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Your Children Will Burn

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YOUR CHILDREN WILL BURN

THIS HAS TO DO with what my friends who have been analyzed would call a screen memory. You know the sort of thing where you dream about raising hell in Toots Shor's because the waiter brought your coffee with some of it sloshed over into the saucer, and you are really concealing from yourself an early memory of bed-wetting. Or you are standing in one of the honky-tonks on West Fifty-second watching a displaced Minsky broad go through her routine, and all the while running underneath is a fantasy about your old lady. In other words, what you're doing is a strip tease down Memory Lane with the customers yelling "take it off!" Well, when you're in a deal like mine — James Moss, Press Information — where you dish out the crapperoo yourself all the live-long day, you develop a nose for it. Maybe you have heard that old Jewish riddle: What is green, hangs on the wall, and whistles? The answer is a herring. Green? You paint it green, so it's green. Hangs on the wall? You hang it on the wall, so it hangs on the wall. And whistles? That's just to make the riddle hard. In other words, gilding the herring is what I get paid to do, and what my friends pay to have done when they lie on the analyst's couch day after day and dig up their buried guilt by free association. I have picked up my share of the spiel about repression and regression, and frustrations and complexes. I even know it's significant that what first came to my mind was not "screen memory," but "scream memory." Still and all and nevertheless, you don't get me down on a couch. Not by myself. And not to talk. That's a great bone of contention between me and Laura. I mean the "not by myself" and "not to talk."

My good friends would say it's also significant that my name is actually Jacob Mosskowitz. Once it seemed important not to have to go down through life being called Jakie Mosskowitz. Times have changed. And anyhow, what kind of a screen is James

Moss? Who, or, as Laura would say, whom am I kidding? One look at me, and you know I'm just a Jew-boy who has had too many hot corned-beef sandwiches at Reuben's. I have seen myself in mirrors. I get the general layout — fat, dark, and past forty. And I have the vital data at my finger tips. Five feet five in built-up shoes. Waist, thirty-nine. Weight, one-eighty-six. Hair still with me, and still black, though graying on the chest. Brown insolent eyes, big insolent nose, full insolent mouth. If I don't shave twice a day, I start looking seedy. But shave me and dress me up in one of my two dozen double-breasted suits cut out of English worsted, French flannel, Italian silk, and other such fine fabrics, with an imported shirt (ruby cuff links by courtesy of Cartier's to match the ruby ring) and a Bronzini tie, and whatever it is the women want, I've still got it. Believe me, this is no idle boast. I could give you the statistics. Which Laura would not like at all, not at all.

Yes, another Hebe who made good. My Madison Avenue offices clear me between thirty and forty thousand. With yet an octagon house overlooking the Hudson. That's Laura. She is devoted to Early American. I once brought home a bar of Octagon Soap to go with the house. But it's a waste of time to joke with Laura. She's a Bryn Mawr girl, the serious type. The only reaction I get is she calls me a product of the age of the wisecrack.

In other words, were it not for the recent clash by night with Laura, the sole extant son of Israel Mosskowitz, immigrant Jew and unsuccessful rag-peddler, would have no complaint. Maybe a guy like me who has become accustomed to a lot of free associating shouldn't have got married at age thirty-eight. But I guess I wanted a kid of my own image. And I won't deny that I was taken with Laura. Not that I ever considered her good-looking. However, even at twenty-three she was more than the usual female vacancy, and the good-looking broad I can get whenever I need it. Laura is not without her attractions. She's an amber blonde, slender build, five feet four inches without heels, about right for me. I don't want to be one of these little tugboats push-

ing an ocean liner around in the night clubs. A fair figure, good legs, a little weak in the breastwork; still and all, a clean neat healthy body showing to its best advantage in a golfer-style dress. You get the idea. Thin face, wide mouth, candid gray eyes, clear skin, not enough make-up, straw-colored hair in a braid around her head. Not strictly a period piece, but quaint. In our earlier and happier days, I called her Quaker Girl. Well, she may look mousy, but she can get her teeth into you. Perhaps we'd get along better if she didn't always give me the frank-and-forthright; if she were — excuse the expression — a devious bitch. To wit, last week, when I came home one evening after having been unavoidably detained in Manhattan all the night before by a certain appetizing little matter of business, she greeted me acidly: "There are one billion females on this earth, and I'm supposed to share you with each and every one of them."

"No," I said, "only those between nineteen and twenty-nine." That, I must point out sotto voce, was neat, Laura being thirty.

"Studs Mosskowitz!" Then she quickly added, "And I'm not being anti-Semitic." That's Laura. She sees all the angles, she's a tonic.

"My own personal praying mantis," I said.

"What precisely does *that* allusion mean?"

"The female praying mantis," I explained, "after mating bites off the head of the male and eats it."

"You and your perfectly *fantastic* notions!"

As she went out the door, taking the kid with her, I had the last word: "This is one male who's not going to have his head bitten off."

I HAD THE LAST WORD Thursday evening. On Friday, in celebration of the domestic crisis, I didn't go to the office. Instead, towards noon I crawled out from under our eighteenth-century tester, made black coffee and charred toast in our maple-paneled colonial kitchen, sat on our eight-sided octagon porch, and gazed across the Hudson to the bluish foothills of the Early American

Catskills. My eyes were lazily following a cloud that, next to our antique shop, resembled a mere parvenu Victorian lace valentine, and presto! I was no longer on the east bank of the Hudson, but back on the east side of Cleveland, when the Mosskowitz family was living on Forty-sixth Street between Woodland and Scovill, in that remote era a neighborhood of two- and four-family houses inhabited by non-prospering Jews. Of course, in reality it was not me back there, but that skinny little bugger Jackie Mosskowitz, seven years old, and dressed in a brown-and-white seersucker blouse and knee pants which the old lady had made after her own exclusive Mosskowitz model. I recognized instantly where I was — the vacant lot on Scovill Avenue where I spent many happy hours playing with my kid brother.

It was a June afternoon, warm and sunny, the last day of school. A cellar excavation which had long before been left unfinished in the lot was already rankly overgrown with weeds. That vacant lot was our Miami Beach and our Luna Park. We played in that spellbound world, completely sealed off from Scovill Avenue and oblivious to the people passing by only a few feet away. But in this particular memory vignette, I was there alone, and hunting for my kid brother who was lost. And on my search through the lot, I came upon the bright speckled orange-and-brown shell of a ladybug resting on a weed. Stooping over it, I chanted:

Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home!

Your house is on fire, your children will burn!

Once you put your mind in freewheeling, one screen memory leads to another. That discovery is not going to win me the Nobel Prize. As if the strip tease ever comes to an end, and with a roll of the drum you can finally say, "*Voila!* There it is! The *tzatz-keleh!* The little treasure trove!" What I remembered next was my six-year-old Abie coming to me a couple of weeks before last Christmas. Incidentally, Laura calls the kid Abraham or Little Abe. What she wanted was James Junior. But Abie was my fixed idea, after my kid brother. On that I proved stubborn, obstinate,

inflexible, and downright mulish. "Do you think you're founding a dynasty?" I said. "The next thing, it'll be King Moss the Third. I don't propose to hang all that crapperoo on my kid like a turkey around his neck."

"It was an albatross, dear, and don't say crapperoo when you mean dung, dear."

"Turkey was a joke, dear, and I don't mean dung dear, I mean crapperoo darling."

Well, to shuttle back to last Christmas, the kid came to me, climbed up on my lap, and said, "Daddy Jim, I want to buy a Christmas present for Miss Gillespie."

"That sounds like an admirable project. Who is Miss Gillespie?"

"She's my teacher at school."

"Oh, yes. You like her?"

"Yes, I do, very much."

"Okay. What do you want to buy her?"

"A lapel pin."

"Reasonable enough. Okay. We'll get her a good one, no matter what it costs."

"But Daddy Jim, I want to buy her one that lights up, with a battery she can carry in her pocket."

"I'm sure that's a present any woman would love to have."

That conversation lifted another curtain on the past, and little Jakie Mosskowitz was back there in the second grade at Outhwaite School with *his* Miss Gillespie, a princess with golden hair and sky-blue eyes whose name was Miss Ryan. Of course, a Christmas present never occurred to Jakie; and even if it had, the old man wouldn't have allowed it. We kids at Outhwaite were not *goyim*: our teachers got their presents on the last day of school. Like my Abie, I knew exactly what I wanted to give Miss Ryan — a blouse of glossy pink satin with ruffles and out-size mother-of-pearl buttons. Not that there was any question of buying such a present. I simply badgered the old lady into making it. The old lady took in dressmaking, as she said, to help out. There's a laugh

for you. That old battered sewing machine standing in mine and my kid brother's bedroom, which became the old lady's workshop during the daytime, was the basic industry and economic mainstay of the Mosskowitz menage. In other words, my old man was a *schlemiel* and a *neffish*, you know, a *creep*, one of those unfortunate bastards you see around, never intended to be a good provider. The old lady did the good providing. When she wasn't cooking, washing, ironing, cleaning, or scrubbing, she was either sitting at the sewing machine or was down on her knees, her mouth full of pins, circumambulating the strange women whom I often found in my bedroom partly dressed, their arms fat and flabby, their pulpy flesh bulging over their corsets.

A full month before the end of school I was after the old lady to make the blouse, and on some pretext she came with me one day to have a look at my Miss Ryan and get an idea of size. Then while she worked the treadle and guided the beautiful shining pink satin under the needle, I hung over the sewing machine impatiently watching my present take shape. On the last day, when I came home at noon for lunch, the old lady folded the blouse in tissue paper and put it into a white gift box which she had saved, and I went off to school with it. As I entered the classroom, I was trembling in my excitement. Miss Ryan was already there, and on her desk were the customary commonplace offerings of candy, fruit, handkerchiefs, soap, talcum, and cheap cologne. I placed my box before her and hurried to my seat, my face flushed and hot, while the other kids stared. Clearly this was a present with authority. From my seat, I saw Miss Ryan open the box and I heard the rustle of tissue paper. She looked in, blushed, and then turned a brilliant smile on me. Little Jackie hadn't learned yet how easy it is to crap out right after throwing seven. When school was dismissed, he ran all the way home in a fever of triumph.

HOME WAS THEN no octagon house, but one of those square box houses which the honest poor are devoted to. Once when I tried to tell Laura that a single room of the present Moss mansion

would have swallowed up the entire Mosskowitz domicile, she said, "Yes, but it *was* home sweet home, dear." That's the way it is sometimes, I am talking Bantu and Laura is talking Kalmuck. Home sweet home was a square divided into four equal boxes, each about ten by ten, with connecting doors. Home sweet home was the second floor of a small dingy two-story frame house which had long since shed its paint, built by a free-enterprising landlord in the patch of yard behind a dilapidated brick house. That Friday noon, as I gazed into the Hudson and shuffled my memories like a pinochle deck, I could see little Jackie run in triumph up the narrow broken stone walk leading alongside the brick house to the back yard where home sweet home stood. I remember looking about me for my kid brother, who was not quite four, and who usually played in the paved areaway between the two houses until I could join him after school was out. He wasn't there, and I went upstairs. The old lady, an anxious frown on her face, was standing in the center of the cramped kitchen, chopping boiled beef liver in a large wooden bowl which she held cradled in her left arm. What sticks now is that the old lady couldn't take time off from her round of tasks to indulge in the luxury of worry. She was a little skin-and-bones, with hard black jealous eyes set in a wasted face. Even though the Mosskowitzes were Orthodox Jews, on coming to the Promised Land she had given up the *sheitel* of the married woman, and instead she wore her own straight black hair in a thin knot. Hanging loose on her meager body was an unclean dark blue dress, with threads and lint clinging to it.

"Mamma!" I shouted. "I'm home from school! I gave Miss Ryan my present!"

But the old lady was far removed from me and my intoxication. "Where is Abie?" she demanded abruptly in Yiddish. "I thought he might be with you." Distractedly, she went to the open window, leaned out, and called, "Abie! Abie!" Then she turned to me. "Did you see him, Jackie?"

"No, mamma."

As she stood there, biting her lip and rocking her head from

side to side, my triumph drained out of me and her anxiety seeped in. "*Oi, gevald, gevald!*" she said. "*Oi*, what trouble your father is making for me!"

Today, of course, I could hazard a guess as to what the old man had been up to. When a woman says trouble in any language including Yiddish, she means another woman. In other words, having been through the mill I am a wise guy, a real *chochim*, with hindsight yet. But Jakie back there must have been one bewildered little bugger. What trouble was his papa making for his mama? And what did that have to do with Abie being gone? All little Jakie was able to gather was that his mama had been away from home for half an hour on some unusual and mysterious errand. "I told Abie he should not step out of the yard. Jakie, run and look in that lot where you play. Maybe he went there."

"Yes, mamma."

"Be sure you find him. He's wearing his green rompers. And come right back, Jakie!"

I can still feel the knot clenching my heart as I ran down the stairs, out to the front, down Forty-sixth Street to Scovill, and along Scovill to the vacant lot. I found green weeds, but no green rompers. And possibly, the way a kid does, I half forgot my urgent mission and lingered a moment. At any rate, in my head is this sharp picture of little Jakie stooping over the speckled orange-and-brown ladybug and chanting to it. Well, that's where we came in, isn't it? Okay. I found no Abie.

In my anxiety, I ran all the way back home, so that I came up the stairs out of breath and with an ache in my side. The door stood open. The old lady was gone. The house, I sensed immediately, was empty. On the kitchen floor lay the wooden chopping bowl where it had apparently been dropped, and some of the liver had dribbled out on the threadbare linoleum.

Ah, that little bugger Jakie! He knows there is cause for alarm. The little *chochim* knows it. Never since has so keen a feeling of desertion pierced him, no, not even on that black Friday when he sat on the octagon porch, with the kid and Laura gone, and the

empty house palpably at his back. I see the little bugger search methodically through all four rooms — the kitchen, with rusted iron stove, small wooden table covered by a worn oilcloth, two straight wooden chairs skinned of their varnish, egg crate nailed to the window sill to serve as refrigerator, zinc-lined sink, and above it a couple of open shelves holding two paltry sets of dishes carefully separated, one for *milchiges*, the other for *flaischiges*, milk and meat to you; to the left of the kitchen mine and Abie's bedroom, with bare floor of pine boards, chipped iron bedstead, sewing machine, straight chair piled high with work in progress, dress form, and nails in the wall to hang our wardrobe on; behind the kitchen, the unused parlor which even the honest poor cannot do without, with cheap floral rug, library table in walnut veneer, cupboard containing our *Pesachdige* dishes, and mantel-piece on which stood the old lady's solitary art treasure, an ornate marble-encased clock, on either side of the clock face a porcelain maiden with waxen cheeks and thin hands rising out of rococo shellwork; and finally to the left of the parlor, the master bedroom where the old man and the old lady slept, with bare pine floor, authentic Early Grand Rapids bed (unfortunately minus tester), wooden chair draped over with the old man's good pair of pants, and dresser whose veneer had come off in strips. Did I hear you ask about the bathroom? That was down one flight underneath the staircase, appropriately furnished with stool and zinc bathtub which we shared with the family living on the first floor. Well, pardon the emphasis on the Oenslager décor. James Moss enjoys setting the stage of his be-it-ever-so-humble origins.

"That explains why you're always so assertive, dear," Laura said once when I had described the Mosskowitz establishment to her. "I mean you push so, you always carry a chip on your shoulder, you have a kind of impudence that makes you so hard to live with."

"The word you are fumbling for, darling, is *chutzpeh*."

"It's the classic example," she went on, ignoring my linguistic addendum. "Your touchiness, your aggressiveness, even your

tomcatting, is simply the standard reaction to the insecurity of childhood poverty. And also being a member of a persecuted minority group."

"*A gesund dir in dein keppeleh!*" I said. "Blessings on thy sweet little head! You are of the great verbalizers."

LET US RETURN to our hero Jakie, whom we left alone in the deserted house. And will you just look at the little bugger, scared as he is, try to pull a rabbit out of the hat. Perhaps, he persuades himself, with a fine display of corroborating details, perhaps Abie returned and his mamma took him with her to Rogin's butcher shop to get some soup meat for supper. Soup meat. There is a detail, a whimsical culinary detail, for the historian of social manners. You will ask in vain at Manny Wolf's or Lindy's for soup meat. Yet that *pièce de résistance* appeared nearly every evening on the Mosskowitz table, attended by boiled potatoes, and now and then a *vorschpeiz* of chopped liver. Only the rarest and most flamboyant occasion brought forth a roasted chicken. But soup meat was Old Faithful. What a job I could do with the soup meat account to endear it to the great American public. Soup meat, the miracle food. It was not only the cheapest cut of beef, it could also be eaten twice. Yes, there's the gimmick. You can eat your soup meat and have it. For the evening's supper (what Laura calls dinner at eight), the old lady simply gave it a thorough boiling in water until it was pallid of hue. For the next noon's dinner (what Laura calls luncheon dear), the old lady stirred a substantial quantity of rice or noodles into the water which the meat had been boiled in. I suppose Jakie Mosskowitz wasn't bothered, but it bothers every corpuscle in James Moss now to recall it. Laura, of course, can't understand why I raise such hell whenever she tries to serve me leftovers made into hash, meat loaf, croquettes, or creamed crapperoo. "Look, darling," I say as I shove the dish aside, "do I have to show you a certified statement of my earnings?"

"But, dear, it's not right to waste perfectly good food,"

"Don't waste it, darling. Just throw it out."

"You never deny yourself anything, do you, dear?"

"What you'd like to do, darling, is build me a prison of my denials. And don't feed that mush to my kid."

"You're only spoiling Abraham."

"That's right, darling. I want Abie spoiled. I want him good and spoiled."

How one does drift off on the magic carpet of his fond memories. To get back to little Jakie. Once again, breathless now and apprehensive, he ran down the stairs, out to the front, then up Forty-sixth Street to Woodland, and, after looking both ways for streetcars, across the cobblestones and tracks to Rogin's. A group of seven or eight women stood on the sawdust-strewn floor, chattering in the aftermath of some mishap. Even Mr. Rogin in his greasy bloodstained apron had come out from behind the meat counter. As I stumbled in over the threshold, one woman who was facing the doorway whispered, "Shh! It's the other boy."

That stage whisper delivered in Yiddish had the cadence of calamity. The other women, replicas of the old lady, in dirty black or dark blue dresses, turned to stare at me. The butcher bustled through the group. "Was my mamma here, Mr. Rogin?" I asked, though my heart swelling into my throat told me it was a futile question.

The women exchanged glances whose import was not lost on little Jakie, and Mr. Rogin said with rough kindness, "Your mamma had to go downtown. She said you should wait for her at home."

I was silent, afraid I might begin to cry if I tried to speak. One of the women, whom I recognized as Mrs. Feinberg, a friend of the family, stroked my head. "There's nothing to worry about, Jakie darling. Come, I'll go home with you."

I let her take my hand, and as we walked along together, she did what she could to divert me by asking about the last day of school and what grade I was in and the present I brought for my teacher. But little Jakie wasn't in the mood for social conversa-

tion. He was relieved finally to reach home and come up the stairs. The wooden bowl was still lying on the kitchen linoleum. However, we had now acquired a visitor whom Laura, with all her Bryn Mawr finesse, would not have known what to do with. Twitching his feelers at the delectable *vorschpeiz* which had dribbled out of the bowl was an Early American cockroach. Our visitor was no problem to Mrs. Feinberg. She quickly drove him off, wiped up the liver from the linoleum, and put the bowl on the table. Then resorting to the universal remedy of Jewish women, she said, "Sit down, Jakie darling. I'll get you something to eat."

I sat at the kitchen table and watched. Obviously Mrs. Feinberg knew her way around the Mosskowitz-type kitchen. She knew where to find the bread and the bread knife. She got the milk from the box on the window sill. And she was not surprised to discover that our butter came not from cows, but from apples. While that kindhearted woman busies herself pouring a glass of milk and spreading a slice of bread with apple butter, let me fill you in, as we say in the trade. My good friends who have been analyzed tell that it doesn't matter whether you remember accurately or not, that what you invent may be even more significant than what you remember. In other words, how can you lose? I am no longer certain which of the mishmash in my memory belongs actually to that June day, which of it I heard about afterwards, and which is, as the *spiel* has it, sheer dream-work. For whatever reason, my kid brother had taken it into his head to go to Woodland Avenue. There as he darted across the tracks, he was struck by a streetcar and dragged an adequate distance over the cobblestones before the motorman could come to a stop. An ambulance took the mangled little body to Charity, a Catholic hospital down around Twenty-second Street. Someone in the crowd that gathered was able to identify Abie, and a policeman brought the good news to Ghent and then escorted the old lady down to Charity Hospital.

And now the police were out hunting for the old man, who

might have been almost anywhere on Cleveland's east side, going up and down the streets, his short emaciated frame (he died later of TB) bent over the handle of the weather-beaten splintered wooden pushcart, and his worn coin purse filled with pennies, nickels, and dimes. He would be buying up old paper, old clothes, old bedding, old pots and pans, old iron, old anything. He would be wearing a dirty shirt and his old pair of shapeless black pants, stiff with grime. The lack of a necktie would be concealed by his ragged black beard, and he would have on an old felt hat, beneath which his long sideburns framed his thin swarthy face. Laura likes to talk about the adorable street cries of London. She would have simply adored the old man. The old man was a great streetcrier. "Rags! Rags!" he would cry adorably. "Paper rags! Paper rags! Paper rags!"

I DON'T MEAN to keep you in suspense. Abie died. In fact, he was good and dead by the time the ambulance got to the hospital. The old lady only served to put the legal name to the broken remains. And in the Mosskowitz family, Abie's death made a difference, a big difference. Something gave way between the old man and the old lady. The old man became quieter, more subdued than he'd been; and the old lady somehow, by a word here and look look there, never let him forget. As for little Jakie, it was not only the gloom that fell over the Mosskowitz family. There was no more Abie for him to take to the vacant lot to catch grasshoppers, or to play Soldiers with in their bedroom on rainy afternoons. I don't of myself remember what Abie looked like. But after the old lady died (breast cancer), I found a faded photo in a soiled envelope hidden behind the *Pesachdige* dishes. It must have been taken during the spring before the accident by an itinerant photographer of those days. The scene is the paved areaway. Abie, dressed in checked rompers, is sitting in a little two-wheeled cart behind a goat in harness. He is holding the reins in his hands. His dark hair is as curly as the goat's, and his big dark eyes are looking seriously at you out of his little face.

On that Friday spent among my souvenirs, I went into the house, got the old faded photo from my wallet, and brought it back out on the porch. Sitting there, I was again struck by how much my son Abie looks like my kid brother. The resemblance is not so much in the actual appearance (my Abie, while he has my dark complexion and eyes, has Laura's straight hair); rather it's in the clean honest look of the two kids, the pure music they give off. I have frequently thought of everything my kid brother missed by tangling with that streetcar — all the good times and the kicks, like putting on a new suit, taking a broad to the Persian Room, playing a pinochle hand in spades, lying in the sun on Bermuda, walking along Madison, inhaling the lights and colors of Manhattan, even buying the octagon house. On the other hand, I tell myself, if Abie missed the fun, he never lost the clean honest look and the pure music. The fishy film never came down over his eye. He never gave with the hearty laugh, he never became an operator, he never had to dish out the crapperoo.

Of course, little Jakie sitting at the kitchen table eating his bread with apple butter and drinking his milk was not yet of the deep thinkers like James Moss resting his round rump on his octagon porch and studying the old faded photo. Strictly, I don't know what Jakie was thinking, except maybe when his mamma would come home. "She won't be gone long," Mrs. Feinberg had reassured him. "I'll stay here with you till she comes back." And when he finished eating and was just sitting there at the kitchen table, she said, "Haven't you got something to play with, Jakie darling?"

As a matter of fact, I did have something. It was not anything you'd find at Schwarz's, but a little game I had invented which I called Soldiers. On rainy afternoons and Sunday mornings (the old man wouldn't allow games on Saturday), I would play it with Abie in our bedroom. In her years of dressmaking, the old lady had accumulated a quart Mason jar of buttons, most of them the ordinary small white or black variety, yet a number of them larger, colored, or oddly shaped. I remember that I would arrange

these into armies, with the ordinary buttons serving as common soldiers, and the larger colored buttons as officers. How do you like that! I'd put Abie in charge of moving certain troops across the floor. And on Sundays, when we could play in our bed, I would fashion the blankets and pillows into hills and valleys for our armies to march up and down. I can still hear Abie's lisping treble echoing the commands, "Company, *attention!* Forward *march!*"

Obediently, at Mrs. Feinberg's suggestion, I went into the bedroom, got out the jar, and lined up the buttons. But my heart wasn't in it. Even though the game went on for a long time, I kept an ear cocked for a sound of the old lady, and I was aware of Mrs. Feinberg pacing the kitchen floor nervously and looking in on me now and then with an encouraging smile. And when, at last, I heard footsteps on the stairs, I dropped my game with relief and ran out into the kitchen, shouting "Mamma! Mamma!"

The mamma who came in stopped little Jakie in his tracks. She was supported by two nuns, who led her to a chair, where she sat lifelessly, her hands dropped loose in her lap, her eyes blank, without recognition. One of the nuns was carrying our chopping knife, which the old lady must have taken with her to the hospital; and she now put it on the table. I couldn't take my eyes off the old lady. She had become a stranger. She sat there, silent and motionless, as if her skin-and-bones didn't belong to her. Her eyes were puffed and red, and clearly they did not know me. Little Jakie's heart hammered its panic; and when the nuns asked which was his mother's bedroom, he could only point, without a word. "Come, my child," said one of the nuns to his mamma. "You'll feel better when you lie down."

They led her back into the bedroom, where he could hear the creaking and crunching of the bedsprings. Mrs. Feinberg clucked her tongue and said, "It would be better for her if she let herself go and cried."

Soon one of the nuns came out into the kitchen. Of course, Jakie has long since got used to eating ham. In other words, some

of his best friends are *goyim*. And doesn't his own wife Laura go off every Sunday morning to visit with her Dearly Beloved? But back there, little Jakie stared with alarm at the nun in her unfamiliar black-and-white costume, and with the forbidden cross dangling at her waist. She put a hand on his head, and a gentle voice said, "Your mother has had a great sorrow. You must try and be a brave boy."

LITTLE JAKIE *was* a brave boy. Okay. So was James Moss. At least until Saturday. In fact, on Friday evening the brave boy even went in to Manhattan, had a steak at Manny Wolf's, got up a pinochle game, and won two hundred and seventeen bucks. But it didn't make him feel any better. And when he returned on Saturday afternoon to find the house still deserted and Abie gone, his heart ached — vibrato. He wandered upstairs and downstairs, inside and outside. No one was there, not even Mrs. Perkins. Her days are Monday and Thursday. Towards evening, he laid out his gray pin-stripe flannel, and shaved, preparatory to going in to Manhattan for another big night. What he had in mind was to call up a broad he knew name of Millie, have dinner with her, and take in a floor show. But when he sat down at the phone, instead of ringing Millie up, he found himself putting through a call to Laura. She was where he'd guessed she would be — at her mother dear's. He opened the negotiations, which, he can report, were brief, succinct, to the point, and a fiasco.

"I want Abie back," I said.

"I'm sorry, dear, but I don't think that would be wise. I think little Abe is really better off here with me."

I took that in for a minute. I have respect for a trump. "Well, just let me talk to him."

"I'm awfully sorry, dear. That would only upset him. Right now the child doesn't quite understand what's happened, and he's a little bewildered naturally."

"Naturally," I said. "How does it taste?"

"How does what taste, dear?"

"My head."

After Laura hung up on me, I sat there at the phone for a long time. Dusk had fallen, and the shadows were collecting in the corners and along the ceiling. Somehow the yen to call Millie, or any other broad, had evaporated. James Moss, man about town and life of the party, felt old. And perhaps because Laura had used the expression "the child," suddenly across forty years, I heard the nun say, "Come, my child," and I realized that the old lady *was* just a child when my kid brother died. She couldn't have been more than thirty. And the same went for the old man. I was almost old enough to be the old man's old man. So what did that make me? My own grandfather? I could see the old man trudging up and down the side streets, stooped over the handle of his pushcart, followed by a troop of kids mocking his "Paper rags! Paper rags!" What was it that made him such a *schlemiel* and such a *neffish*? Every stinking little rag-peddler in those days worked himself up to having his own junkyard in the gully south of Woodland. But not the old man. He never made it. He never got out of another guy's stable.

Once in a while, little Jakie would go with him to the junkyard where he sold what he'd picked up in each day's treasure hunt. I can see the hills of broken stoves and bedsprings and rusted iron, the smaller piles of lead pipe, copper, and rubber, the bales of paper and rags. Somewhere along the line I must have decided I was never going to let myself be the man in the middle. I became a Jew-boy definitely in a hurry. Laura thinks because she sleeps with him she knows James Moss. How can she if she never knew the old man and the old lady? TB, breast cancer, overwork, worry, not having the cash in hand, and quaffing the bitter cup did for them before I met her. It's tough that they didn't live to get a little *naches*, just a grain of happiness, from their little Jakie. They both died, first the old lady and then the old man, just after I quit Ohio State to take a job with the *News*. Well, as I sat there at the phone thinking of the old man grown to his pushcart like

an appendage, I heard his voice. Only it was crying not "Paper rags! Paper rags!" but "Daddy Jim! Daddy Jim!"

I took the stairs two at a time, and had gone half-way up before I recognized where I was and the trick my mind was playing on me. Nevertheless, I continued up the stairs and into my Abie's room. It is a fine little room, over the river side of the porch, with a good view. I looked around without turning on the light. The wallpaper, which he had picked out himself when he was three, has yellow cows jumping over blue moons and red dishes running away with green spoons. However, recently he insisted on picking out a new "grown-up" wallpaper, with a motif of railroad tracks, semaphores, and diesels. That is scheduled to go up in a couple of weeks. Or is it? I saw that his toys, most of them at any rate, were still scattered along the walls, and that his books were in the case. I opened the closet. Laura had taken all his suits. No doubt to show she meant business. I was glad to see that she had not forgotten to take Flapjack, the stuffed velour donkey, all ears, which I bought for Abie on his second birthday and which he never went to sleep without. I sat on his bed in the dusk, and remembered another twilight when I had discovered him there alone, perched in the middle of his bed, hugging Flapjack, with his feet drawn up under him and the blanket wound like a tent around him. He was then not quite four, like my kid brother, and he looked scared, yet determined to be brave and not to call out.

"What are you sitting that way for, Abie sweetheart?" I said.

"I don't want the snookies to get me."

"I don't see any snookies, Abie sweetheart."

"Oh, you can't *see* them, Daddy Jim."

"Then how do you know they're here?"

"When it's dark and you're alone, you can feel them touch your hair."

I took him in my arms. "Next time the snookies are around, Abie sweetheart, you call your daddy. He'll be delighted to keep you company."

"Yes, Daddy Jim."

Snookies happened to be something little Jakie didn't know about. Still and all, sitting back there in the kitchen after dusk had settled, he was glad to see one of the nuns light the gas mantle. Those two nuns had been waiting patiently for the old man to come home and take over. And just as the gas mantle was lit, there were footsteps on the stairs. That time little Jakie didn't jump up. He sat there waiting in silence. The old man came in, tired, dirty, and stricken. (I learned later that the police had not found him, but that on the way home he had received the glad tidings from a neighbor.) His face, framed by the long black sideburns and the ragged beard, was bloodless, almost yellow in the gas light. He stared at me and the nuns for a moment with sick eyes, and then went quickly into the master bedroom. I heard him cry "Sadie! Sadie!" And then it was the old lady screamed. It was as if she had been holding herself in until that moment, waiting for the old man.

"Murderer!" she screamed in Yiddish.

There was a shocked silence. Then the old man said in a hoarse voice, "Sadie! Sadie! What are you saying!"

"Murderer! Where is my Abiel!"

"Sadie, please! It's a shame for the strangers."

"A shame for you and your Eva Silver! You have murdered my Abiel! Murderer! Murderer!"

AT THE OLD LADY'S first scream, the two nuns, who had started to leave, turned back abruptly. The cross dangling from one waist swung against the door frame. Little Jakie heard the clack, and he heard the progress of those rustling gowns through the parlor and into the bedroom. Almost immediately one of the nuns returned, leading the old man, limp and dazed, back into the kitchen, where he dropped into a chair at the table. His hands, little Jakie noticed, were shaking. The other nun could be heard in the bedroom, trying to soothe and quiet the old lady, who had at last given way and whose horrible rasping sobs shook

the air. Then the first nun went back into the bedroom and added her voice to that of her companion. The old man sat where he had been left, so numbed that even the incredible presence of the nuns, emissaries of the ancient enemy, did not affect him. As for little Jakie sitting across the table, he tried to shrink into himself, to make himself unnoticed. Between his mamma's sobbing and his papa's shaking hands, the little bugger was scared bone deep. As Laura so aptly put it, the child didn't quite understand what was happening. And after forty years the child still doesn't quite understand. The name of Eva Silver was never again mentioned, at least not in Jakie's hearing. And don't ask me what exactly gave with the old man. I never figured out whether it was a real affair or just a case of hot pants. And with the kind of guy the old man was, it might even have been one of these walkie-talkie romances, what Laura calls let's-be-Platonic-dear. All I figure was that the old lady must have gone out that afternoon to check up on the old man, and left Abie alone. Ah, sweet mystery of love.

The old lady's sobbing finally subsided to a moaning, and then there was silence in the bedroom. The two nuns came out into the kitchen. One of them said to the old man, "She'll be all right now. But maybe you'd better sleep with the boy tonight." The old man merely stared blankly, as if he hadn't heard. After a moment, she added, "We must go now. We can't stay any longer. I think you can take care of things."

At that, the old man pulled himself together, got up, and mumbled something intended for thanks. The nuns left, and he stood at the door for a minute listening to their footsteps going down the stairs, while his shadow flickered on the wall in the gas light. Then he took a deep breath, turned around, and became aware of me. "Did you have something to eat, Jakie?"

I nodded, "Yes, papa."

"Then it's time to go to bed."

There were no protests and no delaying tactics. I went into my room, undressed quickly in the half-light falling in from the

kitchen, and got into bed in my underwear. The old man soon turned off the gas mantle, followed me into the bedroom, took off his shirt, pants, shoes, and socks, and lay down on the bed next to me in the long woolens which he wore winter and summer. The Mosskowitz family did not know from pajamas and brush-your-teeth-dear. I lay there in the dark, tense and silent, listening to the occasional whimper or moan from the old lady's bedroom. I could sense the old man lying next to me, also listening tensely. Then suddenly in the back room the horrible sobbing broke out again, ruptured by a scream hardly recognizable as the old lady's: "*Oi, gevald, gevald! Mein Abeleh! Mein Abeleh!*" I clutched the old man's hand. It was cold and clammy, and his body stiffened. Then there was another scream. And another. "*Mein Abeleh! Mein Abeleh!*"

The old man disengaged my hand, got up from the bed, and in his long woolens went out. As I lay there trembling, I could hear his bare feet padding through the rooms to the old lady's bedroom, and then his broken pleading voice: "Sadie! Don't! Sadie! Sadie!" After a while the sobbing died down, and I listened to the old lady moaning and whimpering, and the old man pleading, pleading, pleading. The old man didn't return for a long time. I must have fallen asleep. It wasn't until he climbed into bed with me that I saw he had no head. Where his head should have been was a small plain black button.