

THE  
RUINED  
HOUSE

A Novel

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TRANSLATED FROM THE HEBREW BY HILLEL HALKIN



HARPER

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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.

## 2

O 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.

3

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, cloying 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 tingle 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.

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September 10, 2000

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### 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.

5

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 semi-comical, 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.

6

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. A