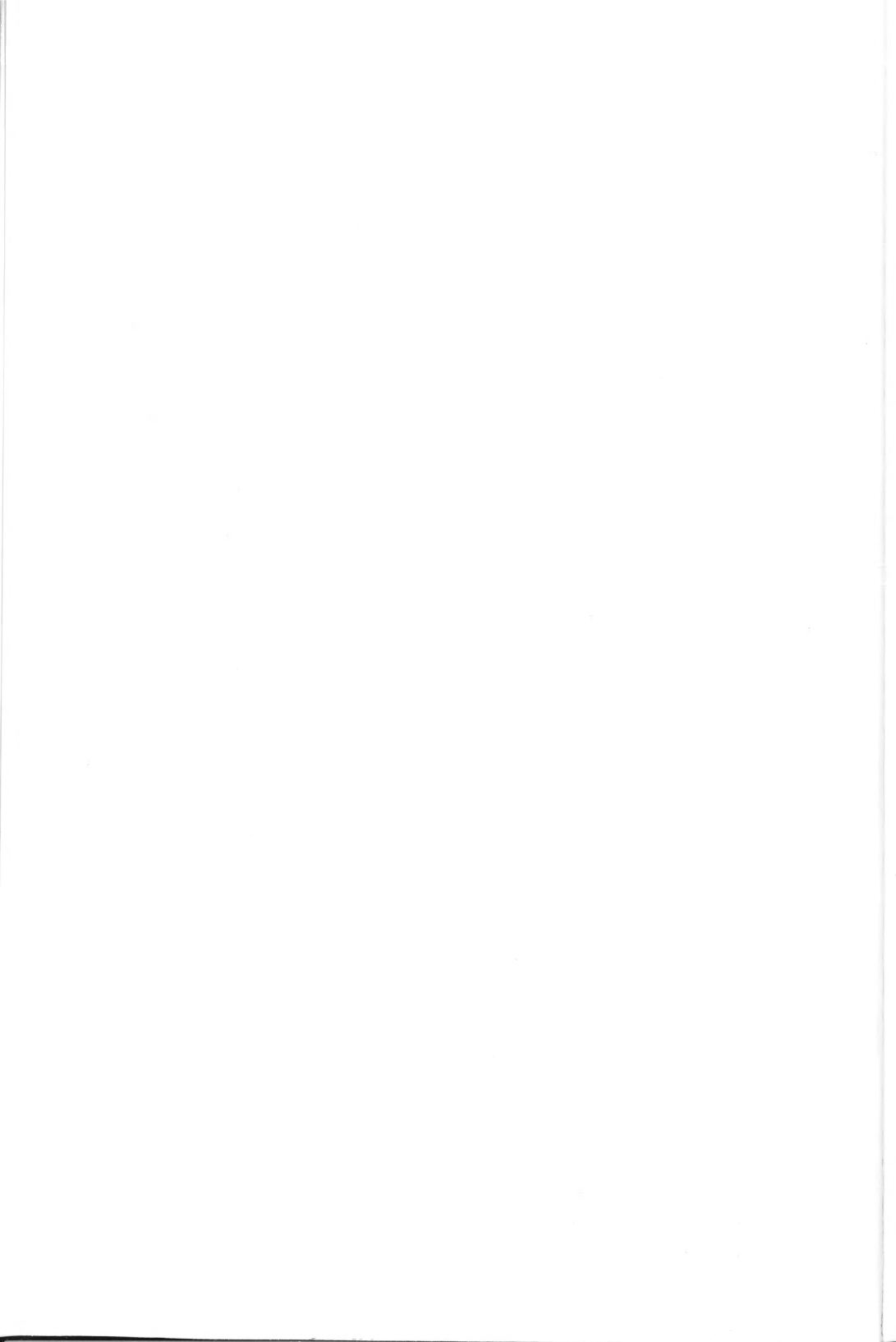


Fiction ⇨



LITTLE GENTLEMAN

Robert Jacobs

MY GRANDMOTHER, Mrs. Hannah Starker, lived at the Surfside Hotel in Atlantic City. The Surfside had a large dining room served by a kosher kitchen. Before meals, the public address system clicked on; an old man's voice, slow and cracking, as if speech were painful, announced: "May you have a hearty appetite." The people sitting in the lobby would nod, a silent amen.

In the dining room, my grandmother began with honeydew melon, her doctor's recommendation. She chewed patiently. Often she signalled one of the waiters for a special favor. A plate of spaghetti without the sauce. An egg matzoh. An omelette with extra cheese. She was always among the last to leave the dining room.

After lunch Grandma went out to the sun porch. She tried to keep from slumping in the deck chair, her smile proud and dour, as if she were sitting for a portrait. This is how she looked when we came to see her. Hair dyed brown, done up in a bun, hard and polished. Her large face shiny with sweet oils: a grand, ancient citrus fruit, pored and finely wrinkled.

"Welcome, my loves," she said.

In turn my father and I kissed her wet cheek. My mother hugged her and held on to her hands. "How are you doing, Mama?"

"I wouldn't complain."

"What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know. I'm okay, Mummaleh."

"Is there something I could get you? Some gingerale. What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"Mama—"

"So, little gentleman," my grandmother said. "You're doing okay in the school?"

I told her I got four A's and a B in gym, which was not really a subject. My teacher wrote that I was a pleasure to have in class.

"Yes," Grandma said. "You're a pleasure. Which grade you're in?"

"Sixth."

"Isn't that nice?"

Mom asked Grandma if she had been getting shots on schedule. My grandmother smiled. Sometimes, she said, she forgot to get a shot. It was so much trouble, and what good did it do?

"It's not up to you to remember," Mom said. "*They're* supposed to remember. Otherwise what are we paying for?"

My father said, "Now you're talking."

"Well they *are* supposed to remember."

"Right. Yes. I'm agreeing with you."

My mother asked Grandma how often she was supposed to get the shots.

"Twice a week," said Grandma, "but I think maybe once is enough."

Mom said, "I think that is for the doctor to decide."

"What does he know?"

"I just want the best for you, Mama."

"Oh?"

"Of course I do. You know that."

"Of course," my grandmother said vaguely, as though remembering a dream.

Mom turned to look at my father. In bright, challenging tones, she told him to take me for a walk. Dad said, "Okay. Fine."

My father and I strolled on the boardwalk. We went into a novelty shop, where Dad bought me a latex mask with purple sunken cheeks and ashen lips. The mask stuck to my face like a cool layer of skin. "Well?" I said. "How do I look?"

"Very handsome," Dad said. "You have your mother's mouth."

When we got back to the hotel, the lobby smelled damp and tangy, like fish. We rode the elevator up to the third floor, where the hallway had that same fishy smell, except that it seemed to be turning rotten. My face grew warm under the mask. Outside my grandmother's door Dad hesitated, listening.

Grandma's voice, calm and frank, was saying: "If I'll stay here, I will die. That's all. So Miriam, you want I should die?"

"No. Oh *no*," my mother pleaded. She sounded weary from crying. "No, Mama. Please."

Dad grabbed my hand. "Let's go," he whispered.

"Where're we going?"

"Stan," said my mother. "Is that you?"

"It's all right," Dad said. "We'll take another little walk."

"Stanley. Mama is coming to live with us."

My father closed his eyes. At length he said, "We'll discuss it later, Miriam."

"We will discuss it now." Mom pulled the door open. Her eyes were bloodshot.

"Later," my father said.

Mom saw me wearing the latex mask. "Oh Christ," she said. "Where'd you get that?"

My expression, hidden under the mask, was contrite. I wanted to invent some appeasing answer, but all I could say was, "On the boardwalk."

Fresh tears glistened in Mom's eyes. "Well it's very funny," she said. "Very funny. You're really funny, both of you."

She slammed the door.

"Take that thing off," my father said.

I showed him my naked face, crying. Dad looked upon me with recognition and mild disgust. "Nice going, David."

Grandma came home with us. The guest room became hers. We installed a television at the foot of her bed, and she let it play constantly with the sound turned down low. She rarely looked at the screen, although sometimes I would find her staring at it without concentration, as if at the sky. I would ask what she was watching. "A nice program," she said sharply. I asked what it was called, and she said she did not know. I asked what it was about. She said if I wanted to know what it was about, I should watch it myself.

Every night my mother tiptoed into Grandma's room and turned off the television.

On the wall behind her bed Grandma placed an oil-on-velvet painting of John and Robert Kennedy. Robert was shown head-on, his cheeks pink, lips alarmingly red. Robert's face was enveloped by a large, pallid profile of John's, as if the older brother were a vague, noble idea emanating from the mind of the younger. The painting disturbed me; I could not refrain from looking periodically, to confirm my distaste for it.

We had a chilly autumn. Occasionally it warmed up for a few hours in the afternoon, and my grandmother sat on the front porch. She favored our mahogany rocking chair, but the movement made her dizzy; twice she vomited quietly into her lap. My father immobilized the chair, finally, by gluing four triangular blocks of wood under the rockers. From then on, the chair afforded Grandma only solitude, a comfortable sense of continuity, as though she had been enthroned there for many years. She never slumped, much less dozed off, while enjoying an afternoon on the porch.

Mrs. Fields, our next door neighbor, would come over for a chat. She was a tall, handsome woman with deep eyes and high cheekbones. Her smile was tense and witty.

"So, Mrs. Fields," my grandmother would say, nodding welcome.

"Hello, Mrs. Starker." The women shook hands.

"You'll sit a minute?"

"Thank you. . . . It certainly is a sunny day!"

"Certainly."

Sometimes, if I was watching television in the living room, I could smell Mrs. Field's acrid perfume through the screen door; I pinched my nose and grimaced. I heard the old woman bragging about her garden: "You know, I have definitely got it down to a science. There is a science to growing tomatoes. You must taste one, Mrs. Starker."

"I couldn't eat it. My stomach."

“Just a little bitty taste?”

“Believe me, I couldn’t eat it.”

Mrs. Fields talked at length about raising tomatoes. My grandmother expressed no impatience. Grandma in her turn would talk about my achievements in school. She described her system of rewarding me: one dollar for every A, fifty cents for a B. She had to smuggle the money to me, because my father objected. “Why shouldn’t I do it?” she said. “It works.”

Mrs. Fields did not comment. She had no grandchildren, although now and then she would speak in praise of John, her poodle, to whom Grandma was allergic. John had won two dog shows in his youth.

“Isn’t that nice,” said my grandmother.

When the weather turned cold, Grandma’s asthma got worse. She never left her bed. She kept the curtains drawn, her room illuminated by the orange coils of an electric heater and the gray shifting light of television. Grandma’s breathing was forced, restless.

The room smelled of urine and musky perfume. I thought of the microscopic communities teeming in Grandma’s bedpan, on her shiny skin, in the humid air. To enter her room was to be embraced by rotten tropical warmth, hospitable to life’s frailest forms, oppressive to the hearty.

Every day I had to come straight home from school and look in on Grandma, since both my parents worked. Grandma liked it when I read aloud. I recited from newspapers, magazines, textbooks—she was not particular about content. What entertained her was the implication of meaning; the voice’s emphatic dip or inquiring rise, the thoughtful pause. I read more and more from children’s books, since they seemed to allow the greatest expressive liberty.

I supposed that the English language, after her half century of exposure to it, still sounded strange and musical to my grandmother. When I would ask her to say *How do you do?* in Russian, she refused—although now and then she offered a Yiddish phrase. I asked which language she thought in; did she ever get one language confused with another? What words did she hear in dreams?

Grandma ignored my questions. She said she was happy to be an American.

On her birthday, December the sixth, Grandma decided to come downstairs and have dinner with us. As she walked down the steps, Mom and Dad stood on either side of her.

“I’m all right,” she said.

“Take it nice and slow, Mama.”

Grandma paused before each step, as if refining her strategy. Her speech was strained and brave. “I’m all right. It’s nothing. No trouble.”

At last she sat down at the head of the table. She pulled a handkerchief from her sleeve and patted her lips.

My mother wiped the sweat from Grandma's face. Grandma tilted her head back, impassive like an old actress receiving makeup. "All right," she said, "that's enough."

Mom started fussing with food—slicing another tomato into the salad, tasting gravy with her finger. "Stan," she said, "you want to slice the meat?"

"Sure."

"No," Grandma said. "Wait."

"What?" My father's knife hesitated above the roast beef. "What's the matter?"

"There is a certain way you'll cut the meat, a certain prayer you'll say. Please."

"Mama. This isn't kosher meat, you know that."

"I know that."

"Then why—"

"Oy, never mind," Grandma said. "Go ahead. Cut the meat. Enjoy yourself."

"Thank you," Dad said. "I will."

Grandma ate only lettuce and bread. At the end of the meal, a slice of roast beef lay alone on her plate.

"Please, Mama, try your meat. It's really very—"

"Jesus," my father said, "why don't you leave her alone? If she doesn't want the meat, she doesn't have to do us any favors."

"Mind your own business, Stanley."

"Exactly, Miriam. That's what I'm telling you."

"Please," said Grandma mildly, "don't fight. Why should you fight?"

My father laughed. He glanced at me, an appeal to reason—and I felt a surge of importance. I smiled intelligently and nodded my head.

"Something is amusing?" Mom said. "Tell *me*. Maybe I'll laugh."

"I don't think you would," I said.

My mother, surprised and fierce, smiled down on me. "Try me, David."

My own smile turned sickly. Was I supposed to say something funny? Defend my right to be amused? What, I wondered suddenly, *had* been amusing? I shrugged my shoulders.

My mother laughed.

She brought out a birthday cake with seven candles. Everyone became cheerful. We sang happy birthday, my father improvising a bass line. Because of Grandma's asthma, I got to blow out the candles. Mom cut the first piece of cake for Grandma. "I couldn't eat it," Grandma said. "It'll make me sick."

My grandmother liked a bowl of bran flakes and a cup of tea in the morning. Mom and I took turns serving; on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, I had to carry the breakfast tray upstairs. Grandma was sitting up

in bed, ready for me. "Good morning, little gentleman." She waited, aristocratic in her patience, for me to kiss her.

The pores of her cheek were dark in the morning.

"Good morning, Grandma."

She stared at me. At last I would kiss her, and the wetness of her cheek would startle me.

"That's a nice boy," Grandma said.

I retreated to the bathroom and washed my face, shielding my tongue with clenched teeth.

One morning I entered Grandma's room and found her lying on the floor, seeming to stare at the ceiling. Her face was dry and still. She did not blink.

Feeling a terrible thrill of responsibility, I put down the tray. "Grandma? Here's your breakfast. . . . Grandma?"

"Who is it?" she whispered.

"Oh. It's me." My voice sounded nasal and strange.

"Miriam?"

"No. It's David."

"David?" Grandma's breathing seemed quieter than I had ever heard it.

"Yes."

"Oh?" She blinked and licked her lips.

"Grandma?" I took a step toward her. "Are you all right?"

"Who is it? Miriam?"

I felt a fresh sense of emergency. "David," I said. "It's David."

"Oh?"

I went downstairs, hoping my father had not yet left for work. He was gone. I tried to tell Mom what had happened, but she ran upstairs before I finished explaining. When she saw Grandma on the floor, my mother moaned and started crying.

"I'm all right," Grandma said.

Mom kissed her and stroked her face. "Everything's all right, Mama."

"Oh?"

Mom saw me standing in the doorway, hands in my pockets. "Call Dr. Angielli!" she said.

"But I don't know what to tell him."

"Just do it!"

On the phone I spoke with remarkable calm and precision. Dr. Angielli was quite friendly. He said he would be right over.

Although he arrived at our house within five minutes, the doctor did not seem to have hurried. He acted pleasant and distracted, as if this were an obligatory social call and he wanted to be somewhere else.

"How's school, David?" he said, pointing his little flashlight at Grandma's eye.

"Okay," I said.

My mother started crying again. She told me to go downstairs.

Grandma was taken to the hospital for observation. She complained of sharp pain in all her bones. The X rays showed nothing broken. Because Grandma would not eat, the doctor kept her in the hospital and fed her intravenously.

Our house was quiet. Without the sounds of Grandma's breathing, we were free from the constant chore of interpretation; little noises—creaks in the floorboards, water trickling, dropped spoons—lost their warning quality. Suddenly I had leisure in the afternoon. My friend Freddy Lerner came over, and he showed me how to build a smoke bomb using only household substances. We played football in my bedroom, padding the walls with blankets and pillows. We watched cartoons. Freddy turned the TV volume way up, and the windows rattled musically.

When my grandmother came back from the hospital, her face looked thinner; bone was evident under the loose skin. Her hair, which had always been dyed brown, was mostly white now, dirty with traces of the old coloring. She did not turn on her television. She talked about the hospital and her inability to eat, about how she mistrusted the doctors.

With my help, Grandma gathered together crayons, matchbooks, a spent toothpaste tube, two spotted banana peels, a dollar bill, a wet rectangle of pickled herring, and a copper replica of the Washington Monument with a thermometer embedded in it. She glued these artifacts together in a great lump and stored them in a paper bag marked INPORTENT. Her collection reminded me of the Time Capsule I had seen at the New York World's Fair.

One day she asked me if I understood why the paper bag was marked INPORTENT.

"Well, I had assumed," I said judiciously, "that it's a Time Capsule."

"What's that?"

"A Time Capsule?"

"Yeah."

"It was at the World's Fair," I explained. "It's where they take various objects and bury them so the people of the future can find out about our civilization. Everything will look old-fashioned to them."

"That's nice." With the fingers of her right hand Grandma was rubbing the back of the left, stretching the loose skin. "That's what you learned in school, little gentleman?"

"No," I insisted. "It was at the World's Fair."

"That's all right," she said, as if to ease some failure of mine. "Wherever you learn, it's still a good thing."

"So is that what it is? A Time Capsule?"

She smiled. "Oh no."

"Then what is it?"

"A letter."

I scratched my chin. "A letter?"

"That's right. I'm making a letter for Israel."

"You mean a package?"

"No," she said, pausing to emphasize the need for precision, "a letter. I'm sending a letter for the state of Israel."

"What do you mean?"

"You wouldn't understand."

"Yes I would."

"Someday, God willing, I'll explain—"

"Tell me now, Grandma." I sat down on her bed. To sit down, I felt, meant to acquiesce in the room's stench.

"All right," she said. "Once upon a time was a land of milk, a land of honey."

"The Promised Land."

"Who's telling this story? When you'll listen, then I'll tell the story. You're too young."

"No. I'm sorry. I'll listen. . . . Go ahead."

"All right: A land of milk, a land of honey. You remember I was in Atlantic City?"

"Yes, but I thought you meant Israel."

Grandma frowned. Her eyes seemed to move closer together.

"Sorry," I said. "Go ahead. *Please*."

"The State of New Jersey, the State of Israel. After thousands of years, who's to say? Who knows, what's what? You understand me?"

I nodded.

"All right: John F. Kennedy." She waited for me to respond.

I looked up at the oil-on-velvet painting. Robert Kennedy's lips were red like a clown's.

"You heard of this man?" she said. "John F. Kennedy?"

"Thirty-fifth President of the United States."

My grandmother shook her head no. She waited with superior patience for me to guess again.

"You mean he was not President?"

Grandma glared at the silent, dark television set.

"Well, don't you agree," I said, "that he *was* President?"

"No."

"Why not?"

Grandma's eyes were sage and disoriented. "He's dead."

"But . . . I don't quite see . . ."

"Believe me, he is dead. Believe me."

"Come on Grandma, you must admit he was the President. I mean he *was* the President."

"Listen to me," she said. "I want you should do something for me."

“But I mean he *was*. I can look it up. I’m sure—”

“Little gentleman!” she shouted.

I felt guilt rising in me like the sourness of an embarrassing memory. What sin had I blundered into?

“You ready to listen?” she said.

“Well . . . By what elegant or perverse logic did my grandmother alter the facts of history? I had heard my fifth grade teacher mention systems in which two plus two equals five. When I had asked whether such systems might have been conceived as jokes, the teacher said no.

“John F. Kennedy,” Grandma said.

“With all due respect, I can only say, it certainly seems to me that Kennedy was our President.”

“Oy, never mind. Listen. When you’ll get a chance, you’ll mail this letter for me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Mail it. That’s all.” Her hands trembled as she lifted the paper bag from her night table and dropped it into my lap. Smelling garbage, I did not open it. I put it back.

“Grandma, I . . . It has no address on it. No stamps.”

“Doesn’t matter.”

“How am I supposed to mail it? It has no—”

“You’ll put it in the mailbox, that’s how.”

“But why can’t my mother do it? I don’t—”

“No. If you’ll love your grandmother,” she said slowly, “you’ll do this one little favor.”

“I don’t think I’m old enough.”

She nodded grandly. “Yeah. That’s what I think, too.” Her satisfaction seemed immutable: No matter what disputes lay ahead of us, her wisdom was proved.

I snatched up the bag. “You’re absolutely wrong,” I said, brave suddenly, insistent as a bad liar. “I’ll mail it.”

“That’s a nice boy.”

I ran downstairs and put on my coat. I hugged the paper bag as if to keep it warm. When I went out on the porch, Mrs. Fields waved to me; she was walking her poodle. Could she see what I held in my arms?

At the end of our block stood a mailbox, serenely blue, with a white placard centered on front like a tidy little bib. The placard, I knew, displayed a timetable and a warning against tampering with the U.S. Mail.

Nearing the mailbox, I squeezed the paper bag as though it were trying to escape. I did not read the placard. I opened the metal flap halfway and peered down into the pure darkness of the belly of the mailbox.

Mrs. Fields approached quickly, smiling, proud of her posture. I decided to wait until after she passed. Standing at attention, I held the paper bag at my side. The bag seemed as heavy and specific as a bowling ball.

The dog stopped to urinate on a tree. Then he began sniffing an old pale turd. "Come along," said Mrs. Fields. She pulled the dog.

"Hello, David," she said.

"Hello." I patted the poodle's head. "Hello, John."

The dog circled behind me, sniffing my backside, then sniffing the paper bag. He wagged his little stub of a tail.

"What do you have in the bag?" Mrs. Fields said.

"I dunno."

The poodle licked the bag. I pushed his head away, and he growled.

"John!" Mrs. Fields pulled on his leash, but the dog resisted. She told me she was sorry.

"That's okay." I smiled. The dog began to chew. I lifted the bag and set it on my shoulder. The dog jumped up, his paws on my belly.

"John!" Mrs. Fields yanked the leash, and the dog yelped. "What is in that bag?" she demanded.

"I don't know. Garbage, I guess."

Mrs. Fields frowned. She pulled the poodle to her side.

"I guess I should throw it away," I said.

"I guess you *should*." Mrs. Fields looked at the dog as she spoke.

"There's a sewer outlet across the street."

"Yes," she said sharply. "There is."

I crossed the street and dropped the bag into the sewer. It disappeared without a splash or thud—I missed the satisfaction of some terminal sound.

"He's not a bad dog," Mrs. Fields said. "Only when he's provoked."

"Sorry."

With no paper bag to weigh me down, I ran up Oak Street Hill. It was a clear, cold day. Snow lay in gray mounds alongside the road. I ran all the way to Freddy Lerner's house, and we played Ping-Pong and watched Merv Griffin. Later, my grandmother asked me if I had mailed her letter. I nodded my head yes. "No," she said. "No you didn't."

In late winter, Grandma would wake up early and talk. Sometimes she called softly for her husband, who had been dead for twenty years. "Pinchas. Pinchas, you forget? You forget already the mishpochah? What's wrong with you? All the time you're forgetting something: how come you didn't buy me an onion? Pinchas. Oy, Pinchas, let me tell you—"

"Mama."

"What?"

"Stop it. He's dead."

"I know. Believe me."

"Go back to sleep."

"I couldn't sleep."

"All right then don't. I am going to sleep."

"Sleep well, Mummaleh."

Afternoons, Grandma no longer asked me to read aloud. She said books were full of lies. She told me her own stories.

"Once upon a time was a land called Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. When I left Odessa, in other words Russia, I went with my Pinchas to Philadelphia. The baby was born in Philadelphia, it was your mother. The child's name was Miriam and it was a sick child, it was dying, but thanks God it lived and is grown up to be a woman. You understand?"

"Yes."

"Many people had went to this United States, it was the land of milk, the land of honey."

I frowned.

"You don't believe it?" she said.

"But what about Israel?"

"All right," she said. "That's the land, it's promised to the Jewish People. Eretz Yisroel. You know what this means?"

"Actually, I—"

"The land of Israel, it's in the Torah. . . . The Bible?"

"Okay," I said.

"Okay. Then the Nazis wanted to destroy the Jewish People. You know what this word means? Nazis."

I nodded.

"A Nazi," she said, "is someone that wants to destroy you."

"Wasn't Hitler the—"

"Don't say that."

"I'm sorry."

"All right: When I was in Odessa, there was everywhere people that wanted to destroy the Jews, since the Jews was different from the regular people."

"Why?"

"What?"

"What did they have against the Jews?"

"Because they hated us."

"But *why*?"

Grandma shook her head slowly. "Oy." Her breathing was horribly loud, phlegm bubbling in her throat. She looked at me with curiosity and apprehension, as if I were talking in my sleep.

Grandma often asked me if it was spring yet; even after spring arrived, she kept asking me.

She seemed to wake up a little earlier each day. By the middle of April, we would hear her talking at 4 A.M. Sometimes she would refrain for many days, and we hoped she had forgotten the habit; then suddenly we would hear the voice straining in the dark, nagging us awake.

My mother had insomnia. She would lie in bed listening for Grandma's plea to begin.

Dad sent for information about nursing homes. He told us about Eretz Chai Estates, a “convalescent community” on Long Island. It was fancy and expensive, with kosher food made-to-order and daily religious services. Dad said we could afford to have Grandma pampered.

My mother said, “A nursing home is a nursing home.”

Dad said, “What about David? He should have more time with people his own age. He should get out, make new friends.” Dad enlisted Dr. Angielli’s support. Grandma’s health was not getting any better, the doctor said. She would require more and more specialized care.

Days before Mom told me, I knew she had given in. She threw herself into housework with an air of martyrdom.

My grandmother took the news lightly, as though it had nothing to do with her. Every time Mom mentioned Eretz Chai, Grandma seemed bored.

“You’ll be well cared for,” my mother pleaded. “I’ve been there three different times, and I was so impressed. It’s just right, Mama, just perfect.”

“All right,” Grandma said.

“Listen, Mama, their kitchen is—are you listening?”

“Yeah.”

“Their kitchen is absolutely spotless. They have the rabbi come in every week to make sure it’s strictly kosher. It’s just your kind of place, they do everything just so, just by the letter.”

“All right, Mummaleh, if that’s what you think.” Grandma smiled agreeably, as if consenting to a change of drapery.

I did my part to prepare Grandma for the change. I would read to her from the brochure. Kosher dining room, resident rabbi, complete medical staff and facilities. Recreation room, color television, swimming pool, sauna. I showed Grandma the pictures, but she might as well have been staring at her television set.

“They’ve got everything, Grandma. I mean they really want to make you comfortable, you know?”

“I know,” she said.

The day before Grandma was supposed to leave, my mother came home with two big shopping bags full of gifts: pastel nightgowns, an electric blanket, flowerprint housecoats. Each article had a small label sewn into it: HANNAH STARKER. Grandma did not seem to recognize the name.

“You don’t like it, Mama?”

“What’s this thing?”

“That’s just a name tag. You like the nightgown? You want to put it on?”

“Not right now.”

“I tried to think if there’s anything else you need, Mama. I could still run out and buy something, it’s no trouble.”

"What would I need?"

"Well, that's what I'm asking. You're all ready to go?"

"Go?"

"Oh, Mama, *please* don't start."

"What—"

"*Please.*"

"All right."

The night before, I cannot sleep. My parents are down in the kitchen; Mom's voice soft, controlled and incessant, as if she were reading verse. The tea kettle whistles. I turn on the light to check the time. Two thirty. Only Grandma is asleep, loudly snoring.

In the morning, Dad comes into my room. "Good morning, Buster." He draws the curtains quickly; the sunshine is like an insult. "Sleep well?"

"No." I hide my head under the pillow.

"I assume you want to say goodbye to Grandma."

"Yup."

"Well, let's go. Rise and shine."

"Yup. Okay." I put on the same jeans and sweatshirt I wore yesterday.

Downstairs, Grandma is sitting on the sofa, framed in sunlight. "Good morning, little gentleman."

"Good morning, Grandma. You look very nice."

"Thank you."

Grandma's lipstick is dark as old apples; her face shines. My mother has dressed her in a gray wool skirt with matching jacket, and a fresh white blouse. For the first time in memory, I notice Grandma's brassiere, severely pointed. "So?" she says. "You'll kiss me good morning?"

"Oh. Yes." I kiss her cheek.

My father brings down two suitcases. Mom carries a hatbox.

"Okay, Mama?"

"Okay."

"You're all ready to go?"

"No."

"What else do you need?"

"I'm not ready."

"Why not? What's the matter?"

"I don't feel like going, Mummaleh," Grandma says gently.

"You . . ."

"Let's not fight about it," Grandma says sweetly. "We shouldn't fight."

Dad's smile is sour. "Mrs. Starker, your coach awaits."

My mother says, "Don't be an ass, Stanley."

Dad shrugs. "There's no sense monkeying around. It's time to go."

"I'm afraid I've decided not to go," Grandma says, dabbing her cheek

with her fine white handkerchief. "Little gentleman, you'll please get my breakfast."

"Mama. You ate already."

"I want my breakfast," Grandma says. "David, you will please get my breakfast."

"I don't think I'm supposed to, Grandma."

"Well I'm telling you, you're supposed to."

"No," Dad says.

My mother kneels beside Grandma, squeezing the old woman's hands.

"Mama, you promised me."

"If you send me there," Grandma says, "I will die."

My mother looks down. "You can't stay here. It's time to go."

"Everything's all set," Dad says.

"Shut up, Stanley."

Grandma says, "It's Stanley's fault, right?"

"No, Mama. Not right. I want you to go." My mother lets herself cry.

"You'll be better off."

"It's better you should kill me."

"Oh!" My mother weeps, burying her head in Grandma's lap.

I feel tears straining behind my eyes, but Dad regards me sharply, demanding courage.

Finally Mom stands up. Her smile is angry and exhausted. "Come on. Let's get it over with."

My mother takes Grandma's left arm, my father the right. They lift her, but she refuses to support herself. "Jesus," Dad says, "do we have to drag you?"

Grandma begins to squirm, breathing heavily. "Put me down."

"David," says Dad. "Don't just stand there."

"What should I do?"

"Give us a hand."

I imagine the sensation of pushing from behind, my hands sinking into Grandma's broad warm rump. I cannot do it.

"Come on, David."

I get behind Grandma. I touch her spine. She writhes and forces out a horrible, choking cough. "My heart!"

"Mama, are you—"

"Oy my heart!"

"Mama—"

"God forbid I should have a heart attack! *Oy mein Gott!*"

We lower Grandma to the sofa. She clutches her handkerchief against her chest. The tight brassiere seems to be suffocating her. My mother strokes her face and neck, and Grandma relaxes.

"That's better," Grandma whispers. "That's nice, Mummaleh."

"You feel better, Mama?"

"Yes. Thank you."

We wait, listening to Grandma recover her breath. She smiles.

Dad says, "I'll call the doctor."

"No," Grandma says. "It's not necessary."

"A minute ago you were having a heart attack."

"I'm all right. I feel better now."

My father calls Dr. Angielli, who comes promptly, but in his usual mood of distraction and politeness.

"Good morning, Mrs. Starker," he says, setting his black bag on the sofa next to Grandma. "How are we feeling today?"

Grandma seems to recognize the black bag as something alien and evil. "Get this away from me."

Dr. Angielli's smile is cheerless, diplomatic. "No problem at all, dear." He puts on his stethoscope. "Now, let's listen to your heart."

"I feel all right," Grandma insists. "I don't need a doctor."

"Good," says the doctor. "Then I'll only take a minute of your time."

Grandma stares at my mother. "Miriam, I don't want him to touch me. Don't let him touch me."

"He's a doctor, Mama. You remember Dr. Angielli."

The doctor listens to Grandma's heart and takes her blood pressure.

Grandma says, "Miriam, he's trying to kill me."

"No," Mom says. "He's a doctor."

"He's a Nazi."

Dr. Angielli laughs softly. "Take it easy, Mrs. Starker. Now I want you to take deep breaths. In . . . Out . . . In . . . Out."

"Enough!" Grandma says.

"Yes. There doesn't seem to be anything wrong with your heart."

"Get away from me."

"Is she all right to travel?" Dad asks.

"Yes, I think so. But I can't—"

"Shut up, Nazi."

Dr. Angielli puts away his instruments. My father asks him to stay until we get Grandma into the car.

"I couldn't go," Grandma says. "My heart. I don't feel good."

Dad says, "We heard this already."

My parents try to lift Grandma from the sofa. She kicks Dad's leg.

"Goddamit to hell! . . . Well it *hurts*, Miriam."

"Mummaleh, why would you give me to the Nazis?"

"You shut up," Dad says. Then he asks Dr. Angielli to give him a hand with Grandma.

"I'm sorry," the doctor says. "That's not part of my job."

"Well then how about giving her something to calm her down. Give her a good shot of something, you know?"

"Well I need the patient's permission to—"

"No!" Grandma says.

Dad laughs bitterly. He sits down beside Grandma. He looks into her face with tenderness and purpose. "You know what I'm going to do now?"

"What?"

"I'm going to pick you up and carry you right through that door."

"No. I'm not going."

"Yes you are."

"No."

Dad slips his arms under Grandma's shoulder blades and buttocks. Groaning triumphantly, he carries her across the room. Grandma cries out, pounding Dad's shoulders with her soft fists. "No! No no NO!"

"We're on our way, dear," Dad whispers.

Grandma is kicking the air. "Miriam!"

Mom turns away.

"Put me down, *Nazi!* Oy mein Gott. Little gentleman!"

For a moment I close my eyes against the need to cry; then I relax, crying without sound, moderately. I open the front door.

"Grandma. Do you want Mrs. Fields to see you like this?"

My grandmother stops kicking. At length she says, "You will please put me down now, Stanley."

"Why should I?" The way Dad is smiling, I know he cannot hold her much longer.

"You'll please put me down now. I'll go."

Dad sets her down.

"I'll go now. Miriam, I'm going." Grandma holds out her handkerchief to Mom. "You'll please wipe my face."

"All right, Mama."

"Thank you. . . . Doctor, you may go."

"Fine."

Grandma walks out into the sunshine, flanked by Mom and Dad. I rush ahead and open the door of the station wagon.

My grandmother does not hurry. Her smile is reasonable, mild with disdain. "It's a nice day," she says.

They put Grandma in the car, then Dad fetches her luggage. He tells me to straighten up the living room. My mother gives me instructions for preparing my lunch. "Promise me you'll eat, David." I nod yes.

Grandma waves goodbye, serene as a monarch mercifully deposed. I run into the house.

The clock in the kitchen says eleven thirty; too early for lunch. I heat some vegetable soup anyway, to get it over with. The soft carrots, peas, and stringbeans all taste alike.

In the living room, the sofa cushions are crooked, and the coffee table has smudges. On the carpet lies Grandma's handkerchief, harshly white in the sunshine. I bend over to inspect it, without touching; there is a

streak of her dark lipstick. I can smell it. I straighten the sofa cushions and dust the coffee table. Whenever I look away from Grandma's handkerchief, it seems to move like flame.

I wax the china cabinet. The furniture wax smells sweet and thick, like the oil my grandmother rubs into her face. The television, too, makes me think of her; the screen is black, solemn. Every object in the room, everything, reflects on her absence. The sofa, massive and sad. The frail bony legs of the china cabinet. This clarity of sight and smell reminds me of the strange, lucid feeling I get from fever. I am afraid the feeling might never go away; things might never return to normal.

I know I will go to school Monday morning, as usual. After school I will play Ping-Pong. Summer will come and I will go to camp, then to seventh grade, then high school and college. I will marry and raise children. These facts do not reassure me. I am frightened suddenly by the perfection of my future, all measured out in seasons and semesters.

