

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Lyle Rockler for the degree of Master of Arts in English presented on May 8, 1997. Title: Chazzonos.

Redacted for Privacy

Abstract approved: _____

Tracy Daugherty

Chazzonos, as presented here for my thesis, represents three chapters of what will be a novel of the same name. *Chazzonos* is about Hal Perlmutter, a cantor, who at the outset of the novel, is resigning his position of twenty years. The novel progresses as Hal decides where he will go after Mirthgate Temple and what will be meaningful to him. Hal's decision is complicated by the opposing forces that run through him: the conservative side that is attracted to ritual, tradition, and, especially, the music of the ancient and respectable art of the cantor; and the liberal, neo-60s, almost anarchic nature of his personal life.

In these three chapters, the dilemmas of Hal's life are introduced. He deals with the implications of an inheritance that has allowed him to resign; he struggles with the mystery of a relationship that is developing between his homosexual son and a new lover; and he is challenged by his long-time girlfriend to make the ultimate commitment of marriage. Throughout the narrative, Hal is affected by his attachment to the music of chazzonos (the cantorial art) and by memories of family and tradition, nostalgic as well as painful.

The questions these three chapters introduce—and that will develop as the entire novel progresses—are those of love, tradition, obligation, and how one struggles with opposing forces in one's nature.

CHAZZONOS

by

Lyle Rockler

A THESIS

submitted to

Oregon State University

in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the
degree of

Master of Arts

Presented May 8, 1997
Commencement June 1997

Master of Arts thesis of Lyle Rockler presented on May 8, 1997.

APPROVED:

Redacted for Privacy

Major Professor, representing English

Redacted for Privacy

Chair of Department of English

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of Graduate School

I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

Redacted for Privacy

Lyle
Lyle Rockler, Author

CHAZZONOS

Prologue

Henry Perlmutter, Hal, a boy four years old and some months; a boy with an adult name: Hal Perlmutter. He is an only child, in the company of adults much of the time. Already, he sings and performs for the neighbors and the relatives, the songs his mother listens to on the radio while he plays with his toys on the kitchen floor. Doris Day. Vaughn Monroe. Eddie Fisher. His mother, Hinda, dotes on him, smothers him, talks without end about the family left behind in Moldava. She fills the childheart with something slavick and black that sticks to his tiny ribs like tar. He hears her say she could have married better. His father Issac, not even a butcher, but a cutter of deli meats—brisket, corned beef, pastrami, tongue. He hears them barking, snarling, growling at each other. They curse, cajole, regret, complain, rail at their fate, frighten the boy. His father shows him a more measured love: he takes him out on the boat fishing, laces him into a life preserver, tells him that they're Minnesota boys, fishing the ten thousand lakes. At home, Issac smooths the boy's fine dark hair as they sit on the couch and listen to Zaida's records, the records Issac calls chazzonos. The records are thick glass, round like pies, a thin hole in the middle to place over the little finger on the turntable of the phonograph. They have red or green or black labels which Issac explains announce the name of the famous cantor singing. They listen together the way Zaida and Issac did when Issac was a boy. Hal loves the sounds of the deep full male voices, the rich instruments in the background which he cannot yet name. He hums the haunting melodies in his head. Hinda likes the chazzonos too—but she cries when she hears it. She sees her

father in front of her, his long white beard combed out for Shabbos, sitting at the table with a volume of the Talmud spread out before him. "Where they are now my family?" she asks, "killed by chayas, by wild animals." The sounds of the cantors, their chazzonos stays with Hal. He doesn't understand the Hebrew words, but he feels the power and the poetry as much as a boy of four can. But his head is also filled with the other sounds. The sounds of Hinda and Issac threatening, screaming, cursing. He understands the Yiddish words: Hang yourself, burn in a fire, get flattened, explode, meet with a horrible end. One day he opens the brown metal closet in the dining room where Issac keeps the glass records. He looks up and sees clothes hanging—jackets, coats, sweaters. He imagines they belong to the dead Jews, the family killed by Hitler that his mother mourns. At the bottom are the records, Issac's chazzonos in black round stacks. He picks up a record and flings it across the room. The record hits the wall, falls to the floor and shatters. The sound, the destruction gives Hal a thrill he can feel all through his small body. It makes him tingle, even in his tiny penis. He throws another and it also shatters, this time even louder. Another and then another. Until Hinda comes into the room, screaming. Shattered glass covers Hinda's polished wood floor. He is punished, made to stay in his room, but he does it again on another day. Issac never moves the records to a different, safer spot. So, even though he is punished again and again, Hal returns to the records until there are only a few left. His daddy's records that had been left to him by Zaida, the gorgeous, plaintive sounds of chazzonos, are gone.

MARCH

Chapter I.

It's Wednesday, Hal's day off and he's fighting the urge to stay in bed. His son has already left the house. The secretaries will be in the office at nine-o'clock and he doesn't want to answer any questions. He pictures Lea, the fat nosy one at the front desk, bracelets dangling from her arm, pointing a stubby finger. What brings you in so early, Cantor, aren't you off? He's curled on his side under the thick comforter Mimi bought him at the start of winter. He answers: "I'm off, I'm off, I've always been a little off."

Finally on his feet, he turns the heat up. He doesn't shave or wash, that can wait until he gets back. Over the underwear he slept in, he puts a plaid flannel shirt and jeans. He notices the buckle on the jeans doesn't close as easily as it used to. I might start taking better care, he thinks.

In the living room, he laces his hiking boots. The streets around the lake are still full of muddy slush and he plans to walk after it's done. His resignation letter is still lying on the coffee table where he left it last night, addressed to the president of the Temple, Fred Deutch.

He walks the two blocks to Mirthgate Temple as he has a thousand times in twenty years; on Friday nights, on Shabbos mornings, on mornings like this when he plans to hike around the streets that follow Mirthgate Lake. But this morning his legs feel heavy, he's short of breath, his guts are rumbling, even on empty. He's eating himself up. He wonders if he should turn around and forget the whole thing. When he passes Anna Dumbroff's house, he thinks maybe he'll go in, ask her opinion. After all, she's been his friend for all these years in Mirthgate. I haven't even told her yet. But he and

Mimi have been through it for weeks. So he keeps moving. He has the sensation of being pushed by fate herself in her newest outfit.

At the double glass doors to the Temple offices, he fishes for his key. He checks and double-checks to see if the envelope is still in the inside pocket of his coat. Still there. Once inside the building, he almost forgets to punch in the numbers that de-activate the alarm. Wouldn't that be nice? he thinks. So much for doing this quietly.

He unlocks the door to the main office, walks behind the counter and with trembling hands that feel like those of a stranger or some agent other than himself, he places the envelope in the president's box. Several times he pulls the envelope back and then places it again. He looks at the front once more: Fred Deutch. He places it the last time and moves quickly out of the office, locking the door behind him. As he locks the front doors again, he remembers to go back and re-set the alarm.

His walk begins just around the corner. As he climbs the first hill, he moves to the side to let cars pass. From some of them, congregants on their way to the train wave and he absently waves back. From one, he just barely misses some splashing mud. This is one morning I could have used David, he thinks.

At the crest of the second hill, out of breath, he stands in an empty lot and takes in the panoramic view. The water is shimmering under a rising sun. All around is a wide arc of houses in the hills, fancy and plain, huge and modest, houses of people he's known for twenty years. Far below, on the other side is the beach, and the clubhouse, the landscaped grounds across the street from the Temple. Twenty years ago, when he first told his family in Minnesota that he had taken a position in New Jersey, they asked him if it

was ugly there. His answer was, "Not where I'm going. Mirthgate is beautiful."

He starts walking again on the long flat stretch. Fear shoves him, mentally, into a cold and empty room where a refrain keeps going through his head—twenty years, twenty years. But then he remembers one of his talks with Mimi. "This is your life, Hal, you're bound to find beauty somewhere else. Mirthgate isn't the end-all." But still he's in that heatless place. He thinks, I felt just like this when I married Myra.

On the way home, he stops at Hy's Deli on Mirthgate's small and primitive business street. Hymie carries the *Times* and serves a strong cup of coffee.

"Good morning, Cantor."

"Hymie, a garlic bagel with a schmear." He takes off his coat and sits at the counter. Food will help.

He looks at Hymie cutting the bagel with a long silver knife. "Lately, the more I look at you, Hymie, the more you remind me of my father," Hal says. "He was short and kind of wily like you. You know he cut corned beef so long that he earned a Ph.D."

"No kidding, what did they give it to him for? Pickling pastrami?"

"Nothing particular. Just P. H. D.—Putz of the Highest Degree."

"You got to be a putz to do this too long. Me, for instance, I got a B.M. degree."

"Don't tell me," Hal says, cracking a smile.

"Yes, brisket mayven."

Hal opens the *Times*, and tries to distract himself from the refrain running through his head again: twenty years, twenty years. He starts an

article on the progress of refurbishing Times Square, but he stays on the same sentence. Finally he gives up.

"Hymie."

"More coffee, Cantor?"

"Hymie," he says, "I've been cantor in Mirthgate for twenty years and I've come in here almost every morning all of that time, even when I was married. You can't call me Hal?"

"All right," Hymie says, wiping his knife on his soiled apron, "I'll call you Hal. But you're my cantor, Cantor Henry Perlmutter. Chazzan extraordinare. A young man who still sings in the synagogue like the old greats."

"I'm not so young anymore, Hymie. I'm fifty."

"Ha, not so young. When you'll be lookin' at seventy like I am, you'll remember what young was. Boychik, I'm lookin' to retire. You want to buy a going business?"

Hall takes a sip of his coffee and closes the paper. "Hymie, you just never know. I might be retiring, too."

Hymie comes around the counter and sits on the stool next to Hal. The sun which had been hidden behind clouds comes out and fills the room with the promise of Spring. For a moment, the faded green walls of the deli seem fresh.

"What would you want to retire for, Hal?" Hymie's face is creased and serious.

Hal can't find the words. He looks at Hymie and sees his father again. Finally he answers. "Maybe I'm tired of bosses."

On his way home, Hal stands for a moment on the tiny bridge over the creek that runs to Mirthgate Lake. The water is moving, but the growth around it is still in wintersleep. It takes a long time for things to bloom, he thinks, but he can almost feel things stirring. When he starts walking again, he recalls summer nights lying in bed, listening to the flowing, humming water, speaking as if to him, vague, but compelling, of a journey. Whenever he would mention this to Myra, she called him a "hopeless romantic." She told him he was too full of his mother's stories.

Before he reaches the top steps to his front door, he hears the phone ringing. He fumbles with the key, anxious to take the call before the machine clicks on. It's too late. He hears Mimi saying: "Hal, I'm taking it as a good sign that you're not there. I imagine you did it already and . . ."

"Mimi, I'm here," Hal says, out of breath.

"Oh good. I was anxious . . ."

"I don't even have my coat off yet."

"Did you put the letter in Fred's box?"

"I did. I'm soon the ex-cantor."

"Not until August."

"What's the matter, you still want to be called the cantor's girlfriend?"

"Sure, I always get joy out of that."

"More than I do."

Indeed, Hal sees Mimi beaming after a service when congregants swarm around her wishing her "Good Shabbos" and telling her what a sweet singer Hal is. Someone once told him (years before he became a cantor) that women are attracted to men that sing. Mimi savors the envious praise.

"Don't start, honey. Do this with grace."

"Yeah, yeah, my kind of grace is Gracie Allen."

"Hal."

"Hold on. I'm dying of heat in this coat."

Hal takes off his coat and throws it over the couch. He pulls the phone over and sits down to talk, muddy water from his boots dripping on the carpet.

"Now, where were we?"

"You were being foolish, Hal. We spent a lot of time going over this. It's what you want. Be joyful."

"I'll make a joyful noise unto the Lord."

"Hal, you're exasperating. Why do I love you?"

"Cause I'm good in bed?"

"Took a little training, but yes you are."

"It wasn't training, I led you on, let you do all that work. It was fun."

"Hal, this is crap right now. We're talking about a milestone in your life. You'll see, it will lead to good."

"Umm hmm."

"I need to work until seven. After that, we'll celebrate."

"You coming here or we'll go out?"

"I'll come there. Will Todd be home?"

"I don't know. He's been staying in the city some nights. I think there's someone new."

"I hope he's someone nice."

Yes, Hal thinks. Someone nice. And safe. He sees his son bar-hopping in that gay scene and his stomach constricts. He imagines drugs that impair judgment. Music so loud, it's surreal. Multiple partners. Destructive characters. Sleaze. The Devil be damned. It's no matter that Todd has told

him that it's not like that. Hal sees his own bizarre city-years of pursuit. Only that was after women. And it didn't threaten to kill you.

"Me too. But meantime, I didn't see him this morning, I don't know if he's coming home or not."

"Well, if he's there he'll celebrate with us."

"All right, I'll see you around eight-thirty, nine?"

"Yes. And Hal, please take it easy. Make it a nice day. Go somewhere you like."

"Okay. Good idea. But I'll probably think all day about Molly Pinsky and how this is all her fault."

"Oh, Hal, go ahead. It's true, it is her fault. But while you're thinking, don't forget to thank her."

Thank you, Thank you, dear Molly, Hal thinks, as he pulls off his muddy boots. "I mean that sincerely," he says out loud, "but I'm not sure yet if your kindness is a blessing or a curse."

He thinks back to that day, Valentine's Day, almost a month ago. The mailman had handed him a registered letter from the law offices of Goldman and Salita in Minneapolis, which said that Molly Pinsky had left him in her will the sum of two-hundred thousand dollars. To him, to Hal Perlmutter, who had never saved a dime in his life, who had raided every false start passbook he ever started, who had not even provided for his kid's college education. Every dime he had ever earned in twenty years in Mirthgate, spent, spent, gone. Even the pension funds. To him, to Hal, who only owns a house (half a house, the other half is Myra's) because his mother-in-law gave the down payment. To him, whose parents, Hinda and Issac, had nothing and left nothing. He stood there that morning dumbfounded, pacing back and

forth on the living room floor, then ran out to Hymie's and bought cigarettes ("You don't smoke Cantor, what the heck?" Hymie asked, but Hal said nothing, just "today I'm smoking"). He paced the house the rest of the morning into afternoon, smoking cigarettes to calm himself, weighing possibilities, strategies, fantasies, choices. He fought the impulse to call anyone, to tell anyone, not even Mimi, not yet. To him, to Hal, a *kaupsin cantor*, a *ne'er-do-well* with money, two-hundred thousand dollars (that's one fifth of a million, he thought that morning, a *velt mit gelt*, a world of money). But the fear he felt didn't come from the prospect of the money and whether he would piss that away too. (He could, he knew that, except that now there was Mimi and she might encourage some sound thinking.) The instant dilemma was that now he could leave Mirthgate if he wanted to, now he might not be beholden to bosses, now he could thumb his nose at all the *drek* and stupidity that had occurred since David retired. He could walk away. But was he ready and did he want to? Mirthgate had also been good, his *Shang-ri-la*, his *Brigadoon*, an *emese velt*, the center of his universe for twenty years.

That night, since it was Valentine's Day, he had agreed to meet Mimi for dinner at Salvino's, an elegant little Italian place on Route 22. He held the steering wheel knuckle-hard, still reeling from the change that had come that morning like a bolt from Mount Olympus. It sure wasn't from Sinai. The God of Israel isn't so whimsical. It had to be one of those Greek guys. All around him was the schlock of the highway—this was the "ugly" his family had asked him about so many years ago. Wendy's, Toy-R-U's (he hated that giraffe), Autoland, Macy's Furniture Outlet, Royal Diner with the absurd sign: "Eat Heavy," Basket Outlet and more, more, more as far as the eye could see. And then, absurdly but thankfully out of place, the small sign that just said

"Salvino's, Exceptional Italian Dining." There he found Mimi in the dim dining room, lost in thought, head bent toward the flickering candlelight like she was at a seance. Hal thought, Good, Maybe she'll conjure up Molly and ask her what I should do with the money.

He still hadn't told anyone. Just said to Mimi when he called her at her Teacher's Agency (Mimi could find a job for even the worst people and sometimes felt guilty about it) that he had some big, very big news. When he broke her spell, he bent to kiss her and held her soft, sensual hands.

"What were you thinking about?" he asked her.

"You. I couldn't imagine what was such big news. You sounded frantic."

"More frantic than usual?"

"Yes, I've been worried."

"Nothing to worry about, believe me. Can we order first? I need a drink at least."

After some antipasto and a second Glenlivet, he told her about the two-hundred grand. Told her it wasn't just the money, it was about whether to pick up and leave Mirthgate. "This might be the opportunity," he said, "but it scares me."

Mimi wanted to know how it happened. In December, she had gone to the funeral where Hal had co-officiated. "No one said a word in Minneapolis? You had no idea?"

Hal dipped crusty bread into a small dish of olive oil.

"Mimi, wouldn't I have said something? I didn't even know she had any money. She still lived on the North Side where I grew up, same house across from where we lived. She stayed there after her husband Eddy died.

She was the last Jew in that neighborhood. I thought she couldn't afford to move."

"And she had all that stashed away," Mimi said. She broke a piece of celery in half and ate it without any dip.

They agreed that night not to share the news with anyone but Todd, since he lived with Hal. Not even Hal's daughter, Talya, should know. (Talya was touchy anyway. After the divorce, she went with her mother to live with Grandma in Staten Island. She became orthodox and decided that her father, with his trayf habits, was a fake, a disgrace to the Jewish people.) There was lots of to think about and they had to be level-headed. (This was the way Mimi spoke to Hal, what saved him half the time.) They would reason it out and decide one thing at a time. If it made sense to leave Mirthgate, then he would.

And now he thinks as he gets up from the couch and places the boots on the rubber mat near the front door, And now I've done it.

By one-o'clock, Hal is in the city, on Mimi's advice to go somewhere he likes. He parks the LeBaron (old and cranky now, it had been his extravagance eight years ago after the divorce, a convertible with all the toys) in the self-serve garage near The Garden. He walks the three blocks to Macy's and has a Bleu cheeseburger with thick-cut fries and cole slaw in the mahogany paneled restaurant on the main floor. After lunch, he walks through the wide aisles lined by Greek pillars where attractive young women offer samples of pricey fragrances from gleaming silver trays. After sampling several smells on his wrist, he buys one he decides will be delightful on Mimi. With package in hand, he heads towards the doors to leave when it hits him that soon he might be able to buy anything he wants in this store.

He walks to J. Levine, only a few blocks from Macy's, singing under his breath a cantorial piece from Rosenblatt. Chazzonos. Maybe Levine will have something new. Ha, Hal thinks. New in chazzonos is old. He wonders if there are any new re-issues on tape or CD. Enhanced, digitalized, clear of static, refurbished versions of the classic recordings of the greats: Rosenblatt, Hershman, Pinchik, Kapov-Kagan, Kwartin, Glantz, dozens of others from the golden era between the two wars. The pieces he first heard sitting next to his father on the couch from the old standing radio-phonograph which played the glass 78's. "Your zaida and I used to listen to these records together," his father would tell him, "and now I listen to them with my yingale, my little boy." On the way to J. Levine, Hal sings, and remembers his father. In this time cocoon, the traffic, the rush, the shouting, the honking, all disappear into a hazy collage.

Inside J. Levine's new store, bright lights and glitz. All around are books on tables, and on shelves which line the walls: bibles, prayer books, commentary, editions of the Talmud, Rashi, Maimonides, the stories of Sholom Aleichem, Bernard Malamud, a new best seller by Alan Dershowitz, a book of jokes by Jackie Mason. On some walls hang Jewish artwork and fancy engraved wedding contracts. There are mannequins wearing prayer shawls in all kinds of styles from traditional black and white to colorful Israeli tapestries. Salespeople stand behind glass counters filled with Passover plates, Chanukah menorahs, Yahrzeit lamps, mezzuzahs, jewelry.

One of the owners, a portly gray haired man with blotches of red in his face sees Hal and rushes over to shake his hand.

"Chazzan, how are you? Good thing you came in today. We just got some new recordings right up your alley. There's a guy in Queens lately got

rights for some pieces that haven't been around for years. It'll be a thrill for you. Go upstairs and see."

"Thanks," Hal says, "thanks for telling me."

"Not a problem. How are things there in, where are you again?"

"Mirthgate. Mirthgate Temple in New Jersey."

"Oh yeah, that's right. Where Kornbluh used to be the rabbi. Where is he now since he retired?"

"David? David is in Florida. Near Fort Lauderdale."

"Really a fine man."

"Yes."

"Don't feel bad though. I always forget where you're the chazzan, but I don't forget you. You're one of our best customers for chazzonos."

"Thanks."

"Now go upstairs and see."

The balcony is J. Levine's music department. He goes to the rotating display which holds the chazzonos. A short, slovenly old man leaning on a cane is already perusing the rack. After a few minutes, Hal perfects a little dance with him, so that they can both look at the selection. But then they bump into each other lightly.

"Sorry," Hal says.

The old man takes a little bow. "Dat's all right," he says, "ve must be friends, since ve bolt liking chazzonos."

"That's true," Hal says, "there aren't many of us left."

"But, don' vorry, it vill come back. Someting so beautiful, it doesn't get lost forever."

"I hope you're right."

"Look, Levine moves up from downtown and opens up dis fancy store, some of da young people, de'll come up here looking for da modern music, that Jewish rocking rolling, you'll excuse me, that drek and de'll discover what else is up here. Downtown dey wouldn't go, but here de'll find it. I always say tings go round and round and dey come back."

The old man reminds Hal of characters he knew from his childhood in Minneapolis. Thick-accented, they would pat your head and ask you who your parents were. They would argue with the merchants over a few pennies. They would shush you in the synagogue. Hal notices the man's sunken eyes, blue veins in gnarled hands. Older than Hal thought at first. He could be ninety.

"Did you know any of them?"

"Know who?"

"The old cantors. The greats."

"Vat are you talkin? I knew most of dem. At least I heard them. In person. I went to all da concerts. In my own shul, ven I lived in Boro Park (it was different den now vid the Chassidim) they hired Kwartin. Zavel Kwartin. He was de best."

"I know. I do some of his pieces."

"You're a chazzan?"

Hal didn't want to say "soon not to be" and he wondered for the first time if there was really such a thing as an ex-cantor, or is it once a cantor, always a cantor?

"Yes, I'm in a shul in New Jersey."

"God bless you. I love to hear you sometime. You a nice lookin' man, you must have a nice voice."

Hal smiles and says, "Thank you."

"An' den I could tell you vat it vas like. I vas a boy, but I remember ven dey came over from Russia, from Ukraine, from Moldava. All da famous ones. Dey came to da rich medina and dey got big salaries for dat time. Den dey started making dese records."

"That's because their landsman owned the record companies," Hal says. "They gave them the chance to showcase their work."

"You right. And the Jews, what they worked hard, and some of dem were poor, had a chance to hear the big chazzonim in dere own houses. With music background . . ."

The old man is in the middle of a sentence when a firm hand touches his shoulder. The woman says, "Pa, we've got to go." Without saying another word to Hal, the man holds on to his daughter and starts to follow her down the stairs. Hal wants to call after him, make plans to meet, to talk more about chazzonos, but he doesn't. Following his daughter, the old man looks like a ghost.

Hal stands still, almost stunned. He wonders whether his interest in chazzonos is like bringing up ghosts. Like that off-Broadway play of a few years back where the cantor haunts his old synagogue. But then he snaps out of the feeling and returns to the rack. He comes across one of the re-issues that the owner was talking about. It's put out by a company called 'Gems' with a P. O. Box address in Queens. The title is "Great Voices of the Synagogue" and it includes Chagy, Hershman, Kwartin, Roitman, Rosenblatt, Shlisky, Sirota. There are pictures of the cantors in their white holiday robes and high cantorial hats. Some still wear their old-country beards. They look, in their serious poses, like the bishops of chazzonos. Hal puts the tape aside. He'll take this one. He anticipates the power of the pieces inside. It feels as alive as his

own blood flowing. No, not ghosts. Immortal. Thanks for the guy in Queens who understands that.

Then something catches his eye. It's called "Golden Voices of Israel." It's a re-issue of an album that Hal's father brought home (he stops and calculates) in 1955. Issac's collection of chazzonos, the glass records he had inherited from his father were largely gone. Hal had destroyed them as a boy of our. He still didn't know why his father didn't protect them and by the time he thought to ask, it was too late. But one day in 1955, Issac showed up with a flat square package in his hand. The family had bought a new phonograph: it closed up like a suitcase and played those new long-playing 33's. Issac marveled that the record was plastic. "It's called vinyl," he said, pulling the record out of its cardboard container, "and it's unbreakable." Was he looking at me when he said that, Hal wonders. "Each side has five full pieces," his father went on. "Can you imagine?" They played that record hundreds of times and Hal eventually knew every note, every turn, every nuance verbatim. The album had somehow gotten lost when Hal's mother died, but now here it was re-issued on a tape. He thinks about playing it right away in the car on the way home. He reads through the pieces on the label one by one and hears them in his mind.

Downstairs, he feels every breath as he pays the owner for the tapes and thanks him.

"I'm glad you'll enjoy."

Hal smiles and starts toward the door. The owner calls after him. "If you speak to Rabbi Kornbluh, give my best wishes."

"I'll do that," Hal calls back.

On Route 46, just out of the tunnel, Hal is neck to neck in traffic. Drivers are leaning on their horns and huge trucks, spewing black smoke,

give off the high-pitched pumping sounds of hydraulic brakes. Hal is singing with the "Golden Voices of Israel."

By the time he's on I-80, the traffic has thinned out some and he's almost heard each piece a second time. He anticipates every note, vocal and instrumental. At the exit to Mirthgate, he's listening to Pierre Pinchik's *Rozo De Shabbos*. He remembers reading that this was Pinchik's trademark piece, the highlight of his concerts. He wonders whether the old man at Levine's ever heard it in person. Lucky old guy probably did. Like his father used to, Hal joins Pinchik in the final twisting and twirling half-falsetto where Pinchik dispenses with words and just sings on "ah" in the back regions where the human voice is so powerful. In those moments, Issac felt uplifted, connected with pure spirit, no longer just a poor shmuck cutting pastrami. He didn't understand the words the way Hal does, but still he intuited the message of being one with the divine, felt the flow of blessings and peace. When Hal listened with his father, his head sometimes on the sleeve of Issac's tattered sweater, the one he wore all the time, the one with the pungent smell Hal associated with daddy, he didn't understand the words either. It didn't matter. Pinchik's rendition was beyond words. Which is why, Hal thinks, as he sings the spiraling "ahs" with the tape, Pinchik chose to end the piece this way.

In Hal's living room, the answering machine which sits on top of his piano, is blinking madly. He listens to the calls one by one. First, Rabbi Jerry Salmon: "Hal, Fred Deutch gave me the news. You never let on. Was this a recent decision? I'm, well . . . I'm saddened. Things will certainly change around here. Can we talk tomorrow? I'll be in the office most of the day." Poor putz means well. Sure, I'll stop by. Fred Deutch: "Chazzan, what a shock!

Here I was thinking how in five years we'll throw you a big party. And now you are leaving us. You have something better? Many people are going to be upset. The Board meeting is next week. I want you to attend. We'll discuss some of the particulars. I will talk to you soon." Just what I expected from that hypocrite. Todd: "Dad. Did you resign? Pretty scary move, huh? After all these years. But you need to move on and now you can do it. Sorry I'm not coming home tonight. I'm staying with a friend." Who's this friend? The mystery man. "But we'll go out on the weekend, O. K.? Are we telling Mom and Talya yet?" We'll tell them, yes, now we can do it. "They're gonna find out pretty fast. See you tomorrow night. Love ya." Celine Mandel: "Cantor, this is Celine." No kidding. I recognize your farpishta voice. "My mother says you canceled choir practice for tomorrow night. How come? Will it be regular time the next Thursday? Let us know, please." David: "Hal, it's David. Just want to know how you are. Hope things are going fine. You don't have to return the call. I'll call you again in a few days. Regards from Penny. Stay well." Why haven't I told David? He should have been first to know.

Hal decides not to respond to any of the calls. He feels no compunction. He's feeling like he does when once in a while he gets a professional massage, and lying on the table, under expert fingers, time disappears. He sinks into his soft recliner, the chair in which he has always stolen quick and precious naps and forgets for the moment, the import of this day. He thinks as he dozes off, that now, with the money, he can have a massage every day, if that's what he wants.

Mimi and Hal sit on Hal's couch munching water crackers and one of those cheese balls covered with chopped nuts. They're also sharing a tall bottle of bubbly with a name on the label that Hal can't pronounce. When

Mimi handed the bottle to him, he took one look and just said "Impressive." Judy Collins is singing "The Life You Dream" on the stereo. "What a shock, What a shock!" Hal says, trying to sound like Deutch on the phone with his slight German accent. Mimi is laughing.

"We can laugh now, but he's been a pain in the ass," Hal says.

Mimi tries to get serious, but every time she wants to say something, she gets caught up in the humor and lets out an undistinguished snort. Finally she composes herself. "Hal, don't focus on Fred and the negatives of the last few years. You had all kinds of good around here. Especially the years with David. And your work with the kids has always been wonderful."

Hal pulls Mimi closer and nibbles her neck. "Don't get serious on me now, I like you better when you're snorting."

"All right," Mimi says, pulling away to pick up her glass from the coffee table, "tonight we can be stupid."

"That's right," Hal says, "tomorrow we have to figure out where we're going."

"We're?"

"Of course we're. Wherever I'm going, aren't you coming with?"

"Depends."

"On what?"

"Depends on where you're going."

"I'll let you know when I find out."

Hal looks at Mimi's wide dark eyes, her long oval face, her sensual lips and long, but pretty nose. He smooths her fine, flowing black hair and thinks how much she looks like a Gypsy. This has always been ironic to him. Mimi comes from Polish Jews. It's his family that comes from Gypsy country. He

kisses her softly on the lips, suddenly awash in the scent he bought for her at Macy's and whispers: "Whither I goest, thou will go."

Mimi pulls away gently. "I think you've turned that around. And wasn't the guy dead when Naomi followed her mother-in-law?"

"Yes, but I'm alive, with a few aches and pains, but still very alive."

"Aches and pains," Mimi says. "What do I need to go anywhere with an alter cocker, even with money?"

The two of them begin laughing again and go back to the champagne.

When the Judy Collins tape is done, Hal suggests that they listen to the chazzonos he brought from Levine. "There's a piece I want you to hear that I hadn't heard for years. It's from a re-issue of something my dad once owned. Pierre Pinchik—*Rozo De Shabbos*."

"What does that mean?"

"The Mystery of the Sabbath. It's from the Zohar, the book of Jewish mysticism. Sephardi Jews always included it in their Friday night prayers. Pinchik introduced it to the Ashkenazis."

Hal finishes the last of the champagne and gets up to change the tape. "Should we smoke?"

"Of course," Mimi says, taking her last sip.

From his bedroom closet, Hal removes the shaving bag where he keeps his stash—Baggie filled with a quarter ounce of cleaned Colombian weed, a well-used metal and plastic pipe that needs a new screen, and a Bic lighter.

Back on the couch, they pass Hal's pipe, while Pinchik's intense, but soft tenor voice interprets the melodic strains of his *Rozo De Shabbos*. The way Pinchik beckons with each compelling phrase, it's as if he's opening elegant palace doors, and saying: "Here, here is the way to eternity, to meaning, to transcendence."

"He wants you to feel by the end of the piece," Hal tells Mimi, "that you're one with Spirit. Now in this part, listen . . . he's given up words and is just draying around that ah. It feels like he's in touch with that oneness himself."

"Beautiful," Mimi says.

By now the pot has taken its familiar course, like it always does for Hal. At first, it brings him even more intensely into the music, concentrates his mind. But eventually, his body feels heavy. He's aware of a tension, a compulsion. His libido takes a front row seat.

"Let's make love," he says. They shut the music.

Mimi sits up in bed while Hal nuzzles her small firm breasts. She holds his head with one hand, smooths his hair, and gently guides him. With her other hand, she strokes his penis with her long soft fingers. They begin to moan in duet. Hal picks up his head and says "I love you, Gypsy."

Chapter 2.

In the morning, Mimi gets up early to get to the agency while Hal stays lazy in bed. While she's washing and getting dressed, he thinks about making her some breakfast, but finally he just mumbles in a haze "There's some bagels in the freezer and some fresh cream cheese in the fridge. Make yourself some coffee." When he hears her leave, he lies awake feeling some guilt. But then he begins a fantasy about a life with all that money and without Mimi. A life full of the old debauchery. Like the years at the seminary when he hardly studied, but spent three nights a week on forty-second. Like the cheating on Myra and the wackiness after the divorce which didn't end until Mimi came along. He could go back to all that, he could say to hell to a life of propriety. He could travel, sleep with prostitutes, gamble in Las Vegas, buy one of those RV's, be a wandering crazy, beholden to no one. Never have to work, be responsible. The fantasy, how real it feels, intrigues him, then frightens him. He thinks, before he falls back asleep, about how the money could be gone in no time.

Lea, the secretary, her voice a deep fog, is badgering Hal in the office. Hal had just wanted to catch the Rabbi before starting to work with the kids.

"I can't believe that you never even hinted, just like that you spring on us that you're leaving?"

"Sorry Lea," Hal says, "I should have at least confided in you."

Lea smiles and pulls back her mess of hair. "You should have. You could always trust me."

That's true, Hal thinks. Lea was a good ear when he was divorcing Myra. But he couldn't have told her anything this time. He had agreed with Mimi to take no chances.

"So when do you expect Jerry back?"

"He said maybe around three. He went for some kind of emergency, he wouldn't tell me what."

"Well, when he gets back, have him buzz me. I want to catch him before I leave tonight."

"Okay," Lea says. But she wants to get back on the subject of Hal's leaving. She shouts after him as he's walking away. "Fred Deutch says everyone is shocked. No one expected it."

"I'll be in my office, Lea."

His office is down a long corridor in the newest section of the building, across from the library and next to the small auxiliary sanctuary. Before the expansion and remodeling (the last big project of David's tenure), he was in a window-less storage room. He waited years for a real office with two small windows, paneled walls, and carpeting. At the end of summer, he'll give it over to a new chazzan.

He stops in the small employee bathroom and fills two large cups with water for the plants which sit in front of his office windows. He decided to get flowering plants the first day he took over the new office when he marveled at how much light came pouring through. Ever since, he takes care of the plants (he can never remember what they're called), like children. He gives them water and food, examines them, trims them, and gets pleasure from every new bud.

At two-fifteen, just off the school bus, Mark Ginzberg walks into Hal's office. He's a strong, handsome, chunky boy, medium height for his twelve and a half years, with glowing pink cheeks. "Hey, Cantor," he says, a little out of breath. He drops his book bag and sits in the chair in front of Hal's desk.

"What's up, Marko?" Hal asks.

"Not much, Cantoro," Mark answers with a broad smile recently refurbished by eighteen months of wearing braces.

"You ready with your work?"

"Oh yeah."

"Gut. Das ist sehr gut."

"Wha?"

"Never mind. Get your stuff out."

Mark starts searching through the mess in his bag, and after crumpling a dozen papers, finds his Bar Mitzvah book and tape at the bottom. "Oh, before I forget," he says as he opens his book to the right page. "My mom said something about hearing a rumor. She wants you to call her when we're done."

"All right," Hal says. The word must really be out by now. But he won't mind calling Naomi Ginzberg, one of his best friends, a sister, really.

Hal opens his large Bible to Mark's portion and asks him to begin chanting his last assignment. The boy chants loud and strong and slightly off key. He makes only a few mistakes, which Hal corrects; then he helps Mark drill. Mark repeats passages he finds difficult until they sound smooth. For a moment, he loses his concentration, looks at Hal and asks "Where am I?"

"Mirthgate Lake," Hal answers.

"I know that . . ."

"Mendota County, State of New Jersey, United States, North America, Western Hemisphere, Earth, Milky Way, Universe."

"Cantor," Mark says, stretching out the second syllable. "You do this every time."

"Well, then don't lose your place."

"Okay."

"You're doing great, anyway. Let's go to the beginning and review what you know."

Mark sings the Haftorah from the beginning. Hal has taught this same portion to a dozen boys and girls to the point where he can daydream and still instinctively pick up any mistakes. He starts to think about how close he has been to Mark's family. He comforted Naomi's mother, who lived with the family, through her years of ordeal with cancer. When the time came, he and David conducted the funeral. He performed the wedding (alone, David was on vacation) for Naomi's brother and sister-in-law. Mark's older brother, Randy, fretted over his Bar Mitzvah, terrified he couldn't do it because of his dyslexia. Hal did everything he could, (talked to experts, read up) to see that the kid succeeded and he did. "In the end," Naomi had said, "it was the relationship—he trusted you." Hal and Myra and the kids shared many good times with the Ginzberg's and since the divorce, Naomi and Mitch (Mark's father) have stuck with Hal and welcomed Mimi. I'll call Naomi as soon as Mark is done, Hal thinks.

Mark finishes his chanting and Hal shouts "Hurrah." He asks Mark to sing several blessings and prayers and then marks off a new assignment in his book.

"I don't think we'll need to tape anything today," Hal says, "I did some extra last time, didn't I?"

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure."

Mark stuffs his book and tape back into his bag. "Hey Cantor," he asks. "Do you think we'll get any more snow?"

"Possible," Hal says. "Lots of times it snows for the first Seder."

"Remember how much fun we had walking through the snow in December?"

Hal remembers. It was one of those all-night blizzards that left tons of snow on the ground and closed the schools. He had walked over with Todd to have breakfast with the Ginzberg's. After they ate, Mark suggested that they hike through the snow to the Mendota Mall, about two miles away. Hal was persuaded. He and Todd and Mark, dressed in down jackets and wearing tall boots, took the back way, through woods, down trails, one junk yard, and over a railroad bridge. Later, Hal wondered why he hadn't fallen from that high track and killed himself.

"It was fun," Hal says. "I'm glad I'm still alive to talk about it."

"Oh, poor old man. You should do more stuff like that. Get rid of that gut."

Hal play-punches Mark in the belly. "Big shot kid. You'll be my age, you'll have one too."

"Not me. I'll work out."

"Bye Mark, see you later."

"Don't forget to call my mother."

When Mark opens the door, Hal's next student, a new girl, is waiting. Hal tells her he'll be with her in a few minutes, explaining that he has to make a phone call. The girl, tall and lanky, but with very delicate features, looks a little nervous, and shakes her head.

"Your kid will never get through Bar Mitzvah," Hal says when Naomi answers the phone.

"If I didn't know you better, I'd start to worry."

"Mark told me to call you."

"What's this I hear, you're leaving the Temple?"

Hal starts to fidget with the pens and pencils in a cup on his desk. "You heard right."

"I knew you weren't always thrilled lately. But this is a surprise. Why didn't you say anything?"

"It was complicated. I'll talk to you about it. Explain everything that's going on. Mimi and I will come over."

"Good. Make it soon."

"We will, I promise. Hey, I have to get back to another student. I'll call when I have more time. It's hard, but I think it will be for good. I'll look forward to your advice."

"There's something I have no trouble giving. My kid really doing bad?"

"No, he's fine. You know that."

"Just thought I'd ask."

Hal beckons to the new girl to come in.

Eileen Abramovitz just moved to Mirthgate in the Fall, so Hal doesn't know her like his other students, many who have been in the Hebrew school since first grade. He noticed her a few times when he went into her classroom to teach music and prayers. He was impressed because she didn't hesitate to sing out loud. Today, she looks nervous, like she doesn't know what to expect.

"First rule to these lessons, Eileen," Hal says, "is that we never have a glum face. So we'll start with smiling exercises."

"That's kind of silly," the girl responds, but still breaks into a smile.

"Good. A good start. I'll mark it here on your file. Smile well on its way."

For that, Hal gets an even bigger smile which reveals the obligatory full mouth of hardware, a rite of passage for Jewish kids of this age.

"Here's a prayer book, Eileen. I want to hear how you're doing in Hebrew. Open to page eighteen and recite the *V'Ahavta*."

Eileen reads the Hebrew, slowly but competently. Hal asks her then to sing the same passage. Eileen's voice is mature for her age, clear and strong, revealing some training. She seems to have some natural talent and genuine vocal instincts.

"Wow," Hal says, "you have a beautiful voice. Have you ever done any singing?"

Eileen raises her head from the Siddur. She suddenly seems more relaxed and self-confident. "In Woodbridge, where we moved from, I was in two musicals at our school. The director, Mrs. Marlowe, said I could sing like those kids on Broadway, and gave me some lessons."

"Terrific. Sing me a few lines from one of those plays."

The girl fidgets in her chair, looks up at the ceiling as if she could find the song up there, but then asks "How about from *Cats*? That song 'Memory.'"

"Yes. Fine."

Eileen starts to sing "Memory" and goes for more than a few lines. Then, abruptly she stops, as if she figured out she's only in the Cantor's office and not on stage.

Hal shouts "Incredible. That was wonderful." He thinks, this girl would make some chazzan.

He hands Eileen a small paperback booklet containing the various blessings that she will need to memorize and her portion from the prophets. "Your Haftorah is from Jeremiah. Ever hear of Jeremiah?"

"No," the girl answers sadly, slightly slumping in her seat. Hal can tell she's one who likes to have the answers readily. He's worked with so many kids this age over the years, literally hundreds, that he's learned to read them. Eileen is the perfectionist.

"Well, for one he's a bullfrog."

"A bullfrog? What does that mean?" Eileen asks, and straightens up.

"There was a rock song from the sixties. The lyrics start out 'Jeremiah was a bullfrog.'"

"Why?"

"I guess like all the prophets, no one wanted to hear what he had to say, so he sounded like a bullfrog. Very unpleasant."

"But why didn't they want to listen?"

"Because he tried to tell the truth. People don't always want to face the truth. They'd rather stick to their illusions."

"Oh."

Hal isn't sure if she understands. No matter. They'll have plenty of time to go over this. "Anyway," he says, "we'll talk about Jeremiah later, when we figure out what he's saying in your portion. But meantime, here's a tape which has the blessings. Learn the two blessings before and after the Torah and the blessing before the Haftorah for next week. If you open to them in your book, I'll sing them once for you."

When he starts to sing, Hal notices the Eileen sings along under her breath.

"Do you know these?"

"I've heard them."

"Well, good, then you'll be ahead."

At the door, Hal tells Eileen that he looks forward to their lessons and that she will be great. He sits back down at his desk and thinks again about how beautiful the girl's voice is. Then it dawns on him. He flips through his calendar to confirm. Eileen's service will be his last in Mirthgate. The thought is bittersweet. There were times, when he'd wished some particular service was his last; times when his dream of some kind of life away from the synagogue was almost palatable. But now, his leaving is reality, and his emotions are not so simple. I will make it a memorable service, Hal thinks. That girl will be spectacular.

Hal sees two more students before Lea buzzes him.

When Hal enters the office, Lea tells him to wait another minute, that the Rabbi is on the phone. Lea is busy filing her nails. Hal didn't want to get trapped, even for a minute, but here he is.

"Oh by the way," Lea says, "Anna Dumbroff was in. She didn't know you were planning to leave, either. I can't believe even she was in the dark. She's like a mother to you."

Hal bites his lip and absorbs this little piece of news. "What did she say? Why didn't you send her down to see me?"

Lea shakes the cuticle dust off her fingers. "She said she didn't want to disturb you when you were tutoring. I think she said you should call her. I'm pretty sure."

Lea's phone buzzes. On the speaker-phone Rabbi Jerry Salmon is saying "Lea, please tell Hal to come in."

Jerry Salmon's office, down a short corridor from Lea's desk, is large, bright and well furnished. His need for showy space is more important to

him than it was to David. When he arrived, he talked the Board into discarding David's simple furnishings for a modern oak desk, computer terminal, beige leather chairs, lamp tables like the ones in the Oval office, plush carpeting. The walls are covered throughout with degrees (real and honorary), awards, citations, pictures with the governor of New Jersey, the Prime Minister of Israel, even one with George Bush. There are cheery looking lithographs with sayings of ancient sages. The three large windows which face the front lawn of the building are now curtained (David had vinyl blinds) with an expensive fabric.

"Sit down, Hal," Jerry says, offering his hand. "I'm glad you could take a few minutes."

"No problem, Jerry. I don't have any more kids until after dinner. I was thinking about going to Hymie's for a sandwich. Lea thought you would be back at three."

Hal leans back in the fancy leather chair that faces Salmon's desk. He misses David. This ostentatious space hasn't earned Jerry a lick of respect, he thinks.

"I had to spend more time than I thought. Hannah White got the news that she'll need a bypass after all. She was pretty emotional."

"I imagine. She's pretty hysterical anyway. I think she cries when the mailman leaves. I'll get over to see her."

"That would be good."

Salmon leans on his elbows and does his best to make eye contact with Hal. "So what's happened, so suddenly you inform us that you're leaving?"

"It's been a possibility for a while, Jerry. But circumstances made it reality."

"What circumstances?"

Hal is annoyed. He shifts in his chair, feels the tightness of his underwear. He doesn't like to talk about the . . . circumstances. Before he can say anything, Lea pops her head in the door.

"Rabbi, I'll be leaving. Hannah White called to say she won't be coming in tomorrow. She was supposed to work on the books. She doesn't sound herself."

"She's got some things on her mind, Lea. She'll come around."

"All right, but no one tells me anything. Not you, not the Cantor, not even Hannah White."

"So I was asking," Salmon says after Lea leaves, "unless it's none of my business, what circumstances?"

"I inherited some money," Hal blurts out almost angrily. "I never expected it."

"Enough to retire on?"

"Not necessarily, but enough to figure out what I want to do when I grow up."

Salmon laughs and leans back in his chair.

"Hal, Hal, I know it hasn't been easy for you since David left. Everybody wants change, change, change. Egalitarian services. That was the easy one. But now. Gender-neutral language. Renewal. The *Borchu* with dance and meditation. Who knows what will come next? This is not the rabbinate I trained for."

"Nor what I expected when I became a chazzan."

"So what do I do? I can't leave. I've still got young kids. I don't want to move. And somewhere else it will be better? The Conservative shuls are all in crisis. And there aren't that many open pulpits now that women are taking them."

"Same is true for cantors. They'll probably replace me with a woman."

"Not if Fred Deutch has anything to say about it. He's dead against it. He told me that the minute he called about your resignation. 'Don't get any ideas about a woman cantor, Rabbi. Tzats veur I draw tza line.'"

Hal laughs and lets go of some of his tension. He thinks Jerry's a shmuck to complain about the changes he claims not to want, but allows. Jerry should just take a stand.

"So you won't take another position in a shul?" Salmon asks.

"Anything could happen, but I doubt it."

"I'm really sorry to see you go, Hal. You're a wonderful chazzan and a skilled teacher. The kids love you. And so does the community."

"Not everyone, Jerry," Hal says. "The Board sure has their complaints. I don't want to cooperate in creating a modern service. I'm too egotistical. They don't like my lifestyle, the girlfriend, my son's lifestyle. I'm stubborn . . ."

"I wouldn't let that bother you, Hal. That's the Board's job—to kvetch and obstruct."

Hal gets up. His guts are rumbling. He needs some of Hymie's greasy brisket. "Jerry, we'll continue this later. I've got to get something to eat. We still have until August together. I look forward to it."

"All right, Hal," the Rabbi says, also standing up from his chair. Hal forgets how short Jerry is when he's sitting. The Board hired a short rabbi after David, who was almost six feet, because he seemed non-threatening. And the Board members were right.

As he's leaving Salmon's office, Hal pauses for a moment, turns around and says, "Jerry, take a stand."

The LeBaron sits in the Temple parking lot, but Hal decides to walk to Hymie's. The air is crisp, still clearly the bite of March with mature teeth. Hal buttons the top button of the coat he's been wearing all winter. The setting sun creates a pinkish hue which reminds him of careless days of play when kids hold on to the last moments of light. His own kids were never to be found, when Myra wanted them for dinner. They hung on firmly to a few possibilities before darkness set in. It's training for middle age, Hal thinks.

He passes Anna Dumbroff's house and makes a mental note to call her after he sees his last students. (There are still two more to go after dinner.) He hopes Anna won't be insulted about not being consulted. All these years in Mirthgate, Naomi has been Hal's sister, but Anna has been a mother. Hinda and Issac died young and left Hal still in need of parents. Besides Anna, he nurtured Molly Pinsky and she called him "my adopted son." All the time, sitting on that small fortune, gaining nothing from it for herself. Did she plan all along to leave it to Hal? Is that what parents do, sacrifice for their kids? *Mir far dir*, Hinda used to say, me for you, whenever Hal was sick or suffering. Did he sacrifice for his kids? It's a subject he doesn't like to think about.

And who has he courted to play father? David? He likes to think that they are just the best of friends. But then again, he wouldn't know what an adult relationship is like with a father. Issac died when Hal was eighteen.

Hymie does a brisk business for breakfast and lunch. But for dinner, there's only a few stragglers like Hal. When things got really bad with Myra, Hal preferred to stop at Hymie's for a sandwich, than to go home for dinner. "I eat alone with my children," Myra would complain. In those days, just like now, Hal wondered why Hymie stayed open until eight. It couldn't be for Hal's sandwich and the few pounds of corned beef he was selling. Was he also

avoiding his wife? Hal wouldn't ask him, he thinks. But then again, he's spoken to Jerry Salmon today in a way he wouldn't have before. Just came out with it. Told him to take a stand.

Hal smiles as he always does when he approaches the entrance to Hymie's. The free-standing building looks like it's about to collapse. Who would buy this place, he wonders. When Hymie closes the doors for the last time, the roof will cave in.

"Cantor, Sholom Aleichem," Hymie shouts as Hal enters the deli. Hymie's voice is strong and resonant. He sometimes leads the preliminary prayers on Saturday mornings before Hal takes over. His untrained voice also reminds Hal of Issac.

"Hello, Hymie. You sound like you're in a good mood."

"What good does it do to be a sourpuss?"

The deli is empty except for Hymie and Hal. The network news is playing on a small TV set sitting on a shelf behind the counter. Dan Rather is describing the President's latest drug strategy.

"I heard bad news today," Hymie says, as Hal spreads his coat on a seat at the counter and sits down. He watches as Hymie opens his steamer, spears a hot brisket and carries it to the slicer. Hymie knows what Hal eats on Thursday nights.

"What bad news?" Hal asks. He hopes it isn't someone in the shul.

"My chazzan is leaving the Temple," Hymie says as he slices Hal's meat. "They came in all day today. 'Did you hear, did you hear?' I told them I saw you yesterday morning and you didn't say a word. What's a matter, you don't know me long enough?"

"Sorry, Hymie."

Hymie leaves the sliced meat on the wax paper and shuts the machine. He comes over to Hal and says quietly, almost sadly, "You really want to go?"

"It's time, Hymie. And I can do it now."

"Why is that?"

"A little help from my friends."

There's a thick silence between them for a moment until Hymie recovers his booming baritone. "So what are you having with the sandwich? I've got some fresh macaroni salad, and I can even slice you up a nice tomato."

"Sounds good," Hal says. "And give me a Dr. Brown's cream soda."

"So what else do you drink?"

"Water, if it's up to Mimi. She thinks the soda is bad for me."

"Sounds like a wife," Hymie says, setting Hal's plate in front of him. "You think now that you're leaving, you two might . . . you know, tie the knot?"

"Not me," Hal says, "I blew it once. I'm not made for marriage."

"Too bad, Mimi's a good woman."

"That she is. But I don't have to marry her. I'll settle for the status quo in that department."

While Hal eats his dinner, Hymie gets busy with a few customers. A pound of pastrami. A jar of pickles. Hal doesn't know these people and he's glad. He doesn't want to make any more apologies. He anticipates enough of that when he calls Anna. As if he conjured her up, just as he's thinking about her, Anna appears on the television.

"Hey, there she is," Hymie shouts, "our friend the cat lady."

"Turn it up," Hal says. At eighty-one, Anna Dumbroff has found a career doing cat food commercials. One of her daughters met an agent down

in Florida, and told him all about Anna's background. He called her for an audition, and she turned out to be just what he was looking for. Hal loves it.

"My cat thanks me every day," Anna is saying in a close shot to the camera. The camera pans out and the cat in her lap looks at Anna lovingly and meows her approval. Hal thinks, I'll have to ask her how many takes it took to get that cat to meow on cue.

"She's an amazing woman," Hymie says, when the news comes back on.

"That's for sure. She hasn't acted in all the years since she came to this country with Willy. They were in the Yiddish Theater in Warsaw, you know."

"She's told me. But they got out of Poland just in time. Willy, he should rest in peace, he was a smart guy. Came here at the right time with a real estate business. I remember when he was the only one selling in Mirthgate."

"Yes," Hal says, "he did well."

At the register, Hymie brings up the question of Hal's leaving again. "What are your plans?" he asks. "I hear you're not even going to another shul."

Word travels fast.

"You're too young to retire."

"I'll do what my heart tells me, I guess."

"You could buy this place. Better hurry, though, I got someone interested in turning it into a pizza parlor."

"In that case, I'm glad I'm leaving," Hal says. "Three nights a week of pizza would really kill me."

On the way back to the Temple, Hal thinks about something he said to Hymie. "With a little help from my friends." He remembers when Todd turned fourteen, he gave him the album from the concert at Woodstock, because he wanted his son to share his love of that hippie milestone. They listened over and over, especially to Joe Cocker's version of the Beatles song—"With a Little Help from my Friends." Cocker's voice was nothing to rave about—he wouldn't make it as a chazzan—but his interpretation and the passion he gave to the song was incredible. And how he builds up to that primal scream near the end. Hal and Todd ran around the house mimicking that scream for weeks and kept Myra and Talya screaming back to stop.

Then there was the scheme he and Todd came up with. Ask one of the Bar Mitzvah boys to pause at the point where he was supposed to say his Torah blessings, and instead look at the congregation and sing in Joe Cocker style: "What would you do if I sang out of tune, would you stand up and walk out on me?" Hal told Todd he would offer a hundred dollars for any kid to do it. But he had no takers.

After his last student leaves, Hal replaces the Bible and the prayer book he used with the kids, on the shelf behind his desk. His books are practically floor to ceiling now, another accumulation of the last twenty years. These he can take with him. His stereo on the middle shelf, and the tapes in the hard-fought-for custom made drawers: prayer services, portions for kids, lectures, and yes, chazzonos, all this he'll take. But then sitting in the swivel chair, his head feeling heavy, he wonders why he would need anything but the chazzonos. Will he ever teach kids again? How many times has he said enough? After twenty years, the same portions, the same routines, the monotonous repetition. Sometimes he struggles to keep awake. But what

about the good stuff: the curiosity, the honesty, the innocence of twelve-year-olds? The way so many times, a child lifted the burden off his shoulders. What will replace that? Without children, Hal wonders, will I just get old?

He thinks of Anna. Her two daughters are married, have kids, live down in Florida. Reversal of how it's supposed to be: The mother down south, the kids up north. She doesn't see her grandchildren much. How does Anna stay so up and young-thinking without her kids around?

He picks up the phone and punches her number. Anna answers in her still strong and deep voice: the oboe section, mysterious but grounded. Anna enunciates carefully, like the actresses you can still see on cable stations that play classic Hollywood. She once told Hal that she learned English by attending a matinee every day at the local movie house. She thought that to sound American, she had to speak like Rita Hayworth or Katherine Hepburn. It was the frustrated actress in her as well, the young woman who had been cut off from a budding career in the Warsaw Yiddish Theater. She could see herself in those glamorous and articulate women on the screen.

"Hello, Anna dear." Anna could bring out an elegance, a pleasant formality in Hal, that rarely showed up with anyone else.

"Hal. Oh my. I've been waiting to speak to you all day. I won't ask you why I was kept in the dark . . ."

"Anna, I . . ."

"Don't even think to apologize. After all we have shared together, over all these years, it just wasn't right that I should hear about this from someone else, especially not that busybody in the office."

"I'm sorry, Anna. It was a conflict for me, but Mimi and I agreed to keep my decision silent until it was public."

"Your lovely Mimi, she has quite an influence on you."

Hal smiles into the receiver as if Anna can see. He knows that she, if anyone, understands his relationship with Mimi. She knew him when, headstrong, he wouldn't listen to anyone. Except maybe David.

"Yes, she does."

"And I suppose that's for the good. But still my feelings are hurt."

"How can I make it up to you?"

"Well for one thing, come to Shabbat dinner with Todd and Mimi tomorrow night."

"Easy enough. I don't have to be dragged by the hair to an Anna Dumbroff home-cooked Shabbos meal. But it's probably going to be just you and me."

"Oh?"

"Mimi's working late. It's her season. And I'm assuming that Todd will be staying in the city. My guess is he's got a new boyfriend. At least I hope so. You know I'm scared to death about him having multiple partners. The way things are today."

"Let's hope it is a new love. And that he's a fine young man."

Anna's progressive nature never ceases to amaze Hal. She and her husband Willy, were young Labor Socialists in Poland. Arbeiter Ring. Willy, after years in real estate, lost some of the edge. But Anna remained left-wing, stood up for the protesters in the Vietnam war, embraced feminism, gay and lesbian rights. When Todd "came out," Myra's response was denial and blame-casting. She wanted Todd to "get help." Hal would go to Anna, for support, for solace. She would tell him that "Todd must be who he is." Hal has always been grateful. More than ever he dotes on her, keeps an eye out for her welfare, more than she probably needs. Mimi might have been wrong. He should have told Anna.

"Meantime, Anna, I'm seeing all the signals of a relationship: spending nights in the city, constant phone calls when he's home, but he hasn't said a word to me."

"Be patient, Hal. If your assumption is correct, he'll come around."

A picture flashes through Hal's mind of him and David Kornbluh performing a wedding under the chupah at the Temple, the same as they did so many times. The sanctuary is packed with murmuring guests. Talya, the maid of honor, stands next to her sobbing mother. They're both dressed in black. In front of Hal stands the couple—his son, beautiful and glowing with joy, and his lover. Hal is singing the wedding blessings. He can't make out the face of the lover. Son-in-law?

"So I suppose it will just be you and me," Hal says. "Six-o'clock?"

"Yes, six will be fine. That will give you time to relax before the service."

Oh God, Hal thinks. The service. He'll be explaining all night. He doesn't look forward to it.

"All right, I'll see you then."

"Good."

"Oh and Anna. I really didn't ask you how you are. Are you feeling well?"

"Me, I'm just fine. I'm ambulatory and taking nourishment."

Hal laughs at this answer he's heard a hundred times. He always wants to say "Anna, I love you," but the feeling just stays stuck to his bones. He doesn't know why it's so hard to express what's deep inside him except when he's singing chazzonos. So all he says is "Okay then, tomorrow night." Then, as an afterthought: "By the way, I saw one of your commercials tonight playing at Hymie's. You were very good."

"Oh yes, I'm involved in a high form of art these days. But it does pay handsomely."

When he hangs up, Hal remembers that he wanted to ask about the cat.

Myra's car is in the driveway next to Todd's. It's an old Buick, immaculately kept up, that she shares with her mother, the meddling in-law Hal still calls the Hagmeister. The car looms like a colossus next to Todd's Sentra. Great, Hal thinks, now I have to deal with Myra. His feet feel heavy as he drags them up the stairs. He fights the urge to turn around and come back later.

Myra and Todd are sitting in the brightly lit kitchen around the antique oak table Hal bought from the estate of a former congregant. When Myra left, Hal threw out the modern glass table and the black vinyl barrel-chairs that he and Myra had owned for years. He painted the walls a bright orange, right over the flowered wallpaper Myra had picked out when they bought the house. For the oak table, he bought sturdy Windsor chairs, also oak. He made the kitchen his.

The house is filled with the aroma of fresh coffee and warmed-up Hagmeister strudel. The old Hungarian still has the touch, Hal thinks. It might as well be ten years ago. Mama and son in the kitchen eating the goodies that Grandma sent; Mama getting larger as the marriage is turning sour. "You're a shit and a hypocrite," Myra would shout when Hal complained. "You can put on extra pounds, but I can't?" But Hal would see his mother, so big that his father could no longer respond to her as a woman, bitter and not understanding her husband's reaction. This pain she laid at Hal's feet, smothered his heart with it like she had done with all her sorrow. "Your father wants to sleep on the couch covered in schmatas, let him." But

her hurt was deep, her rejection searing. Still, she stayed with Hal's father until he died. And carried on when he was gone. With Hal and Myra, it was different. By the time Hal found his way to the couch, it was not long before the marriage ended.

Myra pours Hal some coffee, just like the old days. He bites into a flaky piece of strudel. "So what were you guys talking about?" he asks, knowing that he's opening the door to trouble. Todd gives him a what-a-dumb-question look and Hal notices, as he has so often, just how much his son looks like Myra. He has her thin lips, her high cheekbones, (the way Hal remembers them before she gained all the weight) and her rosy complexion. He has Myra's blue eyes and long lashes. They share flat, but not unattractive noses. Myra's features on Todd's face give him an androgynous quality. It's part of his beauty. Only his hair is lighter than hers and finer, a whisky brown from who knows what genetic strain. Talya had the misfortune of inheriting everything from her father: dark, unmanageable hair, a mix of curly and straight, a large lower lip, and a stereotypical long Jewish nose. Hal's looks work for him, but on Talya, they're too masculine.

"You couldn't tell me anything about it," Myra is saying. Hal has to tune back in. "I had to hear from a couple of old Mirthgate gossips?"

"I was going to call you tonight, Myra."

"He was, Mom."

"You don't have to defend your father, he can answer for himself."

"Don't talk to him like he's a child, he's an adult, Myra."

"And you two are ready for one of your childish bouts, I can see," Todd says. He gets the coffee-pot from the warmer and tries to lighten things up.

"Anyone want some more?" Myra waves him off, but Hal raises his cup.

"So why couldn't you say anything?" Myra asks again.

"I didn't share my plans with anyone. Not until now."

"Todd says he knew."

Hal hates Myra's accusatory tone. It reminds him of the bitter words he had to endure when, in the death throes of the marriage, he would come into the house at two-o'clock in the morning. She was hurt then, she had every right. But now, why does he have to answer to her now?

"Of course, Todd knew. I couldn't hide it. Not with the two of us living under one roof."

"And what about Talya?"

"I'll call her."

"You haven't talked to her in a month."

"I'll call her. We'll have lunch."

"That would be nice."

For some moments, a thick blanket of silence lays over the table. Hal feels a pain in his neck and shoulders. He bites into another piece of strudel. "Your grandmother's baking could still win prizes," he says to Todd.

Todd nods, sips the last of his coffee and excuses himself to his room to make a phone call. Hal is sure it's to his new love. He doesn't mention this to Myra.

"So what will you do?" Myra asks. Her tone has softened.

"I don't know yet, Myra. I really don't. I just know I'm leaving Mirthgate."

"And you won't take another position? You're too young to retire. You just never believed in yourself enough. You're a great chazzan."

"Time will tell, Myra. I need a break."

Myra, from old habit, clears the dishes and brings them to the sink. Over the sound of the running hot water she says, "And this money? Will the kids see any of it? I know Todd is making a salary now, but Talya . . ."

"I'll do what I can for my kids . . ."

"Living in the city, going to school, tuition, dormitory, books, clothes . . ."

"I'll do what I can for my kids, Myra. You don't have to remind me."

Myra joins Hal, still sitting at the table. "I'm glad you've changed," she says, "I spent years reminding you of your responsibility to your kids."

Hal stands up. He's starting to feel a hot burning anger that starts from his feet and then moves rapidly up his body. "Myra, this is old shit. It's a million years ago, as far as I'm concerned. I have a different life now."

"Sure, Mimi tamed you. I was stuck with the tiger. And you don't have to raise your voice. It doesn't scare me anymore."

"I'll speak any way I want in my own house," Hal shouts. He sees Issac opening the windows in the kitchen, screaming at Hinda that he doesn't give a damn if the neighbors hear.

"Your house? Good. But don't forget I have my share coming when you sell. Isn't that what you're going to do now? Sell?"

"Is that what brought you here, Myra? Are you worried you and the Hagmeister are going to lose some money?"

"I came to see my son," Myra answers and pushes back her chair. She stands up and walks up to Hal, looking him right in the eyes. He looks away. "And isn't it about time you stopped bashing my mother? You haven't even seen her for years."

"Well, at least that's some good news."

Myra leaves the kitchen and leaves Hal fuming. He hears her in Todd's room saying goodbye. He grits his teeth and clenches a fist. Get the hell out of here.

At the front door, Myra is putting on a shabby beige polyester coat that Hal still remembers. He feels a pang of guilt breaking through his anger and thinks, maybe he'll do something for her.

"Call Talya," Myra says. "I don't want to be the one to tell her that her father is quitting the shul."

Myra's judgment irks Hal, but now calmer, he decides to hold back any comment. "She won't be surprised," he says, "she doesn't think I'm a Jew anymore. They've got her brainwashed in that orthodox school."

"Call her, she's your daughter," Myra says and slams the door shut.

This is supposed to be a good time, Hal thinks. He's sitting in the black vinyl recliner, another relic from the early days of his marriage. He would rather not think about Myra or Talya, or worry about more than tomorrow right now, but the past is out there dancing around a bonfire, threatening to light a torch and toss it into his present. A bowl might help, that's his usual route of escape. But lately when he smokes alone, it makes him jittery. He needs Mimi's long, slim body next to his, to cradle in her arms, stoned or not stoned.

Sunday's *Times* is still on the floor. He scoops up the section on top which turns out to be Real Estate. He flips through the pages, and settles on Out-of-Town properties. The eastern end of Long Island. Pennsylvania. (He's never wanted to live in Pennsylvania.) Upstate New York. The Catskills. Now's the time for my career as a comic in the Catskills. About forty years too late. The Adirondacks. Property for sale on this lake or that lake, cheap, owner

financing. A bargain. Probably swampland. The Berkshires. Hal finds that interesting. He went there with Mimi one August when they were first going out. They visited Amherst, Northampton. They stayed in a Bed and Breakfast and fell deeper in love under the shadows of the Berkshire mountains. They hiked, did picnics, sat in a grassy spot on the campus of U of Mass. and watched the students. They biked through town and on the trails nearby, had too many beers at a local pub and then fell asleep in the park near the central square in town. (No one bothered them.) They explored all the good bookstores and the growing national Yiddish library that has collected Yiddish works from attics and basements from around the country. Hal never felt better in his life.

"What are you buying?"

Hal looks up and sees Todd over his shoulder. He had been deep in reverie over that wonderful time, and hadn't heard his son come in the room. "The Berkshires," Hal says, "I was thinking about the Berkshires. It's a really beautiful place."

"So you've told me."

"It might be a nice place to live. Peaceful, away from the hustle, still some culture . . ."

"Cold."

"Come on, not much worse than New Jersey."

"Come on yourself, Dad. It's much colder than here."

"I'm not afraid of cold. I grew up in Minnesota, remember?"

"How can I forget? The time you took me and Talya to visit Aunt Molly, we practically froze our butts off. The only nice part of it was meeting Aunt Molly. She was nice."

Todd's recollection fills Hal with deep satisfaction. That's exactly what he had wanted to accomplish, a strong connection between his kids and Molly who was a widow without children. She sent them gifts for their birthdays, they called to thank her. With their father's prodding, they sent her little notes from time to time. She always answered and threw in a five or ten dollar bill with a note that said "treat yourself." Each year, Molly received new school pictures of the kids. All of this slowed down after the divorce, but Hal kept Molly posted on his children. He had often invited Molly to visit New Jersey, but she always claimed to be "too sick to travel." She wasn't a woman of great imagination, stayed hibernated in her house after Eddy died, but still Hal loved her, and bringing his kids to her that one time was a great move.

"And now her leaving you that money has changed your life completely," Todd says.

"Has it?" Hal wonders for the thousandth time if that's true.

Todd stretches himself out on the couch across from Hal. He's in shorts and a T-shirt and barefoot. He's thin, unlike his mother or father or even his sister, who's built somewhat chunky. He's picked up all the right genes, Hal thinks. But what about the gay one, if that's how it works. (Who knows?) Hal sees some poor shtetl ancestor stuck in an arranged marriage to a now dowdy and demanding woman, struggling to make a living day after day peddling milk and butter, and ready to hang himself because he can't understand his attraction to the young men in town.

"I noticed you exited quickly when your mother and I started quarreling."

"As usual. I can't watch it anymore Dad. Sorry, I have better things to do."

"I'm sorry too. I wish it wasn't so bitter between us. It just seems to come natural by now."

Hal is hesitant to ask anything about Todd's phone call. But something is pushing him and he does anyway. "So who were you talking to for so long?"

Todd looks surprised. Hal regrets the question. He has always tried to leave Todd his privacy. He doesn't know why, this time, he can't seem to nose out.

"A friend," Todd answers.

There's a palpable silence between them. Finally, Hal asks: "Will you be available for Shabbos dinner tomorrow night at Anna's?"

Todd doesn't immediately answer. He closes his eyes and Hal imagines that he's seeing and weighing the possibilities before him. *Anna's, a good dinner, make my dad happy, miss a night with my new Mr. Wonderful. Anna's, Mr. W., Shabbos with my dad and Anna, a splendid fuck.*

"I'll make it another Shabbos, Dad, tomorrow I have something very special in the city. I'll make it next time, I promise."

"You never know, there may not be a next time."

"Dad . . ."

"You used to be able to talk to me. What's going on? Can't you level with me?"

"Dad, you're making this into a TV melodrama."

"Drama, schmama, who's this new love?"

Todd sits on the arm of the recliner and puts his arms around his father. "Dad, I'm just not ready to discuss it yet. Okay? Give me the space. I won't hold out on you forever."

"He's not Jewish."

"I thought we settled that a long time ago. My lovers don't have to be Jewish."

"What will your sister think?"

"Talya will always live with whatever choices I make."

Hal wants to say, why you and not me?, but he keeps the thought to himself.

"I'm going to bed, Dad. Just don't worry about it for now."

Hal pulls Todd back when he tries to get up. "Just another few minutes, Todd. I'll change the subject."

"Dad, I have to be up at six. Not like you."

Hal lets go and lets Todd get to his feet. He ignores his son's accusation. No one ever thinks he works very hard. The life of a chazzan. Sleep late and warble a little. They don't understand that he's an artist. That's how an artist lives. And besides, what about all the work with the children?

"All right, good night then. But make some time for me one night. You haven't even told me how things are going there at the great Bettman Archives. I make the kids bring me their Social Studies books from school just to show them that the pictures came from the place where my son works."

"Thanks, Dad," Todd says. He bends over and kisses Hal on the cheek. "I don't mean to offend you. We'll have some time soon."

"I tell them that my son figured out how to make a living with a history degree."

"You tell the kids that?"

"No, but I said that to Hymie."

"Over bad food, I'm sure. Good night, Dad."

Hal changes his mind and smokes a bowl in bed. As soon as he feels light-headed, he starts to think about Mimi. For the first time, he's able to pinpoint a feeling he's had for a long time, to give it a label. I feel safe with her, protected. Shielded from harm. From harming myself. Then why isn't she here now, Hal wonders. Because I've always needed a balance. I'm afraid of being too safe. Through the marijuana haze, he can feel just how horribly tense his body is. But he's also getting drowsy. He finally puts the bowl and lighter on the bed-table and lets go. He dreams of a woman, yelling, complaining, whining, crying, accusing. Sometimes it's Myra. Sometimes Hinda. Never Mimi.

Chapter 3.

Hal is wandering from room to room opening windows. He thinks about doing his walk around the lake this morning, but he can't seem to get started, and finally gives up the idea. It's the end of March, but it's the first real feeling of Spring. The reporter on the radio said it might reach seventy. Hal wants to rid the house of all the stale air of winter, clear out the effect of months of trapped and confined oxygen. In New Jersey, winter will get one more comeuppance. A blizzard can still happen in April, even on Passover. It's the dark day's way of saying, I'm still out here, you must pay homage. But for the time being, the house is filling with sweet warm air and intense light.

Myra finished a bag of coffee last night, so Hal is looking in the fridge for a new one to open. Mimi buys these colorful foil bags of fresh ground gourmet with fancy names—Macadamia Morning, Orgasm Surprise, who knows what? What ever happened to Folger's? Hinda always told Hal that she would only drink Folger's. She believed the authenticity of that commercial on TV, the one where "Mrs. Olson" looked you in the eye and declared in Scandinavian accented English that "Fol-yers iss mountain grown." Mrs. Olson sounded like all the other Swedish goyim that Hinda met in Minnesota. She made friends with them. The waitress at Peter's Grill downtown who she asked "Ah you got toirkey today?" The woman she met on the bus who grew beautiful tulips and helped her start her own garden. The woman who came to the house to fit her for custom-made girdles. She loved the sing-song of their English. But when she drank "Mrs. Olson's" coffee at the kitchen table, with Hal across from her, she forgot the Scandinavian ladies. She was back in Moldava, mourning her life there and her family, romanticizing the harsh realities of the shtetl. "I had my sisters,"

she would cry, as if there had never been any conflicts or sibling rivalry. She would pull a frilly hanky from her stained apron and blow her nose. Hal would cry also and mourn with his mother the life that Hitler destroyed. This cast of characters he cried for: his white-bearded grandfather, tax-collector for the czar, and a Talmud scholar; his frail grandmother, who baked bread with her daughters to eke out a living after her husband died, (including Hinda until she answered the call to come to America); the aunts, Hinda's younger sisters, who might have married, might even have joined Hinda in time, but who instead vanished into the abyss like the rest of them. (Sometimes Hinda thought that she might hear from them, a miracle from behind the Iron Curtain, but it never happened.) To Hal, they were all real, made vivid by Hinda's stories, begun as soon as he could understand. The fate of Hinda's family, of the shtetl, broke his young heart. Only the goyim cast a sinister pall. "A goy is a goy," Hinda would say, "they hate a Jew." But in America, it was different. Here, you could sleep at night without thinking your neighbors might hack you to death. Here, Hinda made friends with the Swedish ladies.

Hal sips a cup of rich coffee, (he found a bag of Guatemalan Goodness), chews on a bagel spread with raspberry jam, and reads yesterday's *Times*. At the back of his mind, there is something bugging him that he knows he must do. Then it comes to him. He needs to call David Kornbluh.

Peggy Kornbluh, David's wife, answers on the first ring.

"Hello."

"Peggy, how are you?"

"Hal, how nice to hear your voice. Isn't this peculiar? David was going to call you later this afternoon. We heard about your resignation."

For a second, Hal feels a pang of guilt. He had wanted to tell David himself. "I should have told you guys before this, Peggy, forgive me."

"That's all right. We're not insulted. We figure you had a good reason."

Hal is relieved by Peggy's answer. He should have known that she and David would be easy.

"Let me put David on. He's right here."

"Thanks, Peggy. Be well."

David comes on in his gentle baritone. "Hal, how are you? What's this I hear, you're really leaving Mirthgate?"

"I'm really leaving, David. The end of August."

"Well, whatever you do, it should be with mazel. I know you weren't happy with all the changes there."

"I lasted five years without your anchor here. I don't know how I did it. But now it's enough."

"And I hear you're not taking another position?"

"How did you find out so much, David? Who's talking?"

"Deutch's nephew is down here. We saw him and his wife at Wolfie's Deli last night."

"Well, I'm sorry I didn't tell you myself. I'll blame it on Mimi. We agreed to keep it hush, hush until I actually resigned."

"How is Mimi?"

Hal holds the receiver to his ear and walks over to the coffee pot. He pours what remains of the Guatemalan Goodness, and adds some milk from the fridge. He gets the phone cord tangled and almost spills the hot coffee on his bare feet.

"Mimi's fine. Hold on David, I almost had Central American revenge over here."

"What?"

"Nothing. I tangled up the phone cord at the same time that I'm drinking coffee."

"I'll wait for you to straighten out."

"It'll be like old times."

David laughs. It reminds Hal of their walks around the lake, when they would exchange stories about the latest shenanigans of the Board. "Balabatim," David would say, bosses, "what can you expect?" He could afford to laugh. The balabatim weren't spinning his head like they do Salmon's.

"So what will you do for a living, Hal?"

"I have a little inheritance, from my friend in Minnesota. You remember I used to tell you about her? Molly Pinsky?"

"Yes, you went with Mimi to the funeral at the end of December."

"Right. Well, anyway she left me some money. Decent money. For the time being, I'm okay."

"Will you stay in Mirthgate?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

"Well, I'm sure you'll figure out what's good for you. But Hal, don't give up chazzonos entirely, You have a gift."

"Thanks. But we'll see. I haven't got it all mapped out yet. Of course, you're right. Chazzonos is part of my lifeblood."

"You could find something here. Florida always needs chazzanim."

"I'm not ready for Florida."

"I suppose not. But it's nice to know it's here if you ever need it. Full shuls every Shabbos. And still lots of old Jews that love chazzonos."

"It's good to know," Hal says, but feels a pain in his gut when he says it, "it's my insurance policy."

David laughs again. "Well put."

"So okay David, now that you know, I feel better. When will you guys be up?"

"I don't know. The kids want us to come for Pesach, but we'd rather have them come here. It could still snow up there."

"It's beautiful today. I have all the windows open."

"So I don't know," David says, "if we'll be up or not. But meantime, we wish you a rich and beautiful future."

"Thanks, David. We'll be in touch soon."

In the late afternoon, Hal gets ready for Shabbos. The house is clean, the woman who comes in twice a month, (one of Hal's few extravagances) makes sure of that. Dinner is no problem, he's going to Anna's. But what he has to do is vocalize and prepare a piece of chazzonos for tonight's service.

Hal sings along with one of the tapes he collected from his lessons of ten years ago with Carmen Grimaldi. Grimaldi, an elegant old Italian (he was never without a jacket and bow tie) who claimed to be related to the royal family of Monaco, lived with his wife in a Victorian building on West End Avenue. The huge parlor was empty, except for tables of plants and a grand piano. On sunny days, the whole room was flush with light as Hal sang "wee-oh, wee-oh, wee-oh, wee." Carmen, sometimes chomping on a sandwich that his wife had brought him with one hand, and traveling up and down the keys with the other, would pause and tell Hal that he had "sucha red cheeks." But the old man knew his stuff, had also worked with many cantors and at the time was just the thing Hal needed to further develop his voice.

After twenty minutes of vocalizing with Carmen's tape, (the traffic noises in the background make Hal nostalgic for the city and that sunny parlor) Hal practices the chazzonos piece. It's a *Hashkiveinu* he wrote

himself, but which he based on a melody his father sang when the spirit grabbed him. Hal knew Issac was in a good mood, when sitting beside him in the old Plymouth, he would break into an improv of classic Bessarabian pathos. When his father sang, Hal felt like he was being bundled in a warm blanket on a frigid Minnesota night. And Daddy was kissing his forehead. What depths of soul these melodies came from. Issac used the familiar words of the *Hashkiveinu* prayer from the evening service, but his melody could have fit any number of texts. When Hal put the piece to pen and ink, he formalized it according to the musical principles he had learned over the years. But the sound of the piece was pure Issac, and still caused Hal to hear his father's untrained, but moving baritone.

"Hashkiveinu Adonay Eloheynu L'Sholom," Hal sings. Grant, Lord our God, that we lie down in peace. *"V'hamedeynu Malkeynoo L'Chaim."* And that we rise again, O Our King, to life. He's pleased with his voice. They'll hear tonight what they'll miss, Hal thinks, and finishes the piece.

The second Anna opens her door, Hal smells a good Shabbos dinner. Anna's glasses are fogged from all the steaming going on in the kitchen, but she's already dressed elegantly in a maroon silk blouse and gray wool skirt. Around her neck there are lovely pearls, a Shabbos tradition she brought from Poland. She kisses Hal and invites him to take off his suit jacket, loosen his tie, and sit in the living room, while she does last minute preparations.

Hal sits in a thickly padded Queen Anne chair, and remembers all the times he has sat in this room, (in this same chair, in fact) commiserating with Anna: over the breakup of his marriage, the anxieties around Todd, Talya's rejection, the problems in the shul since David retired. The room itself is comforting. Every corner is filled with heavy and dark furniture,

accumulated through the years, and nothing ever discarded. Anna and Willy loved to scour the antique shops for curios, chairs, lamps, end tables, desks, china closets, rugs. Hal has never asked, but he guesses that Anna and Willy tried to capture some flavor of the Warsaw apartments. In all other ways, Anna is modern, forward-thinking. But her split-level ranch (companion to a hundred others in Mirthgate) is a museum.

They start with chicken soup and matzo ball. The broth is strained clear and sparkles the way Hinda's used to. The knaidel is light and fluffy.

"I wasn't taken by surprise," Anna says, sipping her soup delicately. "My God, you've said so many times that you need something different in your life."

"That's for sure," Hal says. He sips his soup more audibly.

"And what is this about inheriting money?"

"Wow, everything gets out, doesn't it. I was going to tell you after dinner. Turns out Molly Pinsky left me an inheritance."

"Your other mother?"

Hal smiles. "That's the one."

"And can you live on it?"

"For a while."

"Will you leave Mirthgate?"

Hal finishes the last of his soup. He brushes his lips with a thick cloth napkin. "You know Anna, even this morning I couldn't answer that question. But there's something mulling around in my head tonight. I think, yes, I'm going to put the house up."

"Where will you go?"

"I can't say yet. I'm exploring. I like this feeling of not knowing yet."

"And Mimi, what are your plans with Mimi?"

"I don't know. I guess status quo."

"I don't mean to mix in Hal, but can that be the case forever? Status quo?"

"I don't know," Hal says quietly, as if Anna has touched some hidden and far-away place inside him.

Anna clears the soup dishes and comes back with salad: iceberg lettuce with cherry tomatoes and Russian dressing. After salad, there is chicken roasted heavy with garlic and onions, boiled potatoes, green beans and eggplant, kosher pickles and green tomatoes from the Lower East Side. Even alone, and with her daughters down in Florida, Anna cooks like this.

"Any news about Todd's new relationship?" Anna asks.

"I confronted him last night, and then I felt guilty about it. But he doesn't want to tell me anything."

"What do you think?"

"I think his new lover is either black or a transvestite."

"Oh Hal, come on," Anna says, waving her fork in the air.

"Come on nothing, my dear. Why is he being so secretive?"

Hal changes the subject. He feels emotions right now that he wants to avoid. Anger and pain and frustration. "So Anna, that latest commercial I saw at Hymie's was terrific. Are you going to do any more?"

"I think so. My friend Murray, the agent, the one who got me into all this, says that they're writing some new things just for me, and that maybe he'll get me some other kinds as well. I'm a celebrity in my old age. They call me the 'cat lady.'"

"That's what Hymie called you."

"Hymie too huh? Well, I'll call him Mr. Heartburn."

For dessert, Anna brings in fruit and a plate of home-baked almond sugar cookies. She also places a silver pot of fresh brewed tea on the table.

"Anna, if I eat much more, I won't be able to sing tonight."

"Oh Hal, you say that every time, and then you sing just fine."

"But just fine isn't enough. I want to sound like Moshe Koussevitzky."

"Ah, Koussevitzky," Anna says. She gets a dreamy look on her lovely, thin and wrinkled face and Hal knows she's thinking again of Warsaw before the war.

"They called him the Cantor of Warsaw, you know. He was sent to the camps, but his life was spared because even the Nazi's, may they all be blotted from memory, wanted to hear his voice."

"Did you and Willy ever hear him?"

"Absolutely. Many times. And then when he was in this country, in Brooklyn, we attended several concerts."

"I heard him once in Minneapolis, with my parents. Turns out it was only several months before he died."

Hal had anticipated that concert more than anything he could remember before. He knew Koussevitzky's signature piece, *Shebonah Beis Hamigdosh*, Rebuild the Holy Temple, by heart. The recording of it had somehow survived Hal's childhood destruction of Issac's records, and Hal must have listened to it over a thousand times. It is a plaintive piece, but with a soaring, melodic, legato chorus that encircles and lightens the heart.

Issac came home one early Spring day, flushed with excitement. He hadn't changed or washed yet, and smelled like corned beef. "Hinda, Hal," he shouted. "You'll never guess who's coming to town to do a concert. Moshe Koussevitzksy. He'll be at the Beth El next month and I already have tickets."

Hal was elated. He played the Koussevitzky record every day leading up to the concert.

The Beth El was packed. Koussevitzky, despite an illness that the audience knew nothing about, looked tall, and almost regal. His face was handsome with its neatly trimmed mustache. But it was his voice that was most remarkable. It was a beautiful, powerful, flexible tenor, able to do cantorial runs with deceiving ease and hit effortless high C's. Hal had the sensation of watching a trapeze artist, high in the air, defying gravity, and in the back of his mind, he wondered if he could possibly fall. Koussevitzky sang pieces that Hal had never heard before and which left him spellbound. He and Issac were bursting with awe and joy.

The last piece of the concert (before a roaring demand for an encore), was *Shebonah Beis Hamigdosh*. Many in the audience knew the melodic chorus and sang along. Koussevitzky picked out Hal's voice and paused. "There is a future cantor in this audience," he said and smiled broadly. Then while he and the audience continued singing, Hal's father leaned over and whispered in his ear: "You see, Koussevitzky agrees with me, you should be a chazzan."

"Well," Anna says, "I'll clear these dishes. We don't want to be rushed walking over to the shul."

Before they leave for the service, Anna excuses herself for a moment to the bathroom. Hal is glad for the moment of privacy, because he needs to let out an explosive belch.

Hal enters the sanctuary arm-in-arm with Anna through the massive wooden double-door in the rear. It feels to Hal like everyone seated in the room has turned around to look at them. As Hal leads Anna to a seat, people

lean forward from their places to shake his hand, wish him good Shabbos. Others smile or nod as he walks by.

As he nears the steps of the pulpit, Hal passes the two rows in the front reserved for the choir. This is not a choir night, (the choir only sings one Friday a month) but as usual, Mildred Mandel and her daughter Celine occupy their regular choir seats. They don't do this from habit alone. Mildred and Celine like to create their own choir, singing noticeably and forcefully on the off-choir weeks. Mildred is a woman in her sixties, but still calls herself a single mother to Celine who is pushing forty. Hal and Mimi call her the 'Mother of the Perpetual Virgin.'

Mildred stands as Hal almost slips by. "Cantor," she shouts, and reaches for his hand, making it impossible for him to avoid her. "I can't believe the news. What will the choir do without you?"

"The choir will do fine Mildred," Hal says, subtly trying to release his hand, but only causing Mildred to squeeze tighter. "There is life after Cantor Hal, I'm sure of it."

"My mother has been so upset," Celine pipes in. "She's been hard to live with."

That's this week's excuse, Hal thinks.

"Is this a for certain?" Mildred asks.

"For certain, Mildred, for certain."

Hal reacts painfully to his own words. Such a big piece of him wants to go, but there is still a tiny unresolved piece. He would like, if he chose to use it, an Alice in Wonderland key on top of a table he would have to climb, but that would let him back into a day before Wednesday.

"Oy, what a shock," Mildred says and lets go of Hal's hand.

On the pulpit, Hal greets Fred Deutch and Rabbi Salmon who are sitting on the far left on the "Rabbi's side" in large straight-backed chairs with wide arms carved with lions at their ends. These chairs, upholstered in purple, and designed to look regal, were part of the more traditional pulpit before the remodeling. In this room, with its light wood paneled walls, bright recessed lighting, (the old room had dark chandeliers which now hang in the auxiliary sanctuary) and beamed cathedral ceilings, the chairs don't really fit. But there was no money for new ones. It always seems laughable to Hal when he sees these two short men in these over-sized chairs.

"Shabbat Shalom," Salmon says, the nice Conservative way, and gives Hal his hand. "Gut Shabbos," Hal answers, the way he learned from his parents.

Deutch shakes Hal's hand as well, and mumbles something like "Good Shabbos," but then he looks at his watch and says, "You're cutting it close, aren't you?"

Deutch's comment goes right to Hal's gut. Son-of-a-bitch, he thinks. But he smiles (as Mimi has trained him), and says "Anna made me a heavy Shabbos meal, it was hard to walk fast."

"I wish I was so lucky," Deutch says, "My Henny, God bless her, she can't make a meal like Anna. My liebschen, she has other talents, but comes to cooking, I go hungry."

"Don't fill me in, Fred," Hal says.

I should have told him not to let that big chair go to his head, Hal thinks, as he walks to his side of the pulpit and sits in his own identical big chair.

The Rabbi goes to the lectern on his side, indicating that he's ready to start the service. "Shabbat Shalom," he says, "we will begin our service on

page five in our prayer books." That's Hal's cue to go to his lectern and begin. *Ma Tovv Ohalecha Yaakov, Mishkinotecha Yisrael*. How goodly are thy tents, O Jacob, thy dwelling places, O Israel. It's a standard opener in which the congregation joins. Hal can hear Mildred and Celine singing at the top of their lungs. He remembers (he's done this simple piece so many times that he can daydream), that Mildred dragged Celine into the choir when he separated from Myra. He had hoped that when Celine figured out about Mimi, she would stop coming. But here it is, years later, and Celine is still showering the congregation with her ox piss voice.

The highlight of the service for Hal is the *Hashkiveinu*. It is this night's piece of chazzonos for which the congregation waits. For those who love him, it is a deeper connection and a stronger appreciation each time. (What about tonight, Hal thinks, when they know I'm leaving?) Even those who doubt him, who spread venom about pot, women, his gay son, the fights, the divorce, the poor ex and religious daughter, his eating trayf, even those will find silence for a few moments while Hal moves them with chazzonos.

He starts almost in a whisper—*Hashkiveinu Adonoy Eloheynoo, L'Sholom, V'Haamideinu Malkeynu L'Chaim*. Cause us O Lord our God, to lie down in peace, and raise us up again, O our King, unto life. It is every human being's wish to witness in peace the cycle of life. With Issac's melody, Hal hushes the congregation. Then the piece builds and builds into more complex and elaborate runs, until the pathos of medieval Jewish angst bursts through, and text and music become one: *Oyav, dever, V'cherev, V'Raav, V'Yagone*. Remove from us every enemy, pestilence, sword, famine and sorrow. And the soulful flourish: *Oosh'more tzaysaynoo ovoaynoo l'chaim ool'shalom, mayata v'ad olam*. Guard thou our going out and our coming in,

for life and peace, henceforth and forever. Hal circles twice around "life and peace" with a mideastern trill and then soars on "henceforth," but just when it feels like he will end on some forte plateau, he pulls back and sings "forever" bird-like, almost falsetto, as illusive as "forever" is to flesh.

Salmon's sermon is Hal's chance to relax and to daydream. He has never much listened to Salmon in these five years. It was evident early on that David's great pearls were gone. Some of the congregants are nodding or dozing off, but then they did that to David as well. Hal looks around the room where he has spent so many years (in this version and in the old one), and notices people he has shared so much with, in sickness and in health, in joy and sorrow, as they say. He has seen some of them grow up and some of them grow old. For a moment, he wants to wallow in regret, but then he's gripped by a much more powerful feeling. It's like a message is coming to him from deep inside, but also from a source beyond himself. "You're doing the right thing," it's saying, "You're doing the right thing. Stand by your decision. Be strong" *Hazak, Hazak*, Hal thinks, be strong, be strong. Those words are used when Jews finish a book of the Torah. Be strong as you go to another phase. And then the voice comes back: "Everything will work out, everything will work out. It's a new phase. Trust it, trust yourself."

When the message passes, and Hal feels only himself again, he thinks that like Moses, he has seen the tail of God. But then he thinks, no, it wasn't that at all. It was Issac.

Lost in thought, Hal almost misses it when the Rabbi announces the closing hymns. But just in time, he steps to his lectern and begins the *Alenu*. The congregation sings the familiar melody with gusto. The Lord shall be King over all the earth; on that day the Lord shall be One, and his name One. And his chief choir will be Mildred and Celine.

He girds himself for the oneg, the coffee hour, which takes place in the large, bland social hall just behind the sanctuary. It isn't as bad as he suspected. He stands in line for tea with Anna, and puts a few crunchy pastries bursting with red jelly on his plate. Yes, before he can get to a table, he hears the same thing over and over: "Sorry to hear you're leaving us," "what a shame, after so many years," "I wish you the best of luck, Cantor," "What are your plans?" "You're not going to stay a chazzan, what a shame. You touched me so deeply tonight." From some he gets silent smiles, looks of regret or puzzlement. But Hal's manic side takes over and he finds an approach for everyone. He's soon on a roll. At the table, between sips of tea, bites of his pastry, and with Anna at his side, ready to distract anyone that persists too long, Hal blah-blah-blabs, and blah-blah-blabs, like Mercutio spinning under and over and around the same topic. With some he's gentle, and with others he's blunt, but the job gets done with dignity, until finally exhausted, he asks Anna if she's ready to go. "By all means, Chazzan," Anna says, and the two of them bid good night.

At the doors leading out of the social hall, Fred Deutch stops them. He holds lightly on to Hal's suit jacket sleeve, and says "Don't forget to attend the board meeting next week. It will be very important for you to be there." Hal nods. To Anna, Deutch says, "Good Shabbos, and stay well."

At the bottom of the massive stairs that lead from the Temple to the street, Hal sees Naomi Ginzberg in a big red Bella Abzug hat, with her son Mark, waiting. "You look like you're about to ambush us," Hal says.

"There were just too many people trying to get your ear," Naomi says. "We saw you getting up, and figured we'd catch you out here."

"I didn't even see you guys in the service."

"We came in late and sat way in the back."

"And where's Mitch tonight?"

"He fell asleep right after dinner. So I made Mark come with me."

Mark smiles. "Yeah, Cantor, she put a squirt gun to my head. I'm not kidding you."

"Is she doing the same thing to get you to do your Bar Mitzvah work?"

"Nah, I'm doing good."

"I'm sure you are," Hal says, and ruffles Mark's hair.

"Anyway," Naomi says, "I wanted to invite you and Mimi to our Seder. And you too Anna."

"It would be our pleasure," Hal says. "It's always our favorite place to be on Pesach. Will it be your usual mob scene?"

"What do you think?"

"Well, yes," Hal says, "we'll be there."

"Todd and Talya are invited as well."

"Todd probably, but Talya will be with Myra's family, I'm sure."

"And you'll come Anna?"

"God willing. I'm not going to Florida this year again, I told my daughters. A month in January was enough."

"And you've got your new career to uphold."

Anna blushes. "Oh yes."

"That piece you did tonight was beautiful," Naomi tells Hal, as she reaches for his hand. He puts his head under the brim of the red hat and they kiss.

"Well," Hal says, "I must take Mother Anna home."

"See you soon," Naomi says. "Give Mimi our love."

"Bye, Cantor," Mark says. "I'll see you at my lesson."

At Anna's door, Hal wishes her a good night and thanks her again for the lovely Shabbos meal.

"And you see Hal, it didn't go so badly," Anna says. "These months will not be difficult."

"I haven't been to the board meeting yet."

"You just don't let the likes of Deutch get to you."

"All right, Anna dear. I'll keep that in mind."

Hal walks the block to his house in the cooling night air. He's always liked the feeling of Sabbath peace on his walk home after the Friday night service. Even the trees seem to celebrate the day of rest and welcome the music of the wind playing through their branches. In another month, their leaves will be dancing and the world will be created again. Can I create myself again, Hal wonders. But when he gets to his driveway, and see that Mimi's car is there, he can only think of her.

Hal lets himself in the house and finds Mimi in his bedroom. She's propped up on two pillows, reading a *New Yorker*, and sipping some mint tea. She's covered to her chin by a thin blanket, but Hal knows she's already naked. The soft shaded light from the lamp on the night table throws an intricate shadow on the wall behind the bed (which has no headboard), and fills the room with a mysterious, beckoning warmth. There's something about a good Shabbos meal, like the one Hal had at Anna's, and the aftermath of a Friday night service, that always leads to lovemaking. Maybe it's expectation, out of years of habit, (even with Myra, when there was still some life left in the marriage), but for whatever reason, this is the way it happens.

Hal sits on the edge of the bed, and massages Mimi's thighs under the blanket.

"Everything go okay?" Mimi asks.

"Fine, much better than I expected."

"You were in good voice, I'm sure."

"Yes," Hal says, and then reaches for Mimi to kiss her. She tastes like peppermint. He wonders if any of Anna's garlic has lingered.

"And did you get a lot of questions?"

"Of course. But I just talked and talked until I was on automatic pilot and it just seemed a cinch to repeat the same thing over and over."

Mimi smiles. "Chapter ten," she says and pets Hal's cheek. "The balabatim bid Hal farewell."

"Until Hal exited stage left on Anna's arm."

Hal starts to undress. "Naomi invited us to the Seder. I accepted. Is that okay?"

"Sure, we always have a good time there. She'll have tons of people like always, I'm sure."

"Tons. She'll even invite stray dogs and cats this year."

"Good," Mimi says, "you can teach them that thing you always tell the kids about, the cat Bar Mitzvah song, 'Sh'meow Yisrael.'"

Hal, naked now as well, reaches in the closet for the shaving bag and sings in his best bel canto voice "Sh'meow Yisrael." At the night table, he fills a generous bowl. He lies back on the pillows with Mimi, lights up and takes a deep hit. He coughs like crazy for a few seconds, settles down, and hands the pipe and lighter to Mimi.

"Take a sip of this tea," Mimi says, and hands him her cup.

Hal takes a few sips, squeezes his face, and says, "Feh, it's cold."

"Then get us some water."

In the kitchen, as he pours two tall glasses of water from a plastic bottle that promises that it's "filled at the source," Hal is already feeling light-headed and muddled, and horny. He wonders if he'll ever make love again straight. It's a wonder I still sing as well as I do, Hal thinks. If this was nicotine, I would have been done a long time ago.

In bed again, Hal begins fondling Mimi's breasts. He loves to hold them in his hands. They feel like juicy pears, perfect ovals, with pink silver dollars in the center. He flicks his tongue on the erect part of a nipple while Mimi emits tiny moans of pleasure. He circles outward with his tongue, mixing animal and child-like need with the deeper love that Mimi has nurtured.

He raises his head to look up at Mimi's face. "I think I know where we're going," he says, and dives back to a breast.

"What are you talking about?" Mimi asks. Her words are drawn out, pleasurable, relaxed.

Hal tries to talk while dipping on and off a nipple. "I want us to go together . . . start a new life . . . New England . . . The Berkshires."

Mimi perks up, but Hal is now back to lapping an entire breast.

"What about my business?" she asks, and runs her fingers through Hal's hair.

He switches to the other breast. "You'll sell it," he says, his words partly muffled, "we'll start our own business . . . buy an old farmhouse . . . start a Bed and Breakfast."

He moves to Mimi's soft smooth belly. He feels her breathing heavier as he approaches the black hairs spreading from her vagina. They take each other's hands and match sensual finger to finger. Hal keeps moving until he finds Mimi's button with his tongue. Mimi contorts with pleasure.

Moving in and out of Mimi's dark cave, Hal says, "You've got to go with me. It'll be an adventure for both of us. The Berkshires." He dives further. "The beautiful Berkshires."

By now, Hal is savoring Mimi like Anna's dinner, and she can no longer answer. When Hal lifts his head, she springs up. He knows it's her signal for him to lie on his back. Mimi wants to ride him. She positions his penis and slides down, deep, very deep. She slides up and down and starts to let out little perfect screams.

"Oh, it will be so good," Hal says.

"It is so good," Mimi answers. "So good."

"Our new life, I mean. The Berkshires. It will be so good."

Hal stops talking as the intensity and the rhythm takes over. They explore each other with their hands, thrusting and rocking. Closer and closer they come, until they feel like one. They finally come together, and Mimi bends down to kiss Hal's lips. He stays inside her and they touch hands again, sensual and loving. When Mimi lies beside Hal again, just before he falls asleep, he tells her that he loves her, and that he's happy that they are going to stay together.

In the morning, Hal is eating his usual power breakfast before the Saturday morning service: two basted eggs, challah bread and butter, coffee with milk. Two eggs give him strength to do the service. The challah reminds him that it's Shabbos. The coffee forces him to take a break in the middle of the service, when the Torah is being read.

Mimi was asleep when Hal woke, but while Hal is eating, she comes into the kitchen, bleary eyed. She mumbles something which at first Hal doesn't understand.

"What honey," Hal asks, "I didn't hear what you said."

Mimi opens her eyes wide and looks straight at Hal, causing him to take notice. "I said, if you want me to go to the Berkshires with you, then we're going to get married."