

# *The Lesson of the Rabbi*

## I.

### I AND THOU

"I hate bar-mitzvahs," says her father as he drives, and her mother grunts in agreement, her mouth misshapen as she puts on lipstick looking into the mirror on the flap in front of her. "Did you sign the card?" he asks. She nods.

"How much did we give him?" She waits a moment, folds up her lipstick, throws it into her purse, and then answers coldly, sarcastically: "As per your instructions, \$36."

"I wonder if that's enough," he broods. "Didn't they give Jeff \$50 for *his* bar-mitzvah?"

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"We've already been through this," she says impatiently. "We agreed on \$36. Now leave it."

They lapse into silence. From the middle of the back seat, between the boys, Carla watches her parents' faces in the two flap mirrors hanging down. They are reflected in separate mirrors far apart.

"You okay back there?" her father calls. The boys grunt, Carla smiles into his mirror. He smiles back at her. Fondly, happily.

"Goddamit, Harriet," he says suddenly. "You're not wearing a hat. I told you to wear a hat. We're going to an Orthodox *shul*."

"Well, I couldn't find one," she answers him petulantly. She sounds like a little girl. Carla has heard this thousands of times, her petty rebellions, her refusals, her constant simmering anger always ready to flare. Furiously, her father flicks on the radio. She hears the familiar theme of a Mozart piano concerto, one of her father's favourites, and she watches the tension in his face begin to fade. Her mother is digging around in her purse and pulls out a small paperback volume of Shakespeare's sonnets. From the label on its side, Carla knows it is one of the books her mother has brought home this weekend for company, from the library where she works as Head Librarian. Her mother and father each have their own language, they each have their solitude. *Two Solitudes*, thinks Carla, the book she is in the middle of.



At the synagogue, she sits in the women's section. Her mother lifts a copy of the Pentateuch from the book rack in front of her and skims it, her thin lips pursed, her eyes narrow. A dark, burly man is mounting the steps to the podium. Her mother points to the book in the rack in front of Carla. "Read this while the rabbi's speaking," she says. "The commentaries are quite interesting." Carla takes the book and opens it to the first page. "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. Now the earth was

unformed and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep..." It reminds her of last year's grade nine English text: The footnote on this line refers to similar creation stories from other cultures, for instance, Babylonian and Egyptian, and expounds on some of the symbolic meanings of the Biblical story. She is just beginning to read, when suddenly she hears a loud bang, and looks up, startled, at the podium. The rabbi has pounded on the lectern, and it sounds like something has fallen to the floor with a crash.

He is shouting.

"Do you think..." he is crying out to the assembled congregants, and pauses. *Do you think? No, most people don't*, thinks Carla. *What a stupid question. Mind you, he's only a rabbi, what do you expect?*

The rabbi flings his arm high in the air, and Carla is certain that the glasses he is holding lightly in his hand will fly away. But they don't.

"Do you think," he leans forward and croons in an intimate and confidential voice, "that the rabbis were *stupid?*"

Carla flushes. He has caught her. He has read her mind. He looks around the room and now he is looking at her. She looks down.

"Do you think," he asks, his voice going higher with each word, and ending in a pitch of passion, "that they really thought that Adam and Eve were the only two people in the whole wide *world?*"

*I dunno*, thinks Carla numbly. *I guess they did. Isn't that what it says?*

"No!" He is screaming again. Carla feels personally screamed at, assaulted. She feels frightened, like he is telling her she is stupid. What is he trying to say?

"Of course not!" he shouts. Then he continues quite calmly, and

suddenly he is discoursing about loneliness, his own loneliness, and the need for love and comfort. He is talking tenderly, intimately, as though describing to this roomful of strangers the very inside of his soul. Carla knows he is married, she remembers vaguely that his daughter has just started at her high school, one year behind her—a big, horsey girl whom nobody likes. His wife is probably sitting here in the women's section, somewhere nearby.

"When two people love each other," he is explaining, "it is *as if* they are the only two people in the whole world. When lovers speak to each other nakedly, with the essence of their beings, when they speak to each other with Buber's 'I-Thou', then they can see nobody else, nobody else is real for them. Never mind desiring another: The world is confined, bounded, limited by the one you love."

Carla knows exactly what he means. She has just finished reading *The Little Prince* by Saint-Exupéry: "That which is essential is invisible to the eye." It is only the inner life, the felt truth, the thing that is loved, that is real. Not the apparent, the obvious, the socially confirmed.

He pounds the lectern again, and this time his glasses do go flying. The cantor, seated a few feet behind him, gets a startled, comical look on his face as they fall into his lap. He rises pompously and brings them back to the rabbi, who laughs. The rabbi has a brilliant smile, dazzling in its warmth and suddenness. Carla hasn't noticed till now how warm, how attractive, he is. She wishes now that she had dressed better, worn her pretty pink sweater and her new corduroy skirt.

"Moishe, you should play for the Dodgers," he jokes, and the congregation, carefully, politely, laughs with him. Then, just as everyone's loosening up again, his tone changes. He is suddenly menacing, angry. Immediately the congregation turns silent, serious. Almost fearful, Carla thinks.

"Make no mistake!" he is shouting. "It takes work! No one falls in love and stays in love. *The rabbis knew this!* They knew this! You don't believe me? You think they were any different from you? *No! They struggled!* They also wondered sometimes..." Here he laughs charmingly, as if mocking himself. But then his voice rises again. "But this is the power of moral thinking—this is the power of a vision based not on beauty, but on meaning; not on art (the Nazis loved their music and their literature), but on spirituality; not on passion, but on love." His voice rises in intensity and ends in a passionate falsetto climax: "This is the meaning of a life not of love affairs with men or women, but of a love affair with God." He looks drained, he pauses and breathes deeply. "A love affair with God," he says quietly, then "*Shabbat Shalom,*" and steps back to his seat near the cantor, where he slumps, exhausted, looking into his lap.



Carla leaves her aunts and her parents who have clustered into little knots around the *kiddish* table. She feels strangely excited by the rabbi's talk and thinks that the story of Adam and Eve might be interesting, if read with commentaries, with a poetic sensibility, with a desire to uncover its layers. The president of the *shul* rose at the end of the service and presented her cousin Stanley with a Pentateuch, shook his hand and wished him a hearty *mazel tov*, and then went on to make announcements. One of these was about a Sunday morning class for high school students, studying with the rabbi. *It's not for me*, Carla had decided, watching the rabbi, distant and dreaming on his throne. But he piqued her interest, reminding her of Lillian, a Catholic girl she had met over the summer, who would rapturously go on and on about God and her love of God, while falling about her in droves were guys with their hands on their hearts professing love, ready to die

for her. Lillian couldn't see it until Carla told her. She blushed but basically ignored this information. "It's God I love," she had said piously, and somehow Carla loved her for it, loved her for her freedom from men, for not playing the game, for not revolving around the trappings and sticky longings of teenage love and sex.

Carla wanders off by herself, to be alone, to think. She finds something lonely in these Jewish social events. They are supposed to be about community, but she has no community, she is alone, and no amount of talking, or Yiddish jokes, not even the warmth and comfort of her aunts, who always touch her—on the arm, on the hand, on the hair—can ease this constant ache. She is looking down at the ground as she walks, thinking of the rabbi's glasses flying through the air, and Adam and Eve naked in the garden, when she nearly crashes into the rabbi and his daughter coming up the stairs, arm in arm. Dina drops her father's arm and runs up to Carla. "I thought I saw you!" she cries. "What are you doing here?"

Carla feels the rabbi's eyes on her, and she is happy to be thus greeted, made important, by the daughter. "I'm here for the bar-mitzvah," she answers calmly, feeling very sophisticated next to Dina. "Stanley's my cousin."

"No kidding!" says Dina, as though it were the strangest thing on earth. She turns to her father, who is watching her fondly, with interest. "*Abba*," she says, "this is Carla, from my new school. She's a grade ahead of me, and she's really popular. Carla, this is my father."

Carla feels flattered and very strong. The rabbi shifts his gaze to her. He looks different up close, just like anybody else in a blue suit and tie, a friendly and pleasant smile. Until he looks at her. His eyes are a very deep dark brown, bordering on black, and it is with a grave intensity that he bends down and peers into her eyes (light green with specks in them), as if peering into her soul. She has

learned from Lillian to look right up at other people, to be bold and brave, and not to show her shyness. She dares her eyes right up into his; but he meets and holds them, and she lowers hers first.

"I noticed you while I was speaking," he says.

"Me, too," mumbles Carla, still looking down.

Dina is watching closely. "So are you planning to come here again?" she asks, hungry for friendship.

"What for?" Carla is flustered and a little shaken by the rabbi's piercing look. "Oh, you mean the high school classes. Are you giving those?" she asks, turning back to the rabbi. He smiles a little and nods.

"Come," he says. "It'll be fun to have you. It's going to be a great class." Something in what he says angers Carla, but she's not sure what. Is it his arrogance, his assumption that he is worth listening to? Is it the way he forced her to look down? She dares her eyes upwards again, pretending she's Lillian, and opens them wide into his.

"Can you teach me about God?" she asks with mock innocence, but at the same time bluntly, as if asking a casual question, as if asking, Can he repair a sink? Does he know how to drive? She goes on, brutally, refusing to back down, "Can you teach me how to have a love affair with God?"

He stares at her for a moment, shocked. She thinks maybe she has said something really terrible. Maybe she has blasphemed (a concept she never usually thinks of at all). For a moment, as he looks at her with that expression, she is genuinely frightened. Then, suddenly, as if he has decided to, he breaks into a laugh, a warm, full laugh, with his head thrown back and his eyes shut, while she watches him uncertainly.

"A Ulysses girl," he says, referring to her high school, with its reputation for radical '60's education and prodigious, mouthy

kids. He leans down, bringing his face so close to hers that she can feel his warm breath as he speaks. "Come to my class," he whispers, his eyes boring into hers. "I'll teach you what you want to know, I'll teach you how to fall in love with God."

From the corner of her eye, Carla catches Dina's worried face, looking on. "Come on, *Abba*," she's saying, pulling on her father's arm. The rabbi straightens up very slowly, and once erect, inclines his head ever so slightly towards Carla in a mock bow, the way one might honour a formidable adversary. Then he takes his daughter's arm, and the two of them, king and princess, continue majestically on their way.



On the drive home, Carla's mother is slumped against the front door, sleeping, and in the back seat, on either side of her, Carla's brothers stare blankly out their windows. Carla surreptitiously watches her father as he drives; and although he is in expert control of the wheel, he too is absent—vacuous as he listens to Rachmaninoff. It is the Concerto #3, Carla's favourite, but she knows her father thinks it "immature." Anyway, he'd far prefer Brahms, but "what can you do?" he has told her, regretfully, on several occasions. "You can't control what's on the air."

It was always her and her father, she thinks, not necessarily against anybody, not necessarily against her mother; but they were the prime unit of the family, and even casual visitors could feel it, as Carla welcomed them, and served them tea and cakes, and sat near her father, looking up at him when he spoke. Carla got her position mainly through default, through her mother's indifference and her father's loneliness, and through looking like his dead mother, Russian and beautiful with long dark hair. Sometimes he would stand before Carla and push her long hair back behind her ears, and hold it there, staring at her, seeing his

mother. He even suggested some years back that she wear it in a bun, to which Carla's mother firmly objected—and Carla was glad, aligned if only secretly with her mother just this once. She was only seven and didn't want to look like a grandmother.

Just last year, when she was fourteen, she sprouted little breasts. She thought of them as bizarre growths that were supposed to carry such meaning, they were supposed to mean she was a woman, but they didn't mean anything at all, except that now she had to wear a bra, which felt like a harness, and made her think she was now going to be somebody's horse. The other bad thing about "developing" was that her father began to change. All she had ever had was him: She would run to him when he came home from work, usually well after supper was eaten and cleaned up, and it was almost time for bed. She threw her arms around him, he laughed and swung her around, he called her "little queen" and stroked her hair, and then they went into the kitchen and she kept him company while he ate, silently serving him what she knew he liked best (black bread, cheese, tomatoes, and onions), smiling as she watched him eat. They would comfort each other in this way, without words.

But now something has changed. It is subtle, but palpable. When he comes home now, and she throws herself at him, he gets embarrassed, and pushes her away, and says things like, "My, you're getting to be a big girl." Now she no longer runs up to him, but waits in the kitchen, reading, and calls, "Hi, Dad!" She still serves him when he comes in, but some of the time now, she feels lonely and sad, or angry at him: it seems to her that he has become cruel to her. There is no way to get back to him, there is no way to get back on track.



The first class with the rabbi. It is October, and they are doing *I and Thou*. She has never read this book, but she remembers the

rabbi mentioning it during his sermon. She is surprised when she looks down at his copy of it that the author is not "Buba," as he pronounced it, but Buber. Martin Buber. On the cover, he has a long bearded rabbi's face—a face that interests her, in spite of herself, with its depth and sadness. *A Heart of Darkness*, she thinks.

The rabbi sits at the table, takes off his glasses, lays them gently down. He looks around at his students. There are seven of them, they are all fifteen or sixteen, and he seems suddenly sad and overwhelmed.

"You're so young," he says, "but I think you are ready for this." He seems a little afraid to begin, as though he is about to give them a great gift, and they might not like it, or they might not understand it, and will ask, holding up the present they've unwrapped: "What's *this*?" Carla feels protective of him and also has a great desire to let him know she understands, that his confidence in her is justified.

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54 The rabbi stands up and slowly, tenderly, reads the first section. His voice is deep and resonant. He obviously loves these words, or something that is behind them, and reads them like they're poetry.

"To Man, the world is twofold, in accordance with his twofold attitude."

*To human beings*, Carla translates to herself, *the world is twofold...*

"The attitude of Man," the rabbi continues, "is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words with which he speaks. The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words. The one primary word is the combination *I-Thou*. The other primary word is the combination *I-It*; wherein, without a change in the primary word, one of the words *he* and *she* can replace *it*. Hence the *I* of Man is also twofold. For the *I* of the primary word *I-Thou* is a different *I* from that of the primary word *I-It*."

The rabbi stops, puts down his book, and waits. The silence is dramatic. All the students look up at him, and he looks at them, probing, one at a time.

"Now what is this?" he asks. "What's this all about?"

There is silence in the room. Carla looks around at her classmates, none of whom she has ever seen before. They are all boys, she is the only girl, and they all look nervous, some of them are looking down. She realizes that most of them probably come to this synagogue, this is their rabbi, they have probably even been in classes with him before, and that only she is an outsider, a newcomer to this world.

But she is not afraid. She feels happy, free, she is a "free school" girl, a Ulysses girl, unintimidated by "the great rabbi." This is not a world she has to take seriously. This is just a provincial sub-world, the religious Jewish community, it is something she can play with. Anyway, she's always gotten A's in English, and she thinks she understands perfectly what this passage is about. She can feel the depth and power of this book. This is the kind of book she has been waiting for.

The silence builds, and the rabbi is getting impatient: He is pacing back and forth in front of them as though the room is too small.

A skinny boy on Carla's left ventures an answer: "Maybe it's about faith in God."

The rabbi listens, staring intensely straight ahead as he continues to prowl. Without looking at the boy, he answers him in a tone that is driving, almost bullying:

"What about it, Irwin? What about faith in God?" His voice is rising in intensity, the silence grows; and fierce with frustration, he roars at them, "Come on! Come on! It's not such a hard question! What do you think this is about?"

Carla does not know that this is how he teaches. She thinks he is angry at all of them, including her, and she begins to feel a little panicky, the way she felt as a little girl when her mother's voice began to rise, when the anger began to escalate, and she realized, with a sinking heart, that there was no way she could alter its course, either divert or reverse it, and prevent the explosion. They are three minutes into the class, fifty-seven left to go, and she finds the tension unbearable. Furthermore, the answer seems obvious to her, and she doesn't understand why all the boys are looking down. She speaks up softly.

"It's about reality, isn't it?" The rabbi stops pacing and looks at her. He leans forward to catch her voice which has gone a little breathless. "On the one hand, there are the everyday things, you do the everyday things of life: you buy things, you use things. And then there's really seeing The Other. Something or someone...in their fullness, in their *reality*. I think Buber's talking about that whole other dimension, that way of relating."

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56 He stares at her while she speaks, and when she's finished, he is still staring, speechless. Then he catches himself, and turns to include the rest of the class.

"Exactly!" he says; but he is not bombastic any more, and as he expounds on this idea and develops it and plays with it and challenges it, his eyes keep wandering back to Carla, as if he is puzzling her out: *Who is she? How did she know that?* Carla feels it, too, feels her power, her position in the class, for having given just the right answer, for having pleased him. She is aware of the boys noticing her, too, partly with admiration, partly with resentment.

The next class and all the ones that follow are like the first: as sharp and shining as the edge of a knife, with the ever-present glint of danger. The rabbi teaches with passion that gradually mounts throughout the hour. Sometimes when he is so moved

that he cannot, standing still, contain the lyricism in an idea or a text, he lifts his arms and dances. He ends each class whispering, as though the climax of their study together is the most private of secrets: "To speak with one's essence the *I* of *I-Thou* is to enter into a dialogical existence, into a different relationship with the world—one of intense, almost unbearable, intimacy, a relationship of profound but tragic passion." Then there is a single business-like sentence ("For next time read section four") and he is gone, leaving his young students sitting there, electrified and a little dazed for a few seconds, before rustling together their papers and silently shuffling out.



Over the weeks, the rabbi enters her through her mind—the only place there is to enter her, being who she is—which means that he also has possession of her soul. Her mind is the tunnel to her very essence, the way in some old houses, dark living rooms give out onto bay windows overlooking the lawn, and sun porches drenched with light. She believes, like her mother, in books, and thinks that through books, and only through books, can she solve the problem of evil and pain in the world and the riddle of her own life—her mother's violent hatred of her and her own terrible loneliness. She has read a tremendous amount for her age, but there is still a book she has been waiting for, a book like *I and Thou*, which will teach her another language: the language of love, the language of her soul. In the desperateness of her waiting, she has seemed to those around her as strange and as touched as Hamlet, whom they are studying in school. Her teachers decide she is "going through something," maybe she is in love. One day, in art class, imitating pointillism, she takes a flat-topped glue brush and in an hour creates a portrait of darkness that brings the school psychologist running. Carla feels nothing but

contempt. "Of course it's dark: life is dark. Anyway, there's a little yellow in the corner, so calm down."

In November, at the fourth class, the rabbi asks how many of them have read Heschel, and when the boys look down and Carla is silent, he throws his book down on the table, and bellows, "What the hell do you do with your time? What have you people been doing for the past fifteen years?" At the end of class, Carla goes up to him as he is leaving and tells him what she has read over the past year, and he sneers at her before walking away: "Oh, I see. You read only Christians. It's easier, isn't it, to love others than your own."

She stands there shocked, horrified at what he has said. She has never thought of Shakespeare as Christian, though she supposes he was. Is the rabbi saying that Shakespeare (and Steinbeck and Sartre) aren't worth reading because they aren't Jewish? Is he discounting, discarding everyone and everything else in the world but Jewish philosophers and poets? She feels furious, and faintly nauseated, at his implication. Yet gradually, over the next few weeks, she also begins to see his point. Why *had* she never read the prophets, or the Yiddish classics, or modern Hebrew poetry? They all exist in translation; they just have never existed for her. For the first time, Carla questions her views, which are her father's views. In her mind, the rabbi argues with her father, exposing the shallowness of her father's liberal humanism, the naiveté of his universalism, the lack of firm core, absolute principle, in his philosophy. She begins to see her father as wishy-washy and sentimental, hiding behind beautiful music, and not facing facts. Also for the first time, she takes advantage of her school's policy of optional classes, and starts skipping biology, geography, and history every afternoon, in order to read in the library at the synagogue.

She reads there almost every day, from after lunch until it closes. She reads voraciously, book after book, on Creation, the Flood, the Binding of Isaac, and God's place in history. But most desperately, most hungrily, she reads about Man and God, and the possibilities between them. She reads Heschel's trilogy, linked like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob: *Man Is Not Alone*, *Man's Quest for God*, and (with delight) *God In Search of Man*. She encounters Soloveitchik's essay, "The Lonely Man of Faith," and suddenly realizes that among all these other lonely, yearning souls, she is no longer lonely. When she reads here in this library, she hears the rabbi's voice. In a way he is there, reading with her, reading to her; and when she disagrees with something, she fights with the author as he would fight, she and he fighting together, on the same team, against Erich Fromm or Mordecai Kaplan. "Are you saying," she says to Fromm, her inner voice taking on a trace of the rabbi's Brooklyn accent, and also his contempt, "that a Man can become a God? How can you say such a thing?!"

She reads Heschel's *The Earth is the Lord's* and *The Sabbath*, and she weeps.

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It is early December, when it is already dark by 4:30, and Carla has been invited for Friday night supper at the rabbi's. She arrives early, a good half-hour before sundown, as Dina has told her to, and she meets Ricky, the rabbi's wife, for the first time. Somehow she assumed that Ricky would look either plain and beige like a rabbi's wife, or big and broad-shouldered and vulgar with too much make-up, like Dina. But Ricky has a perfect body, and is very sexy in a straight grey skirt, a close-fitting cashmere sweater, and stockinged feet. She has wide sea-blue eyes, a glowing complexion, and a smile that is ravishing but mischievous, inviting friendship. Carla is dazzled.

Ricky does not seem to her like a rabbi's wife at all: She seems perfectly normal, like someone she could be friends with. Unlike Dina, she is open and accessible, and Carla learns within the first twenty minutes that Ricky wasn't brought up religious, she was working as a model when she first met her husband. Now she likes to invent strange and slightly bizarre clothes for herself (felt slippers, for instance, like Peter Pan's) out of the kids' arts and crafts materials and various old clothes. Then Ricky says, "Excuse me," and with a charming smile, lies down flat on the floor and looks up at Carla. "I like to see things sometimes," she says, "from a different angle. Know what I mean?" and gives her a wink. Carla is too shy to join her on the floor, but stares at her, hypnotized, as Ricky directs and organizes the whole household from her position on the floor, telling the children what to wear, mediating their arguments, warning them to turn off the iron they used for their last-minute, pre-*Shabbat* pressings. Carla is smitten by this wonderful happy child-woman, someone it is hard to think of as anybody's mother. When Dina comes over to say she can smell the chicken burning, Ricky giggles and winks at Carla like a conspirator, and stays prone on the floor. She is having fun, she waves to the rabbi like a little girl when he walks in. He just grins when he sees her. Then he waves and says "Welcome" to Carla, and runs up the stairs, two at a time, to change.

Now that the sun has set, everyone is sitting, freshly scrubbed and dressed, around the table laid with a white linen cloth, and to Carla it seems that the rabbi and his wife are completely filled with light. They are calm and radiant, and after the blessings over the wine and the braided *challah*, the rabbi then blesses each of his children, as though each one is a personal vineyard or wheatfield. He places both his hands on the bowed clean heads (Sarah's with her curly hair is a grapevine; Samuel's and Dina's, straight-haired,

are fields of tired wheat), his lips moving as he mutters blessings over them, and then ends with a soft kiss on each forehead. Carla stands awkwardly before him, and uncertainly, he blesses her, too. Carla notices that only he does the blessing, no one blesses him, because—she supposes—he is so strong, he doesn't need one. She wonders where the word "bless" comes from; in French, which she is learning at school, "blesser" means to hurt. Ricky waits on him with food, with platters of vegetables, and chicken, and potatoes, and afterwards she serves him honey cake and tea.

Carla knew that at her house, her parents would be eating alone, the boys out playing hockey or at friends' houses, and she over here with the rabbi's family. Maybe her parents would have defrosted a little turd of meatloaf, and because it was heated up on the highest possible heat (because her father was so hungry and her mother hadn't prepared for him ahead of time), the outside would be charred and the inside a cold, frozen lump, with varying degrees of warmth or coolness waving unpredictably through every bite.

Or possibly, her father would be eating alone. He would be in his bathrobe, his naked feet up on the empty chair opposite, reading the paper while he nibbled at some bread and cheese. He would pretend he didn't care; but later on he'd find an excuse to criticize her mother and pick a fight, and the evening would end in shouts and recriminations. Or just as often, in silence: those old wooden doors shutting carefully, finally, against each other, and her mother sleeping on the cot in the den.

Here it is all light. Everybody is singing songs that Carla doesn't understand, but she hums along anyway, they seem sweet and faintly familiar, as though she's heard them somewhere before, though she is sure she hasn't. The rabbi and his wife sit at the head and the foot of the table, and look at each other with

pleasure across the long length of it. Carla knows, from something Irwin has said in class, that on *Shabbat* one gets an extra soul from heaven, and therefore it is a special *mitzvah* to make love on Friday night. She can feel the two of them waiting, the stretch of the elastic between them, as they wait for their time, the night.

After dinner, there is more singing: *Shabbos* songs about God, about holiness, about the joys of the Sabbath, and after the singing, more talk, and after the talk, the cake and fruit, and then more singing, and then a loud and rowdy prayer-song, the blessing after the meal, thanking God for the food, and the company, and the beauty of the holy Sabbath. By the end of the meal, Carla has fallen in love: with *Shabbat*, with holiness, with this happy, singing family. That night, when everyone has gone to bed, and the house is quiet and full of peace, she lies awake in the bed they have made up for her in the basement (because on *Shabbat* you don't drive or travel—you leave technology behind, and return to the time of creation—and her parents' house is too far away to walk to). She lies on her back with her hands clasped behind her neck, wondering why she has wasted so much time. Staring at the ceiling, she thinks, *Now I'm at home. My real life is starting now.*



That night, she dreams she is standing in a street downtown, looking into the window of a jewelry store. All by itself, on its own velvet cushion, is a jade statue in the shape of a Buddha. Enigmatically smiling, the rotund figure is smooth and rich-green and, although Carla usually doesn't take to this sort of thing, quite compelling. He has the round peacefulness of her father's face, the same apparently simple but impenetrable smile and the arrogance of his confident, classic pose. As she gazes at

it, thinking that Buddha is eternal—that he will live forever, if only you believe—her father begins to melt. He has turned into one of those candles you buy in cheap stores reeking of incense, and even though he has no wick, he is melting slowly, starting with a small but widening pool at the top of his head, as soft green as the pool in the glade in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. As she watches, horrified, unable to break through the glass, the Buddha is slowly melting, smiling unbearably mildly, *just the way Daddy would*, she thinks approvingly, right in the middle of her dream—*mildly, gently, in classical form*. Now the head is gone, now the shoulders, now the top of his torso, down, down, past the knees, to a little waxy pool at his feet, and her father is gone. She watches helplessly from behind the glass. She watches, loving him, and loving the melted jade.



Two days later, at the last class of the term, they wrap up *I and Thou*, which, Carla presumes, is the basis for redemption, because next term, starting in January (while at school they will be learning in physics about the heat of vaporization, in geography about deserts, and in history about World War I and the Depression), here they are going to do Redemption. The rabbi has mentioned Franz Rosenzweig's *The Star of Redemption* in his last few classes. He has said several times, "Now I can't go into this now, but you'll see, next term, when we study this, it'll all fall into place. Then you'll *really* understand Buber." Carla feels she is being teased, like when she was a child and couldn't understand a joke and was told she would when she was "older." She feels she is older now, but apparently she is still not quite ready for the real, the big, secret. But next term she will be, and she will learn it then.

As she follows the others out of the class, and then rides home on the bus, she is teeming with the ideas the rabbi has filled her

with. Before she met him, the Ulysses School had emptied her of hope, of meaning, by teaching her carefully, deliberately, systematically the contrast between the highest ideals and the workings of this world. *Richard III* terrified her; *The Red Badge of Courage* and *Black Like Me* made her—like the best of her classmates (many of whom turned to drugs)—bitter and cynical. Her school shook her faith in the world, and her family cracked her heart. But she is not yet broken. Somehow the rabbi has penetrated the fortress of her cynicism and disillusion, and his ideas have filled her with hope. What she once scorned as provincial sentimentality, as irrational opiate, and as ghetto-like in its narrowness, she now understands as not only congruent with reason, but as a coherent and complete language for her spiritual-intellectual life. Heschel responded to, argued with, and ultimately triumphed over Kierkegaard on existential angst and loneliness; Fackenheim won the debate with Hegel on history; and the *Torah* wiped out both Blake and Christian theology, the stuff of Lillian's letters, with a firm, swift hand. Carla still struggles with the idea of God, the God whose name is so holy you are not allowed to speak it except in prayer; in everyday speech, He is nameless, referred to only as "The Name" or "Holy One, Blessed Be He." She still hasn't dared to ask the rabbi about that old man sitting on a cloud, pulling strings, like George Bernard Shaw on the cover of her "My Fair Lady" record. She also doesn't see any place for women in Judaism; and she can't really believe that God intervenes in history, that God actually cares about human comings and goings, or more particularly about hers...But there seems in this Jewish way of life a better, a happier, way to live. "Is the happy life the good life?" the rabbi once asked, half-joking, in class. "Absolutely," she answered, without hesitation. For instance, when she thinks about him and his wife looking down the long

table at each other, when she sees the jubilation in his teaching and the way he takes steps two at a time—there is meaning, or the possibility of it; there is a little bit of hope.

## II. REDEMPTION

Carla spends the Christmas vacation with her family. They fly down to Florida and stay with her grandmother, who is depressed and complains and carps at her mother. Her mother, in turn, criticizes Carla ceaselessly on everything from her posture to her grammar. While the boys play ping-pong and swim, and her father reads in the sun, Carla's headaches come back, the ones that miraculously all but disappeared during the fall term.

They drive home from the airport, and as soon as they enter the house, Carla heads straight to her room, puts on Beethoven's nine symphonies, takes out her copy of *I and Thou*, and doesn't resurface until the next morning when she has to go back to school. She thinks of nothing but the rabbi and his promises about Redemption. The idea of redemption is strange to her, she has never thought about it before; and in her parents' old house, stinking with anger and hate, she cannot believe, except with a corner of her mind—the yellow corner of memory—that anything like it is possible.

But at his first class in January, it happens all over again. She is inspired by Rosenzweig's story: a man confined to a wheelchair, whose sum total of movement, of physical capacity, is to blink his eyes; and who singlehandedly built a brilliant and influential institute of Jewish learning, the *lehrhaus*, in post-World War I Frankfurt. Like Carla, he was from an irreligious background,

both secular and cynical, and lived in a place and time as sophisticated, as alienated, as lost, as her own. But with the blink of his eyes, he opened those of his assimilated Jewish friends and acquaintances, introducing them to God and to the possibility of redemption, thus drawing them into the limelight, the centre, of history from their place on the periphery. Carla has both her eyes; she also has a strong, healthy body, two arms, two legs. It emboldens her, fires her, to think what she could do and accomplish—if she had the will. And she is finding the will, she is finding a language for her soul and her life.

At the end of this class, the other students file out, but Carla is still writing in her notebook. The rabbi watches her from his seat.

“How was your holiday?” he asks.

She looks up. “Okay,” she says. “It was Christmas.”

He laughs appreciatively. Then he muses, “You seem so much to want to learn. I have never in my life met anyone with such a passion for learning.”

“I know,” she says eagerly, “but I don’t know why. I think, anyway, I must be crazy, seeking knowledge like this, wanting to learn everything. Because the more I learn, the sadder I get. That’s the main thing I’ve found out so far.”

“How do you know that?” he asks her urgently, almost angrily. “Did you read that somewhere?” She shakes her head. “That’s from *Koheles*, from Ecclesiastes. How can you know that at your age? How old are you, anyway?”

“Fifteen,” she says. “I don’t know how I know, I just do. I’ve always thought about stuff like this.”

“You are so wise for your age,” he says, as if to himself. “It is almost frightening.”

Carla grins and shrugs. She suddenly feels older than this

rabbi, he seems so naive, so easily impressed and shocked, knowing nothing about things, like drugs, that she lives with every day.

"No, I'm not," she says cheerfully. She is happy that he likes her, that she has dazzled him back a little bit. "I'm just regular."

He is staring at her.

"Who are you?" he asks. "What does your father do?"

Carla hesitates. She always answers this question carefully. "He's a public servant," she says. And then, "Not really, that's just our answer we joke about at home. He's in Trudeau's cabinet."

The rabbi's eyes widen. "Tobin, of course," is all he says, "I've seen him in the papers." But she feels how impressed he is and, for the first time, he has disappointed her. She feels contempt for him.

Then he asks, casually, "Your parents—are they happy together? Do they love each other?"

She is shocked by his question, the bluntness of it; but she steels herself, much as she steels herself when she undresses in front of the doctor ("He's a doctor after all," she always tells herself). She pauses. On the one hand, fifteen years of family loyalty, deeply ingrained, struggle within her; on the other, she wants to tell the truth, she was taught as a child not to lie, and she wants to tell it to *him*. She looks up at him, and there is nothing sinister on his face.

"No," she says, looking directly at him, "they are not happy. My parents fight a lot, and I get stuck in the middle." She pauses again, full of fear, but he doesn't say anything, and she feels impelled to continue. "If I make supper, I'm trying to take her place; if I don't, I'm a crappy daughter, why don't I ever help? Whatever I do is wrong. Sometimes I think I'll go crazy. I hate it. I hate that house."

She has never told anyone this before, and she is inwardly trembling. She thinks that the heavens will cave in, she will be

struck down for breaking faith, for breaking the image. But she goes on. She tells him what she has managed to keep from the school psychologist, from the family doctor who she thinks has suspected for years, from the world at large, to protect her father.

"She hates me," she whispers to him. "She really *hates* me. Sometimes she's really crazy."

She stops, terrified. Somehow speaking has made it real. She stares at the rabbi.

"And your father?" he asks. "What about your father?"

She continues to stare, not understanding the question.

He explains quite patiently, not the way he teaches; but there is still something relentless in it, something brutal. "Why doesn't he help you? Why doesn't he *do* something?"

Still, she stares at him, uncomprehending. It has never entered her mind that her father should, or could, do anything, or that she should expect him to. And also, there is an edge to the rabbi's voice when he talks about her father that she can't quite name, but she feels it is there, and it silences her. They go on to talk of other things; but she is exhausted, and when she gets up to leave, she feels raw, and drained, and confused.

He asks Carla, as they stand by the door, to keep on being Dina's friend, to come over as often as she wants (she is welcome any time), that he would personally appreciate it, he worries about his daughter. He tells Carla that she is a very special person, that she has a brilliant mind and a beautiful soul, and that he is honoured to be her teacher. She has a sudden impulse to hug him, the way she would hug her father; and then she remembers that Orthodox men, not to mention rabbis, do not touch women, except their wives, and even then under very strict and controlled circumstances. So she just turns away, and wanders toward the door of the synagogue, blushing and a little dazed. Only through

a haze, as she leaves, does she hear the rabbi pointing her out to someone as "Tobin's daughter"; but this, which would normally revolt her, doesn't bother her at all. Along with her flushing euphoria, she feels shame, as though she's been stripped, and hasn't had time enough to dress, as though she has been triumphed over. She is still confused and shaken an hour later, after the long bus ride home.



After this, Carla begins dropping by his house more, without invitation, and she is always made to feel welcome. The door is never locked, they never ask her why she's come or how long she's staying, and the bed in the basement is always made up. After a few weeks, her arrival no longer prompts anyone to stand up and come over to greet her at the door. They stay where they are, continue what they're doing, and just wave, or smile. Carla makes herself at home, usually goes down to the basement first and puts away her clothes and books. Then if she's hungry, she goes to the fridge and helps herself. Once in a while she offers food to others. Most often she just sprawls out on the couch and reads.

Because it is winter and *Shabbat* comes in so early, on Fridays the synagogue library shuts at one, so she just goes to the rabbi's house straight from school. And on Saturday night, there doesn't seem much point in going home just to sleep, when she has her Sunday class the next morning at ten. And after the class, she comes back to their house for lunch, or stays to study at the library and then drops over in mid-afternoon.

So it ends up that she is spending pretty much all weekend, every weekend, with the rabbi and his family. There are also a lot of weeknight events at the synagogue which she attends and then sleeps over: a concert in Jewish soul music with Shlomo Carlebach, "the singing rabbi," or a lecture by a visiting scholar,

which the rabbi subsequently rips to shreds. And of course, every Wednesday night there is the rabbi's study group on the weekly Bible portion, which Carla sometimes goes to with Dina, walking there and back in the cold winter darkness with her hands in her pockets. In this way, the winter term speeds by, even though not much of anything actually happens, in much the same way that on holidays, once a routine is established, the time just seems to devour itself.

Once, a couple of weeks after their conversation, Carla asked the rabbi if they could talk again sometime. He seemed a little confused, almost as if he'd forgotten their discussion. "Oh, yeah, sure," he said; but he never brought it up again, and she was too embarrassed and proud to ask a second time.

But still she talks to him, anyway. He has become so much a part of her, that anything she thinks or feels that is beautiful or profound she attributes to him. She is certain that before she met him, she had never seen anything, she had never felt anything, she had never known beauty. On the bus to *shul*, gazing out the window at the back, she tells him about everything she passes, as though unless she tells it to him, it is not real. She tells him about the exquisite patterns made by the rain on the back window, shot through like diamonds with light, merging, separating, and swirling infinitely, unpredictably, like the holy sparks that together would one day unite and save the world. She also tells him things about herself, long, intricate stories; and by the time she gets to *shul*, she is exhausted from telling him everything, from explaining to him, picturing him, smiling at him, confiding in him. And by the time she sees him, there is nothing left to say; she has already told him everything. Why go over it again?

In class, she stumbles. She doesn't seem to catch his points as adroitly as before. Sometimes she gives the right answer, but

more often, when he turns to her, she looks at him blankly, almost frightened, as though she's been away, somewhere else, not even listening. The rabbi stops looking only to her for understanding. More often now he is pleased by Irwin, or one of the others.

At school, she has skipped her classes all term, even the mornings, and when she sits to write her exams, she can't even make educated guesses. She writes brief and foolish answers, knowing they are wrong, knowing as she writes that she has failed yet another exam.

*What were the causes of the First World War?*

*Lack of higher purpose. Lack of hope. Insufficient love.*



In June, now that school's out, Carla has no reason to go home at all, and she stays at the rabbi's, one-more-night, one-more-night, for almost three weeks. When she calls home one more time to say she'll be staying over, her father tells her he'd like to see her face once in a while so he can remember what she looks like. She hangs up, tells Ricky and the rabbi she'll see them on *Shabbat*, and heads for home.

A few hours later, she is back. The rabbi is alone in the kitchen, leaning back against the counter on one elbow, munching on some *challah*. He straightens up, surprised, when he sees her.

"Hi," he says.

She stands very still in the doorway, not answering.

He squints at her. "What's the matter?" he asks. "You look like Elijah after a vision."

She shrugs and looks down, and starts to cry—so quietly that it takes him a few moments to understand from the convulsing of her shoulders. He comes over and bends his head down, trying to look into her eyes.

"What is it, Carla? What's happened?"

She shakes her head from side to side, refusing speech like a child. Then she turns her face away, and now the marks on her neck show: long red scratches and finger gouges and a sprawling yellow bruise. The rabbi's breath sucks in sharply and he pulls back from her, standing straight up. From his full height, he looks down and sees the top of her head and the blood caking black in her hair. His face twists as if he will vomit, his eyes shut tight.

"My God," he says.

There is the sound of her quiet sobbing.

"Can I stay here?" she asks, looking up at him. "Don't tell me to go. I can't go home, don't make me go home."

The rabbi stands there dazed. She watches his white shock colour into anger, it rises and trembles in him when he says, "That crazy woman, I'll kill her." Then he looks down at Carla, and his voice is gentle when he speaks. "Of course you can stay here. As long as you want."

She steps forward, closing the one step between them, and leans her weight against him. She can feel his surprise. He doesn't hold her but he also doesn't push her away. She lays her head into the hollow of his arm, presses it as if sticking her head inside a cave, into an opening like a vagina, as though she would push her head through and bury herself inside him. She can feel his shock at the contact with her body. Then she feels his hand, wondering, on her hair.



The usual routine continues, the change is minimal, except that now Dina is in Israel for the summer, so Carla has taken over her room. She doesn't think about going home any more. She can't even picture sleeping in her own bed again without feeling the beginning of one of her headaches, so all month she has refused to think about it at all.

The rabbi and his wife have not asked her to explain anything. They treat her just as they have all year, but even more tenderly, like a child. They cut everything—chicken, bread, watermelon—into five equal parts, one for her, as though she has always been a part of their family. She is soothed, or at least numbed, being near them.

But at night, every few nights, she has nightmares. On the first night, she awakens to find the rabbi standing over her, staring down at her. She is startled and raises herself on her elbows.

"You were screaming," he says. "Are you okay?"

She nods, shocked in that half-place between sleep and waking, the cold darkness she has wakened into more like sleep than like life. She is shivering, her nightgown is drenched, and rising up from it is a sour smell, like rotting grapes.

"What did I say?" she asks.

His face is in shadow, he is a stone-grey archway over her, a rainbow over flat land when the light from the window haloes his hair into gold. His bathrobe is loosely tied, she obviously roused him. He sighs. "Nothing," he says. "You were just screaming."

His shadow moves over to the Venetian blinds. She thinks maybe she is still dreaming, as she lies back under the thin blanket in the white cotton nightgown Ricky has lent her, watching him curiously, almost dispassionately, thinking, as if watching a movie, *He is going to kiss me*. He is facing out the window and fingering the blinds thoughtfully, like reading Braille. He strokes them slowly, back and forth, one at a time, and then stops and turns around to face her. He comes over toward the bed and looks down at her directly, a look almost hard on his face. "Are you okay?" he asks her, and his voice is hoarse and low; it is a voice she has not heard before. She nods, looking up into his eyes, those intense brown eyes that seem to bore into her, through the blanket, through the sheet, through the nightgown. He continues to

stare at her heavily, and then finally nods, with a philosophical smile that turns up only one side of his mouth. "Sleep," he says, and is gone, like Hamlet's father, an apparition.



These are her nights. Every few nights she wakes screaming after dreaming and the rabbi comes in to her room. But in the daytime, she is her usual self. She goes to the last class on Redemption, a special, full-day class. Instead of the usual last-class review and summary, the rabbi has chosen to set his students a challenge. They are each to find one question (never mind the answer, this is unimportant), and they have until 4:00 to search for it. There is excitement in the class, the tone of a scavenger hunt; and they work hard all day searching in *chevrusa*, in study pairs. Now it is 4:00 and they are presenting their questions, gifts to each other, gifts to the rabbi. Most of them are biographical, about Rosenzweig and his experience of redemption. Irwin's is finely philosophical, involving definitions and redefinitions of Redemption: *pilpul*, the art of splitting hairs. The rabbi takes Carla's question last.

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"613 commandments!" she says bluntly, referring to the path to redemption the rabbi has taught them, Maimonides' guide to the moral life. "It's too many. Who could possibly do them all? Who can even remember them?"

The rabbi laughs briefly and nods. Then he looks grave. "I know," he says. "It's hard to be good." He sits at the table with them, takes off his glasses, and rubs his eyes with an expression of pain. Then, after a few moments, he jumps up, an excited little boy.

"I got it!" he cries, jubilant. "I got it down to three!" He mutters on his way to the blackboard, "It's *Pirke Avot*, I think, *Ethics of the Fathers*." Then he grabs the chalk and scrawls, speaking as he writes:

*"Do justice.  
Love kindness.  
Walk humbly.*

That is all that God requires of you." Laying down the chalk, he looks over at Carla. "How's that?" he asks.

To his amazement, she laughs at him. Her laughter is the same as usual, free and apparently friendly, but he looks at her uncertainly, not understanding, waiting for her to finish.

When she finally stops laughing, she explains. "That's way too easy!" she says. *"Anyone can do that!"*

At which he stares at her, even more astonished, and then bursts out laughing himself. He laughs till there are tears in his eyes. They are still there when the class is over, after he has thanked them, after they have risen to their feet and clapped.

Then he and Carla walk back to the house. The sun is setting, and on the way the rabbi nods to his congregants walking to *shul* for the evening prayers. He tells one of them that he will be along soon, and then he and Carla walk on in silence. She feels awkward with him now. She doesn't know what to call him, he is nameless to her. "Rabbi" is too formal, but his nickname Binny (Ricky's name for him, the diminutive of the Hebrew for Benjamin) feels too intimate.

"Do you want a sandwich?" she asks as they enter the house.

They pause together in the hall for a moment, absorbing its stillness.

"Sure," he says.

Then he asks her, as she's turning away, "Are you all right?"

She doesn't know what he means. In the daytime, she remembers nothing of her dreams, and almost nothing of his webbed shadow by her window. In the morning when she showers, it all washes away.

But now he has made her remember: the grape-smelling clamminess of her nightgown last night, the jagged cracks of sobbing that woke him and then continued for some time even after he shook her awake. He had asked, "Can I get you anything?" "I need a new nightgown," she said, and he brought her one of Ricky's, laid it at the end of her bed, a bright rectangle in the moonlight. She peeled off the other one after he left, and felt the clean, dry flannel, as comforting as a baby's sleeper, against her skin.

She shrugs. "I'm all right," she says, wanting to cry, and leaves for the kitchen. A few minutes later, as she's standing at the island, smearing mayonnaise on two pairs of sliced bread, she hears soft footsteps behind her, then feels his hand touching hers as he takes the knife out of her hand and gently lays it down. His hands are around her waist and he is turning her around to face him. She feels panicky, but she looks up at him. It is her rabbi, the one who comes to comfort her in the night; and she watches, mesmerized, as he takes her hand in his, and brings it to his lips. He is kissing her hand in a stately, respectful way, and she thinks of *She*, which they've just finished reading in school, as if she were the queen, and he one of her subjects. His head is bent over her hand, she feels the warm pressure of his lips. It looks like he is worshipping: worshipping her, her mind, her youth—worshipping also her worship of him.

Now he turns over her hand. He is kissing her palm on the inside—she is embarrassed, it is sweaty—and as she watches him, hypnotized, he is kissing one of her fingers, slowly, gently, up the whole length of it and then back down again. She hears the beginning, rising wail of the tea kettle, she's forgotten about the tea, she must turn it off. But she is frozen, watching in fascination, as though this has nothing to do with her, as though it is happening to somebody else. His mouth moves over to her next

finger, and this one he is kissing with his lips, but also she feels something flicking, something light and sensual, like scurrying silk, it must be his tongue. And then she feels her finger going deep inside his mouth, and it is being sucked up-and-down, up and down, over and over. He starts to moan, no it is her that is moaning, and she feels her knees buckle under her. They are kneeling together on the kitchen floor, behind the island with the cutting board. The kettle is shrieking.

Suddenly Carla awakens as if from a trance, and with horror pulls away her hand. She looks at the rabbi: He is still back there in that other place, he is breathing heavily, and he won't look at her, he is looking down. Then somehow he has clasped her hands, both of them, in his, and he is holding them as if comforting one of his congregants, as if comforting a mourner, or a lost person. She hears the door to the kitchen opening somewhere behind her, and the next thing she knows, she is outside, she is on a bus, she is staring at her hands.

On the long ride home, she relives, over and over, the swelling tremor that started in her body, like the genesis of an earthquake, when she felt the licking flicking of his tongue up and down her finger; and then when he took it deep inside his mouth and sucked it, the caving-in, the landslide in her loins. But mingled with this is what she felt pulling her hand away, the most profound *No* she has ever uttered. The pleasure and the horror flip-flop within her, like two sides of the same hand, and by the time the bus has reached her parents' street, they have merged, like the inside and outside of skin.

She isn't ready to go home and face her parents, so she goes to the forest at the end of their street. It is a bright night lit by a glowing gold moon, and she sits on the ground, hugging her knees to her chest, surrounded by towering trees. Over the next

few hours, the sound of the rushing traffic dies down; and by the time the silence of the night has entered the forest, she knows that there will be no more safety, and no more fathers, and no more hope for her, ever again. She knows now that the world is godless and empty, and there will be no redemption, not through the body, and not through the mind.

She doesn't know where she will sleep tonight. But she knows she will not go home; and for the first time ever, she has no words, no human words, for the knowledge in her heart. She raises her hands to her face and covers it, the way she does when blessing the candles to welcome in the Sabbath; and under the full moon she howls, together with the wolves, and all the other creatures of the forest, and the night.