristocratic finish that splendidly gilded everything he touched. Although many attributed this special feeling to Cohen's "charisma," they were aware of the cheap inadequacy of the term. Charisma he had, for sure; yet there was something else, too, something elusive. A student of his, Angela Marenotte, a bright young filmmaker who specialized in advanced visual technologies, once articulated it: "He has an aura." This remark was made in the cafeteria following Cohen's weekly research seminar. Cohen hadn't led the discussion that week. He sat alongside his students listening to a guest lecturer from gender studies who spoke about the covert sexual biases in the supposedly gender-neutral world of virtual reality. "You see," Angela explained to the bespectacled doctoral student who had accompanied her through the emergency exit so that she could smoke a forbidden cigarette, "it's not the 'aura'" (her fingers sketched ironic quotation marks in the air) "that the phony New Age mystics talk about. It's more like Hollywood or TV. You see it in celebrities, especially if they're in a private setting away from the spotlight, at a party, or at some restaurant... They have this halo, as if they hadn't removed their makeup and the lights were still on them. They're shiny. Their skin actually glows... Come on, let's go back." She threw the burning cigarette butt on the floor and strode inside, the doctoral student on her heels. "They don't look real. That's the thing: they're unreal. They're like wax models of themselves, perfectly executed and lit. I suppose it's an accomplishment of a sort to turn yourself into an icon and become a symbol of who you are or, better yet, of what you are. You know what I mean." The doctoral student, who was slightly in love with Angela just as she was slightly in love with Cohen, nodded eagerly despite not being at all sure that she did in fact know.

In honor of the new semester, Professor Cohen was wearing a white suit that would have looked raffish and pretentious on anyone else. A green tie with scarlet embroidery completed the jaunty, somewhat amused look that he liked to cultivate. His whole person was characterized by a stylish boldness that tested the boundaries of good taste without getting dangerously close to them: the old-fashioned watch on his left wrist, the cartoonishly heavy-framed reading glasses, the Warholian shock of hair with its playful wink of gray. His table stood a bit apart, framed by a bright triangle of sunlight that seemed to elevate it slightly off the floor. Two young, pretty students giggled and whispered while stealing admiring glances at him from afar. Cohen smiled to himself as he leafed through his notes. He was used to the warmth of his female students' adoring stares. But although he probably could have seduced almost any one of them, he was a man of moral fiber and almost never strayed from the ethics of his profession. His eyes flitted across the outline in front of him. He was not one of those professors who prepared obsessively for each lecture. He was a natural teacher, in firm control of his material, and anyway, he was at his best when he improvised.

High above, the celestial spheres went on swirling, one atop the other, each lit by a great, world-illuminating radiance.

Meanwhile, on earth, the cheerful bustle of the first day of the
semester continued. Freshmen looked for their classrooms, first friendships forming as they collided in the hallways, guided by the preferences and predilections that would determine their adult lives. Professors strolled back and forth, their self-importance concealed by facades of blithe nonchalance. Department secretaries scowled at anyone who dared enter their offices to ask a question or request assistance. Cohen was the sole person to notice something—something different and momentous that took sudden command of him and moved him inexplicably. He jotted a few words in the margins of his notebook and was about to turn the page when all at once, for no apparent reason, he felt an odd stirring in the pit of his stomach, an aching longing for . . . he didn’t know what. His vision clouded. Although he kept staring at his notes, he could no longer read his own handwriting. The outline of his lecture looked like hieroglyphics, a riddle he couldn’t make out. His heart felt like bursting; his eyes filled with what appeared to be two large, round tears about to overflow.

The whole strange episode didn’t last long—no more than a moment or two. The skies shut and the ascending ladder of light slowly faded. A final glitter of gold flickered in the misty distance, then all reverted to its former state, as though nothing out of the ordinary had occurred. Cohen pulled himself together. His fingers gripped his empty espresso cup, absentmindedly tilting it to his lips. A last, thick, bitter drop rolled onto his tongue and brought him back to his senses. His eyes focused on his notes again. The letters re-formed into words, and the words into sentences. Everything, almost, was as before. The hand he had extended toward the knot in his tie, as though to loosen it, returned awkwardly to the table. What on earth had gotten into him? He hadn’t felt so close to tears in years.

Manhattan, isle of the gods, home to great happenings of metal, glass, and energy, island of sharp angles, summit of the world! Have not we all—rich and poor, producers and consumers, providers and provided for—been laboring for generations with all our might, under the direction of an unseen Engineer, to build the most magnificent city ever known to humankind? We lay down more avenues, rule them straight, strive to get the proportions of their buildings right. We pour our lifeblood into the foundations of the skyscrapers, raising them ever higher: the Empire State Building has added two stories in the last decade; the Twin Towers near the Battery will grow by half in the next century. Slowly, imperceptibly, we deepen the rivers encircling our island: the Hudson is twice the depth it was when glimpsed by the first white settlers. The East River would be, too, were it not for the toxic wastes we continuously dump into it, rendering our own efforts Sisyphean. Everything soars, rushes, accelerates: the Dow Jones Industrial Average, the rate of population growth, the bribes needed to flout municipal building codes, the hire of the whores, the price of pedigreed dogs, subway fares, real estate values. The bridges stretch farther and farther; the tunnels linking us to the heart of the continent grow deeper and deeper. The conical water tanks on the rooftops strain toward the heavens, pulling the buildings behind them as if to detach them from their foundations. One day the subway cars will leap off their rails and plunge into the depths of the earth, severing the last cables that anchor the city to the ground. Our island will be torn loose, ripped from its rocky underpinnings; it will ascend into the sky and pierce it like a fast, shining bullet. The rivers will foam and cascade, immense tides pouring into the gaping wound. When
calm returns, the quiet will be unearthly. Only large, low-flying seabirds will hover over the face of the depths.

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September 9, 2000
The 9th of Elul, 5760

Ten a.m. Andrew chooses a CD and slips it into the stereo, which swallows it eagerly. He presses play, waits for the hot milk to finish foaming in the noisy espresso machine, and carries his coffee cup from the kitchen counter to the brown leather couch in the adjoining living room.

An inviting pile of magazines, periodicals, and weekend papers await him on the coffee table. The music fills the large, bright, clean apartment. Sunbeams trickle through the open door of the bedroom. In the living room, four large windows, all facing west, look out onto the familiar view that he loves: the green treetops of Riverside Park and, beyond them, the line of the Hudson, a shimmering strip of metallic blue. The view reigns over the apartment. The river is visible from the front door, the dining room, and even (Andrew attaches special importance to this) the kitchen. When he renovated, he broke down the walls with a daring that was determined, undaunted by the tyranny of what was, to uncover the promise of what lay behind it. The former owner, a retired elderly Jew who had moved to Florida and sold him the place for a price that now seems ridiculous, had never thought of turning his cramped New York dwelling into the unified, free-flowing space that Andrew crafted. He can stand in the kitchen cutting vegetables, making coffee, or have his breakfast on the bar stool at the slate countertop, with the light-filled view spread out before him, appearing and reappearing in the living-room windows like a landscape painted on four panels. The light changes by the hour: a modernist experiment in texture and color. Winter strips the trees of their foliage, leaving them nakedly somber and gray against the steely backdrop of the river. On long summer evenings, the sunsets are theatrically stunning, throwing their golden-orange shadow on the dark water and turning the ugly industrial buildings and residential towers across it into yet more elements in a breathtaking work of art. Although Andrew has been living with this view for eight years, it keeps revealing new secrets. He has never gotten entirely used to it, not really.

Saturday mornings are his favorite time of the week. He likes to spend them alone and refers to them as “my quality time with myself.” The slowly sipped coffee, the tastefully chosen music, the enjoyable leafing through of the weekend papers—all are a kind of meditation by which he experiences, undisturbed and undistracted, a heightened sense of self that recharges him with the creative energy needed for the rest of the week. A fierce, silent bliss runs through him on such mornings. He does all he can to prolong them, congratulating himself, sometimes almost explicitly, on his wisdom and courage in having left home, with its ceaseless, clinging clamor of family life, for the personal and aesthetic independence of the marvelous space inhabited by him now. His apartment stands in sharp contrast to the feminine clutter that symbolized, more than anything, his life with Linda: the furniture, the rugs, the bric-a-brac; the framed snapshots of the children, the photographs in color and black and white; the bright cushions with their wool and linen tassels, the patchwork quilts, the swatches of embroidery; the bookends shaped like rabbits, frogs, and bears; the flowerpots, the vases, the hammered copper trays, the carved wood, ivory, and mother-of-pearl jewelry boxes; the elongated, black metal dachshund shoe scraper by the front door; the little
bird's nest with its three indigo eggs; the old ceramic pots from Morocco, the painted tiles from Mexico, the nude African women carved in ebony. Each piece was elegant and authentic—Linda's taste was consistently excellent—but as her New York Jewish penchant for exaggeration increased with the passage of time, so did the objects that filled the house to bursting until it resembled one of those self-defeating, overcrowded antique shops that drive their customers away to their competitors.

The more Andrew felt asphyxiated by his marriage, the more insufferable the house had become. Linda, as he once put it to his therapist, was trying to be her own mother by clinging to the aesthetics of the suburban respectability she had grown up with. The content, to be sure, was different: ethnic rugs instead of synthetic carpets, original paintings rather than reproductions, rustic wood furniture, not plastic and Formica. Yet the structural essence remained the same. Even had he wanted to, Andrew could never have spent his life chained to the tedious mediocrity of such bourgeois domesticity. Eight years after his divorce, it still exhilarates him to step out of the shower each morning, a large towel wrapped around his waist, and stride to the espresso machine on the kitchen counter through the uninterrupted, almost empty expanse of a living room elegantly punctuated by a few handsome, carefully selected items: the large screen of Chinese calligraphy whose vertical characters spelled the Mandarin word for “serenity”; the art deco chest of drawers; the carved oak china cabinet; and of course, the costly collection of antique African sculptures and masks hanging on the eastern wall. The startling, almost sterile spotlessness of the place is a statement, too. Not that Linda’s house wasn’t clean, but its cleanliness was of a kind that had to be worked at and maintained by Carmen, the Colombian housekeeper who scrubbed, dusted, and vacuumed three times a week. Andrew’s apartment seems to clean itself, as though repelling every last speck of dust and dirt, politely but imperiously driving it, properly shamed, back to the raucous street it had come from. His own housekeeper, Angie, once said, “I just come here to do the laundry and look at the view. There’s nothing to clean here, this place is always spotless.”

Ten thirty. Although he is having ten guests for dinner the next evening, Andrew is unfazed. He will shop for food later in the day and have everything, as always, ready in time. Settling onto the couch, he puts down his coffee and pleurably surveys the pile of publications and periodicals with their sensuous wealth of paper and fresh, deliciously crisp words in all sizes, shapes, and colors. Each typeface has its aroma and hidden semantic field. The thin, ascetic newsprint of the Times contends with the glossy sheets of slick magazines that made him think of the leather seats of luxury cars; the creamy leaves of professional journals lay beside the recycled, wrapper-like paper of avant-garde reviews whose fuzzy print, an iconic replication of the typewriter’s, suggests the quintessence of the American writer, popularly imagined (closed blinds, a bottle of whiskey, cigarette smoke); and in the midst of all this, curled embryonically among the other magazines, is the latest issue of the New Yorker, concealing an article written by Andrew himself. Although he went over the proofs only two weeks ago and had his research assistant fax his last corrections two days before the issue went to print, Andrew pretends to be surprised by it, both to heighten his anticipation and to hide the slight embarrassment he feels each time he is overcome by a childish joy at the sight of his name in print above words recognizable as his own. Prolonging the sweet suspense, he sifts through the pile, sampling a headline, a masthead, or half an editorial before putting each down.

His coffee is slowly getting cold. Andrew takes short sips of it, conscious of the small red triangle that forms the tip of the New Yorker’s cover. Continuing to ignore it, he pursues his regular Saturday morning routine of going through the heap, selecting what interests
him, marking passages with improvised bookmarks, and returning some items to the pile while discarding others. Only now, no longer able to tolerate the pleasurable suspense, he puts down his empty coffee cup and reaches for the prestigious weekly as though it were a fresh, red, perfectly chilled fruit. With a slight shiver of pleasure, he opens it, inhaling the intoxicating scent of its print, and begins to leaf casually through it, proceeding at a leisurely pace through the front of the book until he comes to the table of contents.

By now his embarrassment is long gone. The tinge of uncertainty with which he searches for his name reminds him of his childhood birthdays, the excitement of getting out of bed in the morning intensified by the titillating fear that this year he had been forgotten. Slowly, he would descend to the ground floor with its pile of presents and smell of blueberry pancakes made especially in his honor. Every time, encountering the printed name of Andrew P. Cohen seems a distant echo of his heart’s wild leap when he saw his first published article, which appeared only after an editorial board had put him through all the hellish rituals of the academic tribe. The manuscript had been returned to him for “improvements” no less than eight times, and each time he had been forced, in those pre-word processing days, to type its twenty pages all over again. The changes demanded were so great that every draft became a new article, every iteration increasingly devoted to the scholarly work of one of the editors. He still remembers his fascinated reaction when he first began to publish and saw his words transformed into a definitive presence, as if given an objective validity by the printed page not had by them before. He puts this experience to use in the classroom in order to illustrate the concept of “reification.”

He asks a research assistant to collect samples of a class’s writing and then returns these printed and bound with the request that the students spontaneously record their feelings at having their work “made official.” They would remember it long after graduation.

Andrew sits up and turns to his latest piece with satisfaction, reading it as carefully as if going over the proofs one more time. The clarity and originality of his phrasing—his own yet no longer his own—pleases him greatly. From time to time, on Saturdays between the hours of ten and twelve, he indulges in a small, harmless dose of vanity.

September 10, 2000  
The 10th of Elul, 5760

The wind gusting from the river carves imperceptible signs on the soft limestone cornices of the buildings’ facades. It howls between the glass and metal cliffs of midtown Manhattan, shrieks in the hollows of the Gothic pilasters of the cathedrals, and charges around the capitals of the soaring towers that glisten against the melancholy blue of the evening sky, ringing the unheard bells of the great city and waking the gargoyles from their slumber on the old rain gutters, causing them to suddenly seem menacing and malevolent. The deep, dark wind of Time itself rises and demands its due.

Yet in the empty apartment, an absolute, majestic silence reigns. The windows keep outside and inside, cosmos and chaos, apart. The walls glow in the orange sunset; the polished parquet floors gleam; the rectangular screen of the computer glows in the twilight as if a small sliver of the river were brought in and carefully placed indoors. The day battles against its own shadows, but in vain. The outcome is foretold. The light will be vanquished; darkness shall cover the earth and a dim, damp mist will blanket the river. The last glimmers will retire from the face of the water. The
strongly pronounced faces of the wooden masks will be flattened and swallowed by the shadows. The masterful brushstrokes spelling “serenity” will be gathered one by one on the darkening wall. It is time to rise, illuminate the room, fill it with music, uncork a bottle of wine. No sun ever truly sets. Light is eternal. Far away, a golden dawn is breaking, shedding its light on nameless islands. White ships sail into it, awash in the fresh radiance of a day reborn.

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September 10, 2000
The 10th of Elul, 5760

Six p.m. Although his guests will soon be arriving, Andrew lingers in the kitchen. He is as attentive to the presentation of the food as he is to its flavor and texture. He loves to cook. His dinners have an almost regal reputation and not just because of the outstanding food and expertly chosen wines: like everything on the menu, the guests are carefully selected, in a way that creates a perfect balance between stimulation and relaxed intimacy. His cooking is creative without being provocative, so much so that someone once remarked that its proportions resembled a Mondrian, almost perfectly geometric. Furthermore, his impressive collection of cookbooks does not deter him from improvising and enjoying himself in the kitchen. Although his Italian, especially Tuscan, dishes are superb, he sometimes flirts with French cuisine and even conducts controlled experiments with Asian fusion. But surprisingly, his true specialty is meat. It is indeed strange that a man like him, so ethereal and aloof, would so masterfully work with such rough and bloody material like beef, bison, lamb, and venison; there is an almost visual contradiction between his thin, delicate form and the large cuts of dry-aged Black Angus that he seared to perfection.

Andrew’s renowned dinner parties are served with a semicomical, theatrical relish that is part of the experience. The guests are long seated, a third bottle of wine opened, and the appetizers quickly consumed as the conversation becomes more and more lively—but the host is shut in the kitchen with the meat, a large cut of which lies on a gray granite slab. Sipping the wine around which he has planned the meal, Andrew stares at the cut as though to penetrate its inner being; then, suddenly, he puts down his glass and attacks the meat with sharp, sweeping movements, cutting it, spearing it, sprinkling it with pepper and coarse salt, beating the spices into it, and lovingly massaging it with olive oil and seasoning. Anyone observing his single-minded intensity at such times might think him an avatar of an ancient hunter or tribal shaman charged with sacrificing to the gods. The oven is now at the right temperature and the large wrought-iron skillet, purchased from a restaurant equipment wholesaler in Chinatown, is red-hot. Taking a deep breath, Andrew seizes the meat with both hands and flings it at the skillet’s center. The effect is cinematic. A loud sizzle explodes in the kitchen and a tidal wave of mouthwatering scent quickly spreads through the apartment.

The fire sputters with glee. The seared flesh cries out in pain, writhing in the skillet as though struggling to escape while Andrew stands over it with merciless concentration, pinning it to its fiery bed of torture with a double-pronged fork. The searing sound begins to fade, the meat surrenders to the flame. Turned on its other side, it rages and resists again, but its defiance is short-lived, and its soul, fleeing the infernal flames, withdraws to its interior, turning into a hot, heavy, bloodred essence that oozes onto
the serving tray and mingles with lemon juice, ground pepper, and olive oil as Andrew carves the roast expertly, the knife in his hands fluttering lightly over it as if it has a life of its own.

The guests, transfixed by this ceremony with its smells and heathenish display of succulent slices of meat wallowing in their juices, singed black at the edges and reddish-pink at the center, hesitate a bit before cutting and biting into it. The warm blood fills the mouth and feels as though it is trickling down the neck and throat. It ignites them with its raw saltiness, its soul transmuted into theirs. Andrew stands by, expressionlessly, small beads of sweat glistening on his forehead. Long seconds pass in silence, until someone (usually, a woman) gasps in astonishment: “Oh my god, this meat is divine.” Now all join in, breathlessly. “Fantastic!” “Amazing!” “Unbelievable!” Only then does Andrew snap out of his trance, his face relaxing and reverting to its usual amiable expression. He refills the wineglasses with wine, takes his seat, and cheerfully welcomes his guests.

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September 18, 2000

The 18th of Elul, 5760

Ten a.m. Though the morning music has finished playing, its last notes still float in the apartment before fading into the walls, ceiling, and furniture. Andrew sits at his desk, wrapped in his silk robe, his reading glasses playfully perched on the tip of his nose. Two or three books, a laptop, and a coffee cup lie on the desk. The keyboard, its keys like little mice dancing mischievously, click away almost inaudibly. Before beginning to work, he decided to record a dream in a special notebook kept for that purpose, an old habit retained from the psychoanalysis he completed several years ago. A huge, splendidly uniformed warrior, blood-drenched and enraged, strides with giant steps toward a sunrise. Everything is in black and white, as in a Kurosawa movie. The uniform is like a samurai’s magnificent armor. Oddly, he awoke with a wonderful feeling. There was something powerfully liberating, almost comforting, about the warrior. Whom did he represent? A transposed father figure, most likely.

Ten twenty. The apartment is still. Andrew is hard at work, whistling merrily with a slight smile on his lips. He has never been a pedantic library rat. Scholarship is an art form for him. His light, airy manner suggests a painter or sculptor working in a spacious, well-lit studio, whistling to himself as he works. Most academics of his generation, products of the ecstasies of the sixties, translated their once-youthful rebellion into political radicalism, but that did not necessarily lead to methodological creativity. Andrew had never succumbed to the cheap temptation of being a professional rebel or playing the exhibitionistic role of the university enfant terrible. Although well versed in the standard critiques of capitalist society and proficient in teaching them to his students, he had never fallen prey to the anger and bitterness that characterized many of his colleagues. The buoyancy of his ideas keeps them afloat. From above, they can easily shift perspective, sometimes tumbling into creative free fall like Alice down the rabbit hole.

At ten thirty his answering machine comes alive with Linda’s voice. “Hi, Andy. About Thanksgiving. We’re making it at four as usual. Everyone will be there. There’s no need to bring anything. Alison says hello. Bye.” As always, Linda plans things months in advance and doesn’t trust him to remember them. Her mention of Alison makes Andrew smile: she is such a sweet child, he wished he saw more of her. The damned thing about life in New York is that it never leaves time for what really matters. He will bring flowers and a bottle of good wine. No, not wine: chocolates.
big box of Belgian chocolate truffles. There is a new Godiva store on Broadway and 84th Street. It’s settled, then: Belgian chocolates and flowers. Linda never filters her incoming calls the way he does. Like an anxious, obedient clerk, she answers the phone whenever it rings. Blinking and bleary-eyed, she lets salesmen wake her early on weekend mornings and friends bare their souls to her far into the night. It never occurs to her that she need only pick up the receiver when it suits her.

Ten forty. Andrew’s fingers are still poised over the keyboard. He opens a book, turns its pages, finds what he is looking for, and replaces it facedown on the table. Ten fifty. Now the commanding voice of the legendary Ms. Harty—the department secretary—sounds in the apartment. Would he please get in touch with her today? No, it isn’t urgent, but she will be waiting to hear from him. Andrew grunts something, picks up the book again, compares a quote with the original text while noting its page number and publication date, shuts the book again, and returns it to its pile. Although he is considered a fashionable thinker, this isn’t because, as is commonly thought, he strives to be one. His detractors who accuse him of being a popularity hound are wrong. Projecting their own dogmatic selves onto him, they fail to grasp his true motives, exactly as they fail to guess a step ahead as to where the academic fashion is heading. The au courant character of his thought, with its playful language and quick, unmediated transitions between seemingly unrelated assumptions and discourses, is a sign not of glibness but of a mercurial, Peter Pan-ish nature that makes other, often much younger scholars, though still at the beginning of their careers, feel stodgy and conservative by comparison. Coupled with their annoyance at the poetic liberties he allows himself is their objection to what they call his “Popular Science” approach. (One cultural critic, a neo-Marxist who failed to get tenure in New York and was forced to wander to a state university an hour and a half from the city, called this “the school of the soft academy.”)

In this, too, they are mistaken. There is nothing opportunistic or designed to inflate his list of publications in the wide range of subject matter and media that engross him. He simply has an open and curious mind that refuses to be restricted to any one field. In his fashion, he is a true Renaissance man.

Eleven twenty. The hesitant voice of Bert, his teaching assistant, requests clarification of Items 1 and 7 on the reading list. Bert speaks quickly and nervously; well aware that Andrew screens his calls, he has trained himself not to be insulted, but he is nevertheless at a loss each time he is ignored. Next come the chiming tones of a young woman, obviously a junior secretary: “Hello, Professor Cohen?” She is inviting him on behalf of the administration to the opening of an exhibit the following month. Andrew goes on writing. Almost any message beginning “Hello, Professor Cohen” is immediately ignored. Every few days he takes all these calls and answers them from the phone in his office. Sometimes he entrusts the job to his young research assistants, who, Andrew observed, feel the same excitement at such moments that is felt by a small child bursting with pride at having been asked by his parents to perform a grown-up task. At other times he asks Bert to confirm his participation in some event or apologize for his inability to attend, while in special cases he even avails himself of Ms. Harty—behavior deemed by his colleagues to violate the laws of nature, all the more so inasmuch as she complied with it even before rumors of his imminent appointment, expected to be announced in September, had begun making the rounds of offices and corridors. Yet neither openly nor in private does anyone protest his presumption in asking to be freed of the annoying everyday chores whose very existence, so it seems, are at odds with Andrew’s aristocratic image. No one feels exploited, not only because, unfailingly polite and respectful, he never crosses the lines of fairness as others in the
department occasionally do, but because of the precious, heady, even addictive nature of the time spent alone with him while receiving instructions or reporting back.

Eleven forty. It takes Andrew a moment to recognize the voice of the rental agent. “It’s all arranged. The house in Montauk is yours for the third weekend of December. You and your lady friend” (does he detect a smirk?) “can have it starting Thursday. Enjoy yourselves!” Andrew grunts his approval: he likes the romantic charm of off-season vacation spots that are otherwise insufferable. It will be nice to be alone, just the two of them, with some privacy and quiet before the bustle of the winter holidays and the spring semester.

Twelve ten. The cautiously friendly voice of Shirin Zamindar, one of his recently graduated research students, catches Andrew off guard. She is so sorry to disturb him, she knows how busy he is, but she hopes it’s okay to ask him whether he read her last article, recently published in *Theory Revisited*. She is very eager to know what he thinks. She is waiting to hear back from him, okay? Andrew frowns in discomfort. No, he hadn’t had the chance to read it yet, and was sort of dreading it, not knowing what to say if he didn’t like it as much as she wanted him to like it. He must do it soon, though. He must read the damn thing and find something nice to say about it—he can’t keep her hanging in the air like this forever.

Twelve fifteen. A loud, clear feminine voice rings through the apartment: “Hi, Dad, I know you’re there!” Andrew roars himself. Rachel. He hurriedly presses “save,” runs to the telephone, and grabs the receiver. The sudden exertion makes his “Hello” sound rushed, hoarse, and out of breath. “Hi, Dad, is that you? For a second I thought you really weren’t there.”

Rachel resembled neither of her parents. Linda liked to joke that she must have been switched at birth. She was long-legged and thin with a stark, angular beauty that made one think of Byron’s or Heine’s Hebrew maidens and rabbi’s daughters, a beauty that was so diametrically opposed to the image of the China-doll, blue-eyed, and blond-haired all-American cheerleader that it seemed to deliberately challenge it. She inherited her father’s aristocratic aura, but hers was not cool and collected; rather it was dark, fiery, and nervous. When she was angry her nostrils flared dangerously and her lips curled in an alluring, cruel smile that had a chilling effect. Her precise, articulate staccato made short shrift of anyone daring to contradict her, snappily dismissing all arguments as blundering and childish. Yet the other side of her, the opposite pole of the same intense equation, was an unrestrained and tender sweetness that stayed with those lucky enough to have kissed her long after she had lost all interest in them and discarded them by the wayside of her trail of romances. In Andrew’s presence, she almost grudgingly softened even more. Her smiles became bigger and lost their all-knowing sarcastic quality, and sometimes, bursting into loud laughter, she would rub her cheek against her right shoulder in a manner that brought them both back to the bright, adorable five-year-old daddy’s girl she once was, when they had spent hours playing word games and competing at intricately invented nonsense rhymes, amazed by their ability to stretch the boundaries of language and even of reality itself, creating and destroying fabulous worlds with wild giggles. Their favorite book was *Alice in Wonderland*. They delighted in its endless, mercurial imaginativeness, conversed in quotations from it, and felt as at home in its pages as if they themselves had written them. How Linda loved looking at them then, taking so much joy in the father-
daughter bond that had seemed a protective wall around the blessed togetherness, the impregnable wholeness, of family life.

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The divorce was devastating for Rachel. She was fourteen at the time, an unusually sensitive, intelligent child able to read her parents’ distress signals before even they dared to do so. She had seen the disaster approaching and had realized, with the maturity precociously imposed on her, that having Alison was their last desperate, irrational effort to keep their disintegrating family together. Still, her feelings of shock and betrayal were as great as her mother’s when Andrew finally left home and moved into a studio apartment in the faculty housing between Bleecker and Houston. For hours on end she shut herself up in her room, stretched out on her bed with her headphones on, listening to music so loud that it could be heard all over the room. Linda, who—for a while—feared she was having a nervous breakdown, was a wreck, too shattered to pay Rachel any attention. Her maternal instincts barely sufficed to care for Alison.

Rachel went through adolescence like a species in the wild, learning the ways of the adult world by trial and error, at once totally irresponsible and shouldering responsibilities far beyond her years. Her schoolwork suffered; she cut classes and spent her time smoking pot, listening to music, and making out, sweaty and glassy-eyed with random boys, her age and slightly older. At night she was often left alone to feed and bathe Alison, read her a bedtime story, and put her to sleep, after which she sat up waiting in the kitchen, sometimes until the small hours of the morning, for a sometimes drunk and disheveled and other times inappropriately ecstatic mother who would tell her, down to the most intimate details, about her date with a colleague from work, a new divorcé, or a sworn bachelor, a friend of a friend. Once, at the height of her abandon, it was even a stranger she met at a party. Rachel lost her virginity too early, slept with too many boys, and developed too sophisticated an exterior. Femininity seemed to her a crossroads that pointed in one of only two directions: humiliation or anger, and she chose anger. She despised weakness. It took years for her feelings for her mother to mellow and warm.

In the end, Linda got over it. Her career as a social worker resumed its central place in her life and Rachel learned to respect her again, though more as a peer than a daughter. When, four years after her divorce, Linda met George, a charming psychotherapist, amateur gardener, and lover of literature and music, and married him a year later in a modest civil ceremony in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Rachel was thrilled for her and delighted to be her unofficial bridesmaid. Not even Andrew’s having been invited to the celebratory dinner party held in the private room of a nice Italian restaurant could cause her to lose her composure, at least not outwardly.

9

October 1, 2000

The 2nd of Tishrei, 5761

There was something special about those lazy Sunday mornings, which didn’t start until the afternoon. True, it felt a bit absurd to be bringing home bagels, cream cheese, and orange juice at an hour when the sun was already listing heavily westward, dappling the river with the first intimations of sunset. Nodding hello to the doorman, Andrew stepped outside and paused as usual by the
two male figures flanking the entrance of the building, carved into the soft limestone. Its facade was studded with gargoyles, which once, in medieval Europe, may have symbolized something but were symbols only of themselves in America. Half-naked, muscular, and neoclassically handsome, they held up the building with an infinite, Atlas-like fatigue in their tormented faces. Andrew’s nod to the doorman was a salute to these figures as well.

It was a warm, humid autumn day, a consequence no doubt of global warming. The street echoed with sound, which was strange, because Sundays were generally quiet. Something was in the air, something unusual that invoked in him an odd yearning, a pang of unclear desire. His heart swelled; his eyes misted and felt about to overflow. As though borne by an unperceived wind, jagged trumpet blasts could be heard in the distance, the bleat of rams’ horns tipped with pure silver. A walled city, round-bellied like a pregnant woman, stood by a river crossing. Its walls would fall on the seventh day, crumbling to dust. Where were those notes coming from? Was there a parade today? An open-air performance by a wind orchestra? A familiar song reached his ears, a song he knew well: Neil Diamond’s “Shilo.” Was it drifting through an open window on a lower floor? *Young child with dreams, dream everyday dream on your own.* It had been their theme song for an entire summer, the unforgettable summer of 1970. Smooth black fins, one after another, emerging from the sea’s metallic blue, overlapping each other in a dreamlike silence, forming a series of perfect arcs in the milky mist of the dawn. But could it really be their song? It no longer sounded like “Shilo.” And those trumpets! So many of them, a hundred or more, all blaring together.

*Papa says he'd love to be with you if he had the time.* Young child with dreams, young child of joy; it wrenched his heart each time he heard his name. Wake up! What in the world was happening to him? Why all these bizarre thoughts? Gradually, the mysterious excitement was wearing off, leaving a vague sense of emptiness. He ran his fingers through his hair and scratched his head vigorously, the hard contact restoring him to his senses. What was going on? He had never felt so emotional for no reason. It was one now, though... almost. The distant sounds had faded, blending into the ordinary din of the city. Quiet at last. But why was the sun so burning hot when it was already October? Bagels. Right: bagels. The Absolute Bakery and then orange juice. He mustn’t forget the orange juice!

Andrew turned left and started up 110th Street toward Broadway. A Jewish family passed by in the other direction, the father’s suit jacket open and his tie loosened. Behind him slowly strode a few young people with yarmulkes and prayer books, heading for Riverside Drive. *Tashlikh,* Andrew told himself, smiling fondly with sudden understanding. It was Rosh Hashanah (the word came to him in its old East European pronunciation, a relic of his distant Sunday school days) and *tashlikh* at the Hudson, with its colorfully symbolic casting of sins into the water, was an entertaining annual ritual that the Upper West Side was known for. Andrew had once gone to see it with a friend, a somewhat practicing Jew who lived in the neighborhood. He had enjoyed the colorful assortment of different clothes and lifestyles with its variety of skullcaps worn by men and women, interspersed with an occasional Orthodox black hat and even a shreimel, a traditional Hasidic fur hat, that looked—against the background of the green trees and the white sails of the boats on the river—like an exotic, wild animal.

Rosh Hashanah reminded him of Yom Kippur. That had to be soon, didn’t it? Andrew paused to write a reminder in the PalmPilot he drew from his jacket pocket: “Confirm Yom Kippur attendance. Check tickets and payment.” He read on, scrolling with a pencil point to check the coming two weeks. While all New York universities were closed on Yom Kippur, he wanted to make sure
he had no other appointments. There it was. Monday, October 9: “10 a.m., Yom Kippur services.” That was seen to, then. Below it, though, appeared: Monday, October 9: “6 p.m. Friends of New York Opera Society. Maria Callas. Lecture and rare recordings.” Of course. Callas. He would have to leave the synagogue early. The lecture, with its never-before-heard tapes of the legendary soprano, promised to be fascinating. Open only to members of the society, it had probably sold out long ago, but Andrew had connections with more than a few cultural institutions in the city. He had written about their activities, had sat or was sitting on their boards, organized joint research projects—getting hold of two invitations would not be a problem. Ann Lee would be so happy! The thought of Ann Lee curled up on his brown leather couch in his spectacular silk robe, which clung to her thin, naked body, watching a TV program recorded the night before on some amazing high-tech innovation that her generation took for granted, sent a wave of warm desire through his body.

The way Andrew and Ann Lee met seemed stolen from a movie. In the second week of April 1999, the spring issue of the New Yorker had had an unusually stunning cover illustration of a good-looking young couple—an embodiment of the anorexic chic of the late nineties—kissing in the street while locked in an embrace that brimmed with youthful sexuality. The nipples of the girl’s breasts were taut against her thin T-shirt; her hair was gathered with fashionable little pins. The boy’s shirt was hiked up past his flat stomach, his sharply outlined pelvis showing above his low-slung pants. Their long, passionate kiss, which deserved a place in the hall of fame of iconic invocations of Eros, had a sur-

prisingly powerful effect on Andrew, who first saw it on one of those Saturday mornings when he sat relaxing on the couch with his papers and magazines, his hair still rumpled from sleep and his cappuccino smelling of hot milk and cinnamon. There was something extraordinary about it, able to penetrate the defenses of a man exposed to large and frequent amounts of art—something enticing, rousing, even moving. Yes, moving. Andrew was moved. For the first time in years, something had touched him to a core that lay buried beneath many layers of knowledge and experience. His eyes glued to the cover, he studied its perfect depiction of the woman’s petite breasts, the round curve of her cheek, and the tilt of her swanlike neck. Even the body of the young man stirred him in an odd, unfamiliar way. It wasn’t strictly sexual; it had to do with something deeper, more elementary, of which sex was only a part. His entire person felt triggered into action: his muscles tensed, the small hairs of his body bristled, his skin tingled. Everything was suddenly alive. Andrew shut his eyes. Disjointed thoughts ran through his mind. He stretched, feeling the seductive kiss work its way into him and course through his veins. He pressed the sole of his bare foot against the couch, pleasurably probing its cool, rich leather. Something throbbed pleasantly between his thighs. Looking down, he smiled in wonder at the warm, boyish, almost full erection prodding his cloth pajama bottoms.

That whole day and the day after that, Andrew continued to feel the same arousal. It carried over to Monday, too, with its promise of rejuvenation that, had he tried to find a word for it, he might have called in his playful manner “Renaissensual.” And then on Tuesday, which happened to be a warm, balmy spring day, at exactly ten thirty a.m., he was surprised, almost startled, to see Ann Lee sitting by herself at a front table of the Hungarian Pastry Shop.

The women Andrew had gone out with since his divorce had been strikingly similar. All resembled feminine versions of himself.
He had met them through the tightly woven network of professional New York intellectuals who commanded the city’s institutional intersections of knowledge and power: female professors, magazine editors, literary critics—well-groomed, attractive, elegant women in their early forties with imposing presences and sharp minds, most of them trim, tall, and athletic. The dynamic of his short-lived relationships with them was repetitive to the point that it might have been deemed an intrinsic part of courtship. A first, Saturday-night date. Dinners at upscale restaurants so alike that one couldn’t tell them apart: the same Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, or Pinot Grigio with the appetizers; the same Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, or Pinot Noir with the main course; the same cognac, grappa, or amaro to round off the meal. Such evenings almost always ended in the woman’s apartment, which, once he made out the unifying idea behind its multiplicity of detail, was like all the others. So was the enjoyable but never exciting sex that inevitably began—too soon and almost out of necessity—on the first date. It was followed, on the woman’s initiative, by a romantic weekend at a vacation home (a beachfront property or mountain lodge, depending on the season) belonging to her or a friend, or else jointly owned, in the Hamptons, Fire Island, the Berkshires, or the Poconos. Indeed, these occasions found Andrew surrounded by the woman’s friends, cooking for them, entertaining them, and impressing them with her choice of the ideal partner—soon after which their relationship invariably came to its painless, tearless, unprotested, and perfectly routine end. Had anyone invented a fictional version of Andrew’s love life, carefully constructing it to have as many complications and contradictions as possible, he could not possibly have imagined anyone so unlike these companions for a week or two, so much their polar opposite, as was Ann Lee.

He had gotten to know her the previous autumn in his weekly research seminar. Her regular seat was opposite him at the end of an oval table, and although she was far from his most active student, Andrew felt that her presence and the partially verbalized communication between them were the class’s hidden axis, not only for him but also for all its participants.

Nearly every teacher has a student who becomes the class’s center of gravity. Something in his or her look—a vital, almost telepathic spark—forge an unspoken bond that is a bit like falling in love, except that it is the love of pure knowledge. It is an ad hoc infatuation that should exist only for the duration of the lesson and under no circumstance be given other expression. There can be no greater mistake than the attempt to preserve it beyond the boundaries of the classroom.

Yet sometimes, less frequently, it happens as well that a student, by virtue of physical beauty or sheer sexual magnetism, has a magical, hypnotic, almost obsessive effect on a teacher. The heady power of youth links up with that of professorial authority, reinforced by a strict, inviolable taboo, a powerful stimulant in its own right, hovering over the classroom like a threatening bird of prey.

Ann Lee’s case was a good example. Each time that Andrew—who, like an actor, picked up every vibration from his audience and adjusted his performances accordingly—surveyed his students, his involuntary glance came to rest on her, forcing him to tear his eyes away before they both were equally embarrassed. She was gorgeous. Her face and proportions gave her beauty a rare, unmistakable quality that Andrew might best have described, had it not been so politically incorrect, as exotic. Young and unspoiled, she had lustrous skin and a willowy frame. Her head was a bit too large for her body, which sometimes lent her the look of a child. And she indeed looked a bit like a child, when Andrew saw her on that balmy Tuesday as she sat, encircled by a softly glowing halo, at a front table of the Hungarian Pastry Shop.
The Hungarian Pastry Shop, a pleasant, dimly lit café opposite the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine on Amsterdam Avenue, was the perfect place to sit and write. It hadn’t been renovated in years, which only heightened its homey charm in the eyes of its regular customers. Its old-fashioned decor had a sweet-and-sour, European flavor. The walls, last replastered in the 1980s, were covered with dozens of naïve, semi-primitive paintings of the kind once popularly referred to by the vague label of “modern art.” A single artist had painted them all, and all, without exception, had a single subject: angels—or, more precisely, the angelical. Well-built, flaxen-haired, and broad-shouldered, the rustic, Slavic-looking women bore hefty wings protruding from their muscular backs through flimsy garments. The café’s motley clientele of Columbia University students and professors, would-be actresses working as waitresses, and not-yet-though-no-doubt-soon-to-be-famous writers was interspersed with a handful of slovenly, unshaven eccentrics, relics of the neighborhood’s previous incarnation, who sat nursing a single cup of coffee all day while devouring cheap tabloids that, like them, seemed to have emerged from a time capsule.

Andrew liked the Hungarian Pastry Shop. He came there to work, to meet colleagues, or just to read. Paradoxically, he found the continual hubbub of public places conducive to his inner quiet and creativity. Yet this quiet was disrupted that spring Tuesday upon seeing, to his surprise, Ann Lee sitting with a large notebook at a front table by the window, radiantly pretty. A cup of red herbal tea stood carefully aligned with the notebook, its vapors that rose to mingle with the sunbeams completing a perfect composition. It was their first encounter outside the seminar’s protective, neutralizing walls, which symbolized the endless prohibitions, justifi-

ations, and rationalizations that circumscribed his infatuation with her and ruled out the slightest possibility of doing anything about it. She was dressed with the same stylish nonchalance as she had been in his classes; her brightly colored, flared pants, which came almost to the ankles and were a throwback to the fashions of the seventies, made her even more attractive, invoking youthful memories as visceral as the strip of belly revealed by the midriff’s cunningly provocative cut and as innocent as her green kerchief and the two long braids descending from it. Resurrecting long-lost sensations: the foam on the waves, the sun’s warmth on bare skin, the salty-sweet kisses tasting of the ocean. Andrew was bewildered by the pounding of his heart and the quickened pulse at his temples, adolescent sensations that his body, seemingly long immunized against them, had allowed itself to forget. The previous Saturday’s spring fever, triggered by the kiss on the cover of the New Yorker, overcame him again with full force, augmented by a new urgency, a sense of alarm verging on panic. Adrenaline flooded his body. His footsteps slowed as he passed her table. Yet not daring to stop, he swallowed hard and made his way inside, pretending not to have seen her, though he had no idea whom he was trying to fool. Was it sensible to ignore her? Should he have said hello? Sat down next to her? He felt an itchy, nervous annoyance with himself that he hadn’t experienced in years.

Andrew continued unsteadily to the back, managed to find an empty table, and sank heavily into a chair, careful to position himself behind a large column. Although suffused by a sour, physical sensation of missed opportunity, he couldn’t muster the courage to return to her table and make up for his lapse, couldn’t even conceive of it. He simply went on sitting there, huddled in his hiding place until he saw her get up and leave. A worn, brown suede jacket, a leather handbag slung across her back. Not until she was gone did he dare rise and go to the counter to order his coffee. At
last, his rational defenses swung into action just as his brain finished processing the visual data transmitted to it in the split second he had paused by her table. The notebook was a musical score. She had been reading music.

Andrew was sure he was dreaming when he heard her voice over the telephone that same evening. He recognized it at once, despite her failure to identify herself. With a casual, even amused assurance, like someone talking to a confidant, she invited him to a concert to be given by her choir. “It’s tomorrow night at seven, at Saint John the Divine. Can you make it?” Andrew was at a loss for words. His mouth dry, he groped for something to say before finally blurting the requisite “Yes, of course” in the choked, raspy voice of a frightened teenager.

He groomed himself for the concert as he hadn’t done in years. For nearly an hour he stood before the mirror, putting on and taking off shirts, staining their stiff collars with perspiration mingled with blood from an overly close shave. In the end, he decided on black with a black jacket and gray tie, a worldly look that suited his crisp shock of hair. Confused by his excitement, he tried standing apart from it and putting it in perspective with a wry, paternal smile, only to be forced to acknowledge (his sweaty palms were the final giveaway) that he couldn’t remember when, if ever, he had last been so nervous before meeting a woman—none of which prepared him for the thrill of her intoxicatingly clear, siren-like voice that was threaded with the finest gossamers of silver. Like a precious metal, it had a perfection born of itself and comprehensible only on its own terms. Andrew stared at her with mounting emotion, his eyes on her mouth. He was in a state of lucid euphoria, last experienced by him in a younger, less jaded, more pristine time of his life. Nor did he expect the spontaneous, behind-stage hug he was given when the performance was over, or the salty, touchingly large tears that trickled from her tightly shut eyes.

He still felt warm all over late that night, long after she had fallen asleep, nestled in the crook of his neck, her heavy childlike breathing tickling him. He could feel her kisses everywhere, on his neck, on the folds of his stomach, on places whose existence had long been forgotten: the kisses of a young woman for whom sex was not yet a routine, who put all her desire, infatuation, and curiosity into each embrace. He lay awake, his arm around her thin body, full of wonder at the speed and intensity with which it had all happened. Only months later, again late at night, in the gentle fog of presleep, did he mention having seen her alone at a table that morning, studying a score.

“Yeah,” she said. “You were so cute.”

Andrew turned to her in sudden, wakeful surprise. “I used to go there all the time.”

Ann Lee laid a tender hand on his cheek, stroking his earlobe and neck. “I know you did. I was there to run into you.”

Propped on his elbows, he looked at her. “Is that true?”

“Of course it is,” she said with a loving smile. “What did you think? It’s not like they have such amazing coffee.”

October 9, 2000
The 10th of Tishrei, 5761

Nine a.m. The Yom Kippur service was on the Lower East Side, and Andrew wanted to be on time, especially since he
would have to leave early. Rachel’s announcement that she would join him had touched and gladdened him even more than he was willing to admit. He wasn’t sure he understood her reasons, especially since it meant coming into the city from Princeton, but questioning her would only have put her on the defensive and forced her to rationalize.

Broadway was less crowded than usual. Yom Kippur made itself felt all over the city, most of all on the Upper West Side. On his way to the subway he glanced, as he did every morning, at his homeless man on the corner, as though to make sure he was still there. He was one of the neighborhood’s iconic lunatics. His obese, grotesque figure complemented that of the skinny, half-mad black preacher who liked to stand on the same corner, always wearing the same hat and suit, holding an unidentified book—the New Testament, no doubt, or else some ancient apocalyptic text—while rocking back and forth and shouting rhythmic ‘allelujahs in his Creole accent. His homeless man never shouted or lost his composure. On the contrary, he seemed perfectly pleased with his station in life. He sat expansively on his bench in a broad-brimmed hat, wrapped in woolen blankets that formed a filthy gray poncho while carefully balancing in one hand a chessboard set for a game that never took place. Like a cruel parody of the proverbial swallow, he appeared annually on the first day of spring and vanished on the first day of autumn, borne away by his grime-encrusted blankets as though on the gray wings of a huge, slow-moving migratory bird.

The skinny preacher was in his regular place, bobbing up and down as always while straining with his hornlike voice to be heard. Andrew’s homeless man, on the other hand, did not display his usual calm. Eyes wide with apprehension behind smeared glasses that were held together by Scotch tape, he was mumbling something unclear, his immense frame shifting restlessly on his bench, throwing off the heap of blankets covering him like a mass of molten magma. His agitation could be felt. Its frantic contortions got under Andrew’s skin, forcing him to slow down and stare, mesmerized, at the heavy, pitiable figure. The flaps of the blankets lifted, revealing a pair of unexpectedly spread massive thighs, between which Andrew saw a huge, bloated member suggestive of a strange, beached sea creature. Quickly, he looked away from the repulsive sight, his heart beating faster; what should have been compassion had turned into an inexplicable anxiety. The penises of drowned men, he imagined, must look that way, sickly hunks of pale, swollen meat. Who by fire, who by water: wasn’t that a Leonard Cohen song?

Andrew hurried down the subway stairs. Only when he had descended a few steps and put himself at a safe distance did the standard New York fantasy occur to him: Why not bring the man home, wash the filth from him, cover his nakedness, give him a roof over his head, and restore him to the human race? Yet no less a part of this ritual, these thoughts were followed by the cold voice of reason: No, that was out of the question, not even remotely possible. As if smelling something bad or spoiled, Andrew involuntarily bit his lips and quickened his pace, trying not to think of the obscene sight he had witnessed, letting it dissipate in the sea of impressions in which his mind swam. How does one get to the Lower East Side? It was at the other end of the world. He would have to take the 1 or 9 train to 14th Street, follow the underground passage that led to the orange lines of the F, B, or D train, and continue to Lower Manhattan, making sure to get off at the right stop. A year ago, immersed in a book, he had missed it and found himself in Brooklyn.
What was left of the old Lower East Side Jewish ghetto? Not much. The neighborhood had been abandoned to low-income housing projects and depressingly ugly high-rises standing in seemingly random lots. Miraculously, the clock of the old Forward Building still showed the right time. On its edifice, the paper’s Yiddish name survived, carved in block gilt letters like those of an ancient prayer book. The large synagogue on the corner of Forsyth and Delancey, a grand structure that once had been the pride of the Jewish community, was now an Adventist church. A huge white cross adorned the facade, centered on the rose window with its former Star of David. And there were still a few Jewish eateries: Yonah Schimmel’s knishes, Kossar’s Bialys, Nathan’s kosher hot dogs, which had never really been kosher. Old-time New Yorkers still recalled Bernstein’s kosher Chinese restaurant on Essex Street with its Chinese waiters and their greasy black yarmulkes, its customers offered gift packages of salami for their sons in the armed forces with the motto “The gift you’ll love to give.” Mysteriously burned down a few years ago, it had been replaced by a nameless, nondescript office building. As for the renowned Essex Street pickle sellers, they became a tourist trap and branded themselves a “New York institution,” as advertised by a sign above the entrance. Now delivered all over the United States, the pickles were sold from hermetically sealed red plastic containers, which are far more economical than the old wooden barrels.

And yet the restless ghosts of the poverty-stricken immigrants who worked themselves to the bone in sweatshops or at miserable outdoor stands still haunt the streets where they had led their slavish lives, seeking their redemption in the old buildings, the basements that once had housed workshops and the lofts of the shut-down synagogues, amid rotting piles of old parchment, torn scraps of sacred books, and Yiddish ads for the Second Avenue Theatre.

Andrew did not go to synagogue on Yom Kippur for nostalgic reasons, or at least so he had told himself. Nor did he do so out of guilt. Ethel Cohen was the complete opposite of any stereotype—comic or tragic—of the Jewish mother. Guilt was not her thing. She deeply disliked sentimental Judaism, of the hora-dancing “Hava Nagila” variety, along with the Jewish mothers who behaved as though the medical degrees of their sons and the nice Jewish girls they were married to were their own achievement. When Andy chose to go to the progressive, even radical University of California in far-off Berkeley, Ethel’s protests were strictly for the record; deep down she was pleased to see her youngest son continue the westward trek of his ancestors, break the last chains of the East Coast ghetto, and leave behind the world of doctors, lawyers, Harvard graduates, and Mama’s boys for a new, more “American” path in life. Perhaps, too, the fact that her older son Matthew had gone to law school and joined a prestigious firm made it easier for her to cast off her generation’s prejudices and take pleasure in the non-Harvard education of her nondonor son pursuing a non-lucrative field. So tolerantly accepting was her outlook that Andrew was ready to swear—it was his and Linda’s private joke—that she was even a bit shocked (“Disappointed,” Linda corrected him once the humor of it had begun to wear off) that her Andy had brought home a Jewish girl. It was from his mother that Andrew had gotten his aversion to the narrow-mindedness of the Jewish middle class and to what he called in an interview with
the *American Review* "the empty matrimonial obsession of contemporary Judaism ... a materialistic, visceral reaction that is fully focused on the nuptial bed, the fetishization of which has stranded it in a symbolic vacuum like a hot air balloon floating in space after the basket holding its passengers has detached itself and crashed."

Why, nevertheless, did he go to synagogue one Yom Kippur after another? Not knowing the answer to this question, Andrew declined to ask it too often. It was neither a rational decision nor the outcome of lengthy debate, but an unthinking, almost absentminded choice. Congregation Anshei Shalom, the synagogue he attended, was particularly progressive, even avant-garde. Except for a few Hebrew verses retained for their poetic value by the editors of *The New Holiday Prayer Book*, nearly the entire service was in English. ("We see no spiritual advantage," proclaimed the congregation's founding declaration of principles, "in the rote repetition of an ancient liturgy that fails to resonate with the speech of our daily lives.") Constantly adapting, it was at the cutting edge of the egalitarian, multicultural, humanistic, left-liberal politics of the day.

Anshei Shalom occupied the premises of an old synagogue, dating to the early twentieth century, which shut down in the 1970s when the last congregants died or left the neighborhood. Due to budgetary difficulties, the church to which it was converted shut its doors after a while. Thereafter, the building sat empty for several years and served as a hangout for drug dealers and the homeless; eventually, it was taken over by a group of young Jewish artists and intellectuals who had moved into the neighborhood, the gentrification of which had begun to attract bohemian types.

The group's religious leader, Abby Rosenthal, was an energetic and charismatic young rabbi, a fellow at the Koenig Institute for Advanced Cultural Studies. One of the founders of the small but dynamic Fringe Theater Troupe, she had also recently published a book of poetry to critical acclaim. In addition to being intellectually gifted and creative, she had a talent for administration and politics that had enabled her to obtain not only permission to use the old building but a municipal grant for its renovation. For reasons aesthetic (and financial), this restructuring had only been partial. Some of the decaying stained-glass windows and gilded molding had survived, lending the space a brooding theatrical charm that suited its sophisticated congregants.

The decision to retain Anshei Shalom's old name was more a matter of whimsy than of any heavy, humorless argument on behalf of cultural continuity. While far from traditional, the congregation's services had none of the group singing, guitar playing, colorful prayer shawls, and embroidered yarmulkes that had replaced the organ and priestly rabbinical garb in most Reform temples. Abby's wit, passion, and powerful presence were enough to keep attendees in a permanent state of spiritual alertness. She liked to refer to her style of leading a service as "eclectic," a blend of mysticism, meditation, and the latest scientific theories that left open the question of God's existence. (Many of the congregation's members were atheists or agnostics.)

"Dad, Dad, over here!" Rachel was waving with a smile while pointing to an empty seat beside her. A warm feeling welled in Andrew's chest, as it did whenever he caught sight of her, his baby daughter who had grown to be such an attractive and impressive young woman. It was strange, though, to see her here. As a rule, she shrank from anything Jewish, and he himself was hardly a regular. He was puzzled even more by the open interest she took in the proceedings. Yet curious though he was, this was not the time to ask...
her about it. He let the hypnotic rhythm of the singing and chanting carry him along, half-concentrating on the motes of dust swirling in the colored shafts of light that pierced the stained-glass windows.

One thirty. The service was taking longer than usual—longer than he remembered, at any rate—and Abby Rosenthal hadn’t yet begun her sermon, the high point of the day for most congregants. Restlessly, Andrew glanced at his watch; he didn’t know how much longer he could stay. He had to meet Ann Lee at five if they were going to make it to the opera on time, which was a shame, because he liked to hear Abby speak. Should he stay a while longer and catch the sermon’s beginning? No, it would be rude to walk out in the middle. “I have to go,” he whispered to Rachel, leaning slightly toward her. “Do you want to come with me?” Surprising him again, she chose to stay. “I’ve heard all kinds of interesting things about this rabbi of yours,” she whispered back. Yes, Abby was interesting. Maybe he would read her sermon later, on her website. He rose, kissed Rachel on the cheek, and headed for the exit. Strange, how her eyes had lit up when talking about Abby Rosenthal. He stepped into the corridor, returned his yarmulke to its basket, picked up his coat from the coat check girl, tipped her a dollar, and left. He could grab a quick espresso and get home in time to rest and change before meeting Ann Lee.

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Abby Rosenthal mounted the podium holding an intriguing, old prayer book with gilded pages. “I want to share something with you this year,” she began after a long moment of silence. “It’s an unusual reading experience: a description, in great technical detail, of a remarkable theatrical performance staged every year on this very day, the day of Yom Kippur, the day of atonement. An audience of thousands watched it with bated breath, itself a participant, everyone’s energy converging on a single figure—a single actor, if you will, the star of our pageant. It’s set in the Temple in Jerusalem. The time is the Roman period. The chief protagonist bears the title of High Priest. It’s a suspenseful, passionate, exacting drama. The climax comes at a highly charged moment, a symbolically explosive one, when the High Priest enters an inner room, the most mysterious and secluded of all the rooms in the Temple, which no one would dare enter on any other day of the year. Its enchanting name: The Holy of Holies.”

Abby let her last words echo, then continued in a less dramatic, more personal tone: “I know that some of you cringed when you heard me say ‘the Temple in Jerusalem.’ I know that for most of you, myself, too, those words are instinctively off-putting. I can remember one year, when I was eleven; my father was a visiting professor at a university in Boston and the nearest synagogue was Conservative, not Reform. Everything was different there—it was a whole other world. Every week they prayed for the Temple, the Temple . . . Build the Temple again, God! It went in one ear and out the other. It was all a lot of white noise, meaningless words, an incomprehensible mantra that had lost its suggestive power—or perhaps nothing but its suggestive or auto-suggestive power remained. Maybe I had to journey a long way and feel sufficiently grounded in the here and now before I could take the time to listen to this ancient voice that tells me about a house destroyed two thousand years ago. Our text for today was deleted from the prayer books that you and I grew up with by the nineteenth century. This year I rediscovered it. Its aesthetics, structure, texture are as fascinating as are its contents. It’s old, strange, fascinating, inspiring. It moves me greatly to share it with you. It’s called”—she pronounced the words in Hebrew, in a deep, musical, guttural voice—“Seder ha-Avodah, Order of the Ritual.”
And the LORD spoke unto Moses, after the death of the two sons of Aaron, when they drew near before the LORD, and died; and the LORD said unto Moses: "Speak unto Aaron thy brother, that he come not at all times into the holy place within the veil, before the ark cover which is upon the ark; that he die not; for I appear in the cloud upon the ark cover."

Now in Jerusalem, there was a certain priest whose name was Obadiah. He served in the Temple and was devoted to its sacred rites, being a pious, God-fearing man and jealous for the Lord. Where there is love, there is jealousy, and where there is jealousy, there is love. There came the week between the festivity of the New Year and the Day of Atonement in which the sages of Israel and the priestly elders seclude the High Priest in the Temple to rehearse with him the order of the ritual, the offerings and sacrifices made on the awesome day. Among those chosen to attend him and be his acolytes was Obadiah. Long before the High Priest arrived in his chambers, these hummed like a beehive. Priests ran to and fro, sparring no effort to make them fit for a king. Floors were scrubbed, lamps polished, drapes hung, and linens taken out to be aired, for while not all High Priests were greatly vested in Tradition, great power was vested in all High Priests.

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The Gate of Rebirth:

Know that the physical body is but the soul's outer garment! Let us begin with our Sages of blessed memory having said that the soul has five names. From the lowest to the highest, these are: Nefesh, or Vital Soul; Ruach, or Intellectual Soul; Neshamah, or Spiritual Soul; Chayah, or the living soul; Tehilah, or the unique core of the soul.

On the day he was brought to the Temple, the High Priest was met at his front door by the elders of the Sanhedrin, who escorted him through the streets of Jerusalem like a bridegroom. The city's youth ran ahead of him to clear his path; musicians marched behind him with their music; young priests sang as they led the bull of the sin-offering that would be sacrificed by him on the Day of Atonement. As they neared the Temple's western gate, the Levites, hurrying to conclude their preparations, spread a damask carpet for him to tread on and stood in rows on either side of it as though for the arrival of a potentate. Obadiah took his place among them, beads of sweat on his brow. He looked at the noisy crowd of old and young priests elbowing and jostling one another by the gate until the voice of the Superior announced, "Make way for the High Priest!"

For I will not contend forever, neither will I be always wroth, for the spirit that enwrappeth itself is from Me, and the souls which I have made. For the iniquity of his covetousness was I wroth and smote him, I hid Me and was wroth; and he went on frowardly in the way of his heart. I have seen his ways, and will heal him; I will lead him also, and requite with comforts him and his mourners. Peace, peace, to him that is far off and to him that is near, saith the LORD that createth the fruit of the lips; and I will heal him. But the wicked are like the troubled sea, for it cannot rest, and its waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God concerning the wicked.
There was a hush. No one dared utter a sound. Two elders of the Sanhedrin appeared in the gateway of the Temple, leading a man of handsome mien and proportions. He had a fine carriage. His hair was coiffed, his beard neatly trimmed, his cloak of the very best cloth. Glowing, he cut a courtly figure as he entered the Temple precinct, stepping like a man without a care, a person of substance and sway who knew not the meaning of want. Obadiah cast a jaundiced eye on him. He thought of his own poverty, of his many labors under the sun, of all the barbs and insults he had had to suffer in his lifetime, and he said to himself: “Here comes one to lord it over us! Why, just look at the curl of his lip: no zealot he! He might even be a subverter of the sacred rites, a secret heretic, a Sadducee who will light the incense before entering the Sanctuary rather than inside it. Then none will be atoned for.”

Rabbi Nathan says: The purpose of Scripture was that he [Moses] might be purged of all food and drink in his bowels so as to make him equal to the ministering angels. Rabbi Mattathia ben Hershel says: The purpose of Scripture here was to inspire him with awe, so that the Torah be given with awe, with dread, with trembling, as it is said: “Serve the Lord with fear and rejoice with trembling.” What is the meaning of “And rejoice with trembling”? Rabbi Adda bar Mattena says in the name of Rab. Where there will be joy, there shall be trembling.

The Gate of Rebirth:
Know that the Neveh, or Vital Soul, is from the World of Ayinah, or the World of Actions, and that the Ruach, or Intellectual Soul, is from the World of Tetrahah, or of Creativity, and that the Neshamah, or Spiritual Soul, is from the World of Beriah, or of Creation. Most of us have a Vital Soul alone, which exists on different planes, for the World of Actions has five aspects, all of which must be perfected if the Vital Soul is to be conjoined with an Intellectual Soul from the World of Creativity. Therefore, one must first labor to perfect oneself in the World of Actions, for the World of Creativity is higher.