
The Contract

A Story

John J. Clayton

MY WIFE thinks I'm depressed. Certainly I'm depressed. Why shouldn't I be? But when she complains about my study of the holy books, she doesn't know. "Your practice is going to hell," she says. "You're too young to retire." I'm an estate lawyer, part of a small firm in Boston—maybe I have less push these days. I am conscientious in behalf of my clients. It's just that I don't work hard to replace them when they leave this world and their affairs are straightened out. "What are you *doing* with your time?" she says.

"What? I'm reading Talmud. I'm reading Midrash. This is not unheard of in our tradition."

"I look in the morning," she says, "and you've got a pile of volumes. Very impressive. I look in the evening, the books haven't moved one inch. But now there are more volumes."

"You should have been Sherlock's sidekick Shirley," I say. I laugh and pat her hand. I'm gentle with Natalie these days. Once upon a life I was an unholy terror as a husband. Now, no. Natalie gets tired. She's lost weight, she's lost hair, she covers it with one of a number of lovely silk scarves—paisley, mauve, and her eyebrows she pencils in like a film star from the 30's. She has a whole new set of

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clothes, which she says she won't ever outwear. A pharmacy of pills is lined up by her bedside. It's understandable she gets upset. She wakes up, nauseated, in the middle of the night, trying not to disturb my sleep, so I lie there and pretend for her sake.

I'll tell you what I do with the books. I'm investigating, I'm trying to figure out. I am, after all, a lawyer. So if I get stuck in a line of reasoning, I follow a thread back through Maimonides; sometimes it takes me to the library at Hebrew College in Newton where I examine records of rabbinical courts, or *responsa*, opinions of the great rabbis.

"You think that's going to get you anywhere?" she scoffs.

"No, sweetheart. Frankly, no. But there's a little comfort knowing great men have also tried to understand."

"There *is* nothing to understand," she says.

"That's your opinion."

"It's like a tornado. It just happens. You want to say God did it? *Say* God. Then say God when your shoe squashes a bug."

"I do."

She rolls her eyes. Same eyes when we met at Jewish summer camp 40 years ago. I was afraid of them then, too. Natalie can be ferocious. She's a very critical person when she wants to be. Until this year she was a high-school teacher of English, and I used to kid her, "God protect those children from your wrath." Often, say when I was soothing

her, praising her the way we do every Friday night with the passage from Proverbs, “An accomplished woman who can find? Far beyond pearls is her value,” that’s when she’d go on the attack: “Beyond pearls, sure. You know what it’s like to be a Jewish woman beyond pearls? With God a male—King, Father, Lord of hosts?” But nobody else better say one word, and you should have seen her searching for the crumbs of leavened food just before Passover. Again, ferocious. So she thinks she’s earned the right.

“You’re looking good today,” I say. “Anything could happen.”

“Three strikes and you’re out,” she says. Like: no palliatives, thank you very much.

Her speech has begun to be a little slurred.

I carry her up the stairs; unfortunately, it’s not hard. She was always wiry, lithe, a gymnast when she was at Sarah Lawrence; but now the wire has gone soft.

I think about Moses, Moses having to carry the children of Israel, a terrible burden, as the Holy One carries the Universe. At the burning bush Moses said: please, go choose someone else. Was he afraid? Who wouldn’t be? And humble—I’m not worthy. Well, who is? And also, I think, exhausted in advance, given the knowledge of what was coming. Because he must have known those Israelites in his heart—a willful, spoiled people, wanting easy victories and a varied diet, not particularly interested in being a nation of priests. *What’s wrong with these people? Every day, food falls from the sky! When will they stop complaining?*

But maybe that’s not the issue—the burden. Maybe Moses looked into the burning bush or the fire on the mountain and saw in advance the black smoke rising. *Am I willing to subject to such suffering the future children of our exile, children of children of children?* He knew—he warned them, didn’t he, before he died? Maybe, at Sinai, that’s what kept him up there on the mountain so long. *A land of milk and honey? Dear God: We both know what’s coming. What kind of contract is this?*

WHAT KIND of contract? I wonder myself sometimes. I mean about my own two boys, their children, *their* children. Born and unborn, what have I gotten them into? It’s not just (God forbid) future Holocausts. It’s everybody’s life—everybody’s ordinary suffering, everybody’s death. Losses.

I’m imagining myself in the desert. That’s not so unreasonable, I’ll tell you. Some nights, it feels that way. But I mean the desert at Sinai. Suppose I was a

little child in the desert when the Lord appeared to Moses at Sinai, and now that whole generation is dead, my mother, my father, even Moses; we’ve crossed the Jordan and taken cities, and I’ve got grandchildren of my own. And as a child of the sojourning I wonder: was it worth it? Not being a prophet, I don’t even know what’s coming—exile in Babylon, imperial rule, the temple, its ruin and then its ruin again until we are all cast out. I don’t know the tearing of flesh and the burnings to come, the humiliations, so many. But already I’m uneasy. *Is it worth it?*

Quietly as I can, I dress in the dark weekdays to go attend a morning service. There are always barely enough to make up a minyan, a quorum, so I feel bad if I would have been the tenth and I don’t get there. She sits up, and in the dark her silhouette is of a pre-adolescent child. “I’ll get your tea warmed up,” I tell her. It’s a brew of Chinese herbs she swears by.

“I can do it,” she says. “Better go pray. What are you praying for this morning?”

I don’t say.

“I’ll tell you something. It makes me hurt more,” she says, hacking up morning phlegm, “to see you praying. ‘*Hasbem ehad?*’ God is one? Is that what you say? All right. The same force that organized the stars is at work in my body.”

“Please. Natalie. Please.” I go downstairs for her tea. Why be bitter, I think, make it all lousy, because you go through this a few years before I do? I’m as good as dead myself. What’s a few years? All day I talk to her in my head. And what about the boys? Hasn’t it been worth it? One son at Berkeley in physics, the other working for a trading consortium in Paris. She’d say she wanted to see them married, to know their children. And you and me?—I want to say—haven’t there been good times?

She’s right, of course—it’s all one. I acknowledge this as I pray. Love and cancer. So does that mean there’s merely amoral power in the universe and *we’re* the ones who invented compassion, invented goodness, out of whole cloth because we couldn’t stand it that our Source has no soul to care with, is care-less, couldn’t care less if we live or die? And so we had to teach God how and what to be, and *that* is the meaning of our prayers?

It’s hard for me even to say such words.

For, at times, I do feel held. At times, I feel, impossibly, it’s all right, dear God, all of it. Maybe the division between love and cancer only exists in our narrow vision and it’s *all* charged with love—and how can such love be a human invention? For look

how incapacitated we are, how crippled. Look at the way we waste life—I mean, to get down to cases, Natalie and me, the way we’ve wasted our life. Take the time we’re climbing a switchback on the Appalachian Trail and my elder boy, Michael, calls out he forgot his canteen a half-day back at the shelter where we slept, and I grouch at him, and his mother defends, and Peter, our younger, makes fun of the three of us; my jaw hardens, my eyes thicken with anger and headache and I stomp on ahead. And all this time there’s mist breaking and through the trees a steep drop to a green valley and, beyond, high peaks of the Presidential Range, and we hardly know it’s there.

The boys are frantic. Michael e-mails every day, passing along Internet sites he’s discovered—experimental treatments for recurrent estrogen-negative breast cancers. Well, he’s a scientist. Natalie deletes. And Peter calls from Paris, furious at the doctors for not catching it sooner. “Should I fly home this weekend?” he asks. “Don’t even think about it,” she says. “They’re not putting me in the ground just yet. It’s not time to say goodbye. Anyway, I don’t want goodbyes.” Then, hanging up, she reconsiders, calls him back. “Honey? I *do* want goodbyes. But not yet.”

“There must be something they can do,” Michael says, almost yelling at me over the phone. Neither son gets it yet. They think battle, strategy; they think, handling problems through human intelligence.

Me, I think: life. Its terms.

FRIENDS WHO KNOW I’m religious and see it as a peculiarity they don’t discuss now ask me, “Are you praying? I suppose you’re praying.” I’m praying. Every day in the *amidah*, the standing prayer, we say, “Heal us, Lord, and we shall be healed.” And we can name those in need of healing, so I name “Natalie, daughter of Ruth”; then with her Hebrew name, “*Naomi bat Rut.*” And at odd times I stop and say what Moses said when his sister Miriam became leprous: “*El na, refa-na lab*”—O God, please, heal her, please.

But Moses was Moses. The only healing I feel I have a right to pray for is of her spirit. Still, at odd times, I close my eyes and see the lumps dissolve, blood and lymphatic fluid carrying only pure cells to strengthen her. Or I talk to God, as if God were a difficult friend. Look, I say. Look. I admit we threw away Your gifts—all right, a lot, a lot! We didn’t see what there was to see, didn’t bless what there was to bless. We were small potatoes with each other, quarrelsome, self-righteous, petty in ex-

actly the same way day after day. Please, I say, I’ll pay attention. But heal her.

I don’t tell my friends. People think it’s primitive to speak to God as if God were a person. They may say, like Natalie, yes, there’s an energy, constrained by law, an energy that sustains us at every moment—without it, there’d be no dance of quarks and electrons, no blueprint for molecules; it would all collapse into aboriginal soup, hot or cold. But why presume to *talk* to this energy?

I disagree. How many of us, really, can love an impersonal cosmic dance? I need to whisper to God, to feel God hears. I admit this presents an old problem. If God hears, what would it take for Him to change things a little? Job was cowed by God’s power. But it’s that divine power that makes us expect better in the first place. If you’re hanging by your fingertips from a bridge, and a muscular friend comes along and you call out, *please, please*—wouldn’t you expect a hand up?

“*El na, refa-na lab.*”

Meantime, I prepare a cocktail of pills, cook food that’s like baby food but that she can hardly eat anyway; I run errands, read my books while she reads hers.

“This is happening because I refused to wear a *sheytl*,” she says to me a couple of days ago: the wig an Orthodox woman is supposed to wear after she marries. We’ve never kept a strictly kosher house, never been as strict as I’d like to be about keeping the Sabbath. But now she pulls a box out of a big shopping bag and says, “Don’t look.” Then: “All right, turn around.” She’s wearing a wig, light brown, a little stiff; she’s bought it to cover her lost hair. “So? You think God will be pleased?”

“Oh, Natalie, this is not a punishment situation. Even as a joke.” I look some more. “But I have to tell you, frankly, the wig doesn’t look bad.”

She laughs, harsh and quick like a cap gun exploding.

AT TIMES, afternoons, I play with her. We were never good at playing. At *being*. For example. Most winters Natalie and I went to the Caribbean for a week, with the boys while they were kids, then, empty-nesters, without. Frankly, I wasn’t the greatest companion. “Do you know how much we’re paying to drink this watery margarita? Including air fare?” “If I want to see fish, I can go to the aquarium in Boston.” “Michael decides to scuba, so now I’ve got to shell out for *two* dive packages.”

This December, I stop in at a building-supply place for two-by-fours and lag bolts, at an import

store for bamboo screens, at a garden store for big tropical plants, and when Natalie goes down for her nap, laughing to myself, I slip downstairs to the unused floor of our split-level house. The boys grew up here. It's not a big house, but huge for just the two of us, so we keep the lower level for their visits. But now I remake the family room.

This takes two afternoons. I push back the living-room furniture we left down there when we could afford a new set for upstairs. I move the exercise bike, the television, and build the frame of an inner make-believe room, hang colored lights across the top and a heat lamp glowing down for the tropical sun. I make the bamboo screens into the walls of a beach shack. To one of the screens I attach a framed travel poster: a beach, blue water. I'd considered a bag or two of sandbox sand, but no—that's *really* crazy. But a foam mattress I cover with summer bedspreads as a beach blanket. I lower the ordinary lights, put reggae on the stereo, prepare fruit-and-ice drinks we can sip through straws. No pineapple—the sores in her mouth would burn; even apple juice I need to dilute. Final touch: I switch on the little rock fountain in a bowl to add the sound of moving water. Now, in swim trunks and a robe, I go get her. "Natalie? Natalie? Are you awake? There's something I want to show you."

She drags herself downstairs. And, praise God, she laughs. She giggles. "Max! A movie set."

"Lie down. Here." I give her a backrub with left-over suntan lotion so the smell will be right. At this, even Natalie grins. I lie back, margarita on my chest. And then what? I look up at the little lights and don't know what else to do. I sigh, take Natalie's hand, smell the smells, listen to music and gurgling water, pretend. "For once," she says, "I don't have to listen to you complain about overpriced restaurants." This means she's pleased with her personal theme park. Pleased I created a world for her. It's a world without dying in it. Not God's world. I made it myself.

"Close your eyes and get your expensive tan. Later on, we'll put on our masks and snorkel over to the reef to watch the technicolor fish."

I look over and see you shaking your head. Laughing at my foolishness? But no, you're crying, and you won't talk about it. I avert my eyes.

I imagine my ancestor in the Promised Land. He must have had a wife, and let's say they quarreled even crossing the Jordan, and now she's dying. And he feeds her dates and figs from their own trees, and she complains. "Why didn't you do this before—when I could enjoy it?" "I was too busy get-

ting us here," he says. But privately, he has his reservations—the covenant, the journey, building the Promised Land. It's not all been milk-and-honey.

We followed Moses, my Israelite says to his wife. We were too afraid to face the Lord of Hosts ourselves. That cloud of fire, that terrifying voice. The ordinary cracked open to reveal the extraordinary. And the *shekhinah*, the Holy Presence—even me, a child, I "saw" it. But we begged Moses to do our *listening* for us, and I wonder whether he heard all there was to hear.

"Let me know Your ways, that I may know You," Moses asks the Holy One. Was there a secret Torah that made it all add up but that he couldn't transcribe—maybe couldn't even hear? I want to understand—as a lawyer—the contract. I imagine there was no room to negotiate. But maybe he was given to understand, in the *music*, that by the terms of this secret Torah, we would be held in God's hands, even if it doesn't seem that way.

These speculations don't impress my wife.

SHE GETS tired, she gets so tired. "Do you want to fly downstairs, to Aruba? You can rest, I'll give you a massage."

"No, thank you!" She bristles. "Enough massages." She refuses again the next morning, Friday. "Soon, I'll get plenty of rest." I go off to work but I have no heart in it and come home to make her a lunch she won't eat. "You think this solves something, makes up for something? Why do you feel so guilty?" she asks. "What did you do so bad?"

"Who says guilt?"

"What did you do so terrible you have to expiate with big tropical productions?"

"It was supposed to be amusing—a way of helping."

"Oh, I know you."

"You should."

"I was at least as rotten to *you*," she says. "You remember how mean I was at Cindy's party on Block Island?"

"No. You were . . . unusually mean?"

Now her hard laugh. "I like the 'unusually.' Can I take you up on that massage?" So we go downstairs. She holds on to my hand, only half as a crutch. "But listen," she says. "Please. No more reggae. How about Mozart?"

For years we've been saying, we should take time to listen to music, but we never do. Today, we just listen. Mozart, then Schubert. Natalie says, "I'm not so sick I can't give you a massage back." And that's how it is. I massage, she massages. Her fin-

gers are weak, so weak. This beach resort, this land of milk and honey—so fragile.

It's almost the Sabbath. I run upstairs for candles and wine and the challah we froze last Friday because she became sick to her stomach. She lights the candles, we say the blessings, thanking God for the Sabbath. I recite, "An accomplished woman, who can find?—far beyond pearls is her value," and tonight she doesn't have any smart remarks. She closes her eyes. I drink the wine. She drinks her herbal tea. The endless heat-lamp sun, set on a timer to shut off when we sleep, shineth down.

This is my land of milk and honey. I'm the proprietor, forgive the shabbiness. Fragile, but the best I can offer. Even now, to say these words gives me goosebumps, as if I'm usurping sacred prerogatives, as if I'm saying, dear God, why can't You do something about that world of Yours? Of course, I'm only a subcontractor, borrowing the materials and the relations among atoms that we call Your laws of physics. I'm not starting from scratch. But in my world, thank God, there's warmth and no bugs. You're practically guaranteed not to get electrocuted; only the suffering that Natalie brings here comes from that other world.

You and me, Natalie, we signed a *ketubah*—our marriage contract—and God knows I can get annoying, just like you, I can get grumpy, just like you, but I'm going to comfort you, I'm going to carry you to bed, to wash you, to read to you if you're tired, I'm going to say kaddish for you if things don't turn out. In this world: Mozart, Schubert. In this world, possibilities bloom out of our imaginings.

All right, all right. I'm *trying* to be humble.

THE NEXT afternoon, Saturday, both boys show up at the door together. This must have taken no small arranging: from Paris, from San Francisco. Telephone calls, e-mails. Michael caught the red-eye from California, napped at a friend's apartment before meeting up with Peter. Peter, who has plenty of frequent-flyer miles, flew business class from Paris.

Hearing laughter, Natalie calls from downstairs, "Who is it? Who's there, Max?"

"Friends of ours," I call back. I put my finger to my lips. "Boys, this will sound peculiar, but have you packed bathing suits? Of course not. All right. Tiptoe upstairs to my bureau, bottom drawer, get into swim trunks, don't ask questions, and come downstairs to the family room. Please? Just do it."

"Max?" she calls up from Aruba.

"Just a minute, just a minute, sweetheart. We're coming."

They look at each other and back at me, and I raise a lecturing finger they well remember. Off they go, and back they come in swim trunks—baggy, I grant—with towels across their shoulders. They're both big guys with small waists. Michael is chunky, takes after me, a wrestler in high school. I look at him, I see myself as a young man. Peter is, I suppose, more handsome. He looks like Natalie, blue eyes, high cheekbones. He's wiry, lean, a runner. Big, both of them. I forget when they're gone for a couple of months that these aren't children anymore. They were our chief project, and praise God, they've turned out fine young men. Except for High Holy Days and Passover, they're not so observant, but I think that when they marry. . . .

Peter says, "Has Mom . . . has something happened mentally? What's going on?"

"Not to Mom. To *me*, if you must know. Boys, we're going to Aruba. No, really—I've made Aruba in the family room. It's a joke—but not just a joke."

And they look at each other and follow me to the now unused, once-jumbled-with-life lower floor of the split-level. Natalie sits up and immediately sinks back onto the beach blanket in tears, and they hug and kiss her. I say, "Gently, boys . . . gently," and they're laughing. "Your father!" she says.

And I think, I'm not acting in the place of God. This is it—this is how God operates. Through us.

We sit cross-legged on the beach blanket, I get fruit drinks. Now it's Natalie who improvises. "Isn't this beach nice? You see? Not in the least crowded. And wait till you see the luxury accommodations." It tires her out. She lies down again and from the way she's moving her tongue in her cheek, I know it's time to get her Nystatin to soothe her mouth. Michael is holding her hand and admiring the tropical décor and the view. Peter is in a different script—he's banging his fist on the mattress. He thinks she doesn't know, but he's wrong, she knows, and I put my hand over his fist and hold on.

"I don't have the heart for this," he whispers.

I tell him, "You do."

Michael tells her about Sophie and Aaron. "Getting married. And Arnie's getting married. And Saul."

"Who's Saul?"

"Saul Kaminsky."

"Oh, you mean Jessie's friend. Saul's getting married. Unbelievable. And you?"

"Not yet. But Mom, I've got news," Michael says. "A post-doc. I'll be working with George Singer next year. It's perfect. And Pete—he's got good news too, Mom." And Peter says, "Just that Chase is courting me. Maybe for London, more

likely for New York. I'll be able to get up to see you a lot."

She scowls. "Make sure you're not doing it for me. I'll get furious if I think you're doing it for me."

Peter broods. Michael tells Natalie about new medical research: a few studies show that people who get prayed for—even when they don't know it, even when they don't know the people doing the praying—are more likely to get better than other people. Natalie, wanting to comfort Michael, nods—but she sends me a look. I try to liven things up. "So—how does this compare to Aruba?" The three of them are silent. I get nostalgic. "Remember that beautiful empty beach? Remember snorkeling by the reef?" Silence. I'd brought downstairs an album of family pictures but I figure, this isn't the time. Everyone looks around at this Aruba of mine. I become defensive. "Well, if you'd rather, we can go upstairs."

Peter says, "I remember Aruba."

"Can't forget it," Michael says.

NATALIE SIGHS. "Max, they mean that terrible fight we had."

"We had a terrible fight?"

"Don't you remember? We stayed on one end of the beach not talking to each other, and the boys stayed on the other end of the beach as far away as they could get."

"They did? What was it about? I honestly can't remember. Anyway, does it matter? In my Aruba we're going to get it right."

"Max."

But now I remember the fight and fall silent myself, because there are still things we can't say in front of our grown sons, private things. Shameful things. And I'm annoyed with the three of them for bringing ugliness into Aruba on a Sabbath. The Sabbath is supposed to be a foretaste of paradise. Especially now.

Peter lightly punches Michael on the arm. "You," he says. "I was maybe twelve. I think it was the January before my bar mitzvah. You, Mike, the big brother who knew everything, telling me—the little twerp—it was all my fault, I started it, their fight, they'd never fight if it weren't for me."

"I don't remember that," Michael says. "Well. Not nice. Sorry." Silence.

They're in their late twenties, the difference in age between them now inconsequential. They've each started good careers, they're grown up, they're not going to start punching and wrestling, throwing sand in eyes, cursing one another the way

they once did, God forbid. Last summer they went sailing together off the coast of Maine. Friends. For the most part. Now, it's subtle; once in a while one says something that only the other will recognize as a dig.

Natalie gives me a signal with her eyes; I check my watch, open a container, hand her her pills and a glass of water. There's Peter, watching, furious again, squeezing the corner of the bedspread in his fist. I say, "I think we should say a blessing together."

"A *blessing*?" Peter says. Natalie would say the same, in exactly the same sardonic tone, but she's occupied with trying to keep her medicine down.

I almost rise to the bait and preach: we are to say a blessing for suffering as well as for happiness, having faith that they both come from the same source and that that source is loving, ultimately loving. But I don't, I say something easier. "A blessing that we're here together, a blessing for your lives, Michael, Peter, what a gift you are to us. And also—a blessing that with a little imagination we can make the old family room into Aruba."

But Michael hulks down, brooding. Peter looks through the album of family pictures. What blessing? I should never have mentioned Aruba. So let's call it Martinique, St. John, Jamaica. But it's getting too warm in my tropics. I've got the thermostat jacked up for the sake of my skinny little wife, and with the heat-lamp sun it's maybe too much. It's the Sabbath, I can't switch off the bulb till after sundown, but I can lower the sun behind the tropical plants so it glows through the leaves. Anyway, the day is almost gone. The real sun is down outside, what sun there was, and through the window, past the frozen lawn, the houses across the street are growing dim.

I'm *trying* to keep up my spirits.

My world all of a sudden doesn't seem all that beautiful.

"My three big men," Natalie says. And then she surprises me. It's hard for her to talk. Everything's hard. But she sits up. "Your lives *are* a blessing to us," she says. "Your father's right. And look—forget Aruba. This is our island. It's another blessing."

This takes a big load off my mind. But Natalie using the word *blessing*, even as metaphor?—I don't know what to say. Anyway, we sit for a while, I fix piña colodas for the boys. We drink, we look at pictures, and some of them actually remind us of happy times. It was foolish of me to worry that I was playing creator, implicitly critical of what God had provided. What a joke—we shlepp the same old creatures we are into this new world.

It's getting dark outside. Can we see three stars in the sky, a sign that the week has begun? Not yet. Only the little lights strung above my beach shack. But soon. Time to get dressed, go up to the kitchen table and mark the end of Sabbath, the beginning of ordinary time. "Boys," I say, "you want to make a sling out of your hands, carry your mother upstairs? Remember how you did that when you were teenagers? I'm afraid it's even easier now."

"Max, this was very sweet," she says.

They carry her, perfect teamwork, upstairs. Words from somewhere in the Bible come to me, *How good and how pleasant when brothers dwell together—like fine oil on the head running down onto the beard*. Peter is singing some pop song from ten years back, and Michael joins in.

I'm lumbering up the stairs behind the music. I'm glad to let them do the carrying tonight. Natalie smiles down at me, an arm around Peter, around Michael. And that's when I get it, the nature of the gift. Oh, I think, the real gift—not mine to her of Aruba, but hers to me. For her to accept my island as a gift—today, when she's bedraggled, nauseated, angry; when breathing comes hard, when smiling comes hard, that's the gift. This is how God speaks to us.

IS IT enough? I'm filled with love for her, but the lawyer in me wants another look at that contract. The blessing and the curse. "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse." My ancestor who heard Moses explain the contractual obligations, explain the penalty clause—even with all the faith in the world, he must have been bewildered.

Maybe, he thought, Moses himself can't put it into words, the way it works. The blessing—we enact. The curse—that, too. And then . . . there's cancer.

Maybe, if Moses were here, he could explain.

At the top of the stairs Natalie snaps, "Enough! I'm not totally helpless yet! That's next week." She's trying to get them to laugh at her tough-guy voice. They don't laugh, but they set her down. Michael on one side, Peter on the other, they help her to the kitchen, where I've got an easy chair set up at the table. A queen's throne, but so big around her it's like Alice in the queen's chair, or as if the queen had shrunk into Alice.

She sits up, arms folded. "Peter, please, I'll make a deal with you. You stop looking at me like that and I'll buy you a beautiful silk shirt for your birthday."

My boys look at each other. Michael sits beside her and squeezes her arm.

"And Michael, you, too. Cut that out. Stop evaluating my muscle tone."

"I'll start dinner," I say, "right after we make *havdalab*." I get yarmulkes and the little prayer books we've always used. Silver spice box for scent, kiddush cup for wine, colored candles twisted into a single candle for fire: we praise the gift of the sensuous world, the world that will die.

Soon, I think, as I pour the wine, soon I'll be alone in this house, too big for me the way the easy chair seems oversized for Natalie. Sure. But the gift has been given and the gift has been received, the contract passed on. And these young men will go on, God willing, to be fruitful and multiply, like the stars in the sea and the fish in the sky.