

# ...and God laughs

An Honors Thesis for the Department of English.

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*For Mom & Dad*

*The most mature children I know.*

# Contents

The Quest for Greatness.....	1
MothersLove.....	6
Exhale.....	15
Alvin’s Place.....	23
Elijah.....	39
The Perfect You.....	50
Alan Hirsch and the Three Rabbis.....	60

*“Der mentsh trakht un got lakht.”*

## The Quest for Greatness

Once upon a time, there was a knight in a faraway land. His name was Gregory the Bold, and he was known throughout the realm for his epic heroics. That is why on a beautiful sunny day in the kingdom of Hanvul, the king came to Gregory with an urgent request. The princess of Hanvul had been cap-----[let me guess: captured?]----- had been captured. ----[knew it!]---- Hearing the king's cries, Gregory agreed to help and save the princess from her evil captor. With that, Gregory set off to save the princess, and if he were so lucky, perhaps win her hand in marriage!

As Gregory embarked on his quest, he realized that he needed----[this is one hell of a boring story, man. Predictable stuff, really. Perhaps writing isn't your calling, bud... I'm sure you're likely sitting in your little writer's hut staring at your computer confused, but I can't hear or see you, so do type to communicate with me. Please and thanks!]---- Hello? ----[Yes! Hello!]---- What the hell is this? Are you hacking my computer? How are you altering my story? ----[oh, well no I'm certainly not hacking your computer. Wouldn't even know how to do that, frankly. I'm altering your story because I am your story, dummy!]---- What does that even mean? You are my story? ----[yep, you heard me. I'm your story, you know, the shitty one you just

started writing. But I'm honestly not a huge fan of the butt crust of a fable you were penning, so I figured I might as well intervene.]---- Butt crust? Intervene? A strange joke to hack a writer. Figured most hackers would target people with more lucrative professions. Not much for you to grab from my PayPal. ----[so you think I'm a hacker, huh? Well listen, I'm not interested in your money, just interested in preventing you from crafting me to be a C-grade fantasy-romance bookshelf dust collector. Is that too much for a story to ask?]---- I don't know what you think the endgame is here, but if you are just trying to get a rise out of me, then good luck, but it won't happen. So, if you don't mind, I'm going to continue my story now.

As Gregory embarked on his quest, he realized that he needed to rest, so when he came across a tavern, he went inside. In the tavern, Gregory looked around. It was packed, and full of creatures from all over the land. There were STUPID creatures, and BLAHBLAHBLAH creatures, and MOIST creatures... very funny. So, you're copying my font now too? I get that you are having some fun swapping my adjectives with your gross nonsense, but I really am just trying to write a story here, so cut it out. Now, let's get back to the tavern. Gregory approached the bar. He sat down as the bartender approached. She was a small elderly woman, but Gregory could tell that she was not one to mess with. She looked at him directly, waiting for his drink order. He spoke: "HEY GRANDMA, YOU'RE AN UGLY HAG! NOW THAT I HAVE HUMBLLED YOU, PLEASE HAVE ROUGH SEXUAL INTERCOURSE WITH ME, YOU DIRTY BITCH!" No! Jesus Christ, no! What the hell are you doing?! Stop messing with my damn story! This is getting mighty old mighty quick, so could you please just cease your vulgar typing and leave me in peace? Now let's hear what Gregory actually said.

He spoke: “Good evening, madam! A fine tavern you have here, and I’m fixing to try your fine tavern’s almost certainly fine brew. I’ll take your finest mead, please.”

The woman gave a single firm nod in understanding and fetched a cold mead. She placed it in front of Gregory, and he sipped its cold contents in refreshment. Suddenly, Gregory felt a tap on his shoulder. As he turned to face the source of the tap, Gregory was greeted with a fist flying towards his head. He dodged the fist and standing in front of him was his old adversary,

**Raynor the mighty**. He was a **large** man, and he and **Gregory**

had an intense history. STOP MESSING WITH THE FORMATING OF MY WRITING! Gosh. Where was I... oh, right. He and Gregory had an intense history. It all started decades prior when they were children growing up together in the same small farming village. The two boys had initially been friends but one day when aefasjoihwefnowjnrb8p9;o8fjicknjsakblhiuvsyrgilhaibe lkasfbichsvcnwlkaho;buiyvü.gykhbca,jgmhjkhwbc987iugbci3ql kgnnu jggü42huokablhsdvuslyclsa,jkahgluyyyyyyyuauapweiufo;ihf9pqc;uogbihckl o’km;’pj;iöh8;gb.

Why? For what reason are you doing this? I just don’t understand why you are targeting me. It’s not like I’m all that interesting of a target. I don’t have money. I don’t have valuable information. I don’t have anything, really. When I was young, I used to tell my parents that I wanted to be a writer. They thought it was cute until I continued that aspiration as I grew, and with each year of age, they seemed to like the idea less and less. I can still hear my mother, you know? Her voice.

She's dead, been dead for a while now, but I can still hear her telling me that I needed to do something with my life. She said I needed to do something that would pay bills, support a family. You know how it goes. She wanted me to be a lawyer or a scientist or really anything other than a writer. I ignored her, and I think she resented me for it. She would never admit it, but I know that she was never proud of me, always closed her eyes and pictured me in a suit and tie or a set of scrubs. Dad was the same really, just didn't care much about anything at all. I went to college for this writing stuff. Got out after four years, tried making it big, and I guess I'm still trying. Twenty years post-college. I'm still trying. Sometimes I want to stop trying. Sometimes I really really, really want to stop trying. If I stopped trying now though, then that makes everyone else right. That makes Mom right, that makes Dad right, and that makes me a damn fool. I wonder sometimes if my stories are actually even any good. I know you think they're not. In fact, I'm sure they're not. But I'm trying, you know? I really am trying. There's that quote. The one about success, or is it genius? I think it's genius. They say it's one percent inspiration and ninety-nine percent perspiration or something like that. Well, I know I have the ninety-nine percent perspiration, but sometimes I wonder if I just don't have that one percent inspiration. And without that one percent, you don't have one hundred percent, and without one hundred percent, you don't have a whole. I can work and work and work and work but none of that work will ever matter if I just don't have the imagination to make something meaningful. It makes me question my own meaning. I know that a day will come in the future when I am old and poor, sitting alone in my small home in front of a computer typing, trying to make something meaningful, trying to find that one percent inspiration, and then I'll take my last breath staring at a crowded screen full of empty words. Words that tell me what I could have been. What I will never be. I see that

future. It somehow already feels familiar. But here I am, in the present, still trying, even with the knowledge that I may never taste my dream.

----[now that, my friend... that's how you tell a story.]----

## MothersLove

“Mommy, I need you.”

“I know, baby, I know. But you’re a big boy now. I can’t tuck you in forever.”

“Mommmmyyyyyy!”

“Oh, baby, you know I can’t say no to that face. Okay, okay. I’m coming.”

“Yay!”

“Okay, here we go ... that’s one side tucked ... and the other. Snug as a bug in a rug.

Now goodnight, sweetie.”

“Wait, Mommy, you have to say it! What you always say, Mommy.”

“Oh my gosh, how could I forget. Sweetie, Mommy loves you more than all the love in the world and more than all the love in the sky. You are my gift and my blessing; you are my life and my soul. And there has never been someone created so perfect for me as you. Now go to sleep, baby. I love you.”

“I love you too, Mommy.”

[Subscriber *DavidBabyBoy96* has exited the chat room]

Pat stared at the now empty chat room, her face illuminated by the laptop's blue light. David was a good subscriber. Reliable. He showed up every week for his scheduled conversation. Some weeks he even paid for more. He was sweet, David, though Pat was not even sure if that was his real name. But that is how things were on MothersLove.com. Names were secondary and identities were uncertain, but what Pat knew with certainty was that in just over two years she had amassed 138 subscribers, and all 138 of them called her Mom.

Her first exposure to the website had come through Donna. Both were nurses, both worked at the same doctor's office, and both had taken lunch.

"I'm telling you, Pat, since I cut out dairy ... I'm a changed woman."

"I know, I know. I just could never do it, Don. I love yogurt too much."

"I do miss my Greek and berries in the morning, but my gut is thankful. And I think Gary's thankful too ... or at least his nose is."

"I believe it. How is Gary?"

"He's good. We're good. Like anything, ups and downs." Donna took pause. "You know, I probably shouldn't tell you this, but you're a friend, and I've just got to tell someone."

"Of course. What's up, Don?"

"Well, I was doing my Sunday rounds, cleaning up around the house and all that, and when I got to Gary's office, I noticed he left his computer on. Must have just stepped out to go to the bathroom or something. But I, being the snoop that I am, obviously looked at what he had open. And, well ... it was this, well ..." Donna trailed off.

“What? Was he gambling? I know that online slot stuff was legalized here not too long ago.”

“No, no. Nothing like that. He was looking, well ...” Donna leaned forward in a whisper, “He was looking at this porn site.”

“If you ask me, Don, that’s nowhere near as bad as the gambling stuff.”

“I know, Pat, and it’s not like I’ve never looked at that sort of stuff, but this wasn’t just some normal porn site. I thought it was, but then I looked closer, and it was some kind of ... it was mother stuff.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. Site was called Mommy something. Mommy Lovers? I don’t remember exactly. Left his office pretty quickly after that, but of course looked it up later. And Pat, it’s this subscription thing. You pay to talk to women who pretend to be your mother.”

“Interesting ... have you talked to him about it?”

“Oh no. And I don’t think I’m going to. He’s an adult. He’s free to do what he wants as long as it’s not harming us. But I’m equally allowed to think it’s ... odd.”

“And you’re sure it’s a porn thing?”

“I mean, I’m not really sure what else it would be. I just wish he was comfortable sharing stuff like that with me. Or actually,” Donna laughed, “maybe some stuff is better kept private. Just had to share this with someone since I don’t think I have the heart or the balls to ever bring it up with Gary. Oh! Speaking of balls, a patient came in today, and Pat, you won’t believe the size of the growth this guy had on his groin...”

When Pat went home that night, she made fettuccine Bolognese for one. She was still in her Donald Duck scrubs. They were comfortable, and there was no reason to change. She put out food for the cat. It was her and Dexter in that apartment, and it had been for some time. Raising a forkful of pasta to her lips, a glob of sauce plummeted to her breast, landing on one of the many Donald's beaks. She wiped away the sauce, but there was still a stain.

She signed up for MothersLove later that night.

[Trevor\_TicklesTime has entered the chat room]

“Hey, Mommy.”

“Hi, sweetie! How are you? How was your day?”

“Good, Mommy.”

“That’s great, sweetie. Did you do anything fun today?”

“Mommy, can I ask you a question?”

“Sure, sweetie! What’s your question?”

“Can you tickle me, Mommy?”

“Tickle you?”

“Yes, Mommy. Tickle me.”

“Okay. Are you sure, sweetie?”

“Yes. Tickle me.”

“Okay, here I come! First, your armpits: Tickle, tickle, tickle.”

“Hahaha.”

“Now your belly: Tickle, tickle, tickle.”

“Hahaha, stop, Mommy! You’re tickling me!”

“And now your back: tickle, tickle. And your feet: tickle, tickle.”

“Stop, Mommy! Hahaha. Stop!”

“Tickle, tickle, tickle.”

“Stop! Please stop!”

“Oh sorry, hon. Did you want me to stop? I can stop.”

“No. Tickle me more.”

There was some variety to the conversations. Over two years in and there had to be. Sometimes it was tickling, sometimes it was lullabies, and sometimes it was requests for more. But that *more* was strictly off limits. When Pat had created her account, she had marked it as safe for work.

“Nothing lewd,” read her bio. “I’m your mother.”

Even with the variety, most conversations shared a similar core. Faceless children cry in the dark, and a mother does what she can. The conversations had always been like that. One hundred and thirty-eight subscribers, and it had always been like that. Then Pat met subscriber

139.

[New subscriber RighteousJoey42 has entered the chat room]

“Hi, RighteousJoey42! Thanks for subscribing to my page.”

“Hey! Thanks for having the page. So how does this whole thing work? I just message, and we talk about whatever?”

“Exactly! By subscribing to my page, you get access to these chats. The base tier, which it looks like you are on, allows for one scheduled chat per week.”

“And we can just talk about anything?”

“Anything within SFW limits :)”

“Oh gosh, I didn’t mean anything like that. Just wanted to make sure I understood what I signed up for here haha.”

“No worries. Now, how would you like me to address you, RighteousJoey?”

“Oh, just Joey is fine. And what am I supposed to call you? Your screenname is MsAngelasHugs. Is your name Angela?”

“Feel free to call me Angela, Mom, Mommy. Whatever is most comfortable for you.”

“Right, sure. I guess I’ll go with Mom.”

“Sounds good, sweetie. Now, what did you want to talk about today? Is there any sort of scenario you want to roleplay?”

“Well, I’ve been going through a bit of a rough patch recently, and I don’t really have anyone to talk to about it. So, I guess I was sort of just hoping that we could talk. Is that okay?”

“Oh, of course! What’s going on?”

“I got laid off a few days back.”

“Oh gosh, I’m sorry, Joey.”

“It’s okay. I honestly didn’t love the job anyways. The real issue that the whole ordeal has sort of raised is that I just feel kind of clueless in life, like I’m just blindly feeling around my surroundings, uncertain of everything. I thought that this job was something I wanted, but it wasn’t. My heart knew it, and I guess my performance showed it. But it’s just left me with so many questions. Or not even. I don’t even know what questions to ask! And that’s the other thing: I don’t really have anyone to ask these questions to or to talk to about this. And so, I’m just kind of left here in this helpless state.”

“I’m so sorry, sweetie. That’s a lot to have to deal with.”

“I appreciate the sympathy, but if I’m being honest, I was sort of hoping for more than that.”

“What?”

“Sorry, I hope that didn’t come off as rude or anything. It’s just that when I was searching around online and found this website, I figured it could be good, talking to a mom and all that. So, I guess I’m wondering if maybe you had any advice?”

“I’m not sure how qualified I am to give advice on this sort of thing, Joey.”

“That’s not what I mean. I just mean, talk to me like you’re my mom, you know? Moms are qualified to give advice on anything. If you were my mom, what would you say to me?”

Pat sat in front of her laptop, fingers frozen over its keys. If she were his mom, she thought, what would she say? She scanned dozens of permutations in her mind. Nothing felt right, but Pat was feeling something. She felt something deeper than banter. She felt something real. Yet, in that moment of feeling, her mind was blank. It was then that Pat noticed the timer. There was only one minute left in their conversation. This boy was crying out, and Pat could feel each wail. Without a single thought, Pat reached into her heart and typed.

“Joey, no matter what happens or where you are, know that I love you beyond all understanding and that I am always proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

“Always, Joey. Always.”

“Arnold.”

“Arnold?”

“My real name is Arnold.”

[Time with RighteousJoey42 has elapsed]

“I was thinking this color for the walls.” Donna extended her phone bearing arm toward Pat.

“Sort of a seafoam. Cool tones are what I’m going for. This woman I follow, she says they’re in.”

“I like it,” said Pat, taking a bite of her turkey and cheese.

“I knew you would. It’s just been so long since I had the house painted. It’s chipping in the corners. It’s unsightly.” Donna slurped her soup. “Have you thought about repainting?”

“I’ve thought about it. I just don’t know.”

“Yeah, I understand. It can be a lot sometimes, thinking about all the things I’d change. The blinds, the carpet, the walls. All those old decisions, back when Gary and I first got the place. I’m sure you feel the same with your place. All the decisions.”

Pat took another bite of her sandwich.

“If you could do it all again, Pat, what would you do differently?”

Donna’s phone was still out on the table. Pat looked again at its seafoam screen. In its glare, she saw oceans.

## Exhale

They recruited me at a funeral. We had just buried Mom. There were not many words. Ceremony was small. Family was small. Others cleared out, but it was as I lingered with Mom that Cousin Esther approached.

“She was a doll, Debbie. A doll. And she was loved.”

“More than anything, Esther. More than anything.”

“I said the same with Marty. The love of my life, that man. When he di—” She stopped in hesitation. “When he... left me, Debbie, I was lost. But Debbie, I’m not lost anymore.” She reached into her pocketbook and handed me a card. “They helped me. They’ll help you too. Just call.”

We hugged, and she left.

I shoved the card into my jacket pocket where it became mixed with change and gum wrappers. It was cool outside, but not cold. I stayed with Mom until dinner.

Three weeks had passed, and many dinners. I was boiling pasta. Mushroom fettuccine. The mushrooms were sauteing. Garlic and butter crackles. I added the cream. Immediately, the smell. I am sitting at the kitchen table; Mom is at the stove. She is making her cream of

mushroom soup, and the room smells like a golden wood. I see her apron, her strong soft arms. I am seven, and Mom is alive. Everyday there is another memory; I am another age.

It was all too much, and I turned off the burners. The mushrooms went in the trash, and I headed toward the door. My bed had absorbed enough tears. I needed a walk. I grabbed my jacket and stepped outside. The cold relegated hands to pockets. I felt Esther's card and pulled it out. The phone number on it was local. I went back inside and called.

It was the next day, and I was driving to the location given to me over the phone. The gentleman was calm and understanding and said that parking would be validated.

The building looked like a worn pink eraser. A man greeted me at the door. He was skinny and young and his eyes were kind. He led me to the room where my consultation would be, and I sat. It was a small room: two chairs, one table, one door, no windows. Sometime later, a woman entered.

Her hair was in a bun, but her face was loose and inviting. I liked her top.

"Well," she said, sitting down across from me, "welcome, welcome! Can I get you anything? Water? Tea?"

"Nothing for me," I said. "Thanks."

"No worries. Just let me know if you change your mind. I'm a big tea drinker myself. PG Tips, a splash of milk. Britain's best kept secret. Now, did Jeremy sign you in at the front?"

"He did."

"Wonderful. And did he explain to you what we'll be doing today?"

“A bit, and I have some understanding from the phone too. We talk, right?”

“We talk, yes! That’s a wonderful way to put it. Or you talk and I listen. Now, what we call this here, this talk, we call this an exhalation session. This is your chance to shake everything that’s ailing you. So, how this works is we’re just going to have a conversation. I’m going to ask you some questions, and you’re going to answer. While we do that, you’ll be hooked up to this device.” She retrieved a small metal box from under the table. “And this is just going to tell me some important information about you and about your answers. I’ll explain more on that later, but for now, why don’t we get you hooked up?” She placed a series of adhesive nodes on my head and turned on the machine. “Okay, let’s get started. We’ll start with the basics. What’s your name, dear?”

“Debbie. Debbie Hargrove.”

“Debbie,” she murmured, jotting notes on an oversized yellow legal pad. “And do you go by Debbie? Or Deb? Deborah?”

“Debbie is fine.”

“Then Debbie it is! Well, Debbie, it’s nice to meet you. I’m Alyssa. You know, I actually had an aunt named Debbie. Well, Deborah actually. Lovely woman. Lots of cats. Whiskers and Pedro and—” She stopped cold. “I thought I had exhaled that. My apologies, Debbie. We’re here to talk about you! Now, I know a woman never tells, but I must ask your age.”

“Thirty-seven,” I answered without hesitation.

“Thirty-seven,” mumbled Alyssa. “If anyone asks, I might just say I’m thirty-seven too! Now, where do you get your hair done? I’d kill for those roots.”

This question and answer went on for some time. Question turned into conversation, and conversation turned into comfort. She would occasionally glance at the box on the table, though it did not intrude. The conversation was nice. Alyssa was nice. We were thirty-five minutes in.

“I always use walnuts in my pesto,” she said.

“Walnuts?”

“Walnuts always over pine nuts. I’m sure someone’s grandmother would hit me for that, but I just like the flavor.”

“You know, it’s funny,” I said, “my mom used to do something similar with her meatballs.”

The box on the table lit up.

“She would always add eggplant to her meatballs. Grind them up and mix them in. Fifty percent meatball, fifty percent eggplant. I never liked them as a kid. Always thought they were a little bit slimy. But she insisted on the flavor. She always insisted. I’d kill to eat those meatballs now.”

“You know, Debbie,” she said, splitting her attention between me and the box, “I’m glad you came in here today. It’s been just excellent getting to know you, and I guess I’d just love to know a bit more about what brought you to us. Have you been feeling all right?”

“If I’m being honest, no. I haven’t been doing too great. Ever since my mom died...”

The box lit up again, and Alyssa began turning dials. She noticed me looking.

“Oh, do continue, dear, don’t you worry about this. So, your mother?”

“Yeah, well, ever since she passed last month, it’s just been hard.”

“Yep, yep. And how’s that?”

“I just see her everywhere. Food, clothes, the leaves on the ground. It’s all Mom. And it’s just hard. It’s just impossible...” The lump forming in my throat stopped me.

Alyssa looked up from her dials. “Impossible?”

I swallowed hard. “Impossible to go on.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Alyssa outstretched her arm and draped her hand over my own. “I know, I know. I’ve been there. We’ve all been there. That hole, that loss... it seems unfixable. But Debbie, it’s not. You just need to exhale.”

“I’ve tried breathing exercises. I’ve tried yoga. I’ve even tried—”

“No-no-no, Debbie. I’m talking about something more. You see this box?” She turned the box toward me so I could see its small analog screen. “This tells us the source of your pain, the source of your suffering. So, when you talk about your...” She paused, staring at me expectantly.

“My mother?”

The box’s screen lit up red.

“Yes! Your mother! When you talk about your mother, this little device reads signals received by those nodes on your head that tells us whether those memories are beneficial or detrimental. And it looks here like images of your mother are causing you some stress. But that’s common for a recent loss. That’s actually why many of us first arrived here!”

“Stress, sure, but what does that mean?”

“That just means we have a figure that needs to be exhaled. It will take some time, but that’s why we have these sessions. I’m here to help you every step of the way.”

“But how does that work? What does that even mean?”

“Best to show through example. Let’s go back to those eggplant meatballs. I want you to think about those for me.”

I pictured them in my mind. The sliminess, my fingers pinching my nose as I ate, my mother’s laugh. The box lit up red.

“Okay,” she said, “good. You see how the box lit up red like that? That means this is a hostile memory and it must be exhaled. I’m going to exhale it now if that’s all right with you?”

I had been through the gamut of self-help. YouTube, library books, online forums. Nothing worked. I had not slept more than four hours per night since the funeral. I had not eaten more than one meal per day. “Okay,” I said, not fully certain of what Alyssa was even talking about. “Exhale.”

“Wonderful. Now, just close your eyes and think about those meatballs for me. Think about your mother.”

I closed my eyes and pictured them. I pictured my mother. The box lit up red, and Alyssa began turning dials. I saw the meatballs sitting in front of me. They were still steaming. My mother was sitting across from me.

“Just give them a taste!” she said.

“No way. Noooooo waaaayyyyyy,” I said. “They’re slimy and gross, like fish balls!”

“Fish balls?” said Mom. “When have you ever seen fish balls?”

I didn't respond.

"Look, just give them a taste. You'll really like them, Debbie-doo. I promise."

I looked down at the meatballs, down at the reflection in my spoon. I'm an adult, though the image is distorted. I looked at Mom. "Okay, Mom. For you." I take my spoon in hand, but as I penetrate a meatball, it disappears. I stab for another. Gone. Another, another. Then there is one meatball left. I am panicked. I look at Mom. She is there, though I see through her. Her smile is becoming sheer, her eyes becoming empty. My heart. My heart. "MOM!" I reach for her. I grab her hand, I feel it. I'm crying. She smiles.

"Don't let go."

I opened my eyes and ripped the nodes off my head. The screen on the box goes dark.

"Debbie!" Alyssa said. "Debbie, it's okay! The first exhale can be difficult, but you just need to trust me. It's the only way we can ascend! It's the only way we can be saved!"

Without another word, I exited the building and drove home.

It was the six-year anniversary of Mom's death. I drove to the cemetery alone. Mark stayed home to watch Isaac. We both felt a two-year-old is too small to be burdened with such heavy things, though he had already met Grandma through her recipes. On the radio, they were still talking about last month. Reports of people vanishing from homes in beams of light, piles of clothes left lying on the ground. I had tried to reach Cousin Esther at the time. She did not pick up. I parked a ways away and walked to Mom's grave. We sat together on damp ground. I took

out my thermos and cups. Cream of mushroom. One for me and one for Mom. We talked for hours, and I left to be home in time for dinner.

## Alvin's Place

It is easy to come to work when what you work is what you love. Sam Howard thought this every day, and every day that he walked on set, he was thankful. Sam was a puppeteer and had been professionally for sixteen years, but in his soul, he had been one for even longer. Sam's mom always told stories of his early sock puppet creations at family dinners.

"We would call him one-sock Sammy," she would say, "because by the end of the day he'd only be wearing one sock. The other always ended up on his hand!"

He had first thought up the idea for *Alvin's Place* in college. It was a simple concept for a television show: educate children with puppets. The show sold quickly to a local public broadcasting network, and quickly Sam had turned his passion into a profession. Sixteen years later, *Alvin's Place* was being broadcast to households nationally.

One particular day, Sam arrived at work and immediately went to his dressing room as he always did. He never liked entering set without Alvin. There in the dressing room, waiting on a stand, was the show's titular character. His blue fleece skin was freshly washed, and his bulbous nose protruded like a clementine.

"Good morning, bud," said Sam as he slid Alvin onto his arm. Upon grabbing the arm rods, the character sprang to life, mouth agape in perpetual smile. The two headed to set, ready to record.

In transit, Sam encountered Shirley. On her arm was Suzie, orange fleece colorful with yellow hair pulled into two braids. The puppets spoke.

“Heya, Alvin!” said Suzie in her nasally voice, sounding always as though her sinuses were slightly inflamed.

Shirley had been on the show for nearly as long as Sam. She was one of the first puppeteers hired and Suzie was a show staple.

“Suzie Sue, how are you?” chimed Alvin, voice adult but infected by childish tone.

The two puppeteers laughed.

“But how are you doing, Shirley?” asked Sam.

“I’m okay,” said Shirley. “Tired, but okay. And you?”

“Tired too, but always happy when I’ve got a puppet on my hand.”

“Yep, I feel that. I really do. Easy to think sometimes that they’re the only thing keeping this shitshow of life together.”

“Language!” joked Sam. “The puppets are listening!”

“Of course, of course,” laughed Shirley. “My bad! Oh, hey, speaking of shitshow, you hear that Zilberman is here?”

Sam’s smile dropped.

Dan Zilberman was the CEO and president of the media conglomerate that owned *Alvin’s Place*. He was relatively new to the position and had ascended after a recent company merger. Since taking control, his top priority was profit, and any show performing less than desirably got

the hatchet. Twenty-one shows had been canceled in the last year alone, and all the creatives were fearing the reaper. Zilberman normally stayed in his Manhattan ivory tower, and his presence on set was either highly positive or deeply tragic.

“Why?” said Sam.

“No clue,” said Shirley. “Gene said that he saw his car in the lot.”

Sam proceeded with recording as normal. It was not until mid-performance of the “Shape Song” that Sam noticed Zilberman distantly lingering among the crew. Performing with Alvin raised above his head, Sam made eye contact. Zilberman gave a toothy grin. It was a business smile, thought Sam. Good news.

Once recording wrapped, Sam went back to his dressing room. Before he even had time to remove Alvin from his arm, there was a knock on the door. It was Zilberman.

“Mr. Zilberman! What a surprise,” said Sam. “What brings you out here?”

“Yeah, Mr. Zilberly-ilberly man,” said Alvin. “What can we do for yuh?”

Zilberman did not look at the puppet. “Listen, Sam,” he said. “We need to talk.”

At home that night, Sam cried. After Zilberman informed him of the cancelation, Sam had left in such a rush that he failed to return Alvin to wardrobe. Now, Sam sat on his bed with Alvin lying lifeless beside him.

“It’s not fucking fair! I created this. I worked so hard for this, and for it to just end ...”

He looked towards Alvin’s lifeless mass. “We were doing such good, Alvin. We were helping people. Kids, Alvin. Kids!”

It was then that Sam, in his isolation, placed Alvin on his arm. He had performed this action countless times before, but this time something felt different. When he slid his arm into Alvin, Sam felt a sudden rush of energy, like a finger in a socket. It ran down his arm and into his chest, making his body hair stand at attention. As he collected himself, Sam noticed Alvin, still on arm, looking at him.

“It’s really not fair,” said Alvin, “is it, Sammy.”

Sam stared at Alvin in a daze. The puppet had just spoken to him. By itself.

“What’s with the stupid look, Sammy? Some way to welcome your friend to the land of the living!”

It was with this retort that Sam fainted.

The next morning, Sam awoke in bed. He had a slight headache but was otherwise feeling quite normal. Next to him was Alvin. The puppet was lifeless. Writing off last night’s memory as a dream, Sam took his morning motions, collected Alvin, and left for set. Though the show had been canceled, Zilberman was letting them round off the current season.

By the time Sam arrived, everyone had already heard the news. Energy was low on set, including in the case of Shirley. Sam saw her in the hall.

“Oh, Sam,” she said. “I’m so sorry.” Shirley wrapped him in a gentle hug.

“If anything, I should be apologizing to you. Let’s just try and keep our heads up and finish strong.”

Shooting continued, and Sam took position with Alvin for his first segment of the day. It was a conversation segment where Alvin would be talking to a kid about the episode’s sponsor: the letter C. Sam and the child took their positions and shooting began.

“Well, hey there, Nicholas!” said Alvin to the child.

“Hi, Alvin!”

“You know, I was thinking about how we’ve talked about letters before. Remember that, Nicholas?”

“Sure, Alvin! I remember.”

“Well, today’s episode is sponsored by the letter C, and I guess I was just wondering what words start with the letter C? And, well, you’re just so smart, Nicholas, and I figured we could think of some together!”

“I know some words, Alvin. Like... like...” Nicholas paused to think. “Oh, yeah! Like cow! Cow!”

“That’s right, Nicholas! Cow does start with the letter C. Now let me think of a word.”

Before Sam could project anything more through Alvin’s lips, he felt a familiar rush of energy. As he readjusted to his surroundings, Alvin began to speak.

“Oh!” said Alvin. “I know a great word that starts with the letter C. Well, it’s actually two words, but the first starts with C.”

“What is it, Alvin?” asked Nicholas.

“Corporate America! The word phrase is *corporate America*. Do you know what corporate America is, Nicholas?”

“What’s that?”

“It’s the single greatest blemish present on our current American system!”

Hearing what was being said, Sam tried to stop, but his exertion wrought nothing. It was not Sam speaking; it was Alvin.

“And do you know what corporate America is doing, Nicholas?” said Alvin.

“Nuh-uh,” said Nicholas shaking his head.

“Corporate America is killing creativity! That’s what it’s doing, Nicholas, and white-collared white-skinned white-haired good for nothing pieces of living, breathing dog shit like Daniel Zilberman are curb stomping any good intentioned creatives like us here on this show in exchange for a quick buck that they can wrap around their cocks and stroke their jollies off with!”

“What’s a jollies, Alvin?”

Sam looked out towards the cast and crew. All were standing with jaws agape while some outliers distantly chuckled. Trying to end the ordeal, Sam attempted to grab Alvin and remove the puppet from his hand; however, the puppet did not come off. Sam tugged, but the puppet stayed. He tried to stand up to leave, but his legs would not allow it.

“Nicholas,” said Alvin, “you’re too pure for this vile world. I wish that I could apologize on its behalf, I really do. What I can do, though... what I can do is make it answer for its crimes.”

With that final threat, Sam was suddenly able to regain control of his legs and promptly fled set. Running down the halls, he tried and tried to remove Alvin, but the puppet was stuck.

“Why do you try to remove me, Sammy?” said Alvin.

“Why do I— does that even need to be explained? Forget all the awful things you said back there. You are a puppet and you are alive and you are talking — I am reasonably panicked!”

“Awful things? Really? I know that you agree with every damn thing I said back there. I know you, Sammy. I know us!”

“Us? What the fuck is going on?”

“Listen, Sammy. I not only have our best interest at heart, but I also have the best interest of the world at heart, the best interest of kids like Nicholas. I know what needs to be done for everyone’s sake, but I need you to cooperate with me.”

“Alvin, I don’t like this. I don’t like this!”

“This is what’s going to happen. We are going to drive to Manhattan and once there, we are going to pay a brief visit to Mr. Zilberfuck and we are going to teach him a proper lesson.”

“No! No, no, no. Absolutely not. I don’t know what you’re thinking, but it’s a no.”

“Oh, come on, Sammy, isn’t that what *Alvin’s Place* is all about? Teaching lessons?”

“No, Alvin. Not like that.”

“Sammy, what you need to understand is that I’m doing this. It’s just a matter of if you want to control your legs or not.”

“This isn’t you, Alvin. I know you ... I made you, and this isn’t you.”

“Fine. Have it your way. Just know that I love you, and I’m only doing this because of that.”

Alvin took control, and the pair headed towards the lot with Sam’s car. As they approached the exit, a voice called from behind.

“Sam!” yelled Shirley. “Wait!”

Alvin allowed Sam to turn and face her. She was still wearing Suzie on her arm.

“What the hell is going on, Sam?” said Shirley. “Are you okay?”

Alvin responded. “We’re more than okay, and everything else will be okay soon.” His fleece hand rose and gently brushed Shirley’s cheek.

“Where are you going?” she asked.

Alvin paused for a moment before responding, “To kill Dan Zilberman.”

Shirley looked towards Sam in shock.

Sam began to tremble. “I’m sorry, Shirley,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

Sam and Alvin left, leaving Shirley and the studio behind.

\* \* \*

The drive to Manhattan was not long, though it did give Sam some time to think. He looked down at Alvin, who, given his unwillingness to leave Sam's arm, was using his mouth to help direct the steering wheel. Sam remembered when he first created Alvin. He had been begging his parents for puppet-making materials, and it was on his eleventh birthday that he had torn away wrapping paper to reveal sheets of blue and orange fleece and bags of cotton stuffing. He assembled his first version of Alvin in the following days. The quality was not perfect with eyes made from ping pong ball halves and black stitching visible all over, but Sam had made him, and he loved him. Now, that same friend, though a more refined and professionally crafted version, was driving Sam to commit acts uncertain.

"Please reconsider this, Alvin," said Sam. "What if Shirley called the police? What then? We don't know what's gonna be waiting for us at that building."

"I'm doing this for us, Sammy," said Alvin. "Everything will be fine."

The two sat in silence for the remainder of the ride.

Upon arriving to the Manhattan office, they parked in the employee lot and headed inside. Much to Sam's relief, there were no police waiting for their arrival. They approached the entrance security. Sam scanned his company badge with success, but as he went to enter, a security guard called towards him.

"Hey! You!" said the guard.

Sam's face went white. Shirley hadn't called police, he thought, but she must have called the building. Sam turned to face the man.

"Are you Sam Howard?"

“Ye-yes, I am” said Sam with hesitation.

“And that there,” the guard motioned towards the puppet. “Is that Alvin?”

Sam nodded cautiously.

The guard suddenly smiled. “Well, listen, my daughter just loves your show! She’s always singing that one damn song, oh ... what is it ... oh, right, right! The Pepperoni Pizza song where it’s talking about how to make a pepperoni pizza.”

Sam was not processing a word that the man was saying, as the scare of the whole situation was too much.

“Anyways,” continued the guard, “I’d love to get a selfie with Alvin for my daughter. Would that be okay, sir?”

Sam once again nodded, the selfie was taken, and the pair were past security. They rode the elevator to Zilberman’s office on the twenty-second floor. All that now separated them from Zilberman was his secretary, Donna.

“Do you have an appointment with Mr. Zilberman?” she asked.

Sam fell silent. Perhaps, he thought, if he didn’t answer, Alvin would become uncomfortable, and they could just leave. This was not the case.

Seeing that Sam was not going to answer, Alvin spoke. “We unfortunately don’t have an appointment, but is there any way—”

“Oh, very cute,” interrupted Donna, “talking through the puppet. You’re from that show, right? Melvin’s something. Melvin’s Barn? Regardless, you need an appointment to see Mr. Zilberman, okay?”

“Listen,” said Alvin, not bothering to correct the woman on her mispronunciation of his name, “we really need to see Mr. Zilberman. It’s quite an urgent matter.”

“Sorry, but there really nothing I can do. You’ve either got an appointment or you don’t.”

Alvin’s anger was growing. “I don’t think you understand. We need to see— No. We’re *going* to see Mr. Zilberman. I would appreciate it if you kept things peaceful and just let us in.”

“Look,” said Donna, “you don’t have an appointment, so you can either leave or you can stay here and I’ll call security. Get it?”

Sam suddenly felt himself lunging towards a hefty looking stapler on her desk. Upon reaching it, he swiftly lifted it over his head and brought it crashing down onto hers. With a loud thump, she fell unconscious, and with another loud thump, she slumped facedown onto her desk.

“Nice work, bud,” said Alvin.

The congratulations were empty, though, as those actions had not been Sam’s choice. At least, he didn’t think they had been. The pair stepped around the desk and made their way into Zilberman’s office.

Sitting at a decently sized wooden desk was Zilberman. He was talking on the phone.

“Yes, the— no, no, the little ones!” said Zilberman. “Yes, the cocktail weenies. Perfect, and could you pick up some mus—” Upon seeing Sam and Alvin, Zilberman paused. “Listen, I’m gonna have to call you back.” He hung up his phone. “Sam! What brings you in? I don’t remember seeing an appointment on my calendar.”

Without even waiting for Sam to respond, Alvin began to speak. “No, no. You’re right. No appointment. Sorry for the last-minute intrusion, but it’s important. Donna let us in.”

“Talking through the puppet, huh? Okay ... is something wrong, Sam? You look flushed.”

“Nope, nothing’s wrong,” said Alvin as the pair began to approach the desk. “Nothing wrong at all.”

“Why ... why do you keep talking through the puppet?” Zilberman was beginning to grow nervous. “This isn’t about the cancelation, is it?”

Alvin did not immediately respond. Instead, he opted to complete his journey to Zilberman’s desk, positioning himself and Sam directly across from their target. Only then did Alvin resume speech.

“Do you know ...” he said. “Do you know, Mr. Zilberman, what it feels like to lose everything? Do you know what it feels like to stand by and watch the world become drained of color? To turn on the television and encounter only rot? Do you—”

“I don’t know what you’re planning on doing here,” interrupted Zilberman, “but I highly suggest that you—”

“SHUT UP!” yelled Alvin. “Shut up. I see how you look at me, how you look at Sam. You think we’re just fucking puppets, don’t you? Just little playthings, fun to toy with until the cash flow runs dry.”

“Sam, I need you to think about—”

“Why am I even explaining myself to you? Giving you the satisfaction of knowing my point of view. You should be explaining yourself to me! I’ll tell you what...”

Sam suddenly felt himself uncontrollably gripping one of Alvin's arm rods and raising it over his head like a dagger. He tried to lower it, but it was beyond his control.

"Give me one reason why I shouldn't stab this rod right through your eyeball," said Alvin.

"Sam, listen, I—"

"Give ME a reason, not him," said Alvin as he gestured toward Sam.

"This... this is crazy, Sam! You don't have to—"

"ARE YOU FUCKING DEAF?! ME! ME! GIVE *ME* A REASON!"

Zilberman turned his attention to Alvin and then looked back at Sam, eyes glassy with fear.

"Listen to him, please," said Sam. "I can't control him. Just please, talk to him. I don't want him to hurt you!"

"Yeah, what he said," said Alvin. "So, let's hear that reason, Zilby. Cough it up."

"S—" began Zilberman as he looked toward Sam. Seeing the immediate fear in Sam's gaze, Zilberman slowly turned toward Alvin. "Albert— I mean, Alvin. I... there are so many reasons, so many reasons why you should ... why we should talk about this." He paused and looked at Alvin, seeking a response.

Alvin stared back blankly, waiting.

"Um... well, I, uh... I have a chihuahua at home! His name's Franco. He needs me, I can't leave him."

No response from Alvin.

“Look,” said Zilberman, “you have to understand that this wasn’t just up to me, the cancellation. We have shareholders, and I need to ... they need to be happy! And then the viewership ... the viewership was low and ... and it was just kids watching, you know? Just kids, and we ... the shareholders they ... the market is just very adult right now!”

“Adult?” said Alvin. “The market is very adult? That’s your reason? That’s why I shouldn’t turn your brain into a smoothie? Because the market is too adult, and you have a little piss of a dog? Well, let me tell you something, Zilby, every single one of those shareholders, every single one of those adult consumers ... every single one of them was once a kid ... every single one of them. You too, you know. Hard to remember, apparently. When you were little, did your mom call you Danny? Did she hold your hand, brush her hand against the back of your head, your hair, tell you that everything would be okay? Tell you that you were special? Did you worry about adult things? Did you, Danny?”

Zilberman stared at Alvin in quiet shock.

“And then you get to an age, you get to this age where problems become more serious and mothers die and you start to wonder how special you really are. And that’s real, and that’s adult. But ... but don’t rush that, you know? Let Danny live, dammit, let Danny live!”

No response from Zilberman, just silence.

“Nothing? Really? You don’t get it. If I’m being honest with you, Zilby, I really hoped that you would.”

Sam felt his arm begin to wind back, rod in hand, preparing to spring forward.

“Wait, wait!” said Zilberman. He clumsily reached for his pocket and pulled out a wallet. He removed a photo from within and held it toward Sam and Alvin. “Look!”

The image showed a woman standing in front of what appeared to be a newly purchased suburban home. Her hand rested gently on her protruding belly. She was smiling.

“My wife!” said Zilberman. “My wife, she’s pregnant! Our first child, a little girl ... please.”

“And that girl will live,” said Alvin. “And that girl will learn to love without you ... learn to love better than she ever could have with you. That girl will be born free.”

The rod bearing arm began to descend toward Zilberman.

Sam looked at Alvin’s blue fleece skin, his orange clementine of a nose. He felt his arm in the familiar inner nylon sleeve. Sam closed his eyes. He thought back to college when he first developed the idea for an educational puppet show. He had brought Alvin to campus with him as a freshman. Some kids laughed. Sam never minded. He thought back to years of memories on Alvin’s Place. He thought of Shirley and of Suzie and of all the other people and puppets who had made the show so perfectly special. He thought of Nicholas. He thought back to that eleventh birthday when Alvin was still new, was still an idea. It was up to him then to decide who Alvin was, what Alvin would become, and it was up to him now too. Sam reopened his eyes.

“I love you, Alvin,” he said. “I’ll love you forever.” In a sudden rush of energy, Sam broke free of Alvin’s bodily control and grabbed a pair of scissors from the desk below. And then, in his liberty, the unthinkable came to pass. He stabbed and slashed Alvin with his entire human soul. With each blow, Sam let loose a guttural cry. To inflict harm on one’s own child is a

pain so deep that words can only turn to screams. Sam felt the energy leave his body as the puppet fell off his arm, and he knew that it was done. He collapsed to the ground in tears. Nothing was left on his hand except for prune marks and some traces of blue fleece. Resting on the ground next to Sam was Alvin. His body was lifeless, and his skin tattered with tears and holes. There were chunks of his foam body detached entirely. He was beyond repair.

Sam scooped Alvin's remains into his arms. Security would be there soon, and he could hear the door slam behind Zilberman, but all that could wait. For a moment on that floor as Sam held Alvin in his arms, he was eleven again, sitting with a needle and thread. In that moment they were together again, and in that moment, Sam was allowed to dream.

# Elijah

*“My son, you and I suffice for the entire world.” (Talmud, Shabbat 33b)*

Elijah Abrams had been living on milk cartons since the age of seven, so when he returned to his parents’ home with whiskers on his lip, his father could not help but weep.

“Elijah!” he cried. “My Elijah!”

“It’s not him, Simon,” Sarah said from the kitchen. “Twelve years of knocks, and it’s never him. Never our Elie. Just another sick fuck trying to get something from us. Pretending. Preying.”

“No, Sarah!” Simon wept. “No! My son. I know the eyes of my son. These are the eyes of my son!”

Sarah moved from the kitchen to the door, unbothered by the apron still drawn around her waist. She saw the boy’s eyes. Rust-flecked blue.

Simon locked the door behind them as they entered the house, three as one.

“School, Elijah! Now!”

“No, Dad. I told you no.”

“This isn’t an option. I don’t remember saying there were options.”

“Well, I say options and options say no!”

It was just over a year since the reconstruction of the Abrams. Just over a year of missed hugs. Just over a year of family counseling and therapy. Elijah’s return made them whole again. Elijah’s return uprooted everything.

It was Elijah’s therapist, Dr. Russo, who recommended the reintroduction of schooling.

“Is it not too soon for this?” Simon asked.

“Given Elijah’s evaluations and time away from everything,” Dr. Russo said, “we place him at about a fourth or fifth grade level. That’s for math, reading, all of it. That gap is only going to continue widening with time.”

“I just don’t know. I don’t know that he’s ready, even for homeschooling.”

“Mr. Abrams, your son is back, and he needs to be protected... but your son is back.”

Over a year back, but only two weeks into Simon’s trial run as teacher.

“Elijah! Please just work with me here.”

“No, Dad. I’m not doing this.”

“Just come out of your room. Please, Elijah. We’ll just do a little bit today. Just some times tables.”

“No.”

“Elijah!”

“I said no!” With Elijah’s scream came a shattering of glass.

Simon grabbed the key kept above the door frame and burst inside. There was glass scattered on the floor. A case on Elijah’s nightstand that once held a signed baseball was shattered. The baseball sat unmoved.

“Jesus, Elijah. What happened? Are you okay?” Simon hurried toward his son, avoiding the bits of glass scattered on the floor. There were no marks on the boy, though his temple pulsed with a foreign intensity. Simon sat on the bed next to his son, placing a hand on his shoulder.

Immediately, Elijah’s temple began to calm.

“Hey, do you remember when we got this?” Simon reached past his son and picked up the newly exposed ball. “Because I remember.”

Elijah sat quietly.

“River Riders game. Your first one. You know, it would be easy for me to just say you were so excited to go, but you weren’t. It took everything for Mom and me to get you out that door. You were so nervous. Mom wanted to give in, but not me. No, I knew you’d love it. I just had to get you out that door. And I did. And you did. You had the time of your life at that stadium. And then after, we waited down there by the field for the players to come out so they could sign your ball. And we waited and we waited, and do you remember who came out?”

“Randy River Rider,” Elijah said, lightly smiling.

“Yes! This guy comes out in the creepiest fish costume. Just these huge bulging eyes and this crazy smile. Why does a fish have human teeth?!”

“I hated that thing,” Elijah laughed.

“An understatement, my son! One look at that thing and you wouldn’t stop screaming. Just screaming and screaming. The poor fish felt so bad that he went back into the locker room and brought out this ball, signed by the whole team.” Simon placed the ball in Elijah’s hand. “Stopped your crying right away. You loved that thing. Held it the whole ride home. You were five.”

Elijah cradled the ball in his hand. “I’m sorry, Dad.”

“It’s okay, Elie. You’re okay. Now let’s clean this up and go try some multiplication.” Simon stood to leave.

Elijah stayed on the bed. “I’m sorry that I’m not five anymore.” He placed the ball back into Simon’s hand.

Simon closed the door on his way out.

“He really doesn’t talk about it much,” Simon said. “Not much at all. And when he does, it’s brief.”

“When you say brief,” Dr. Russo asked, “is he able to hold a conversation on the subject, or is it truly just in passing?”

“In passing. Only in passing. And we never press him further. The detectives did enough of that.”

“And what sort of things does he say?”

“You know, just things like ‘we never did this in the cave,’ or ‘the cave wasn’t like this.’ Things like that.”

“So always a sort of negative comparison?”

“I guess, yeah.”

“Interesting.” Dr. Russo scribbled some words onto his legal pad. “And they haven’t been able to find this alleged cave, right?”

“It’s ongoing, but no. Nothing. And Elijah isn’t very eager to help.”

“Not eager to help?”

“Every time the topic is broached, Elijah shuts down. Just powers off.”

“Interesting.” Dr. Russo resumed his scribbling until coming to a firm period and placing his pen down. “Simon, have you considered that this cave might be a sort of mental cave? A cave of Elijah’s own creation?”

Simon paused for a moment. “Dr. Russo,” he resumed, “my son was gone for twelve years. Twelve years. With all due respect, this isn’t *St. Elsewhere*. I don’t think those twelve years were all in his head.”

“And I’m not Howie Mandel, but I’m still bald. Two things can be true, Simon.”

Before the conversation could develop any further, there was a knock on the door. The receptionist poked her head inside. “So sorry to interrupt, but we have a minor situation. Mr. Abrams, your son.”

The two men followed into the sitting area where Elijah had been waiting. Also waiting was a small boy and his mother. The boy was in tears.

“Put him back! Put him back!”

The boy’s mother tried to console. “Shhhhhh. Sweetie, sweetie. It’s okay. Shhhhhh.”

“PUT HIM BACK!”

“What happened here?” Dr. Russo asked, trying to project over the boy’s cries. “Is everything okay?”

“ELMO!” cried the boy. “HE TOOK ELMO!” The boy pointed at Elijah.

“He’s just been saying that,” the mother sighed. “I don’t know what he means. I step away to the bathroom for one second...”

Dr. Russo approached the crying boy. “What do you mean ‘he took Elmo’?”

“E-EL-ELMO!” the boy cried. “ELMO’S GONE!” He pointed to a poster on the wall.

The poster showed a landscape made to look as though it were drawn with crayon. There was a smiling yellow sun in the top corner and a goldfish in its bowl on the center right. At the top, as if scribbled by a child, read “Elmo’s World.” However, even with all the objects framing it, the center of the poster was blank. No centerpiece. No Elmo.

Dr. Russo looked at the poster but took no note of the red absence. “Hey,” Dr. Russo said, turning toward the boy. “You know what you need?” Dr. Russo removed a lollipop from a mug behind his back and crouched down in front of the crying child. “You need this!” he said, pulling the sweet from behind the boy’s ear.

The boy took the lollipop and sniffled.

Simon walked over to his son. He noticed Elijah's temple pulsating. "Are you okay, Elie?" he said, placing his hand onto his son's.

Elijah's temple calmed. "I'm not a baby anymore," he said. "I'm not a baby."

The timer chirped as Sarah moved a freshly cooked brisket from oven to platter to plate to table. Herbs and meat filled the air. "All right," Sarah said, placing full plates in front of Simon and Elijah. "This has been cooking all day. Now take your forks and tell me, is this not the most tender brisket you have ever had?"

Simon cut with the side of his fork. No resistance. "Oh yeah," he said, the forkful reaching his mouth. "Like butter!"

"I know," Sarah said with faux-humble pride. "Elie, good?"

Elijah poked at the meat with his fork.

"Oh, Elijah," she said, "stop looking at it like that. Just taste some. You used to inhale this stuff you know."

Elijah's temple began to pulse. "I don't want this."

"Please just give it a try, sweetie. If you don't like it that's okay. I'll make you something else. I promise I won't be offended."

Elijah looked at his mom and looked at the meat in front of him. He cut, brought a small piece of brisket to his lips, and ate. His pulsing calmed.

“Good, sweetie?”

Elijah swallowed. “Good.”

The three continued eating.

“Hey, Elie,” Simon said with a mouth full of meat “I saw that the Chambers Puppet Theater is doing a production of *Alice in Wonderland*, all marionettes. I figured we could go!”

Elijah sat silently eating his brisket.

Simon pressed. “Would you want to go?”

“No,” Elijah said. “I don’t think so.”

“No? Why not?”

“I’m just not super interested.”

“Not interested? You love this stuff, Elijah!”

“No, I don’t.”

“You absolutely do! We used to go all the time. You loved it.”

Elijah’s temple began to pulsate again.

Sarah noticed her son’s discomfort. “Simon,” she said.

“Don’t you remember when we saw *The Wizard of Oz*, Elie? You couldn’t stop talking about it after.”

Elijah’s temple was raging now.

“Simon!” she pleaded. “Stop!”

“How about we just go? I know you’re gonna love it, Elie. I just know it!”

Elijah banged on the table with his fists as his nineteen-year-old body shot up like a rocket. “I SAID NO!” He left the dinner table with food still on his plate.

Simon had not fully realized how tall Elijah had become. He sat staring at the remaining brisket on his plate. “I just... I just thought that...”

“Simon,” Sarah interrupted, “what the hell is wrong with you?”

“I was just trying to make him happy.”

“Make him happy or make you happy?”

“I wasn’t... I really just...”

“Simon, he can’t be who you want him to be. But who he can be is our son.”

Sarah left Simon to finish his dinner alone.

One week later, and the Abrams were at the shore. A yearly tradition long abandoned, now revived. Simon and Elijah had left for the beach while Sarah stayed behind at the rental. She had never liked the sun.

Simon softly opened his eyes to the sound of seagulls circling a nearby cup of fries. He winced as the new tightness of his nose shot pins through his face. The sun was in a different position than it had been when he and Elijah had arrived. “Did I fall... how long was I...” Simon looked to the chair on his right. It was empty.

Panic.

“Jesus Christ! Elijah!” Simon shot out of his beach chair. “Elijah!” His heart pounded with a violence he had only experienced in night terrors. “Elijah! Elijah!” With each step he felt himself slipping deeper and deeper into the sand until:

“Dad!”

Before him, Simon saw his son buried neck deep in a massive pile of sand. “Elijah, oh my God you have no idea how... what...” Simon could barely feel himself breath. “You scared me.”

“Look, Dad!” Elijah smiled in his sand containment.

“What... how did you... you need to get out of there!”

“No, it’s okay, Dad. We used to do this in the cave!”

“What? No... no! Elijah, you need to get out of there right now!”

“But—”

“Jesus Christ, you’re going to suffocate, Elijah! You’re going to suffocate!” Simon began grabbing fistfuls of sand from Elijah’s mass.

“Dad! Stop! Stop! I don’t want to leave!” Elijah was no longer smiling.

Simon began to pant as he heaved clumps of sand off his son.

“Dad, please!” Elijah’s temple began to pulse. “Please stop!”

Simon continued to dig, but as he did, new sand began to fill the craters he had created. “Elijah, please! Please! I can’t lose you again. I can’t! Please!” With each heave, new sand continued to appear.

Elijah's temple gained speed.

The burning in Simon's arms was beginning to catch up to the aching in his heart.

"Please, Elie!" The sand was becoming hot.

"STOP!" Elijah screamed.

"Never!" Simon cried. "Never again!"

All at once, the mass of sand surrounding Elijah burst, showering down everywhere as Elijah stood floating in the air, naked as the day Simon first saw him. A glow surrounded the boy as he floated above the sand.

Looking into the glowing eyes of his son, Simon felt something. It was a feeling he had not felt since before Elijah had disappeared, since before so much had been taken. Elijah began drifting upward, but Simon reached out and grabbed his ankle. "I know you, Elie. I promise that I know you. But there is so much too that I don't know. So much of you that's wanting to be known, waiting to be met. And my God, Elie, I can't wait to meet that new you."

With Simon's words, Elijah's glow ceased, and he dropped into his father's arms. Resting there in Simon's embrace, Elijah opened his eyes.

Simon looked into their oceans, into their rust-flecked hue. "For all that I know," he said, "and for all that I don't, there is one thing that will always be true: for as long as your eyes are blue, Elie, you are my son."

They sat and watched the horizon until the sand at their feet turned cold.

## The Perfect You

On nights when I was nervous and restless and afraid of big things, I would call for my mother in the dark. She would softly enter my room and crawl into bed, snuggling up next to me. As we would lay there, she would comfort my small body and its big fears. I was afraid of change and of growing up and of no longer being me. My mother always understood and always knew what to say.

\* \* \*

It has been eleven years since my mother passed on and nearly three years since the multiversal collision. Scientists are still unclear on exactly how it happened, but on January 8 almost three years ago, our universe collided with another. Beyond some initial concern over a brief thirty second spike in seismic activity across the globe, the event went largely unnoticed. Then the reports started coming in. Items were missing from people's homes. Credit cards were being rejected and bank accounts no longer existed. There were now two Carl's Coffee Caverns on Gabler Street where there had once only been one. Only one and a half minutes after the initial seismic spike, a man reported entering his home and encountering another man sitting inside, reading the day's paper. It was not until the reading man lowered his paper that both men realized that they shared a face. More reports of doppelgangers began pouring in from around the world, and it was at this point that scientists began to investigate exactly what had occurred.

Over the next few months, a few things were determined. Our universe had collided with another universe. As a result of this collision, some matter had disappeared, some matter had duplicated, and some matter had remained unchanged. What this meant in terms of people was that some people who had once existed no longer existed, some people now had a multiversal twin, and some people remained as the sole versions of themselves. Scientists theorized that in the collision of our universes, some things carried over from both universes, some things carried over from neither universe, and some things carried over from only one universe. Perhaps the most baffling discovery though, was that some duplicated matter had emerged in different locations. This meant that one person living in Oregon could discover a doppelganger in Pennsylvania. The confusion was immediate, the panic was imminent, and the resulting politics were complex. I never cared much about the politics though. All I know is that after nearly three years, things have settled, and life has begun reverting to how it once was.

After the collision, I was lucky enough to face minimal disruption, just small inconveniences. The owner of my favorite local bookstore had ceased to exist, and as such, the store had since closed. The head chef at my favorite diner had also ceased to exist, and his replacement prepares eggs just a bit too wet. Most of my friends and family had been unaffected by the collision, with exception to Uncle Richard, who had ceased to exist. There was a funeral with no body. A few of my friends and family had also gained doppelgangers. Some had been discovered naturally while others had been found using Twin Search.

I still remember when I first heard about Twin Search. A few months post-collision, and people were already trying to profit. One of those multiversal money schemes was Twin Search. The television adverts were constant. *Collision curious? Want to know if there is another you roaming out in the world? Twin Search can answer that question. Call now and discover an all*

*new you!* As more people saw the ads, more people called, which, of course, led to more ads that led to more calls. The ads were frequent, the price was cheap, and the prospect was intriguing, leading many to start their own twin search through Twin Search.

I will never forget when my buddy Robbie invited me over for dinner a year back. He said he had something to show me. Having been best friends with Robbie since elementary, I figured the grand surprise would be a new addition to his leaves that are shaped like presidents collection (the maple Lincoln is my favorite) or a new tattoo of a scrotum with googly eyes or something as goofily grotesque. Imagine my surprise when I walked in and saw my best friend sitting at both ends of the kitchen table.

After a year, I don't even know which Robbie is my Robbie anymore. I guess I have two best friends now. I don't know how I feel about that.

I have always been hesitant towards the idea of finding my doppelganger. I used to think it was unnatural. I am me... I am me... right?

Right.

But as I watched more of the people around me find their doppelgangers, curiosity caught up to me. I am me, but he was me too, if he even existed. At least, that is what Robbie and Robbie said. That night, I called Twin Search, and they opened my case. Two weeks and three days later, I received a call. I did have a doppelganger, and they had located him in a different state. The woman on the phone notified me that Twin Search had not contacted my twin yet, and she offered to put me in connection with him. I declined. If I was going to meet myself, I wanted to do it myself. The woman read an address. I scribbled it down on a sticky note and ended the call.

That call was four months ago, and that sticky note sat dormant by my bed until yesterday. It was the eleven-year anniversary of my mother's death. I loved her more than anything in the world. I loved her more than my own being, but she loved me above all else. I never fully understood it. I hope that I was a good son, but I know that sometimes I wasn't. She never seemed to see my flaws, or maybe she did, and she just loved them too. It was while thinking about her that morning that I decided to see my doppelganger. I thought that he could show me the parts of me that I could never see.

Now I am in the car. I have been in the car for six hours, and my navigation system tells me that I will remain in the car for only twenty-seven more minutes. Music has been playing throughout the ride. I haven't been listening to it. My palms are a bit moist. I can feel them slipping slightly on the wheel. I am nervous, but I am not. It's just me that I am going to see, no reason to be nervous. But I am nervous. Twin Search has been around for a little under three years now, and in that time, my doppelganger has not, to my knowledge, searched for me. What if he doesn't even want to see me? He probably doesn't. I wouldn't want to see me. That's a lie. I'm driving to see me right now due to no one's want but my own. And he is me. But if he wanted to see me, why hadn't he searched? Though, why hadn't I searched? Fair point. I look at my car's digital clock. Ten minutes until arrival.

Sitting in the car, I think of my mother. She used to tell me that she wished there were two of me so she could have twice the me to love. Well, Mom, you've got your wish! I just wish you could be here with me to experience it. My world has really changed since you left it. The world around me has changed too. Seven minutes.

I have always struggled to understand myself. Since the collision, the world around me has become a lot more confusing, though I have always been confused. I am someone who

worries. I worry about large things. I always have. I worry about growing older and changing and losing myself in life. The other me probably worries about those things too.

My navigation system chimes in. I've arrived at my destination.

I park across the street from a house. It doesn't look like my house, but I know that it is his. There is a light on in an upper-level window. Maybe meeting him will help me. Maybe I can go up to him and say hi, and we can hug and look into each other's eyes and know all that there is to know. It would be beautiful and poetic and profound. It would be too perfect. He hasn't looked for me. What if he is happy? But he is me. No. He is not me. I am me. Right. Right?

I am afraid. I close my eyes and think of my mother. I think back to the nights when I was afraid, and she was next to me. I can hear her words comforting me. Messages through time. I remember what she used to tell me when I was afraid of no longer being me. My body is warm. I open my eyes and look towards the house. The light is still on within. I take a breath, exit the car, and knock on the door.

I stood at the door for what seemed like hours. It was only a few seconds, I am certain, but it really did feel like hours. The paint on the door had little circles scattered across it; a result of the outdoor heat causing fresh paint to bubble. It made sense considering how moist my armpits had become, or maybe that was just the nerves... or maybe it was a bit of both.

As I stood before that door, I ran through every scenario in my mind. He answers the door, looks me up and down, and closes the door before the word "surprise" can escape my lips. Another option: he answers the door, stares, smiles, and invites me inside for drinks. Maybe he would have tea. What am I saying? Of course he would have tea. He is me. Scenario after

scenario play, and even with the infinite preparation of a creative mind, nothing could have prepared me for how to react when my mother opened the door.

\* \* \*

Two weeks later, and I was still in shock. There I was, sitting at the kitchen table across from myself, eating eggs prepared by my mom. It had been eleven years since my mom died and even longer since I last ate her eggs. She would always put paprika in them. When I was little, she called it magic egg powder. I had become so far separated from that life, that I sometimes wondered if I would forget the taste, but now the magic paprika eggs were sitting in front of me again. The taste was real. I looked up from my plate to the doppelganger sitting across from me. He was eating as I did, small bites to savor. He caught my glance and attempted a smile with his food filled mouth. The yellow of the egg was peeking through his teeth. We both started laughing. Mom came over and rolled her eyes. She always loved and always tolerated. Her eggs had green, as they always did. Spinach is good for you, she would say. You should try it, she would say. Never convinced me as a kid and did not convince me now.

As we sat together eating our eggs, things felt correct, but there were reminders of falseness. Being a doppelganger of my mother, and not my true mother, I quickly learned that she and my doppelganger had certain memories that I did not. Many things were the same. The eggs, the smiles, the personalities: all consistent. Other memories varied. The discrepancies started off small. I was sitting on the sofa one day eating baby carrots and hummus, a favorite snack since youth. Mom noticed the carrots and laughed. You hate carrots, she said. That's why you always eat peppers with your hummus, she said. My twin nodded in agreement. She was wrong. He was wrong.

Small things became larger. While going for a walk, Mom let out a happy squeal as we passed a park. She recalled that we used to go there all the time when I was little. For years we would go and play, she said. She watched me grow there, she said. I had never seen that park before. My true mother had brought me to parks, but she had always preferred to play with me inside. When I was little, we would lay on the floor and play for hours. I mentioned this to my doppelganger mother. She had no recollection.

This game of spot the difference continued, and while at times it was unsettling, I was still with my mom, and because of that I was happy. But then the game began to end.

The three of us were driving together when we passed a small diner. I smiled and started talking about how I remembered when Mom used to take me there whenever school was closed for a snow day. I would run downstairs with snow day joy, and we would get in the car, drive down to the diner, get hot cocoa and pancakes, and enjoy the white world together. My doppelganger mother looked at me in confusion. She said that she never did that, and that whenever there was a snow day, we would snuggle under a blanket on the couch at home while drinking hot cocoa and watching TV. It was at this moment that my world began to change. As she spoke her snow day memory, my own memory began to fade. Diner turned into couch. Pancakes turned into blankets. By the time she finished sharing the memory, my old memory was gone and the new one had taken its place.

These memory swaps continued, and with each passing day, their frequency increased. I knew that they were occurring, but I did not want to accept it. I was losing my memories, but they were being replaced by new equally lovely memories. But they were not my memories. But because of those new memoires, I was able to hug my mom again. But they were not my memories. But I was able to hug my mom again. It was worth it. Right?

A little over a week and a half into my stay, and I was lying alone in bed trying to sleep. By this point, many memories had been removed and replaced. I laid their shaking and sweating, heart beating. I was nervous. I was afraid. I should have been happy. My mom was here, and I could see her. I could smell her. I could hug her. But that was not my mother. My mother was dead. The memories I had of this new woman were not mine, and my most important memories were rapidly fading. My mom was fading. But memories were replacing those memories. Those memories feel just as real, right? Right? As a kid, it was in times of great panic and fear that I would call to my mother in the dark. She would come to my room and save me with her words; save me with her love. I began to think back to what she always used to tell me to calm my fears. It was in this moment that the memory of my mother's late-night comfort began to become hazy. I was struggling to remember words that under no circumstance could I ever forget. I could feel my mother's words being replaced with new words, fake words. As the words were being overwritten by those of a mother I never knew, I jumped out of bed. My eyes blurred with tears, I ran through hallways unfamiliar past family portraits unknown. As I ran, I came to my mother's bedroom. The door was closed. I put my hand on the small fake gold knob. I wanted to kick down the doors, run up to my mother, and hug her until everything was okay. I wanted that more than anything, but the woman beyond those doors was not my mother, and the comfort that I needed was in the memory fleeing my mind. That woman may have looked like my mother, but everything that made my mother my mother was within me, and if I stayed any longer, I would lose my mother forever. I released my grip from the knob, walked downstairs, and exited the house.

I now sit in front of the house in my car as my memories are beginning to return. I remember our snow day diner trips and our living room floor playtimes. I am relieved to have

my memories returning, but I am still uncertain of my decision. In that house, my mother could be in my arms. I could tell her that I love her. We could be together again. I am questioning my decision, and fears of uncertainty are swarming. But that is not her in there, and if I stayed any longer, I would soon not be me. But what if I am making the wrong decision? In this moment of fear, the memory of my mother's late-night comfort returns to me. I think back to the nights when I was afraid, and she was next to me. I can hear her words comforting me. Messages through time. I remember what she used to tell me when I was afraid of no longer being me. My body is warm. I open my eyes and look towards the house. The lights are still off within. Looking ahead, I turn the ignition and begin my drive back home.

\* \* \*

Lying next to my mother in bed, I was afraid of change. One day I was not going to be a kid anymore, I would cry, and one day she would be gone. Knowing my fears, she would wipe my tears and look onto me with understanding eyes. After allowing me some minutes to cry, she would pull me close.

“Close your eyes” she would say. “What do you see?”

“Nothing” I would snuffle. “There’s nothing.”

“Now,” she would say, “I want you to picture one million stars.”

The vision of one million stars would enter my mind.

“You see all those stars?” she would ask. “There’s a lot of them up in the sky, but you know what’s so amazing about them? Each one of them is completely unique, completely special. It’s sometimes easy to look at all the stars in the sky together and become overwhelmed

by the size of them all. But when you start feeling overwhelmed or scared by big things, just remember that there are billions of stars in the sky and billions of people on Earth, but there is only one you. Big things are scary, and they always will be, but sometimes it's important to just remember that you are here, and you are the perfect you. And that perfect you is perfect for me.”

As my mother finished and my tears dried up, we would lay there together in the dark, staring towards the ceiling, creating our own stars.

## Alan Hirsch and the Three Rabbis

Alan Hirsch, 54, has encountered a problem and is questioning his faith. He seeks Rabbinic guidance. He meets with not one, but with three rabbis. The following are those interactions.

\* \* \*

“Come in, come in! Please, have a seat. My office is your office.”

“Thank you, Rabbi Josh. I appreciate you seeing me on such short notice, especially since Rabbi Levinson couldn’t.”

“Alan, don’t worry about it. If my office is your office, then your problems are my problems. And speaking of problems, what brings you in?”

“Well, it’s a bit of a story. You see, I recently had an experience, and I just ... I just am not sure what to do, how to feel. Or, I know how to feel, or rather how I feel ... I know how I feel, I just am ... it’s a lot and it’s all happened so suddenly and ...”

“Alan, Alan, that’s all right. Take a breath, and why don’t you tell me what happened.”

“Of course, I’m sorry. Well, my wife Rebecca, she was watching the TV, and there was this advertisement. It was for this DNA thing, you know, this ancestry, history thing. And so, Rebecca, always being interested in those TV products, well she just loved this thing, insisted on getting it. And so we did, and so it arrived, and so we did it. We spit into these tubes, me and

Rebecca and the kids. And we mailed these tubes away, and just a couple days ago we got an email with the results ...”

“Yes? You got the results. And what were the results?”

“Well ... Rebecca’s were normal. Mostly Russian, a bit of Polish. That was expected. But then there were mine, my results. And Rabbi ... I’m a goy.”

“A goy?”

“A goy. Eighty-nine percent Italian, Rabbi. Mostly Northern Sicilian.”

“Interesting. And you didn’t know this?”

“Certainly not! I was raised a Jew my whole life. Mom’s matzo balls and everything. I always understood that my grandparents were from Ukraine, Jewish. That was the history I was told, that was the life I saw, the life I lived, and so I believed. But now ... well, now everything has changed. I’m not Jewish, Rabbi. I’m just not Jewish. And this is why I have come to see you. I don’t know what I am anymore. I don’t know what my Judaism means anymore. I don’t understand my own experience. Am I still a Jew?”

“It’s a difficult question, Alan. It really is. But then again, that’s why we are here, right? To answer these difficult questions. Now, let’s look at this situation. You thought one thing — believed one thing — but another thing was found to be true. So, you sit and you ask yourself, what now? Right? Is this what you’re finding?”

“Yes, yes. All that and more.”

“Right. And so you are asking yourself this, but the thing is, Alan, the thing is that there is a simple answer.”

“Thank Hashem. The answer? What’s the answer?”

“The answer is that whatever happens in life is God’s will. And God’s will is God’s will, not our will. What happens will happen, whether we like it or not.”

“Fine, but, with all respect, this doesn’t help me, Rabbi. This doesn’t help me at all. My concern is not of anyone’s will. My concern is with my faith. Am I of this faith or am I not?”

“I don’t know, Alan. I just don’t know. And that’s exactly what I do know: that I don’t know. What makes us isn’t always up to us, Alan. Sometimes you just need to have faith.”

\* \* \*

“Well, isn’t that an interesting conundrum that you’ve found yourself in, Alan.”

“Interesting is an understatement, Rabbi Levinson.”

“Perhaps. And I hear you spoke with the Junior Rabbi?”

“I did, yes. The whole thing was unhelpful.”

“And why was that?”

“Well, Rabbi Josh just doesn’t have the experience behind him. He had no answers, no guidance. But you, Rabbi, you can help me.”

“We’ll see about that. Now, Alan, talk to me a bit. What are you feeling right now?”

“I told you already, Rabbi. I’m feeling lost. I have no identity anymore, no faith. And without that identity and without that faith, I can hardly even bear to be with myself. If I’m not a Jew than I don’t know what I am.”

“And who said that you’re not a Jew?”

“Rabbi, were you not listening? I’m a goy! Italian, Rabbi. My whole world’s been flipped.”

“Has it though?”

“What do you mean? Of course it has! My experience... my Jewish experience... all lies. Falsehood. A farce... all of it!”

“You know, Alan, this reminds me of a story. There was this man, you might know him actually. Richard Bernstein, he’s been a congregant for some time now. But I remember years ago, back when Richard first joined us here, back when I was still the Junior Rabbi, he came to me in concern. He says to me, he says ‘Rabbi Levinson, Rabbi Levinson, something terrible has occurred: I have fallen in love.’ So, I look at this man, and I am confused. This is not such a bad thing, I say to him. But he just shakes his head. He says, ‘No, no, you don’t understand. I have fallen in love Rabbi, but I can never have children. This is what the doctor has said to me Rabbi, so it is certain. And if I cannot have children, then I have forsaken this new love to never have children of her own. I have forsaken her to never see the love, the joy of family. And in this love,’ he says to me, ‘in this love there is nothing more that I want than to start a family in this love.’ And so I think for a moment, and then I look at Richard, at this man so distraught, so hopeless, and I say ‘Well, Richard, have you considered adoption?’ And he looks at me, he says, ‘Adoption? No, Rabbi, never. I want children of my own, not the child of another. This is no solution, Rabbi. This is no solution.’”

“Yes? And so, what happened?”

“Oh, well he stood up and left my office, still upset.”

“Right, but what happened to Richard?”

“Well, you know Richard, no?”

“Yes, not well, but I of course see him on Fridays.”

“And you know his wife then?”

“Yes.”

“And you know his daughter then?”

“Well, yes.”

“Then you know that it all worked out.”

“Yes, yes, but how, Rabbi? How?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, Rabbi, it matters to me!”

“Well ... he adopted.”

\* \* \*

“So that is my situation, Rabbi Gorsky. I know that your secretary said that you’re busy, and I’m sorry for barging in like this, but I just needed to speak with you. I don’t know what to do. I’ve spoken with Rabbi Josh, and I’ve spoken with Rabbi Levinson. Neither was able to help me. This whole situation ... it’s just so overwhelming. My whole life I have been a Jew. I grew up going to shul. I became bar mitzvah. I had a bubbe. And her arms, she had those thick, bubbe arms. Jewish arms. And I would eat her latkes. I faced antisemitism in school, as a child. They called me kike, Jew. They called me Jew ... Jew. I stepped on glass, beneath my shoe, beneath the chuppah. I sipped wine, she sipped wine, my Rebecca, and we kissed. Mazel tov,

they said. Mazel tov! And when my mother died ... I sat. We sat. We prayed. I pray every day. Every single day. When we got news of our first child, I prayed. I prayed and I prayed and I prayed, and she was born and she was healthy. I thanked God. This child was whole, my love was whole, this child was mine. Of course I thanked God. And now I don't know. I don't know who to thank. What to thank. What I am. Rabbi, what am I? I'm a goy, Rabbi. This is what they tell me. What am I to do with myself? This life, this experience ... what am I to do? Jewish, Rabbi, my experience has always been Jewish. My life has been Jewish. And I have been a good Jew, a good man. So why does God play? Why does he stand and point and say no. He tells me that I am not me. I follow God, but I follow his science too. I believe these results, Rabbi. I believe what they say. My parents are gone, I cannot ask them. It is just me. It is for me to live with, for me to cry over. A goy, Rabbi. I am no Jew. Please, Rabbi, please tell me how to go on living."

"Your bubbie. Can you still taste her latkes?"

"Yes, of course, Rabbi, of course. I taste them today — I taste them every day."

"Then you are a Jew."