

Greene

Messiah

WAITING FOR THE MESSIAH

A Novel

By

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One Words

Nudelman started it.

"I want Isaac to have a real education," he said, looking around at the Synagogue Board with his wise hound's eyes.

Those were the words that began it all. Just eight words; a few sounds tossed into the air of the boardroom. But words have power. They can make people kill, make them fall in love, even buy appliances they don't need.

Nobody paid attention to Nudelman that day. There were more pressing matters to be decided at that meeting, like where to get the money for re-wiring the sanctuary. The eternal light kept going out and if you can't have an eternal light over the ark, what kind of a sanctuary is it? Although some would say that the Torah has its own light, but not everybody can see it.

It's easy to find the money for a nice stained-glass window, but who wants a bronze plaque that says "Abe Strauss, circuit breaker"?

Here I am, not even a page into my story and already digressing. Sorry. You have a right to go from here to there in a reasonably direct route, not by way of Minsk and Pinsk, as my Uncle Mayer used to say. On the other hand, who knows what you'll see in Pinsk? Listen! Put this book down right now and go on to something less airy than the Messiah and his coming. No? You're curious. Good.

Nudelman didn't let it drop. He kept pushing the idea of a Jewish day school. They don't call him Needleman for nothing. He constantly complained about the public schools in Bolton, the thirty-five students to a class, the dumbing-down of the textbooks. He'd say, "There's no texture to

history; it reads like a deodorant commercial," "The crime and drugs!" and "My God, school is like life!" He'd rage about the lack of amenities: "The school doesn't even have an orchestra anymore. Can you imagine a violinist in the school band marching down the football field?" He'd mention the shallowness of the kids' Jewish culture: "They care more about the Young Judea dances than the Bible." Not that Nudelman was a great, or even a trivial, biblical scholar, but maybe he saw a lack in himself and wanted more for Isaac, his only child.

His carping and harping went on for about a year, until one evening, at the end of a long meeting, Finkelstein's eyes looked ready to pop as he glared across the polished mahogany of the board of directors' table, slapped down his spiral secretary's notebook, and hollered, "What do you want from us? Stop already with the Jewish day school. It's impossible! A dream. A fantasy! You want a school? Move to Pittsburgh!"

By the look of him, Nudelman wasn't bothered by the outburst. Not at all. Nudelman had finally touched a nerve. They were listening. He hit the accelerator and peeled rubber—you could almost smell it.

"Bolton's Jewish community is going the way of Megiddo," he said. Nobody but Rabbi Bing knew what he was talking about. "If one more family moves to Phoenix, we can open an archeological park and sell tickets. We need to do something that will restore the vitality of the community. And my solution is a Jewish boarding school."

A shiver of approval, less than a nod, came from Rabbi Bing, but the rest of the Board glowered. Rosenzweig, a lawyer and no friend of private education, took the lead. He shook his head, causing his jowls to quiver like Jello, and pronounced, "You think you're the Music Man, Nudelman? Let me give not one no, but three nos. No money. No building. No students."

"Not exactly," Nudelman retorted. He drew a little circle on his scratch pad then looked at each of them in turn, his face showing the after-blush of a secret joke.

"Nudelman has had a letter from the Reparations Board," said Dr. Zucker., Phil Feld

pulled a cigar out of his suit pocket. Chastened, by Heda Finkelstein's frown, he contented himself with crinkling the cellophane between his fingers.

"Are you going to watch the Pirates game?" he asked Finkelstein, who looked in response as though someone had already blown smoke in his eyes.

About that time Nudelman, was standing, preparing for a dramatic exit, when Rabbi Bing, always the conciliator, stopped him with a firm touch from his long fingers.

"Let's once and for all hear Nudelman out on this, shall we?" He raised his head heavenward for emphasis, as if he expected God to vote. Then he gave one of his sweep-the-room-full-of-meaning glances from behind his inch-thick lenses. The rabbi's palm flipped and gracefully gestured toward Nudelman, who remained standing, poised over the table, as if he were preparing to vault across it. (Nudelman had vaulted for Bolton High.)

"How many Jewish boarding schools are there in this country?" Nudelman asked, and before anyone could speak, he answered, "None?"

"So what!" said Rosenzweig, leaning his bulk into the words. "You might as well ask how many crocodiles there are in the Monoganssen River. It is beyond our small means. The Pritzkers (he meant rich people) chose to make their home a bit farther down the turnpike in Chicago."

"Hear him out," said Rabbi Bing, with a sprinkle of pepper in his usually mild tone. "Don't interrupt."

"Thank you, Rabbi Bing," said Nudelman. "Don't think I haven't thought about it. Maybe this'll shock you, but when you think about it, it'll make some sense."

"Get on with it, Nudelman, life is passing you by," Finkelstein chided.

"OK."

"Do that." Finkelstein just had to have the last word.

"It's simple."

"We're all ears." Finkelstein does in fact have big ears.

"The Home for the Aged."

"So? What about it?"

Nudelman's hound eyes lit up with a vision.

"As you know, it was built as a TB sanitarium in 1912," he began, "converted in 1947 to a home for the elderly. It has spacious grounds, a solid stone Tudor gothic building, room for 150 maybe 200 if we pack them in, and an endowment, the Mossberg Trust, you all know what that's worth in income. What is it, \$400,000? And thanks to aerobics, golf, vitamins, triple bypasses and Leisure World condos in the sun, we have just five—count 'em: five—seniors rattling around the place."

"So what do you have in mind? Should we sell the place and move the rest of them to Phoenix?" Rosenzweig said, shaking his leonine head. "It can't be done; we've been through that before. Close the Home for the Aged and the money goes to the Jewish Home for Parents in Pittsburgh. And they've already got enough to supply every resident with their choice of a Steinberg piano."

"Steinway!" said Heda Finkelstein, gazing up over her half-lenses from her knitting. Heda had one.

"Or a motorized wheelchair made by Cadillac," Rosenzweig muttered.

Nudelman looked like Edison when the light bulb started to glow. He rose up to his full five feet ten inches, opened both of his hands and proclaimed, "We don't have to. That's what I've concluded after reading the original trust. Rosenzweig, you'll like this: a section that says you can provide for all the needs of the residents."

"So, buy a color television, even a Jacuzzi!"

"What about things to do, companionship? The school will be like therapy. The old folks will teach the young, give them values, and give them a sense of history, of generational change. And the kids will keep them company, just like grandchildren."

"That's a novel idea," said Roe. "But as I recall only one of them was a teacher. What's her name?"

"Miss Leventhal," I said. She had been my English teacher and Nudelman's and a few of the others as well. "We'll hire a staff of teachers, who will spend part of their time in a learning-in-retirement program."

"Nudelman, I've got to hand it to you, you should be Secretary of the Treasury. You could turn the deficit into a surplus," said Finkelstein, grinning around the table for confirmation.

"What do you think, Mendel?" asked Rabbi Bing. I was there to take notes, one of my duties as the Community Center Administrator—a fancy title intended to take the place of a better salary.

"Well," I began, looking around for signs of approval. No doubt about it, Nudelman had finally turned a little credibility valve in each of them. Everyone on the Board had wanted somehow to crack the stone sheath that surrounded the Old Folks Trust, as it was called. And Nudelman, they were all thinking, had possibly found the cabbalistic formula. "I like the idea," I finally said.

"You know, Nudelman. A Jewish boarding school isn't such a bad idea, now that I think of it," added Rosenzweig, pulling on a left jowl with his frankfurter-sized fingers and looking around at the others,

And so I learned something else about the gears and machinations of human events. Ideas germinate for a long time before they find validation in others. Look at Galileo, Columbus, Spinoza and the tough time they all had selling their concepts. It's not the idea itself but the way it's packaged that matters most, it seems. And whether it gives someone something they might like but don't have, that matters most of all. Now don't just get the idea that Nudelman had carried off a *fait accompli*, not by a long shot. But his bat had hit the ball and he was running like hell toward first base.

Two Courage

Obsession is not too strong a word to describe Nudelman's dedication to the Jewish boarding school. Seeing him badger and cajole made me think of the energy he and Sarah had focused on the problem of having a child. Years had passed but they never stopped trying and finally it happened. Now here he was again, swimming against the current like a spawning salmon Isaac, their son, was now thirteen, all elbows and knees, self-conscious with a breaking voice and a few pimples—a young Nudelman with the same thick black hair and large expressive brown eyes.

One of our high school buddies once said, “Nudelman sees with his ears and hears with his eyes.” He played guard on the Bolton High basketball team and I remember how fast he was. In fact, Nudelman was Most Valuable Player, his senior year even though Bolton lost the divisional to Slippery Rock. About nine years back, he had sold the family plumbing supply business to a large Pittsburgh chain for what most people said was a killing, although everybody always says that about the other guy. After a few months of looking around, including three weeks on Nassau, he had the guts to buy the local GM truck dealership after the 86-year-old owner, Walter C. Taffey, broke his hip changing a tire during a teamster's strike. Everybody said he got a bargain. Rumor had it that Taffey still remembered Nudelman's winning basket the night the Bolton five stole the championship from Beaver Falls.

What did Nudelman know about trucks? Nothing, but that didn't stop him; after all, he knew how to run a business. And he made a go of it with discounts, leasing, fleet rates and who knows what else. He even installed a computer to keep track of parts, which was better than relying on Mr. Taffey's memory, so the customers said.

Every year Nudelman and Sarah did better and better. They were giving a lot more money

to the synagogue and they were spending long weekends in New York seeing plays, eating in Italian restaurants that Sarah found in *Gourmet*, even buying an occasional painting and replacing the framed Matisse and Cezanne posters. Enough of that. All it shows is that Nudelman doesn't let go once he starts.

Watching Nudelman chip away at the Board made me think that there are two kinds of achievements—big and little. Most of us are content with the little: getting up on time, catching the bus. Our lives are a pile of acts, benign and banal, unique in a way but undistinguished.

Then there are the few who somehow move boulders. Looking at the boulder-movers, we who can't are left to wonder how they can. History is full of them: Madame Curie, Columbus, Hannibal, Alexander, Balzac, Shakespeare, Ben Gurion, Washington and the others, the nameless bush-league heroes, people like Nudelman. Their secret is that they don't see how impossible their goals are. They too just get up in the morning and put on their shoes, just like Nudelman. By the way, his first name was Nachman, but nobody ever called him that—nobody could pronounce it.

He didn't look much like a truck dealer the day I went up to his home office, over his two-car garage. No shoes on and a hole in his sock. His blue wool sweater was faded and the rumpled moss green corduroy pants bagged at the knees. As usual that thicket of ungovernable black hair was in need of pruning. Maybe that's why people trust Nudelman; he doesn't look like a sharpy and he's not.

The room, his study, was as rumpled as he was, piled with discarded or half-read *Wall Street Journals* and *Popular Mechanics* open to articles he wanted to get back to someday. Even with the window open there was a smell of pipe smoke and dog. Mandalay, an old Labrador retriever, grey at the muzzle and milky in the eye, lay at his feet on a faded hand-hooked circular rug. In front of him, Nudelman, not the dog, was a mosaic, with little notes on scraps of paper of different sizes and colors covering him.

"Mendel. Glad you could come." He had a sharp voice, urgent, like every sports announcer

I've ever heard. He thrust his long-fingered hand toward me and asked, "Rosenzweig gave you the agreement?"

"Yes, I have it here, but don't ask me what it says. It's all commas and no periods."

"Better you don't know, and then nobody will blame you if we blow it."

"What's it all about?"

"Just a formality. A long-winded resolution, from the trustees of the old folks' home, to the effect that funds can be spent for education, recreation, and therapy for the residents at the discretion of the Board."

"So that's all it takes, Nudelman? I've got to hand it to you, you're a magician."

Nudelman raised his hand and let it fall, dismissing the accomplishment. "All I did, Mendel, was show them how to turn on the lamp."

"I have to say, though, I've been wondering what Mr. Mossberg would have said."

Mossberg had set up the trust in the late twenties.

"We'll discuss it with the lawyer."

"There may be relatives who would just as soon have the money. I've heard of such things."

"They're long gone, as far as I know; don't worry about it. We've got a million things to do: recruit teachers, find a director, advertise in the Jewish papers for students, buy sporting equipment, books, desks. It's endless. I'm glad you're experienced, what with the synagogue school." As he spoke he was rearranging the little notes.

"Have you talked to the old folks about it?"

"You should do that, Mendel. You've got a way with them."

I knew he would say that. It all eventually comes to me as the amanuensis of the synagogue and factotum of the Board, not that they don't do their share. But I get paid for what I do. No matter. I like the old folks and thought, as Nudelman did, that the idea of a school in their midst would be as energizing as a brothel at a miner's camp—though not in that way exactly, don't get me wrong.

Nudelman leaned back in his chair and gave me that loose grin that hadn't changed much since the first time I saw him that day at Bolton High. I still remember the words, "C'mon, I'll show you around." He mused his words, still does, and I didn't know what "c'mon" meant but I soon got used to his speech. It's American, I later decided, informal and direct. What's a consonant among friends after all? He was the first one of my classmates at Bolton High to reach out to me after the War Refugee people dropped me in Bolton straight from the D.P. camp.

That night in my book-lined apartment at the Center I worked late, drafting a well-reasoned persuasive explanation of the advantages of the boarding school. But as it turned out I wouldn't use it. So much for battle plans.

Three

The Talk of Elders

There we were, the five old folks and me, seated at the heavy black oak dining table in the cavernous dining hall with its peaked roof supported by massive cross beams. Through the tall gothic windows on both sides of the hall I could see bibulous white clouds and the tops of old chestnut trees swaying in the autumn wind like praying Jews. It was cold in the vast room—a cold that had been stored for years—and we seemed so fragile and insignificant, as if the room had been designed for Goliath.

Remnants of a gentler naive time, the old folks sat in a line, expectant, their faces shrunken, wrinkled, distended, beautiful, faintly lit with the satisfaction that they had been recognized. Most of the time they were overlooked like a picture in a dark corner that has hung quietly for forty years. Their functions in Bolton had either been taken on by others or were no longer needed. Among them was the owner of what we used to call a hamburger joint; an antiques dealer (there was no branch of the Salvation Army in Bolton); a door-to-door household goods salesman (“Dollar down a dollar a week!”); a mother of two sons, both killed in World War II; and a high school teacher.

Selma Novik, the matriarch, was frail, almost transparent, as if her body would one day disintegrate, leaving only her soul. Her blue, deep-set eyes were those of a child peeking out of the Halloween mask of an old wrinkled lady. Next to her was Izzy Bortz—owl-like behind his post-cataract magnifying glass lenses, a deck of cards on the table in front of him.

Gene Karp was eyeing me from under his still-black, barbed wire-like eyebrows, with his characteristic suspicion. Then there was Susana Leventhal, the first woman high school teacher in the county. Her age was either 101 or 98 depending on whom you talked to—she was no longer sure. Miss Leventhal, as she was still called, was sitting erect as she always had in class; she was a

stickler for good posture. Steel grey hair, what there was of it, was neatly knotted on top of her head. Her clackers, too perfect to be real, just showed through the opening of her tight lipless mouth. Her eyes looking alternately vacant and alert suggested that her mind was living in two places at once. Maimonides Kravitz looked sanguine and self-possessed, with a much-thumbed copy of the *Atlantic Monthly* and an anthology of poetry by Milosz open in front of him. His many-colored *keepah*, a mystical vision of paradise, sat perched on his shiny, bald head. He acknowledged me with a curious and warm look.

I sat down, feeling at ease and glad to be among them. Except for a cousin in Israel I had no family so the old folks were as close as I could come to knowing their generation. Aside from that, they were as comforting as an old quilt on a winter night. Being with them is a glimpse of what's ahead for all of us.

There was a pot of tea on the table, brown stoneware with a top that didn't fit. Chipped but indestructible china mugs, and a pile of Russian tea biscuits filled with cherry jelly and walnuts baked by Selma Novik completed the service. Remarkably self-sufficient, the seniors shared much of the daily chores other than the housecleaning. As Maimonides liked to say, "We don't want to put people out."

The old folks lived almost in a state of grace. No one had died among them in the last ten years. True, there had been a little corrective surgery now and then but what old garment doesn't need a patch or two. Dr. Zucker was out there three times a week, and they consumed so many pills that the Purity Drug Store might have closed down without them.

"So, Mendel, what brings you out here on such a blustery day?" Selma asked, as if I had come by foot on a long journey rather than five minutes out of town in a car. Implicit in her question was the premise that few people came to visit.

"I longed for a good conversation," I said.

"A good conversation is like sweet butter," said Kravitz.

"Schnapps is better," said Bortz, riffing his cards.

Kravitz gave me a look that said, don't mind him. "When I was your age, Mendel, we used to talk till dawn over tea." He was the only one who hadn't been born in Bolton, having come from Brest-Litovsk in 1919, and he still spoke with a little Slavic twist of the tongue.

"Now there's the all night TV movies if you can't sleep." said Karp.

"Trash!" said Kravitz, not unkindly.

"Your garbage is my gold," rejoined Bortz, his laser lenses pointed at his adversary.

"Never argue with a fool!" said Kravitz and he shook his head with a bemused smile.

"They go on that way sometimes, Mendel," Selma said. "It happens when you live day after day with somebody. Habits get on your nerves. It takes tolerance, which we have of course."

"How are you getting along?" I asked, still unwilling to put the subject on the table.

Kravitz shrugged. "Every day is a blessing!"

"A gift," said Miss Leventhal. "When you get to a certain age, every day is a gift." Her head shook a little, as did her voice when she spoke. She flicked a few crumbs of the tea cake off of her brown shawl.

I remembered how old she had seemed that first frightening year at Bolton High and how nervous I had been the day she asked me to recite some Wordsworth. Not that I didn't know it, but I was afraid the others would snicker at my Polish accent. To put me at my ease she had announced to the class that I could speak five languages, all of them fluently, and that Josef Conrad, a Pole, had written all of his novels in English. Nobody laughed.

"Do you get bored out here?" I asked, leading toward the topic of my visit.

"Never! There's always something to do," said Selma, and in turn they catalogued their interests and activities. Selma watched birds, kept a record of each siting, cooked, baked, and sewed. Kravitz read and wrote. Currently he was grinding away at a monograph on Duns Scotus and Herman Hesse. Miss Leventhal played the piano when she had the energy. Izzy Bortz and Gene

Karp played cards, watched television, and kept the place from falling apart; both were handy with tools.

"Would you believe it, Mendel?" said Selma, gesturing toward Bortz. "He has rewired the fuse box, himself?"

"I almost electrocuted myself, but I did it," said Bortz shaking his hand.

"Isn't this place just too big for you?" I asked.

"No, we love the space. Each of us can be alone when we want to," said Miss Leventhal. Her voice had grown younger with age and was childlike but the articulation was precise as ever.

None of my reasons for ultimately suggesting that they share the building with a school was reaching them. "Do you miss having children about?" I threw out hopefully.

"I had enough of children," said Karp, swinging his hand with contempt, "with all that noise, and always spilling things."

"Don't mind him," said Selma. "Everybody loves having children around, even Gene Karp."

"God communicates through the faces of children," said Maimonides Kravitz.

"Then I have good news. You'll be having children all around you soon. The Board has decided to create a Jewish boarding school." I tried to make it sound auspicious and looked at each of their faces.

It took a few seconds for the message to register and each took it differently. Miss Leventhal began to glow. Izzy Bortz contracted an advanced stage of gangrene. The rest seemed as though they were about to try a new cake recipe.

"Where?" said Izzy.

"Here."

"Where do we go?" Izzy sounded hurt and he began to automatically wipe the table in front of him with his crumpled napkin.

"You stay here. Of course you may have to move to another room, since we'll be putting up

some walls to separate the dormitory from your quarters."

"Move from my room? But I like my room," said Izzy Bortz, drawing in his drooping lower lip.

"It will be just as big, with the same view of the grounds."

"But it won't be my room. And what about the noise and the tumult?" said Karp.

Selma and Maimonides seemed to be getting used to the idea, glancing at each other with questions in their eyes. Afraid to say any more, I zipped my lip. What if they raised a fuss, wrote to the Grey Panthers, or even worse, the newspaper. I picked up the rest of my tea cake and bit into it. The room was so quiet, my chewing resounded in my head like a meat grinder. Maimonides raised his eyebrows and took a deep, wheezy breath before he reached for another tea cake.

"I think it's just a wonderful idea, Mendel," Selma finally said. "After all, this place is empty. It should be put to use. And it would give us something more to do than watch the paint peel off of the walls."

"I agree," said Kravitz, and his Adam's apple bounced as he swallowed.

"It's positively exciting!" said Miss Leventhal.

My heart began to beat in my ears with relief.

"Yes, you'll even help with the classes if you like," I said. "They will be like grandchildren to you and the teachers will provide adult learning, learning for the elderly, all sorts of courses. It will be stimulating, a new lease on life."

"My old lease hasn't expired yet," said Bortz.

"It sounds like heaven." Selma.

"I'll teach poetry," said Miss Leventhal and the look she gave me was full of a common recollection of my days in her class.

"And I will teach the Baal Shem Tov," Maimonides said.

"Izzy Bortz will teach poker," said Karp, pointing at the cards.

And Bortz answered, "Karp will teach them how to cheat."

"Will we eat together as well?"

"Yes, if you like, but we plan to set up a separate sitting room for you and the faculty, just to have quiet. And there will be a table in there and comfortable chairs."

"Yes, that's good. I like that. What about the bathrooms?" Selma asked.

"You won't have to share."

"Good. That's important." Selma nodded and poured some more tea.

"So you agree?"

"And if we didn't, what then?" Izzy Bortz was smiling now, a dill pickle smile, but a smile all the same.

"Even so, the Board wants to know."

"Well, tell the Board, we'll make the best of it." Izzy Bortz folded his hands over his flabby stomach.

"More than that, Mendel. I'm looking forward to it," said Selma.

"I hope there won't be a lot of carpenters around. I can't stand hammering and those electric saws. It's like they are sawing inside your head."

"Mendel, before you go, let me give you two of my tea cakes. I know how much you like them. Do you think the children will as well?"

"Selma," I said. "I'm sure the tea cakes will make you the most popular person at the school."

Four

A Faithful Friend

Estelle had thought of selling the house many times but she couldn't bring herself to. What would she do with all the furniture, all the stuff that filled the drawers and closets? Sometimes, late at night if she couldn't sleep, she would pick a drawer or a closet and browse. At these times she wished that she had kept a journal, even though the pages would have been filled with tuna casseroles, and scrambled eggs, and poems written by their friends in celebration of their twentieth wedding anniversary. Sydney was gone; her son Noah was practicing psychotherapy in Pittsburgh. She had a grandchild now, Ariel. Noah, Monica and Ariel came down for the weekend often enough. When they did, the house was full again and echoes of the friendly chaos of a young family's life carried her to the next visit.

She would tell me this and more. Estelle told me everything. I was her counselor, her confessor, and through her I lived the surrogate life of a father and grandfather. I told her everything as well. Almost everything. I had never told her that I loved her, more than as my closest friend; but I couldn't bring myself to say it. Even after all these years, to say that I wanted her, as a woman, would somehow adulterate Sidney, which was foolish and irrational. (Is that proper English: *adultery* therefore *adulterate*? I must look it up in the dictionary later.) Somehow I always had the feeling of Sidney's presence, of the curl of cigar smoke coming through the half open door of his den. I couldn't imagine being in bed with Estelle, not in her bed at least. But I could see myself waking up, rolling over and bumping into Sidney. So there we were, the two of us, living today but stuck in the cobweb of the past.

In truth I had missed my chance. Nudelman was a jumper. I was a hesitator. Some years after Sidney's death, Estelle had asked me to move in with her—as a boarder of course, but I

refused, tempting though it might have been. Later I regretted refusing but she had never asked again and I assumed she had lost interest.

Then came my so-called medical leave to Canyon Springs, California and my fling with Sarah Cavanaugh. That spun me in a different direction and, I guess, put Estelle off. When I came back from Canyon Springs she was welcoming and we saw a lot of each other. I was there several times a week for dinner and often dropped in for morning coffee. We went to plays and concerts in Pittsburgh at least once a month and always had dinner before. Sometimes we held hands like teenagers, but nothing more. I suppose I was afraid of disappointing her. After all, I was no Casanova. On the other hand I wasn't exactly a monk. I had a physical, even sensual side, if you will, and lately I had even begun to flirt with the national craze of jogging. Understand I had never been chubby, but I had an aversion to these middle-aged men who begin to look a little pregnant just about the time that their wives don't.

If Estelle knew about the nameless widow from McKeesport, she never mentioned it. Heda Finkelstein knows all and tells all. Now that I think of it, Estelle asked once what I did every Sunday night and I recall brushing the question aside with an embarrassed chuckle and cursing Heda Finkelstein, in my head of course.

Here we were, the two of us in that perfect dream of Middle America: the Casa Cantor, colonial in its decor right down to the pin cushion, except for the green copper menorah on the maple buffet; an incongruous novelty that Sidney had picked up on one of his Jewish Welfare Board missions to Israel. Would that I could have given her my mother's three-hundred-year-old silver menorah with the two rampant lions holding up the *shammes* candle, but that was only a sweet painful memory. So now there was this candelabrum, perched on its spindly legs and still holding the candles, like Israel itself.

Estelle was just emerging from the kitchen, a glass coffee pot extended forward like a handgun. Food is a weapon after all. She has changed very little over the years, to my eyes at least.

Estelle is not a tall woman, although she has a presence in the way she holds her head, a little high, so that some people might take her to be haughty when she is only trying to make the best of her five foot three stature and keep her breasts from sagging. Her eyes are on the dark side of mahogany, so that you have to get close to see the nuance and texture of her irises, and they are acute and animated, revealing a lively, critical, but caring mind. Her eyes are just as big as the first time I saw her next to her locker at Bolton High, but the little creases all around them give away the number of years they've been looking at the world. Her most striking feature is her eyebrows, shaped exactly like the wings of a gull in flight. Her hair is thick and the rich auburn highlights that I remember are beginning to fade, now that the grey is starting to intrude. She's been talking about "touching it up." She's also a good dresser, and the taupe silk blouse and black wool slacks favored her shape, but I'm no fashion editor.

OK, she was older than she used to be. So am I. Even so, there is something magical about growing old. As a snake sheds its skin, we are slowly replaced by another person, resembling us more than a little, but certainly not the same, yet close enough and slowly enough that we don't go out of our mind. What if we woke up one day, say on our sixtieth birthday, and found that we were old. What then?

Outside, it was raining hard and the wind was making a little tattoo on the window and sighing in the nearly bare trees. We had just finished the apricot crisp, and I was feeling pleasantly full—Estelle never serves over-sized portions.

"No butter!" she exclaimed. And the dried apricots are Sulphur-free."

"I feel better already, doctor. I think I shall live forever. Well, at least longer than I had planned to."

"Seriously, Mendel, how is your cholesterol. Have you had it checked?"

"Yes, I am pleased to announce that it is 50-percent butterfat, which is good."

"Be serious, Mendel. You should be aware of such things."

She poured some coffee into the Limoges china cup, not colonial—an heirloom from her mother—and sat down, bending toward me.

"So you were telling me about the boarding school."

"You should be on the Board, Estelle. It would be good for you."

"I've got enough to do, Mendel. You know how it is, the busy never have enough time."

Estelle was still fixated on the stock market and doing well with the insurance money and the little she had recovered from the sale of the business. But it took a lot of time, buying and selling, selling and buying, hedging, putting and taking, optioning and futuring and all that.

"In your next life, maybe you'll be a what-do-they-call-it, a barb, the ones who bet on companies taking each other over?"

"You mean an arb, from *arbitrage*."

"More like *abattoir*."

"Never mind the market, I get enough of that. The school!" Estelle has a high, nasal voice, but I rather like it. It keeps you on your toes, you could say.

I raised my hand and fluttered my fingers, something my father used to do.

"It comes."

"The gossip, Mendel. Do I have to get it all from Heda Finkelstein?"

"There is no gossip, only facts. We have applications for teachers; some look OK but not enough. The same can be said about the students. The carpenters are disturbing Izzy Bortz."

Months had passed since the Board had given Nudelman the green light. Months full of details, what with architect's plans, building contracts, permit applications, budgets, mailings and so on. And this was just the beginning. There was still the search for teachers and a director to be faced. After all, not everyone would put a position in Bolton on par with one in Cleveland or Pittsburgh. Nudelman's patience was beginning to wear thin, and he had the tenacity of a pit bull.

"Izzy Bortz was always a complainer," said Estelle. "I remember the time he kicked us all

out of his hamburger joint because Nudelman put an open bottle of beer on the counter."

"We were so naive, then. What did we know from hard drugs? Drugs were aspirin. Coke, you could have at the fountain with cherry or chocolate. Remember the soda fountain at the... What was it called?"

"Mary's Confectionary."

"The stools with little backs. You could swivel around and they would bring you back to center."

"They tore it down after Mary died." Estelle got that dreamy look, then she turned to me with amusement and said, "She was so fat. And remember, she didn't have any eyebrows. She used to paint them on. She looked like a kewpie doll."

"Yes. Like a clown."

"Remember we used to place bets on whether she would get wedged behind the counter. Wait. I want to show you something." She got up and went to the kitchen, returning in a moment with a heavy glass dish shaped like a banana. She handed it to me with a look of pride. "I found it at a rummage sale. There were six of them on the shelf."

"I must confess something, Estelle. I've never had a banana split in my life, never," I said, brandishing the bowl.

"I don't believe it."

"Who could afford thirty-five cents?"

"I'll make you one some-day."

"I led a deprived childhood."

"You were talking about the school."

"The old folks are surviving, even looking forward to it, except for Karp and maybe Bortz. Just what I told you the last time. Why are you so curious? Do you want a job or are you planning to endow a classroom, which you don't have to do as there is so much money in the Mossberg Trust."

Greene

Messiah

And that's how it was with us.

Five

Red Star in the East

Life is an endless paper chain of compromises, you could say. As children we equate our aspirations with what is fair. But life is not always fair, any more than we—you and me—always do the right thing, making the right choice when we have a choice, and meeting the expectations of people who depend on us. Life comes at you like a drunk driver. It's nothing you planned, and if you had thought it was going to happen you would have gotten out of the way.

Sorry about that! You wanted to know what was going on with the school and I drop a wet rag on your face. But what I said has something to do with the school, you see, because as the Board plodded forward and the momentous start of the first academic year closed in on us, we were all seized by icy panic. Nothing was as we hoped it would be. One phase of the work was going well, at least, the minor structural changes in the main building had been completed. But enrolment and teacher recruitment were falling short, and worst of all, none of the people who had applied for the post of Director looked good enough.

The day of the momentous Board meeting it was raining cats and rats, a smothering August rain. The whole town was drooping, the trees forlorn with weighted leaves, showing the fatigue of a hot summer. A yellow poster from last spring's county fair, blistered and peeling, clung to the window of the army surplus store at the wrong end of Main Street. Children, looking like runaway fire hydrants in their bright yellow slickers and rain hats, splashed through puddles on the way to visit friends.

The mood around the Board table was like the taste of milk gone sour. Fourteen synagogue presidents looked down from the wall, spectators at a losing game. Raincoats, limp and smelling of mildew, were draped over the spare chairs. Water was still trickling down Finkelstein's wrinkled forehead from his soaked hair. The rest were waiting, sipping coffee from Styrofoam cups. Rabbi

Bing was making notes, probably for his next sermon, and between thoughts chatting with Steve Roe. Looking ahead to the winter, Sophie Feld was knitting something brown while Harriet Rosenzweig skimmed the *New Republic*.

If Nudelman was worried he didn't show it. It was his baby and he was bound to feel good about it no matter how it turned out. He watched Finkelstein settle into his chair then opened his file and fanned out the letters, as diverse in their appearance as the applicants.

"Good news!" he said, with the sincerity of a master salesman. "I think we have found our director!"

"None too soon," said Rabbi Bing, polishing his thick glasses with a clean handkerchief and looking like a mole.

"Yes, and you'll be surprised although there is a downside."

"Surprise us!" said Finkelstein.

Nudelman picked up a clipped sheaf of papers and flourished it with the air of a momentous announcement; a war had ended or one had begun. "I think our director has been located."

"Where's he been?" quipped Finkelstein through a summer cold.

"Moscow."

"Not a Refusenik! Are you nuts?" shrieked Finkelstein.

"Yes, a Refusenik! It'll put us on the map!"

"Nudelman, you're losing it," said Roe.

"Hear him out," said Rabbi Bing, now back in focus.

"Thank you. You'll be glad. First off, he speaks English and Hebrew, and he's a pedagogue by profession."

"Good, then he likes little boys!" Finkelstein again. Don't get him wrong. He wasn't the kind who gripes about everything, just the type who had to get his word in all the time on every subject.

"Not a pederast! May I go on?"

"Go."

"His name is Lev Kyol." Nudelman repeated it, trying to get the pronunciation right. "He's been the director of an elementary school in Moscow. He's now in Vienna."

"What could he possibly know about Jewish education? They send people to Siberia for having a study group." Sophie Feld looked up from her knitting to ask this in her languid tone.

"His grandfather was a famous rabbi."

"So hire his grandfather," persisted Finkelstein. "You think knowledge comes by osmosis? You'll make fools of the community, Nudelman."

Nudelman's face was getting red. He picked up a few of the letters, shook them and said in a tight voice, "That would be unnecessary, in your case, at least. Look, I've written 30 letters, made 20 phone calls, gone through 35 applications, and this is the only one that comes close to what we want."

Harriet Rosenzweig looked up from her magazine. "A sad commentary on the state of Jewish education."

"Look, Bolton isn't Los Angeles. Not every rising educator would think of Bolton as advancing his career—no offence to you, Rabbi Bing or you, Mendel." Steve Roe was probably thinking back on his move from Hartford, Connecticut.

"So what's wrong with Bolton, Steve?" said Finkelstein.

"Please let him finish." Rabbi Bing swept the room with his gaze.

And finish he did. An hour later the Board was convinced, or rather resigned, or more to the point rationalized. We would hire the Refusenik for a year and if he didn't work out, at least he would have gotten to America, and we'd have a year to find somebody else.

"Are you satisfied, Nudelman?" I asked, as we walked out of the room together.

"Satisfied? Why?"

"You got what you wanted, didn't you?"

"This isn't what I wanted, Mendel, but life is a series of compromises." And with that he rushed ahead of me into the rain. I never found out just what would have suited him.