

A Serious Man

by

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White letters on a black screen:

*Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you.*

—*Rashi*

FADE IN:

AGAINST BLACK: SNOWFLAKES

The flakes drift lazily down toward us. Our angle looks straight up.

Now an angle looking steeply down: the snow falls not quite dead away to collect on a foreground chimneypot and on the little shtetl street that lies maplike below us.

It is night, and quiet, and the street is deserted except for one man who walks away from us, his *valenki* squeaking in the fresh snow. He carries bundled branches on one shoulder and has a hatchet tucked into his belt.

We cut down to street level. The man walks toward us, bearded, and bundled against the cold. Smiling, he mutters in Yiddish—the dialogue subtitled.

Man

What a marvel . . . what a marvel . . .

HOUSE INTERIOR

As its door opens and the man enters.

Man

Dora!

Voice

Yes. . .

The man crosses to the stove with his bundle of wood. The voice continues:

. . . Can you help me with the ice?

The man dumps the wood into a box by the stove as his wife enters with an ice pick.

. . . I expected you hours ago.

Man

You can't imagine what just happened. I was coming back on the Lublin road when the wheel came off the cart—thank heavens it was the way back and I'd already sold the geese!

Wife

How much?

Man

Fifteen groshen, but that's not the story. I was struggling to set the cart upright when a droshky approaches from the direction of Lvov. How lucky, you think, that someone is out this late.

Wife

Yes, very remarkable.

Man

But that's the least of it! He stops to help me; we talk of this, we talk of that—it turns out this is someone you know! Traitle Groshkover!

His wife stares at him as he beams.

He takes the stare as a sign that she can't place the name.

. . . You know, Reb Groshkover! Pesel Bunim's uncle! The *chacham* from Lodz, who studied under the Zohar reb in Krakow!

Still she stares. Then, quietly:

Wife

God has cursed us.

Man

What?

Wife

Traitle Groshkover has been dead for three years.

Laughter erupts from the man but, as his wife continues to stare at him, he strangles on it.

Quiet.

Wind whistles under the eaves.

The man says quietly:

Man

Why do you say such a thing! I saw the man! I talked to him!

Wife

You talked to a dybbuk. Traitle Groshkover died of typhus in Pesel Bunim's house. Pesel told me—she sat *shiva* for him.

They stare at each through a silence broken only by the sound of the quickening wind.

A rap at the door.

Neither immediately responds.

Finally, to her husband:

... Who is it?

Man

I... invited him here. For some soup, to warm himself.

The wind moans.

... He helped me, Dora!

THE DOOR

We are looking in from the outside as it unlatches and creaks in, opened by the husband

in the foreground, who has arranged his face into a strained look of greeting. In the background the wife stares, hollow-eyed.

Man

Reb Groshkover! You are welcome here!

Reverse on Reb Groshkover: a short, merry-looking fellow with a bifurcated beard and a silk hat and spectacles. He gives a little squeal of delight.

Reb Groshkover

You are too kind, Velvel! Too kind!

He steps into the house and sees the wife staring at him.

... And you must be Dora! So much I have heard of you!  
Yes, your cheeks are pink and your legs are stout! What a wife you have!

The husband chuckles nervously.

Man

Yes! A ray of sun, a ray of sun! Sit!

Wife

My husband said he offered you soup.

Reb Groshkover

Yes, but I couldn't possibly eat this late, or I'd have nightmares. No, no: no soup for me!

Wife

I knew it.

Reb Groshkover laughs.

Reb Groshkover

I see! You think I'm fat enough already!

He settles, chuckling, into his chair, but Dora remains sober:

Wife

No. A dybbuk doesn't eat.

Reb Groshkover stares at her, shocked.

The wife returns the stare.

The husband looks from wife to Reb Groshkover, apprehensive.

A heavy silence.

Reb Groshkover bursts into pealing laughter.

Reb Groshkover

What a wife you have!

He wipes away tears of merriment; the husband relaxes, even begins to smile.

Man

I assure you, Reb Groshkover, it's nothing personal; she heard a story you had died, three years ago, at Pesel Bunim's house. This is why she think you are a dybbuk; I, of course, do not believe in such things. I am a rational man.

Reb Groshkover is still chuckling.

Reb Groshkover

Oh my. Oh my yes. What nonsense. And even if there were spirits, certainly. . .

He thumps his chest.

. . . I am not one of them!

Wife

Pesel always worried. Your corpse was left unattended for many minutes when Pesel's father broke *shiva* and left the room—it must have been then that the Evil One—

She breaks off to spit at the mention of the Evil One.

—took you!

Reb Groshkover is terribly amused:

Reb Groshkover

“My corpse!” Honestly! What a wife you have!

Wife

Oh yes? Look, husband. . .

She steps forward to the Reb, who looks enquiringly up at her.

. . . They were preparing the body. Pesel’s father shaved one cheek. . .

As his eyes roll down to look at her hand, she draws it across his smooth right cheek.

. . . Then he left the room. He came back, and shaved the other. . .

She reaches across to the other cheek, Reb Groshkover’s eyes following her hand—

. . . You were already gone!

—and drags her hand across. A bristly sound.

Reb Groshkover laughs.

Reb Groshkover

I shaved hastily this morning and missed a bit—by you this makes me a dybbuk?

He appeals to the husband:

. . . It’s true, I was sick with typhus when I stayed with Peselle, but I recovered, as you can plainly see, and now I—hugh!

The wife steps back.

Reb Groshkover looks slowly down at his own chest in which the wife has just planted an ice pick.

Reb Groshkover stares at the ice pick.

The wife stares.

The husband stares.

Suddenly, Reb Groshkover bursts out laughing:

. . . What a wife you have!

The husband can manage only a shocked whisper:

Man  
Woman, what have you done?

Reb Groshkover again looks down at his chest, which again moves him to laughter. He shakes his head.

Reb Groshkover  
Why would she do such a thing?

He looks up.

. . . I ask you, Velvel, as a rational man: which of us is possessed?

Wife  
What do you say now about spirits? He is unharmed!

Reb Groshkover  
On the contrary! I don't feel at all well.

And indeed, blood has begun to soak through his vest.

He chuckles with less energy.

. . . One does a *mitzvah* and this is the thanks one gets?

Man  
Dora! Woe, woe! How can such a thing be!

Reb Groshkover  
Perhaps I will have some soup. I am feeling weak. . .

He rises to his feet but totters.

. . . Or perhaps I should go. . .



He smiles weakly at Dora..

. . . One knows when one isn't wanted.

He walks unsteadily to the door, opens it with some effort, and staggers out into the moaning wind and snow to be swallowed by the night.

The wife and husband stare at the door banging in the wind.

Finally:

Man

Dear wife. We are ruined. Tomorrow they will discover the body. All is lost.

Wife

Nonsense, Velvel. . .

She walks to the door. . .

Blessed is the Lord. Good riddance to evil.

. . . and shuts it against the wind.

BLACK

A drumbeat thumps in the black.

Music blares: the Jefferson Airplane. Grace Slick's voice enters:

When the truth is found to be lies  
And all the hope inside you dies  
Don't you want somebody to love. . .

An image fades in slowly, but even up full it is dim: some kind of round, dull white shape with a small black pinhole center. This white half-globe is a plug set in a flesh-toned field. The flesh tone glows translucently, backlit. We are drifting toward the white plug and, as we do so, the music grows louder still.

AN EARPIECE

A pull back—a reverse on the preceding push in—from the cheap white plastic earpiece of a transistor radio. The Jefferson Airplane continues over the cut but becomes extremely compressed. The pull back reveals that the earpiece is lodged in someone's ear and trails a white cord.

We drift down the cord to find the radio at its other end. As we do so we hear, live in the room, many voices speaking a foreign language in unison. A classroom, apparently.

The radio is on a desktop but hidden from in front by the book held open before it. The book is written in non-Roman characters.

We are in Hebrew school.

The boy who is listening to the transistor radio—Danny Gopnik—sits at a hinge-topped desk in a cinderblock classroom whose rows of desks are occupied by other boys and girls of about twelve years of age. It is dusk and the room is fluorescent-lit.

At the front of the room a gray-haired man in a worn suit and tie addresses the class.

Danny straightens one leg so that he may dig into a pocket. With an eye on the teacher to make sure he isn't being watched, he eases something out:

A twenty-dollar bill.

Teacher  
Mee yodayah? Reuven? Rifkah? Mah zeh "anakim"?  
Efsheh mashooach ba-avodah?

#### A BLINDING LIGHT

At the cut to the light the Jefferson Airplane music jumps up full. The light resolves into a multi-flared image of a blinking eye.

Reverse: the inside of a human ear. Fleshy whorls finely veined, a cavity receding to dark.

Objective on the doctor's office: the doctor is peering through a lightscope into the ear of an early-middle-aged man, Larry Gopnik.

The Jefferson Airplane music continues.

Doctor

Uh-huh.

## HEBREW SCHOOL

Close on Hebrew characters being scribbled onto the blackboard as the teacher talks.

The teacher, talking.

A bored child, staring off.

His point-of-view: a blacktopped parking lot with a few orange school busses, beyond it a marshy field, and distant suburban bungalows.

Close on another child staring at something through drooping eyelids.

His point-of-view: very close on the face of a classroom clock. We hear its electrical hum. Its red sweep-second hand crawls around the dial very, very slowly.

Danny Gopnik hisses:

Danny

Fagle! . . .

The teacher drones on, writing on the blackboard. Danny's eyes flit from the teacher to the student sitting kitty-corner in front of him—a husky youth with shaggy hair. He hasn't heard the prompt.

. . . Fagle!

The teacher turns from the blackboard and Danny leans back, eyes front, folding the twenty up small behind his book.

Teacher

Ahnee rotzeh lalechet habait hakisai. Mee yodayah?  
Misaviv tamid anachnoo tamid. . .

The clock-watching child, eyelids sinking, is beginning to drool out of one side of his mouth.

## DOCTOR'S OFFICE

The light again flaring the lens.

Reverse: looking into a pupil.

Objective: the doctor looking through his scope into Larry's eye.

Doctor

Mm-hmm.

#### HEBREW SCHOOL

A bored child is excavating a bugger from his nose.

The teacher turns back to the chalkboard to circle something.

Danny

Fagle!

Teacher

Hamrah oomoh—

He interrupts himself briefly to make a couple of phlegm-hawking sounds. He resumes:

. . . Hamrah oomoh meshiach oomshel zal?

#### DOCTOR'S OFFICE

The doctor palpates Larry's midriff, digging his fingers into the hairy, baggy flesh.

Doctor's Voice

Uh-huh. We'll do some routine X-rays.

#### HEBREW SCHOOL

A young girl holds a hank of her bangs in front of her face, separating out individual hairs to examine them for split ends.

Teacher

Ahnoo ahnoo mah? Mah? Talmidim? D'vorah?

D'vorah

Ahnee lo yodayah.

The teacher begins to pace the desk aisles, looking back and forth among the students.

Teacher

Mee yodayah?

The bugger-seeker, having successfully withdrawn a bugger, carefully drapes it over the sharp end of his pencil, to what end we cannot know.

Danny, apprehensively eyeing the teacher, slides the twenty into the transistor radio's cover-sleeve.

#### X-RAY CONE

A huge white rubberized cone, pointed directly at us.

We hear a rush of static and the doctor's voice filtered through a talk-back:

Doctor's Voice

Hold still.

Wider: Larry is in his shorts lying on his back on an examining table covered by a sheet of tissue paper. The X-ray cone is pointed at the middle of his body.

There is a brief sci-fi-like machine hum. It clicks off.

#### HEBREW SCHOOL

The clock-watching student's head is making descending bobs toward his chest.

Teacher

Nefsheh shelach hamilamid—eh?!

The teacher's circuit of the classroom has taken him around behind Danny. Danny's book lies face-down on the desk, covering the radio, but the white cord snakes out from under it up to his ear.

The teacher yanks at the cord.

The cord pops out of its jack and the Jefferson Airplane blares tinnily from beneath the book of torah stories.

The teacher lifts the book to expose the jangling radio.

Outraged, the teacher projects above the music:

... Mah zeh?! Mah zeh?!

Some of the students are singing along; a couple beat rhythm on their desks.

... Shechet, talmidim! Anachnoo lo cam zeh b'bait sefer!  
Shechet bivakasha!

Three other students join in a chorus:

Students  
Shechet! Shechet bivakasha!

The nodding student's head droops ever lower.

Other students join in the chant:

Chorus  
SHECHET! SHECHET! SHECHET BIVAKASHA!

The nodding student's chin finally reaches, and settles on, his chest, and he gives a long snorfling inhale of sleep.

#### DOCTOR'S OFFICE

Larry, now fully clothed, is seated across from the doctor.

The doctor is looking at his file. He absently taps a cigarette out of a pack and lights up. He nods as he smokes, looking at the file.

Doctor  
Well, I—sorry.

He holds the pack toward Larry.

Larry

No thanks.

Doctor

Well, you're in good health. How're Judith and the kids?

Larry

Good. Everyone's good. You know.

The doctor takes a long suck.

Doctor

Good. Daniel must be—what? About to be bar mitzvah?

Larry

Two weeks.

Doctor

Well, mazel tov. They grow up fast, don't they?

#### TINTED PHOTO PORTRAIT

The portrait, old, in an ornate gilt frame, is of a middle-aged rabbi with a small neat mustache and round spectacles. He wears a tallis hood-style and a phylactery box is strapped to his forehead. A plaque set into the frame identifies the man as Rabbi Minda.

Wider shows that the portrait hangs in the Hebrew school principal's office, a white cinderblock room. It is quiet. The only sound is a deep electrical hum.

Just visible behind the principal's desk, upon which is a low stack of books and a name plate identifying the occupant as MAR TURCHIK, is the top of a man's head—an old man, with a few wispy white hairs where his yarmulka is not.

Danny, seated opposite, pushes up from his slouch to better see across the desk.

We boom up to show more of the principal. He is short. He wears a white shirt and hoist-up pants that come to just below his armpits. He has thick eyeglasses. He fiddles with the transistor radio, muttering:

Principal

Hmm. . . eh. . . nu?

He experiments with different dials on the radio.

Danny nervously watches.

Danny

You put the—

The old man holds up one hand.

Principal

In ivrit. (In Hebrew)

Danny

Um. . .

The old man looks down at the little earpiece pinched between two fingers. He examines it as a superstitious native might a Coca-Cola bottle.

The source of the electrical hum: a wall clock whose red sweep-second hand crawls around the dial very, very slowly.

The Reb continues to squint at the earpiece.

Danny sighs. He encourages:

Danny

Yeah, you—

The principal's tone is harder:

Principal

In ivrit!

This time his cold look holds until he is sure that the admonishment has registered.

He looks back down at the earpiece.

We hear the door open. The principal ignores it.

An old woman walks slowly in with a teacup chattering on a saucer. She has thick eyeglasses. She wears thick flesh-colored support hose. She takes slow, short steps toward the desk. The principal is studying the radio.



## Principal

Mneh. . .

The old woman continues to take slow short steps toward him. The tableau looks like a performance-art piece.

She reaches the desk and sets the teacup down. She summons a couple of phlegm-hawking rasps and turns to go.

She takes slow short steps toward the door.

The principal raises the earpiece experimentally toward his ear.

Close on his hairy, wrinkled ear as his trembling fingers bring in the earpiece. The fingers push and wobble and tamp the earpiece into place, hesitate, and then do some more pushing and wobbling and tamping.

The principal keeps Danny fixed with a stare as his hand hesitantly drops from his ear, ready to reach back up should the earpiece loosen.

. . . mneh. . .

Satisfied that neither the student nor the earpiece are about to make any sudden moves, he looks down at the radio. He turns a dial.

Faintly and tinnily from the earpiece we hear the compressed jangle of rock music. The rabbi stares blankly, listening.

Danny slumps, looking warily at the rabbi.

The rabbi continues to stare down at the radio. The compressed rock music jangles on.

The rabbi is expressionless, mouth slightly open, listening.

Tableau: anxious student, earplugged spiritual leader.

Muffled, from the outer office, the hawking of phlegm.

## CLASSROOM

We are behind a man who writes equations on a chalkboard, shoulder at work and hand quickly wagging. Periodically he glances back, giving us a fleeting look at his face: it is

Larry Gopnik.

Larry  
You following this? . . . Okay? . . . So. . . Heh-heh. . . This  
part is exciting. . .

Students follow along, bored.

Larry continues to write.

. . . So, okay. So. So if that's that, then we can do this,  
right? Is that right? Isn't that right? And that's  
Schrodinger's paradox, right? Is the cat dead or is the cat  
not dead? Okay?

BLEGEN HALL

Larry is entering the physics department office. The department's secretary wheels her castored chair away from her typing.

Secretary  
Messages, Professor Gopnik.

He takes the three phone messages.

Larry  
Thank you, Natalie. Oh—Clive. Come in.

A Korean graduate student who was been waiting on a straightbacked chair rises.

LARRY'S OFFICE

He is flipping through the messages. Absently:

Larry  
. . . So, uh, what can I do for you?

The messages:

WHILE YOU WERE OUT Dick Dutton  
OF Columbia Record Club

CALLED.  
REGARDING: "Please call."

WHILE YOU WERE OUT Sy Ableman  
CALLED.  
REGARDING "Let's talk."

WHILE YOU WERE OUT Clive Park  
CALLED.  
REGARDING: "Unjust test results."

He crumples the last one.

Clive

Uh, Dr. Gopnik, I believe the results of Physics Mid-Term were unjust.

Larry

Uh-huh, how so?

Clive

I received an unsatisfactory grade. In fact: F, the failing grade.

Larry

Uh, yes. You failed the mid-term. That's accurate.

Clive

Yes, but this is not just. I was unaware to be examined on the mathematics.

Larry

Well—you can't do physics without mathematics, really, can you.

Clive

If I receive failing grade I lose my scholarship, and feel shame. I understand the physics. I understand the dead cat.

Larry

*(surprised)*

You understand the dead cat?

Clive nods gravely.

But . . . you . . . you can't really understand the physics without understanding the math. The math tells how it really works. That's the real thing; the stories I give you in class are just illustrative; they're like, fables, say, to help give you a picture. An imperfect model. I mean—even I don't understand the dead cat. The math is how it really works.

Clive shakes his head, dubious.

Clive  
Very difficult. . . very difficult. . .

Larry  
Well, I. . . I'm sorry, but I. . . what do you propose?

Clive  
Passing grade.

Larry  
No no, I—

Clive  
Or perhaps I can take the mid-term again. Now I know it covers mathematics.

Larry  
Well, the other students wouldn't like that, would they. If one student gets to retake the test til he gets a grade he likes.

Clive impassively considers this.

Clive  
Secret test.

Larry wraps a hand wearily over his eyes.

Larry  
. . . No, I'm afraid—

Clive

Hush-hush.

Larry

No, that's just not workable. I'm afraid we'll just have to bite the bullet on this thing, Clive, and—

Clive

Very troubling.

He rises.

. . . very troubling. . .

He goes to the door, shaking his head, as Larry looks on in surprise.

He leaves.

Larry stares at the open door. The secretary outside, her back to us, types on.

Larry looks stupidly around his own office, shakes his head.

He picks up the phone message from Sy Ableman—"Let's talk"—and dials. As he dials his other hand wanders over the papers on the desktop.

There is a plain white envelope on the desk. Larry picks it up as the phone rings through. A ring is clipped short and a warm basso-baritone rumbles through the line:

Phone Voice

Sy Ableman.

Larry

Hello, Sy, Larry Gopnik.

Sy

*(mournful)*

Larry. How are you, my friend.

Larry picks idly at the envelope.

Larry

Good, how've you been, Sy?

Inside the envelope: a thick sheaf of one-hundred-dollar bills.

Sy  
Oh fine. Shall we talk Larry.

Larry reacts to the money.

Larry  
*(into phone)*  
What?! Oh! Sorry! I, uh—call back!

He slams down the phone.

. . . Clive!

He rushes out the door, through the secretarial area, and into the hallway, and looks up toward the elevators.

Empty.

He looks at the stuffed envelope he still holds.

He goes back to the departmental office. The secretary sits typing. She glances at him and, as she goes back to her typing:

Secretary  
Sy Ableman just called. Said he got disconnected.

BATHROOM DOOR

A hand enters to knock.

Man's Voice  
Out in a minute!

Sarah, the sixteen-year-old girl who has just knocked, rolls her eyes.

Sarah  
I gotta wash my hair! I'm going out tonight!

Voice  
Out in a minute!

Sarah

Jesus Christ!

She stomps down the hall.

KITCHEN

Judith, a woman of early middle age, is at the stove. Sarah enters.

Sarah

Why is Uncle Arthur always in the bathroom?

Judith

He has to drain his sebacious cyst. You know that. Will you set the table?

Sarah

Why can't he do it in the basement? Or go out in the garage!

BUS

We are raking the exterior of an orange school bus as it rattles along. Hebrew characters on the side identify it—to some, anyway.

INSIDE

We are locked down on Danny as the bus rattles like an old crate, squeaking, grinding gears, belching exhaust. Danny and the children around him vibrate and pitch about but, from their lack of reaction, seem used to it.

They raise their voices to be heard over the engine noise and the various stress noises in the chassis and a transistor radio somewhere that plays Jefferson Airplane.

Danny

I had twenty bucks in it too. Inside the case.

Mark Sallerson

Twenty bucks! How come.

Danny

I bought a lid from Mike Fagle. Couple weeks ago. I still owed him twenty.

Mark Sallerson

He already gave you the pot?

Danny

Yeah but a couple weeks ago my funding got cut off. Fagle said he'd pound the crap out of me if I didn't pay up.

Howard Altar

What funding got cut off? Where do you get your money?

Another boy, with thick glasses, is Ronnie Nudell.

Ronnie Nudell

What happened?

Mark Sallerson

Rabbi Turchik took his radio. Had money in it.

Ronnie Nudell

That fucker!

Danny

Yeah. I think he said he was confiscating it.

Ronnie Nudell

He's a fucker! Where do you get your money?

Mark Sallerson

Mike Fagle's gonna kick his ass. Last week he pounded the crap out of Seth Seddlemeyer.



Ronnie Nudell

He's a fucker!

Mark Sallerson

Fagle? Or Seth Seddlemeyer?

Ronnie Nudell

They're both fuckers!

#### BATHROOM DOOR

A hand enters to knock.

Uncle Arthur's Voice

Out in a minute!

Sarah

Are you still in there?!

Uncle Arthur

I, uh. . . Just a minute!

Sarah

I've gotta wash my hair! I'm going out tonight, to the hole!

Uncle Arthur

Okay!

#### OUTSIDE

Larry pulls into the driveway and gets out of the car. The purr of a lawn mower. He looks.

His point-of-view: Gar Brandt, the next-door neighbor, is mowing his lawn. He has a buzz cut and is wearing a white T-shirt.

Another noise competes with the lawn mower: rattling, squeaking, gear-grinding. The orange school bus with Hebrew lettering pulls up across the street. Its door opens with a pneumatic hiss to discharge a passenger.

## DINNER TABLE

Larry sits in. His wife and two children are already seated. There is one empty place.

Larry projects:

Arthur! Larry

A muffled voice:

Yeah! Arthur

Dinner! Larry

Okay! Out in a minute! Arthur

We should wait. Larry

Are you kidding! Sarah

They start eating.

Mr. Brandt keeps mowing part of our lawn. Larry

Does that matter? Judy

What? Larry

Is it important? Judy

Larry shrugs.

It's just odd. Larry

Judy  
Any news on your tenure?

Larry  
I think they'll give me tenure.

Judy  
You think.

Larry  
(*equably*)  
Well, I don't know. These things aren't, you know. . .

Judy  
No, I don't know. Which is why I ask.

Larry  
Well—

Sarah  
Mom, how long is Uncle Arthur staying with us?

Judy  
Ask your father.

## BACK YARD

Twilight.

Larry is stepping onto a hose as he unwheels it from the drum of a traveling sprinkler, laying out an arc to cover the back yard. Intermittent thwacks from next door:

Gar Brandt and his son, who also has a buzz cut and a white T-shirt, throw a baseball back and forth. Gar Brandt throws hard. The ball pops in the boy's mitt.

Mitch  
Ow.

Larry walks over to the boundary defined by the fresh mowing. He sights down it.

Gar Brandt looks over his shoulder at Larry, looking. Gar Brandt is expressionless. He

goes back to throwing.

Mitch

Ow.

INSIDE

Evening. Lights on. Larry sits at the kitchen table, a briefcase open on the chair next to him. Blue books—examination booklets—are spread on the table in front of him. He reads, occasionally making marginal scribbles, grading.

From off, faint and dulled by intervening walls, rock music: somewhere in the house Danny is listening to the Jefferson Airplane.

The clink of teaspoon against china as Larry stirs his tea. He looks up at a noise: Judy enters.

Judy

Honey.

Larry  
(*absent*)

Honey.

Judy

Did you talk to Sy?

Still absent, without looking up:

Larry  
Sy?—Sy Ableman!—That's right, he called, but I—

Judy

You didn't talk to him.

Larry

No, I—

Judy

You know the problems you and I have been having.

Sympathetic, but still absent:

Larry

Mm.

Judy

Well, Sy and I have become very close.

This brings Larry's head up. He focuses on Judy, puzzled. She elaborates:

. . . In short: I think it's time to start talking about a divorce.

Larry stares at her. A long beat.

At length, trying to digest:

Larry

. . . Sy Ableman!

Judy

This is not about Sy.

Larry

You mentioned Sy!

Judy

Don't twist my words. We—

Larry

A divorce—what have I done! I haven't done anything—  
What have I done!

Judy

Larry, don't be a child. You haven't "done" anything. I  
haven't "done" anything.

Larry

Yes! Yes! We haven't done anything! And I—I'm  
probably about to get tenure!

Judy

Nevertheless, there have been problems. As you know.

Larry

Well—

Judy  
And things have changed. And then—Sy Ableman. Sy has  
come into my life. And now—

Larry  
Come into your—what does that mean?! You, you, you,  
you barely know him!

Judy  
We've known the Ablemans for fifteen years.

Larry  
Yes, but you—you said we hadn't done anything!

Judy suddenly is stony:

Judy  
I haven't done anything. This is not some flashy fling.  
This is not about woopsy-doopsy.

Larry stares at her.

Larry  
... Sy Ableman!

From down the hall, a knock on a door. A muffled voice:

Arthur  
Out in a minute!

Judy  
Look, I didn't know any other way of breaking it to you.  
Except to tell you. And treat you like an adult. Is that so  
wrong?

Larry does not seem to be listening. His eyes roam the room as he thinks.

Larry  
Where do I sleep?

Judy narrows her eyes.

Judy  
What?

Larry  
 Arthur's on the couch!

Judy  
 Look. Sy feels that we should—

Larry  
 Esther is barely cold!

Judy  
 Esther died three years ago. And it was a loveless marriage. Sy wants a Gett.

This derails the conversation. Larry stares, trying to pick up the thread.

Larry  
 . . . A what?

Judy  
 A ritual divorce. He says it's very important. Without a Gett I'm an Aguna.

Larry  
 A what? What are you talking about?

She turns to go, shaking her head, peeved:

Judy  
 You always act so surprised.

As she leaves:

. . . I have begged you to see the Rabbi.

FADE IN

Larry has fallen asleep at the kitchen table, face-down in a pile of blue books. Cold blue light sweeps across him and he looks up.

A short, balding middle-aged man in flannel pyjamas and an old flannel dressing gown stands in front of the open refrigerator holding an open jar of orange juice. He tips the jar back to drink, his free hand holding a balled-up towel to the back of his neck

Larry stares at him.

FADE OUT

BLEGEN HALL

Larry enters the departmental office. His eyes are red-rimmed and dark-bagged. He has beard stubble.

The department's secretary wheels her castored chair away from her typing.

Secretary  
Messages, Professor Gopnik.

He takes the two phone messages.

HIS OFFICE

Larry looks at the messages:

WHILE YOU WERE OUT Dick Dutton  
OF Columbia Record Club  
CALLED.  
REGARDING: "2<sup>nd</sup> attempt. Please call."

WHILE YOU WERE OUT Sy Ableman  
CALLED.  
REGARDING "Let's have a good talk."

A knock brings his look up.

Larry  
Yes—thanks for coming, Clive.

Clive Park enters the office.



. . . Have a seat.

Larry uses a key to open the top left desk drawer. He takes out the envelope.

. . . We had, I think, a good talk, the other day, but you left something that—

Clive

I didn't leave it.

Larry

Well—you don't even know what I was going to say.

Clive

I didn't leave anything. I'm not missing anything. I know where everything is.

Larry looks at him, trying to formulate a thought.

Larry

Well. . . then, Clive, where did this come from?

He waves the envelope.

. . . This is here, isn't it?

Clive looks at it gravely.

Clive

Yes, sir. That is there.

Larry

This is not nothing, this is something.

Clive

Yes sir. That is something.

A beat.

. . . What is it.

Larry

You know what it is! You know what it is! I believe. And

you know I can't keep it, Clive.

Clive

Of course, sir.

Larry

I'll have to pass it on to Professor Finkle, along with my suspicions about where it came from. Actions have consequences.

Clive

Yes. Often.

Larry

Always! Actions always have consequences!

He pounds the desk for emphasis.

. . . In this office, actions have consequences!

Clive

Yes sir.

Larry

Not just physics. Morally.

Clive

Yes.

Larry

And we both know about your actions.

Clive

No sir. I know about my actions.

Larry

I can interpret, Clive. I know what you meant me to understand.

Clive

Meer sir my sir.

Larry cocks his head.

Larry  
 . . . Meer sir my sir?

Clive  
*(careful enunciation)*  
 Mere. . . surmise. Sir.

He gravely shakes his head.

. . . Very uncertain.

CLOSE ON A TONE ARM

A hand lays it onto a slowly spinning vinyl record.

Through scratches and pops, a solo tenor starts a mournful Hebrew chant.

Close on the sleeve:

*Rabbi Youssele Rosenblatt Chants Your Haftorah Portion  
 Volume 12*

Rabbi Youssele wears a caftan and a felt hat and has sad eyes. They peer out from the dark beard that covers most of the rest of his face like owl's eyes peering out of the woods.

Wider, on Danny, in his bedroom, evening. He lifts the tone arm on the portable turntable.

He chants the passage.

He drops the tone arm at the same place; Rabbi Youssele chants the passage again.

Danny listens, eyes narrowed. He lifts the tone arm and chants the passage again.

He replays the passage again; before he can lift the tone arm to echo it his door bursts open. Rabbi Youssele continues to chant.

Sarah

You little brat fucker! You snuck twenty bucks out of my drawer!

Danny

Studying torah! Asshole!

Sarah

You little brat! I'm telling Dad!

Danny

Oh yeah? You gonna tell him you've been sneaking it out of his wallet?

Sarah

All right, you know what I'm gonna do? You little brat? If you don't give it back?

We hear the thunk of the front door opening. Danny stands, calling:

Danny

Dad?

FOYER

Larry is entering with his briefcase. As he stows it in the foyer closet Danny's voice continues, off:

Danny

Dad, you gotta fix the aerial.

Judith emerges from the kitchen.

Judith

Hello Larry, have you thought about a lawyer?

Larry

Honey, please!

Danny emerges from the hall.

Danny

We're not getting channel four at all.

Larry  
(to Judith)

Can we discuss it later?

Danny

I can't get *F Troop*.

Judith

Larry, the children know. Do you think this is some secret?  
Do you think this is something we're going to keep quiet?

Sarah enters.

Sarah

Dad, Uncle Arthur is in the bathroom again! And I'm  
going to the hole at eight!

She hits Danny on the back of the head.

Danny

Stop it!

Larry

Sarah! What's going on!

Danny

She keeps doing that!

LATER

Larry sits in a reclining chair in the living room, head back, listening to Sidor Belarsky on the hi-fi. On top of the music is a hissing-sucking sound. There is also the sound of a pencil busily scratching paper.

We cut to its source: Uncle Arthur sits scribbling into a spiral notebook, his free hand holding the end of a length of surgical tubing against the back of his neck. The tube leads to a water-pik-like appliance on an end table next to him—the source of the sucking sound.

After a long beat of listening to the music, Larry speaks into space:

Larry

Arthur?

Uncle Arthur does not look up from his scribbling.

Uncle Arthur

Yes.

Larry continues to stare at the ceiling.

Larry

What're you doing?

Still without looking up:

Uncle Arthur

Working on the Mentaculus.

Long beat. Music. Scribbling.

Larry

. . . Any luck, um, looking for an apartment?

More scribbling.

Uncle Arthur

No.

The doorbell chimes.

#### FRONT DOOR

Larry enters, glances through the front door's head-height window, and—freezes, one hand arrested on the way to the doorknob.

His point-of-view: framed by the window, yellowly lit by the stoop light, a human head. A middle-aged man, a few years older than Larry. A fleshy face with droopy hangdog features, a five-o'clock shadow, and sad Harold Bloom eyes.

Larry opens the door.

Larry

Sy.

Sy, entering, thrusts out a hand. His voice vibrates with a warm, sad empathy:

Sy

Good to see you, Larry.

He is a heavy-set man wearing a short-sleeved shirt that his belly tents out in front of him. In his left hand he holds a bottle of wine.

Larry

*(tightly)*

I'll get Judith.

Sy

No, actually Larry, I'm here to see you, if I might.

He shakes his head.

. . . Such a thing. Such a thing.

Larry

Shall we go in the . . .

He is leading him into the kitchen but Sy, oblivious to surroundings, plows on with the conversation, arresting both men in the narrow space between kitchen sink and stove, and invading Larry's space.

Sy

You know, Larry—how we handle ourselves, in this situation—it's so impawtant.

Larry

Uh-huh.

Sy

Absolutely. Judith told me that she broke the news to you. She said you were very adult.

Larry

Did she.

Sy

Absolutely. The respect she has for you.

Larry

Yes?

Sy

Absolutely. But the children, Larry. The children.

He shakes his head.

. . . The most impawtant.

Larry

Well, I guess. . .

Sy

Of coss. And Judith says they're handling it so well. A tribute to you. Do you drink wine? Because this is an incredible bottle. This is not Mogen David. This is a wine, Larry. A bawdeaux.

Larry

You know, Sy—

Sy

Open it—let it breathe. Ten minutes. Letting it breathe, so impawtant.

Larry

Thanks, Sy, but I'm not—

Sy

I insist! No reason for discumfit. I'll be uncumftable if you don't take it. These are signs and tokens, Larry.

Larry

I'm just—I'm not ungrateful, I'm, I just don't know a lot about wine and, given our respective, you know—

He is startled when Sy abruptly hugs him.

Sy



S'okay.

He finishes the hug off with a couple of thumps on the back.

. . . S'okay. Wuhgonnabe fine.

#### SKEWED ANGLE ON PARKING LOT

We are dutch on a slit of a view through a cracked-open frosted window: the Hebrew school parking lot.

The last couple of busses filled with students are rolling out of the lot. It is late afternoon.

A reverse shows Danny in a stall, standing on a closed toilet, angling his head to peer out the bathroom window opened at the top.

The bathroom outside the stall: Ronnie Nudell leans against a sink waiting, sucking a long draw from a joint.

Danny emerges from the stall. Ronnie Nudell offers the joint.

Ronnie Nudell  
Want some of this fucker?

#### HALLWAY

The bathroom door cracks open in the foreground. Danny peeks out.

His point-of-view: the empty hallway ending in a T with another hallway. A janitor crosses, pushing a broom down the far hallway. He disappears. His echoing footsteps recede.

Danny and Ronny emerge from the bathroom.

#### RABBI MINDA

The photo-portrait on the wall of Mar Turchik's office lit by late-day sun.

We hear a scraping sound.

Wider: Ronnie Nudell looks over Danny's shoulder as Danny, hunched at Mar Turchik's desk, fishes the end of a bent hanger into the keyhole on the top left drawer. After a beat, the hanger turns.

They open the drawer. In it: squirt guns, marbles set to rolling by the opening of the drawer, a comic book, a Playboy magazine, a slingshot, a small bundle of firecrackers. Hands rifle the gewgaws: no radio.

Ronnie Nudell

Fuck.

## SANCTUARY

We are behind the two boys who sit side by side on the last pew, staring at the front of the empty sanctuary. Its stained glass windows further weaken the late-afternoon light. In deference to the location, the boys wear yarmulkas.

A long hold on their still backs.

At length, some movement in Danny's back, his head dips, and we hear him sucking on the joint. He holds it, exhales, and passes it wordlessly to Ronnie Nudell.

## SUBURBAN STREET

We are pulling Danny as he walks along the street, eyes red-rimmed, still wearing his yarmulka. It is dusk.

After a few beats of walking, the front door of a house just behind Danny opens. A husky, shaggy-haired youth emerges on the run.

The sound has alerted Danny. Seeing Mike Fagle, he too begins to run. He reaches up and grabs his yarmulka and clutches it in one of his pumping fists.

Pursued and pursuer both run wordlessly, panting, feet pounding.

Mike Fagle is closing. But Danny is already cutting across the Brandt's front yard, approaching his own. He plunges into the house and slams the door.

Mike Fagle draws up, panting, gazing hungrily at the house.

Lights are on inside. The house is a warm yellow citadel in the dusk.

After a beat we hear, faint and dulled, the Jefferson Airplane.

Mike Fagle slinks away.

#### PUFFY WHITE CLOUDS

A shockingly blue sky with picture-perfect clouds hanging in it.

After a beat the top of an aluminum extension ladder swings in from the bottom of the frame and comes toward us.

We cut to a side angle as the ladder clunk against a roof.

It starts vibrating to the rhythmic *clung* of someone climbing.

Hands enter. Larry's head enters.

He climbs onto the roof.

He takes a couple steps away from the edge and stands tentatively, making sure of his balance. He looks around.

His point-of-view towards the front. An unfamiliarly high perspective on the street and the neighboring houses, almost maplike. Very peaceful. Wind rhythmically, gently waves the trees.

Larry gingerly walks up to the aerial at the peak of the roof. We are hearing a rhythmic popping noise.

Larry reaches the peak and straddles it. He looks down at the back yard.

Mitch

Ow.

Foreshortened Gar Brandt and Mitch are playing catch in their back yard. With each toss the ball pops, alternately in father's mitt and son's.

Precariously balanced, Larry reaches out for the aerial. He tentatively touches it. He grasps it. He twists the aerial.

Something strange: as it rotates the aerial creaks—a high whine as pure as the hum sounded from the rim of a wineglass.

Mitch

Ow.

Faintly, under the wineglass sound, and clouded by static, a high, ringing tenor sings in an unfamiliar modality. Cantorial music.

Larry drops his hand. Inertia keeps the aerial rotating slowly til it dies, the sound drifting away into the sybillant *shushing* of trees.

Larry reaches out again to turn the aerial. The same crystal hum. . . cantorial singing. . . and now, layering in, the theme from *F Troop*.

Music. Crystal hum. Wind.

Mitch

Ow.

Larry's look travels: his point-of-view pans slowly off the steep angle of father and son playing catch, travels across his own backyard, and brings in the white fence that encloses the patio of the neighbor on the other side.

Gar (off)

Good toss, Mitch.

On the enclosed patio a woman reclines on a lawn chaise of nylon bands woven over an aluminum frame. She is on her back, eyes closed against the sun. She is naked.

Mitch (off)

Ow.

Larry reacts to the naked woman: startled at first, he moves to hide behind the peak of the roof. But as he realizes that the sun keeps the woman's eyes closed he relaxes, continuing to stare.

She is attractive. Not young, not old: Larry's age. Peaceful.

After a still beat one of her hands gropes blindly to the side. It finds an ashtray on the table next to her and takes from it a pluming cigarette. The woman takes a puff and replaces it.

Mitch (off)

Ow.

*F Troop*. Cantorial singing.

Blue sky and white puffy clouds.

The sound of a pencil scratching against paper.

#### NOTEBOOK

A pencil scratches equations into a lamplit spiral notebook.

Sidor Belarsky comes in at the cut. So does the spluttering suck-sound of Uncle Arthur's evacuator.

Wider on Uncle Arthur, in his pyjamas, propped up on the narrow fold-out sofa, writing with one hand as he holds the evacuator hose to his neck with the other.

Squeezed into the living room next to the fold-out sofa is a camp cot of plaid-patterned nylon stretched over an aluminum frame. On the camp cot is Larry, lying half-in, half-out of a rumpled sleeping bag. He stares at the ceiling, a damp washcloth pressed against his forehead. His face is flaming red.

Arthur speaks absently as he scribbles:

Arthur

Will you read this? Tell me what you think?

Larry continues to stare at the ceiling.

Larry

Okay.

Uncle Arthur glances up from the notebook, focuses on Larry.

Arthur

Boy. You should've worn a hat.

LATER

The lights are out. Very quiet. Uncle Arthur lightly snores.

Larry still stares at the ceiling. He shifts his weight. The aluminum frame of the cot squeaks. He shifts again. Another creak.

Larry fishes his watch from the jumble of clothes on the floor: 4:50.

#### KITCHEN

Larry, in his underwear, spoons ground coffee into the percolator. Uncle Arthur snores softly on in the other room.

From outside, a dull thunk.

Larry pulls back a curtain.

Next door, Gar Brandt is going down the walk, wearing camouflage togs and camo billed cap, a rifle bag slung over his shoulder. He is carrying an ice chest, its contents clicking and sloshing.

The boy Mitch, also wearing camo clothes and cap and also with a rifle bag, has just closed the front door. He now lets the screen door swing shut behind him and follows his father down the walk to the car in the driveway.

The twitter of early morning birds. Gar's voice, though not projected, stands out in the pre-dawn quiet:

Gar

Let's see some hustle, Mitch.

#### CLOSE ON THE NOTEBOOK

Its top sheet, densely covered by equations, has a heading:

*The Mentaculus*  
*Compiled by Arthur Gopnik*

After a beat Larry's hand enters to turn the page. The second page is also densely covered with equations.

Voice

Larry?

This brings Larry's look up from the Mentaculus. We are in Larry's office. Standing in the office doorway is Arlen Finkle.

Larry

Hi Arlen.

Arlen Finkle

Larry, I feel that, as head of the tenure committee I should tell you this, though it should be no cause for concern. You should not be at all worried.

Larry waits for more. Arlen seems to need a prompt.

Larry

Okay.

Arlen Finkle

I feel I should mention it even though we won't give this any weight at all in considering whether to grant you tenure, so, I repeat—no cause for concern.

Larry

Okay, Arlen. Give what any weight?

Arlen Finkle

We have received some letters, uh. . . denigrating you, and, well, urging that we not grant you tenure.

Larry

From who?

Arlen Finkle

They're anonymous. And so of course we dismiss them completely.

Larry

Well. . . well. . . what do they say?

Arlen Finkle

They make allegations, not even allegations, assertions, but

I'm not really. . . while we give them no credence, Larry, I'm not supposed to deal in any specifics about the committee's deliberations.

Larry

But. . . I think you're saying, these won't play any part in your deliberations.

Arlen Finkle

None at all.

Larry

Um, so what are they. . .

Arlen Finkle

Moral turpitude. You could say.

Larry

Uh-huh. Can I ask, are they, are they—idiomatic?

Arlen Finkle

I, uh. . .

Larry

The reason I ask, I have a Korean student, South Korean, disgruntled South Korean, and I meant to talk to you about this, actually, he—

Arlen Finkle

No. No, the letters are competently—even eloquently—written. A native English-speaker. No question about that.

Larry

Uh-huh.

Arlen Finkle

But I reiterate this, Larry: no cause for concern. I only speak because I would have felt odd concealing it.

Larry

Yes, okay, thank you Arlen.



Arlen Finkle

Best to Judith.

Larry answers with a wan smile. He looks down at the Mentaculus.

#### HEBREW SCHOOL EXTERIOR

Day. Somewhere inside the school a bell rings. Its doors swing open and children emerge.

Our angle is down a line of school busses, each with the the same stenciled Hebrew lettering, waiting to ferry the children home.

We are tracking toward the busses to steepen the rake. As children sort themselves out and climb into their respective vehicles, the track brings the nearest bus into the foreground. It noisily idles with its signature squeaks and stress sounds, its low coughing engine ominously rumbling. Children start climbing on.

#### MINUTES LATER

Inside the bus, now moving. Engine noise bangs in louder and air roars in through open windows.

We are on the driver, a sallow man in a short-sleeved white shirt with earlocks and a yarmulke. He pitches about, stoically wrestling with the wheel and gear shift as the vehicle bucks.

The pitching children. Somewhere, Jefferson Airplane plays.

Danny

I gotta get my radio back.

Ronnie Nudell

Maybe the fucker lodged it up his fucking asshole.

Danny

I gotta get it back. Or Mike Fagle's gonna pound the crap out of me.

Ronnie Nudell

Way up his asshole.

Danny

And I'll still have to get my sister the money back or she's gonna break four of my records. Twenty bucks, four records.

Howard Altar

How do you buy all those records. Where do you get your funds.

#### CLOSE ON LARRY

Standing in his yard. His eyes are darkly pouted. He is staring at something, it seems in distress. We hear a fluttering sound.

His point-of-view: stakes are set out in the Brandts' yard. Red ribbon connecting them outlines a projection from the side of the house. The loose ends of the ribbon flutter in the breeze.

Engine noise brings Larry's look around. A car is arriving.

It is the Brandts' car, oddly burdened. As it pulls into their driveway we see that there is a four-point stag strapped to the hood, its head lolling over the grille.

Gar and Mitch get out of the car in their hunting fatigues. Blood is smeared on Gar's shirt.

Gar

Go scrub up, Mitch.

Larry

Uh, good afternoon.

This brings Gar's look around. Apparently he is unused to talking with his neighbor. There is a short beat before his response.

Gar

Afternoon.

In the background of his angle is the dead buck, staring off through sightless eyes.

Larry  
(lameley)  
... Been hunting?

Gar  
Yep.

Larry  
Is that a, uh...

He is indicating the staked area. Gar looks around at it, looks back at Larry.

Gar  
Gonna be a den.

Larry  
Uh-huh, that's great. Uh, Mr. Brandt—

Gar barks at Mitch, who has lingered to listen to the grown-ups:

Gar  
I said scrub up, Mitch!

The child quickly goes. Larry frowns.

Larry  
Isn't this a school day?

Gar  
Took him out of school today. So he could hunt with his dad.

Larry  
Oh!

He nods.

... That's... nice.

Gar stares at him with button eyes. Small talk is not his thing.

Larry clears his throat.

. . . Um, Mr. Brandt, that's just about at the property line, there. I don't think we're supposed to get within, what, ten feet---

Gar  
Property line's the poplar.

Larry  
. . . the . . . ?

Gar  
Poplar!

Larry  
. . . Well. . . even if it is, you're just about over it---

Gar  
Measure.

We hear two pairs of pounding footsteps coming up the street.

Larry  
I don't have to measure, you can tell it's. . .

Gar  
Line's the poplar.

He indicates.

. . . It's all angles.

Gar Brandt turns and goes.

Larry turns, reacting to the pounding footsteps. One of the two pairs belongs to Danny who arrives, slowing to a walk, panting, a bookbag over his shoulder.

A half-block back the pursuing boy also stops running. Husky, shaggy-haired, he watches, scowling, as Danny goes up the walk to his house.

Larry addresses Danny's retreating back:

What's going on? Larry

Nothing. Danny

## IN THE HOUSE

As Larry enters.

Larry? Judith (*off*)

Yeah? Larry  
(*projecting*)

Did you go to Sieglestein Schlutz? Judith (*off*)

No, I—not yet. Larry

Larry. Judith (*off*)

Appointment Monday. Larry

The thud of a car door outside.

Sarah heads for the front door, pulling on a jacket. Larry is surprised.

... Where are you going?

I'm going to the hole. Sarah

At five o'clock? Larry

He looks out the front-door window. Four girls of Sarah's age are coming up the walk

from the car. All have dark hair and big noses.

Sarah  
We're stopping at Laurie Kipperstein's house so I can wash  
my hair.

Larry pulls open the door just as the doorbell rings. From the four dark girls:

Voices  
Hi, Mr. Gopnik.

Larry  
You can't wash it here?

From somewhere in the house, Jefferson Airplane starts.

As she brushes past Larry:

Sarah  
Uncle Arthur's in the bathroom.

Voice  
Out in a minute!

Judith enters.

Judith  
Are you ready?

Larry  
Huh?

Judith  
We're meeting Sy at Embers.

Larry  
I am?

Judith  
Both of us. I told you.

EMBERS

Larry has his arms pinned at his sides by hugging Sy Ableman.

Sy

Larry. How are you.

Larry

Sy.

Sy

Hello Judith.

Judith

Hello Sy.

Once Sy releases Larry, all seat themselves at Sy's booth, Judith next to Sy, Larry facing.

Sy

Thank you for coming, Larry. It's so impawtant that we be able to discuss these things.

Larry

I'm happy to come to Embers, Sy, but, I'm thinking, really, maybe it's best to leave these discussions to the lawyers.

Sy

Of coss! Legal matters, let the lawyers discuss! Don't mix apples and oranges!

Judith

I've begged you to see the lawyer.

Larry  
(teeth grit)

I told you, I'm going Monday.

Sy

Monday is timely! This isn't—please!—Embers isn't the forum for legalities, you are so right!

Judith

Hmph.

Sy

No, Judith and I thought merely we should discuss the practicalities, the living arrangements, a situation that will conduce to the comfit of all the parties. This is an issue where no one is at odds.

Larry isn't sure where this is leading:

Larry

. . . Living arrangements.

Sy

Absolutely. I think we all agree, the children not being contaminated by the tension—the most impawtant.

Judith

We shouldn't put the kids in the middle of this, Larry.

Larry

The kids aren't—

Judith

I'm saying "we." I'm not pointing fingers.

Sy

No one is playing the "blame game," Larry.

Larry

I didn't say anyone was!

Judith

Well let's not play He said, She said, either.

Larry

I wasn't! I—

Sy

Aw right, well let's just step back, and defuse the situation, Larry.

Larry glares at Sy.



Sy smiles at him, sadly. He reaches over and rests a hand on Larry's hand.

. . . I find, sometimes, if I count to ten.

A beat.

. . . One. . . two. . . three. . . faw. . . Or silently. . .

Long beat.

Judith

Really, to keep things on an even keel, especially now, leading up to Danny's bar mitzvah—

Sy

A child's bar mitzvah, Larry!

Judith

Sy and I think it's best if you move out of the house.

Larry

. . . Move out?!

Sy

It makes eminent sense.

Judith

Things can't continue as they—

Larry

Move out! Where would I go?!

Sy

Well, for instance, the Jolly Roger is quite livable. Not expensive, and the rooms are eminently livable.

Judith

This would allow you to visit the kids.

Sy

There's convenience in its fava. There's a pool—

Larry

Wouldn't it make more sense for you to move in with Sy?

Judith and Sy gape at him, shocked.

After a long beat:

Judith  
Larry!

Sy  
Larry, you're jesting!

Judith  
Larry, there is much to accomplish before that can happen.

Sy is sadly shaking his head.

Sy  
Larry, Larry, Larry. I think, really, the Jolly Roger is the appropriate coss of action.

He shrugs.

. . . It has a pool.

IN BLACK AND WHITE: A BRAIN

It sits in a large fishbowl filled with clear fluid.

The brain, alive, pulses. Leads connect it to various pieces of gear outside the fishbowl. Brain and appurtenances sit on a dais of sorts dressed out with bunting.

Oddly, the picture is scored with cantorial singing.

The brain seems to be giving orders to people who wear imperfectly form-fitting 1950's uniforms of the future. After receiving their instructions the minions of the brain kowtow before it and leave. They are succeeded by two leather-helmeted thugs, big and heavy though lacking muscle definition, who escort a resisting handsome man before the brain. The handsome man, hands tied behind his back, gazes defiantly up at the brain which in some fashion addresses him.

We hear blows and voices over the cantorial music:

Danny  
Stop it!

Sarah  
Creep fucker!

Danny  
Stop it! I'm getting it! I'm gonna get it!

Wider shows that the brain is on television, which Danny has muted while he plays the Cantor Youssele Rosenblatt record and drills his torah portion. He and Sarah are in a stand-off, hands tensed to either deliver or ward off blows.

Sarah  
Brat!

Larry enters.

Larry  
What's going on?

Sarah  
*(leaving)*  
Nothing.

She closes the door behind her.

Larry  
What was that?

Danny  
Nothing.

Larry  
How's the haftorah coming? Can you maybe use the hi-fi?

Danny  
What?

We hear the doorbell off. Larry indicates the portable record player.

Larry

Can I borrow this? I'm taking some stuff. To, you know,  
the Jolly Rodger.

Danny

Sure Dad.

On TV, the handsome man shouts defiance at the brain.

From off, Sarah projects:

Sarah

Dad. Chinese guy.

ASIAN MAN

A middle-aged Korean man, well groomed. He wears a nicely cut suit and a jeweled tie-pin.

Man

Culcha clash.

He bangs his two knuckles together, illustrating.

. . . Culcha clash.

He faces Larry in the driveway. Larry's car is half-loaded with open boxes that are haphazardly stuffed with clothing and effects.

Larry is leaning against the hood, arms folded, gazing at the man, unimpressed. A long beat.

Finally he bestirs himself.

Larry

With all respect, Mr. Park, I don't think it's that.

Mr. Park

Yes.

Larry

No. It would be a culture clash if it were the custom in your land to bribe people for grades.

Mr. Park

Yes.

Larry

So—you're saying it is the custom?

Mr. Park

No. This is defamation. Grounds for lawsuit.

Larry

You—let me get this straight—you're threatening to sue me for defaming your son?

Mr. Park

Yes.

Larry

But it would—

Gar Brandt

Is this man bothering you.

Gar Brandt stands on the strip of lawn separating the two neighbors. He is giving Mr. Park a hard stare.

Larry

Is he bothering me? No. We're fine. Thank you, Mr. Brandt.

Gar Brandt, not entirely convinced, withdraws, glaring at the Korean.

Larry turns back to Mr. Park.

. . . I, uh. . . See, if it were defamation there would have to be someone I was defaming him to, or I. . . All right, I. . . let's keep it simple. I could pretend the money never appeared. That's not defaming anyone.

Mr. Park

Yes. And passing grade.

Larry

Passing grade.

Mr. Park

Yes.

Larry

Or you'll sue me.

Mr. Park

For taking money.

Larry

So . . . he did leave the money.

Mr. Park

This is defamation.

Larry stares at him.

Larry

Look. It doesn't make sense. Either he left the money or he didn't—

Mr. Park

Please. Accept mystery.

Larry

You can't have it both ways! If—

Mr. Park

Why not.

Larry stares.

We hear Sidor Belarsky music.

RECORD PLAYER

Sidor Belarsky's singing crosses the cut. The tone arm of Danny's portable record player rides on a spinning LP.

Wider shows Larry grading bluebooks at a small formica table crowded into a corner of his motel room. It is a depressingly generic budget motel room of the mid-sixties with cheaply paneled walls, thin carpet, formica night tables, plastic lamps, and twin beds with stained nubby bedspreads.

The phone rings.

Larry

Hello. . .

He brightens.

. . . Fine, Mimi, how are you?. . . Uh-huh. . . No, it's not that bad. . . It's not that bad. . . There's a pool. . .

Arthur emerges from an alcove in the dim depth of the room that has a dressing-room mirror and apparently connects to the bathroom. He has a hand towel pressed to the back of his neck.

. . . Oh sure, that sounds great. . . Oh, great, then I'll bring Danny. . .

## LAKE NOKOMIS

The beach: families are crowded onto the small beach of a freshwater lake, children cavorting, adults lounging, much sun, few umbrellas. Red floats connected by red nylon rope define a swimming area; beyond it people dive from an anchored raft.

Splashing and children's laughter slap off the surface of the lake.

## WOODS

Above the lake. The beach noise has some distance. It also has a faintly bizarre canyon echo. There is a present, sybillant *shushing* of breeze in the trees.

It is dark here with intense hot spots where sun sifts through the leaf cover. We are close on Danny, who sits very still, leaning back against a tree trunk.

After a very long beat he slowly exhales, a small amount of smoke feathering out with his breath.

Voice

Gimme that fucker.

Danny passes the joint to Ronnie Nudell, who sits opposite.

#### PICNIC AREA

On a woodless rise above the lake. Each of the separate picnic areas consist of a redwood table and benches placed next to a firepit.

Here in the sun both Larry and Mel Nudell, a man slightly older than Larry, glisten with sweat. Mel, in the background, bounces a bag of charcoal briquettes to spill some into the firepit. Larry sits at the table in the foreground with Mimi Nudell who alone seems unaffected by the heat—or by anything else in the physical environment. Her pale, gravely composed Giacometti face is shaded by a large-brimmed hat.

Larry

No. Almost a year and a half since Touche Ross let him go. He's very good with numbers. I think his, his social skills have held him back.

Mimi

Such a sweet man though.

Larry

Arthur has a good heart. And he never complains, unlike me. Sometimes I don't give him enough credit.

Mimi

He tried to tell me about this thing he's working on, this, um. . .

Larry

The Mentaculus? He says it's a, uh. . . a probability map. Of the universe. He asked if I could help him publish it. Um, it was a little hard for me to evaluate.



A beat.

Mimi

Does he go out socially at all?

Larry

He tries. He's been going to the singles mixers at Hillel House.—Well, I should talk, I'm not doing any better.

Mimi

How is Judith?

Larry

Fine. She's fine. I'm the odd man out.

Mimi smiles.

Mimi

Sometimes these things just aren't meant to be. And it can take a while before you feel what was always there, for better or worse.

Larry

I never felt it! It was a bolt from the blue! What does that mean! Everything that I thought was one way turns out to be another!

Mimi

Then—it's an opportunity to learn how things really are.

Larry broods. Mimi softens.

. . . I'm sorry—I don't mean to sound glib. It's not always easy, deciphering what God is trying to tell you.

Larry

I'll say.

Mimi

But it's not something you have to figure out all by yourself. We're Jews, we have that well of tradition to draw on, to help us understand. When we're puzzled we have all the

stories that have been handed down from people who had the same problems.

Larry

I guess.

Mimi

Have you talked to Rabbi Nachtner?

Silence.

Arthur is climbing the hill from the lake, dripping wet. He projects:

Arthur

Boy! The air out here is magnificent!

Mimi, looking at Larry, responds to his dark silence:

Mimi

Why not see him?

Mel Nudell has finished spreading and lighting the coals. He now comes and sits next to Mimi, draping an arm over her shoulder. She strokes his hand, still looking at Larry.

Larry

What's the rabbi gonna tell me?

Mimi

If I knew I'd be the rabbi.

He looks at her glumly. She laughs.

. . . Life is beautiful, Larry. Nobody's sick. Nobody died.  
You just need help remembering how to enjoy it.

She rests her head against Mel's shoulder.

. . . Where are the kids?

Mel

Woods. Exploring.

Uncle Arthur approaches, swim trunks plastered to his thighs, hair dripping, one hand

pressing his towel to the back of his neck.

Arthur

If somebody could bottle this air they'd make a million bucks!

A white title comes up:

*The First Rabbi*

SYNAGOGUE OFFICE ANTEROOM

Day. Larry sits waiting. A door opens and he rises.

Larry

Oh—Rabbi Scott.

Rabbi Scott Ginzler is the junior rabbi, a man in his twenties.

Rabbi Scott

Hello Larry.

Larry

I thought I was going to see Rabbi Nachtner.

Rabbi Scott

He was called away on an *etz monim*: Ruth Brynn's mother is in the hospital and she isn't doing well. Rabbi Nachtner asked me to cover for him—come on in.

RABBI SCOTT'S OFFICE

A few minutes later. Larry sits tensely hunched forward facing Rabbi Scott.

Larry

And she wants a Gett.

A long silence. The hum of ventilation.

At length:

Rabbi Scott

A what?

Larry

She wants a—

Rabbi Scott

Oh, a Gett. Uh-huh, sure.

Larry

I feel like the carpet's been yanked out from under me. I don't know which end is up. I'm not even sure how to react; I'm too confused.

Rabbi Scott

What reasons did she give? For the rupture?

Larry

She didn't give—reasons. Just that, oh, you know, things haven't been going well.

Rabbi Scott

And is that true?

Larry

I guess. I don't know. She's usually right about these things.

Rabbi Scott

Mm-hm.

Larry

I feel so. . . addled.

Rabbi Scott

Yes, I can see.

Larry

I was hoping that. . . Rabbi Nachtner. . .

Rabbi Scott

That he would. . . yes?

Larry

Well, with the benefit of his life experience. . . no offense—

Rabbi Scott chuckles.

Rabbi Scott

No, of course not. I am the junior rabbi. And it's true, the point-of-view of somebody who's older and perhaps had similar problems might be more valid. And you should see the senior rabbi as well, by all means. Or even Minda if you can get in, he's quite busy. But maybe—can I share something with you? Because I too have had the feeling of losing track of *Hashem*, which is the problem here. I too have forgotten how to see Him in the world. And when that happens you think, well, if I can't see Him, He isn't there any more, He's gone. But that's not the case. You just need to remember how to see Him. Am I right?

He rises and goes to the window.

. . . I mean, the parking lot here. Not much to see.

It is a different angle on the same parking lot we saw from the Hebrew school window.

. . . But if you imagine yourself a visitor, somebody who isn't familiar with these. . . autos and such. . . somebody still with a capacity for wonder. . . Someone with a fresh. . . perspective. That's what it is, Larry.

Larry

Um. . .

Rabbi Scott

Because with the right perspective you can see *Hashem*, you know, reaching into the world. He is in the world, not just in shul. It sounds to me like you're looking at the world, looking at your wife, through tired eyes. It sounds like she's become a sort of. . . thing. . . a problem. . . a thing. . .

Larry

Well, she's, she's seeing Sy Ableman.

Rabbi Scott

Oh.

Larry

She's, they're planning, that's why they want the Gett.

Rabbi Scott

Oh. I'm sorry.

Larry

It was his idea.

Rabbi Scott

Well, they do need a Gett to remarry in the faith. But—this is life. For you too. You can't cut yourself off from the mystical or you'll be—you'll remain—completely lost. You have to see these things as expressions of God's will. You don't have to like it, of course.

Larry

The boss isn't always right, but he's always the boss.

Rabbi Scott

Ha-ha-ha! That's right, things aren't so bad. Look at the parking lot, Larry.

Rabbi Scott gazes out, marveling.

. . . Just look at that parking lot.

#### EXTERIOR: GOPNIK HOUSE

Our low angle looks across the lawn toward the front of the house. Someone's pounding footsteps approach and his feet enter just off the lens and he quickly recedes, cropping in as he races up to the house: Danny.

A beat later pursuing feet enter, slowing—for Danny is already mounting the front stoop. Danny's pursuer does not go deep enough to crop in but we might gather from the size eleven sneakers and the cuffed jeans that it is hulking Mike Fagle.

## GOPNIK KITCHEN

We hear the front door being flung open and slammed shut, and in the background foyer Danny appears, panting heavily. He gives one glance back toward the front door and then looks at his mother and sister eating soup in the foreground. His sister has a towel wrapped turbanlike around her head. She holds it with one hand to keep it from tipping off when she tilts her head down for the soup.

Danny  
*(still panting)*

We eating already?

Sarah

I'm going to the hole.

Danny enters the kitchen and sits at the setting across from his sister. He picks up his spoon.

Some movement in Sarah's body; Danny recoils from a kick.

Danny

Ow! Cut it out!

Judith

What's going on?

The siblings slurp soup, neither answering.

After a couple slurps:

. . . Isn't Dad eating?

Judith

He's at the Jolly Roger.

Danny

Oh yeah.

More eating.

FADE OUT

## SIEGLESTEIN, SCHLUTZ

In a small windowless conference room lined by bookshelves filled with law reference books, Larry rises to greet Don Milgram, entering.

Larry

Don.

Don

How are you, Larry, Jesus, I am so sorry to be seeing you under these circumstances.

Larry

Oh, well. . .

Don

I always thought you and Judy were rock solid. This is so terrible, Larry. This is devastating.

Larry

Well, the way I look at it, it's an opportunity for me to really sit down and figure things out, and, and, look at the world afresh instead of just, you know, settling for the routine, tired old way of looking at things.

Don Milgram stares at him.

Don

. . . Really?

Larry

*(deflating)*

I don't know. Maybe not.

Don

Well, legally, I have to warn you, it's never easy for the husband. Unless, of course, there's some question of the wife having violated the marriage contract.

Larry

Oh no, nothing like that. She's planning to marry Sy Ableman, but they—



Don  
 Sy Ableman!

Larry  
 Yes, but they—

Don  
 Esther is barely cold!

Larry  
 She passed three years ago.

Don  
 Well, okay, still—this changes the complexion, Larry! Sy Ableman!

Larry  
 Not in the sense that. . . there hasn't been hanky-panky. To my knowledge.

Don  
 Oh.

Larry  
 No. I'm fairly certain this is not an issue. And in fact they, uh, Judith wants a Gett.

Beat. Don stares blankly at Larry.

Larry clears his throat.

. . . A ritual divorce.

Don  
 Oh.

Larry  
 So that they can remarry in the faith—

Don  
 Uh-huh, sure, not really a legal matter. Okay. Well. My goodness. How are the children taking it?

Larry

Oh, they're very. . .

He gropes.

. . . resilient.

Don

Good. Well. On the other thing, the neighbor's property line, I've asked Solomon Schlutz to take a look. There's very little having to do with real estate that'll get by Sol.

Larry

Okay. Good. How do you—I guess I'm a little worried, how do you, I have money pressures and—

Don

Our fee structure? We bill by the hour. Dave Sieglestein and Solomon Schlutz bill at a hundred and ten, the associates, me for instance, bill at—

A secretary sticks her head in.

Secretary

A call for Mr. Gopnik. Danny. At home.

Larry

Danny?!

Don

You can take it here.

Secretary

Oh-eight-oh-nine.

Larry punches a button on a row of four on the conference-room telephone.

Larry

Danny?!

Voice

Dad?

Larry  
Are you all right? Are you all—is everything—

Voice  
*F Troop* is fuzzy.

Larry  
. . . What?

Voice  
*F Troop* is still fuzzy.

Larry stares.

Don  
Everything okay?

#### DAWN AT THE JOLLY ROGER

Wide on the motel room, dimly lit by weak sun starting to seep in around the curtain.

Larry sleeps in one of the twin beds; Uncle Arthur snores in the other.

Uncle Arthur's breath snags and tangles on a snorfling inhale and it wakes him, gagging. He blinks, sits up, swings his legs out, gazes blearily around the room.

He rises stiffly and heads for the bathroom.

Larry stirs. The sound of Uncle Arthur urinating. Larry looks blearily around.

Larry stiffly rises. He takes the two steps across the room to the formica desk on which are spread papers for his class. As we hear the sucking sound of the neck evacuator in the bathroom, Larry sweeps papers together and mechanically stuffs his briefcase.

#### CAR

Larry is driving, hollow-eyed, to work.

After a long beat of staring, the *ka-ching* of a bicycle bell.

Larry's eyes widen and his head swivels, tracking as he overtakes and passes:

The bicyclist. A young Asian man wearing a white traffic-mask.

Larry looks at him in the rear-view.

Larry  
Clive!

He starts frantically pumping down his window, shouting:

. . . Clive! You gonna send your mother next?! You little  
bastard! I wanna see you! I wanna—

*Crash.*

He has rear-ended someone.

A blaring horn, a quick second *crash*: wrenching steel and spattering glass.

He has been rear-ended in turn.

The *ka-ching* of the bicycle. Clive Park cycles past without looking.

#### BLEGEN HALL

Larry enters the outer office, hugging his paper-stuffed briefcase to his chest.

The secretary is just crooking the phone into her shoulder.

Secretary  
Oh—Professor Gopnik. It's Dick Dutton again.

Larry  
(*blank*)  
Dick Dutton.

#### LARRY'S OFFICE

He sits in and picks up the phone.

Larry  
Hello?

Voice  
Hello, Mr. Gopnik, this is Dick Dutton from the Columbia Record Club. I'm calling because it is now, what, four months and we have yet to receive your first payment.

Larry  
I—there's some mistake. I'm not a member of the Columbian Record Club.

Voice  
Sir, you are Lawrence Gopnik of 1425 Flag Avenue South?

Larry  
No, I live at the Jolly Roger.

Voice  
Excuse me?

Larry  
No, I—well, yes, okay.

Voice  
Yes you are Lawrence Gopnik?

Larry  
Okay.

Voice  
Okay means. . .

Larry  
Okay, yes, Lawrence Gopnik, yes.

Voice  
Okay, well, you received your twelve introductory albums and you have been receiving the monthly main selection for four months now—

Larry  
“The monthly main selection?” Is that a record? I didn't

ask for any records.

Voice

To receive the monthly main selection you do nothing.  
You—

Larry

That's right! I haven't done anything!

Voice

Yes, that's why you receive the monthly main selection.  
The last—

Larry

But I—

Voice

The last one was Santana Abraxis. You—

Larry

I didn't ask for Santana Abraxis!

Voice

You request the main selection at the retail price by doing  
nothing. It is automatically mailed to you. Plus shipping  
and handling. You're about to—

Larry

I can't afford a new record every month! I haven't asked  
for—

Voice

You're about to get Cosmo's Factory, sir. The June main  
selection. And you haven't—

Larry

Look, something is very wrong! I don't want Santana  
Abraxis! I've just been in a terrible auto accident!

Beat.

Voice

I'm sorry sir.

Larry

Well—thank you. But I—

Voice

Are you okay?

Larry

Yes. Yes, no one was hurt.

Voice

Okay. Good. Well, you had fourteen days to listen to Santana Abraxis and return it if you weren't completely satisfied. You did nothing. And now you—

Larry

I didn't ask for Santana Abraxis! I didn't listen to Santana Abraxis! I didn't do anything!

The secretary is sticking her head in.

Secretary

Sir. . .

Voice

Sir. Please. We can't make you listen to the record. We—

Secretary

Professor Gopnik, your son. He said it's urgent.

Larry

Okay, look, I have to call you back, this is, this is—I'm sorry.

He irritably punches a button on the bottom row of four.

. . . Danny?

Danny

Dad!

Larry

Did you join the Columbia Record Club?!

Silence.

... Danny?

Danny

Um...

Larry

Danny, this is completely unacceptable. I can't afford to—

Danny

Okay Dad, but you gotta come home.

Larry

Is it *F Troop*?

Danny

Huh? No no. Mom's real upset.

#### GOPNIK HOUSE

Larry enters. We can hear weeping, semi-hysterical, from somewhere in the house.

Sarah's Voice

... Dad?

Larry

Yes?

She enters.

Sarah

Does this mean I can't go to the hole tonight?

Larry

Does what mean—what happened?

Sarah

Sy Ableman died in a car crash.

Danny's Voice



Hey Dad!

Larry

... What?!

Danny enters.

Danny

So are you coming back home? Can you fix the aerial?

The weeping, off, grows louder and more hysterical.

Larry

What?!

Danny

It's still, you know. . .

Loud wailing.

BLACK

After a beat in black, a white title:

*The Second Rabbi*

The title fades.

RABBI'S OFFICE

We are close on Larry. He sits hunched forward, hands clasped in front of him, staring at the floor, sadly shaking his head.

After a long beat:

Larry

It seems like she's asking an awful lot. But then—I don't know. Somebody has to pay for Sy's funeral.

Rabbi Nachtner, sitting opposite, nods.

Rabbi Nachtner

Uh-huh.

Larry

His own estate is in probate. But why does it have to be me? Or is it wrong to complain? Judy says it is. But I'm so strapped for cash right now—paying for the Jolly Roger, and I wrecked the car, and Danny's bar mitzvah. . . I . . .

Rabbi Nachtner

Something like this—there's never a good time.

Larry

I don't know where it all leaves me. Sy's death. Obviously it's not going to go back like it was.

Rabbi Nachtner

Mm. Would you even want that, Larry?

Larry

No, I—well yeah! Sometimes! Or—I don't know; I guess the honest answer is I don't know. What was my life before? Not what I thought it was. What does it all mean? What is *Hashem* trying to tell me, making me pay for Sy Ableman's funeral?

Rabbi Nachtner

Mm.

Larry

And—did I tell you I had a car accident the same time Sy had his? The same instant, for all I know. Is *Hashem* telling me that Sy Ableman is me, or we are all one or something?

Rabbi Nachtner

How does God speak to us: it's a good question. You know Lee Sussman?

Larry

Doctor Sussman? I think I—yeah.

Rabbi Nachtner

Did he ever tell you about the goy's teeth?

Larry

No. . . I—What goy?

Rabbi Nachtner

So Lee is at work one day; you know he has the orthodontic practice there at Texa-Tonka.

Larry

Uh-huh.

Rabbi Nachtner

Right next to the Gold Eagle Cleaners.

We cut to:

#### SIGN FOR THE GOLD EAGLE CLEANERS

It dominates a small suburban strip mall.

Rabbi Nachtner continues in voice-over as we cut to a smoked glass door that identifies Leon Sussman, DDS.

Rabbi Nachtner

He's making a plaster mold—it's for corrective bridge work—in the mouth of one of his patients. . .

A close shot of a man's mouth biting down on two horse-shoe shaped troughs—an upper and a lower—that overflow an oozing white goo.

. . . Russell Kraus. He's a delivery dispatcher for the Star and Tribune with chronic mandicular deterioration.

The grinding guitar solo from Jefferson Airplane's "Bear Melt" scores the narrative.

The patient opens his mouth as a hand enters to grab the upper tray.

The reverse shows Dr. Sussman, a balding middle-aged man, dressed in the the high-collared white smock of an oral surgeon. He carries the mold over to a drying table.

Kraus is twisted over the side of the chair spitting into the water-swirled spit-sink.

. . . Well, the mold dries and Lee is examining it one day

before fabricating an appliance. . . .

Another day: Dr. Sussman is sitting at his desk examining the lower mold. He notices something unusual.

. . . He notices something unusual.

Sussman reaches up for the loupe attached to his eyeglasses.

There seems to be something engraved on the inside of the patient's lower incisors. . .

He flips down the loupe. His eyes are hugely magnified as he stares.

. . . Sure enough, it's writing.

Sussman squints.

His point-of-view: Tiny incised Hebrew letters:

תרנלנשצ

BACK TO RABBI NACHTNER

He confirms with a nod.

Rabbi Nachtner

This in a goy's mouth, Larry.

BACK TO LEON SUSSMAN

The Rabbi's narrative continues.

Rabbi Nachtner

*Tet resh nun lamed nun shin tsayin.* What is that—*tiranu linoshets*? "Help me"? Is that what it says? Or is it a name? It's not Kraus's name.

Sussman flips the loupe away and looks off, haunted. He rises.

. . . He checks the mold, just to be sure. Oh, it's there all

right. . .

A dental mirror is dipped into the horse-shoe-shaped hardened paste of the mold. It pans tiny letters that stand out in relief, right-side around in the mirror:

חרגלנשצ

Sussman leans back, thinking.

He calls the goy back on the pretense of needing additional measurements for the appliance. . .

Close on Kraus grinning as he shakes Sussman's hand in the reception area. Sussman gestures to invite Kraus back to the examination room.

Sussman chats, affecting nonchalance.

In the examination room, leaning over Kraus in the chair, the dentist is indeed chatting with seeming casualness.

Notice any other problems with your teeth? Anything peculiar, et cetera?

Sussman takes a dental mirror.

No. No. No. Visited any other dentist recently?

He looks in Kraus' mouth with the mirror:

חרגלנשצ

Sussman frowns.

There it is. "Help me"?

He leans back.

Sussman goes home. Can Sussman eat? No.

Sussman sits at the kitchen table, untouched food in front of him. His wife chats volubly while Sussman stares into space.

Can Sussman sleep? No.

Sussman is in bed, pyjamas buttoned to the neck, staring at the ceiling.

What does it mean? Is it a message for him, for Sussman?  
And if so, from whom? Does Sussman know? Sussman  
doesn't know.

Back in the dental office Sussman pulls boxes containing other molds off the shelf.

Sussman looks at the molds of his other patients, goy and  
Jew alike, seeking other messages. He finds none. He  
looks in his own mouth. . .

Close on Sussman in front of a mirror straining to see the reflection of a reflection of the  
dental mirror he holds in his own mouth.

. . . Nothing. His wife's mouth. . .

Sussman's wife lies asleep on her back, her mouth open, snoring softly. Sussman, in  
pyjamas but with his glasses on and loupe in place, lies over her in bed, supporting  
himself with one arm thrown across her body. He leans awkwardly in, carefully  
lowering a dental mirror into his wife's open mouth.

. . . Nothing. It is a singular event. A mystery.

The Jefferson Airplane guitar solo is heating up.

But Sussman is an educated man. Not the world's greatest  
sage, maybe, no Rabbi Minda, but he knows a thing or two  
from the Zohar and the Caballah. He knows every Hebrew  
letter has its numeric equivalent.

Sussman, still in his pyjamas is sitting at the kitchen table scribbling on a tablet of lined  
paper.

Close on the paper: the Hebrew letters have been transcribed into their numeric  
equivalents:

לגשז-תרנ  
496-2428

Nachtner continues in voice-over:

Seven digits—a phone number maybe?

Sussman reaches for the phone. He hesitates a moment, then dials.

. . . Sussman dials. It rings.

#### AN ELEVATED CUBICLE

In a grocery store. A man in short sleeves reaches for the phone.

Rabbi Nachtner

It's a Red Owl grocery store in Bloomington. Hello? Do you know a goy named Kraus? Russel Kraus?

The store manager is shaking his head.

Where have I called? The Red Owl. In Bloomington. Thanks so much.

The manager, puzzled, hangs up.

Sussman thinks, am I supposed to go to the Red Owl, to receive a further sign? He goes. . .

In the parking lot of the Red Owl Sussman, wearing a short-brimmed fedora, emerges from his car. It is an unremarkable grocery store in a suburban mall.

It's a Red Owl.

Inside Sussman, in his fedora, gazes around.

Groceries. What have you.

A service alley behind the store: dumpsters, wind-blown garbage, Sussman looking.

On the wall behind the store, a stain. . .

There is an old, rather nondescript stain of some liquid splatted against the back wall and long since dribbled away.

. . . Could be a *nun sofit*. . . Or maybe not. . .

The parking lot again: Sussman gets back in his car.

Sussman goes home. What does it mean? He has to find out, if he's ever to sleep again.

Sussman again, in pyjamas buttoned to the neck, lies in his bed staring at the ceiling.

He goes to see the Rabbi, Nachtner. He comes in and sits right where you're sitting now.

Sussman is indeed sitting across from Rabbi Nachtner, just where we've seen Larry sitting.

What does it mean, Rabbi? Is it a sign from *Hashem*? "Help me." I, Sussman, should be doing something to help this goy? Doing what? The teeth don't say. I should know without asking? Or maybe I'm supposed to help people generally—lead a more righteous life? Is the answer in cabalah? In torah? Or is there even a question? Tell me, Rabbi—what can such a sign mean?

Nachtner—not the narrating Nachtner but the Nachtner in the scene—nods and considers.

LARRY

Staring at the Rabbi. He waits a good beat.

He prompts:

Larry

So what did you tell him?

The Rabbi seems surprised by the question.

Rabbi Nachtner

Sussman?

Larry

Yes!

Rabbi Nachtner

Is it . . . relevant?



Larry  
Well—isn't that why you're telling me?

Rabbi Nachtner  
Mm. Okay. Nachtner says, look. . .

We are back in the scene, narrated by voice-over, of the Rabbi silently advising the fretful Sussman.

. . . The teeth, we don't know. A sign from *Hashem*, don't know. Helping others, couldn't hurt.

Larry's voice-over question plays over Sussman asking the same thing:

Larry (*off*)  
But—is that what it meant?—*tet resh nun lamed nun shin tsayin*, was it “Help me”? or a number? Or was it—

Rabbi Nachtner (*off*)  
We can't know everything.

Sussman stares blankly at the Rabbi.

A beat.

Larry (*off*)  
It sounds like you don't know anything!

THE RABBI

Smiling equably at Larry. He reacts to the ejaculation with a shrug.

Larry scowls.

Larry  
Why even tell me the story?

Rabbi Nachtner  
(*amused*)  
First I should tell you, then I shouldn't.

Larry, exasperated, changes tack:

Larry  
What happened to Sussman?

SUSSMAN

In his office. Working on different patients as the Rabbi resumes his voice-over.

Rabbi Nachtner  
What would happen? Not much. He went back to work. For a while he checked every patient's teeth for new messages; didn't see any; in time, he found he'd stopped checking.

Sussman, at home, chats with his wife over dinner.

. . . These questions that are bothering you, Larry—maybe they're like a toothache. We feel them for a while, then they go away.

Sussman lies in bed sleeping, smiling, an arm thrown across his wife.

LARRY

Dissatisfied.

Larry  
I don't want it to just go away! I want an answer!

Rabbi Nachtner  
The answer! Sure! We all want the answer! But *Hashem* doesn't owe us the answer, Larry. *Hashem* doesn't owe us anything. The obligation runs the other way.

Larry  
Why does he make us feel the questions if he's not gonna give us any answers?

Rabbi Nachtner smiles at Larry for a beat.

Rabbi Nachtner

He hasn't told me.

Larry rubs his face, frustrated.

A last question occurs to him:

Larry

And what happened to the goy?

Rabbi Nachtner's forbearing smile fades into puzzlement.

Rabbi Nachtner

The goy? Who cares?

EXTERIOR: THE SYNAGOGUE

The modern synagogue grafted onto a patch of prairie.

An echoing voice rings out:

Voice

Sy Ableman was a serious man!

RABBI NACHTNER

In close-up he gazes around, weighing the effect of the words just delivered.

After a long beat during which he seeks to establish eye contact with as much of his audience as possible:

Rabbi Nachtner

. . . Sy Ableman was a man devoted to his community. . .

Wider shows Rabbi Nachtner up on the bema. He and the congregation face each other across a casket down at floor level.

. . . to torah study. . .

Larry sits among the congregants, his gaze fixed on a point off.

. . . to his beloved wife Esther until, three years ago, she passed. . .

Larry's point-of-view: Judy is visible from  $\frac{3}{4}$  behind. She sits a few rows ahead looking grimly up at the rabbi.

. . . and to his duty, as he saw it. Where does such a man go? A *tzadik*—who knows, maybe even a *lamid vovnik*—a man beloved by all, a man who despised the frivolous? Could such a serious man. . . simply. . . disappear?

The words echo.

Again the rabbi gazes around, as if awaiting answer.

Then:

. . . We speak of *L'olam ha-ba*, the World to Come. Not heaven. Not what the gentiles think of as afterlife. "*L'olam ha-ba*." What is *L'olam ha-ba*? Where is *L'olam ha-ba*? Well: it is not a geographic place, certainly. Like—Canada.

Murmured chuckles from the congregation.

Nor is it the *eretz zavat chalav ood'vash*—the land flowing with milk and honey, for we are not promised a personal reward, a gold star, a first-class VIP lounge where we get milk and cookies to eternity!

More chuckles.

*L'olam ha-ba*. . . is in the bosom of Abraham. *L'olam ha-ba* is in the soul of this community which nurtured Sy Ableman and to which Sy Ableman now returns. That's right, he returns. Because he still inspires us Sy Ableman returns. Because his memory instructs us Sy Ableman returns. Because his thoughts illuminate our days and ways Sy Ableman returns. The frivolous man may vanish without a ripple but Sy Ableman? Sy Ableman was a serious man. . .

A sob echoes through the sanctuary.

Larry looks at Judith, who stifles further sobs with a handkerchief.

. . . As you know, the mourner's kaddish does not mention the dead. It praises *Hashem*; it praises what abides. And Sy Ableman, whose spirit will continue to assist us in *tikkun olam*, is with us even now, a serious man who would say as we now say *Yiskadal v'yiskadash sh'may rabah*. . .

The congregation begins to chant along but it and Judith's weeping are cut off by:

A HAND RAPPING AT A DOOR

The front door to the Gopnik home.

Larry, still in his suit from *shul* and wearing a yarmulka, opens the door. He recoils in surprise edged with fear.

Reverse: two uniformed policemen.

Cop 1

Arthur Gopnik?

Larry is momentarily dumb. Inside the house we can see a corner of a card table set up in the living room with food laid out on it. Sarah sits with her back to us, head wrapped by a towel-turban. Arthur, on the far side of the table, his balding head domed by a yarmulka, half-leans out so that he may sneak looks toward the men at the door without totally revealing himself. From somewhere down the hall come Judith's muffled sobs.

. . . Are you Arthur Gopnik?

Larry

I'm . . . Laurence Gopnik.

Cop 1

Do you go by the name Arthur Gopnik?

Larry

No.

Cop 1

Is that Arthur Gopnik?

Arthur ducks away.

From inside the living room:

Danny (off)

Dad? What's going on?

Larry

Can you tell me what's going on. We're sitting *shiva* here.

Cop 1

You're what.

Larry

A religious observance. We're . . . bereaved.

The cop standing behind gazes in over his partner's shoulder.

Cop 2

Who died?

Larry

My wife's um. . . it's a long story.

Cop 1

Look. Tell Gopnik—you know, Arthur Gopnik—he's breaking the law. We're not arresting him now but next time we will. Gambling is against the law in this state. That's just the way it is. All right. Go back to your. . .

Cop 2

Sorry, sir.

## LIVING ROOM

A minute later. The family—except for Judith, whose weeping continues off—sits around the card table. A long beat.

At length:

Danny

Dad, we get Channel 4 now but not Channel 7.

Larry

Arthur, how could you do that to this family. On Sy's . . .  
on Sy's—

Arthur

It's a victimless crime.

Larry

That doesn't make it right! And you—

Danny

He won a lot of money, Dad! The Mentaculus really  
works!

Larry's gaze swings onto his son.

Larry

You knew about it?!

Danny

Well, um. . .

Arthur

They must have finked me out. They knew I could just  
keep on winning, so a couple weeks ago they blackballed  
me, and now they've—

Larry

What did you do with the money you won?

Silence. Arthur sneaks a look at Danny.

Larry looks back and forth between them.

. . . What's going on?

Arthur shrugs.

Arthur

I didn't want it. Danny said he could use it—

Sarah

Unfair!

Larry

What have you been—

Arthur

What's unfair is these guys saying I can't play in their card game!

Sarah

Why give him the money?! You know what he spends it on?

Larry

*(knowing nod)*

I know about the records.

Sarah

Records?! You think he buys records from Mike Fagle?

Movement in Danny's body; Sarah recoils from a kick.

... Ow! Little brat!

Larry

Hey! What's going on!

Danny

At least I'm not saving up for a nose job!

Larry

What?!

Sarah

Brat!

Larry

Nobody in this house is getting a nose job! You got that?!



Danny

Ah!

Struck by a thought he leaps up and bolts from the room.

Larry

Danny! You weren't excused! We're still talking!

Sarah

What a brat.

Larry

What was this card game, Arthur?

Arthur

Some goys run a private game.

We hear the TV go on down the hall and the theme from *F Troop*.

. . . I think they're Italians.

Larry

Danny, what's going on!

He rises.

## BEDROOM

Larry enters to look down at Danny's back. Beyond him *F Troop* flickers on the TV.

Larry

Danny! We're sitting *shiva*!

## DON MILGRAM'S OFFICE

Larry, sitting across from Don, has his head buried in his arms on the desktop.

Don

She's retained Barney Silver at Tuchman, Marsh. This is a, uh—this is an aggressive firm, Larry.

Larry  
(muffled)

Uh-huh.

Don  
These are not pleasant people. Judith is free of course to retain whoever she. . . I take it you don't talk to her?

Larry raises his head, squinting against the light.

Larry  
It's hard. I think she emptied our bank account. I tried to ask her about it, very civilly.

Don  
Mm.

Larry  
She, uh. . .

Don  
Yeah, yeah you better open an account in your name only, put your paychecks in there from here on out. Til we know where we stand.

Larry  
Can I?

Don  
Oh, absolutely!

Larry  
That's not, um, dishonest?

Don  
Oh, absolutely! You, uh—

Larry  
I hate to say this, but I think she's also been sneaking cash out of my wallet.

Don  
Ouch. Well, yes, this is definitely, um, adversarial. The

first thing we—are you all right?

Larry is wincing as he rubs a forearm under his shirtsleeve.

Larry  
Just a sunburn. I've been spending a lot of time on the  
roof. For . . . perspective.

He trails off and his head drops back down onto his arms. Don gives him an appraising look.

Don  
. . . Have you seen the Rabbi?

Larry  
(*muffled again*)  
Talked to Nachtner.

Don  
You should talk to Minda.

Larry  
They told me Minda doesn't do pastoral work any more.  
Just. . . ceremonial.

Don  
Mm. Congratulates the bar mitzvah boy every week, so  
forth?

Larry nods miserably.

. . . That's too bad. A very wise man, Minda.

Larry raises his head.

Larry  
Getting old.

Don  
Very old.

Larry  
No, me.

Don

Larry, you're fine. It's a bump in the road. Was Nachtner helpful at all?

Larry gives a helpless shrug.

Don rolls his eyes.

. . . What—did he tell you about the goy's teeth?

A knock on the door. Don projects:

Yeah?

The door cracks open. A pipe edges in, followed by a peeking face: Solomon Schlutz.

. . . Oh, good! Sol, come on in.

Solomon Schlutz is a large man in shirtsleeves and suspenders. He has the smooth impassive face of a sphynx with a pipe clenched in its teeth.

He glides into the room, a sheaf of files tucked under one arm.

. . . Sol has been looking into the property-line issues. . .

Solomon Schlutz seats himself at the conference table and starts sorting and arranging the files into three piles.

. . . It seems that you do have a real problem with the original survey. But Sol seems to think there's some kind of nifty way for us to—well, I haven't heard it myself, I'll let Sol map it out.

Solomon Schlutz continues to arrange the files, his eye occasionally lingering on a specific page. When at length he is finished he carefully justifies the edges of the closest pile, takes the pipe out of his mouth, gives Larry a smile that seems to take some effort, and then taps the pipe in a large glass ashtray.

He looks up again at Larry, this time shocked. His stunned look on Larry holds for a long beat.

Larry returns a bewildered look.

Solomon Schlutz, staring at Larry as if he were some sort of monster, emits one barking syllable:

Solomon Schlutz  
Gah!

His stare holds. He reddens.

Don  
... Sol?

Solomon Schlutz's face now passes from the red end of the spectrum to the purple.

Solomon Schlutz  
Nnnfff!

The pipe clatters out of his hand. The hand grabs at his own shirt front.

... Glufffl. . .

Now his head pitches back. His backflung weight and twisting body send his chair tipping over, one hand still clutching at his chest while the other frantically waves. He disappears behind the conference table and lands with a floor-shaking *thump*. His writhing and gurgling remain audible.

Don  
Sol! Sol!

Don Milgram has risen to look down at his fallen colleague; now he flings open the conference room door and bellows into the office:

An ambulance! Quick! Somebody call an ambulance! A  
doctor!

A secretary looks in and screams.

Solomon Schlutz  
Garf! . . . Nnlogl. . . .

BLEGEN HALL

Larry walks into the outer office clutching his briefcase, eyes wide, shell-shocked. The secretary is at her typewriter but holding the phone, one hand covering its mouthpiece.

Secretary  
Dick Dutton. Columbia Record Club.

Larry  
Call back.

HIS OFFICE

Larry sits in heavily behind his desk.

A beat.

He opens the top left desk drawer. He withdraws the bulging white envelope and opens its flap.

He runs a finger over the wad of bills.

Voice  
Larry?

He looks up, startled.

Arlen Finkle stands in the doorway.

. . . As you know, the tenure committee meets—are you all right?

Larry sits frozen with the white envelope in his hands.

Larry  
I'm . . . fine.

Arlen Finkle  
I'm sorry. I know you've hit a rough patch.

Larry  
Thank you. I'm fine.

He puts the envelope in the desk drawer and closes it.

Arlen Finkle

Uh-huh. Well. As you know, the tenure committee meets next Wednesday to make its final determinations. If there's—

Larry

Arlen, I am not an evil man!

Arlen looks at him, shocked.

Arlen Finkle

Larry! Of course not!

Larry

I am not—

Arlen Finkle

We don't make moral judgments!

Larry

I went to the Aster Art once. I saw *Swedish Reverie*.

Arlen Finkle

It's okay, Larry, we don't need to know! The Tenure Committee—

Larry

It wasn't even erotic! Although it was, in a way.

Arlen Finkle

It's all right, Larry. Believe me.

Larry calms somewhat.

Larry

. . . Okay.

Arlen Finkle

Okay. Okay. We, uh, we decide on Wednesday, so if there's anything you want to submit in support of your tenure application, we should have it by then. That's all.

Larry

Submit. What. What do you—

Arlen Finkle

Well. Anything. Published work. Anything else you've done outside of the institution. Any work that we might not be aware of.

Larry

I haven't done anything.

Arlen Finkle

Uh-huh.

Larry

I haven't published.

Arlen Finkle

Uh-huh.

Larry

Are you still getting those letters?

Arlen Finkle

Uh-huh.

Larry

Those anonymous—

Arlen Finkle

Yes, I know. Yes.

A beat. Larry nods.

Larry

Okay. Okay. Wednesday.

Arlen Finkle

Okay. Don't worry. Doing nothing is not bad. *Ipsa facto*.

Larry

Sure.



## CLASSROOM

We are close over Larry's shoulder as he scribbles symbols onto the chalkboard.

Larry

... and that means. . . so that. . . from which we derive. . .

His glances back toward the class show that he is wearier, baggier-eyed, more haggard than ever. There is also something odd about his posture.

He writes smaller and smaller so as to finish before hitting the right edge of the chalkboard.

... and also. . . which lets us. . . and. . .

Wider as he finishes and straightens up, revealing that he has been stooping to write across the very bottom of the board.

The equation covers every inch of the classroom-wide three-paneled chalkboard. Larry is an off-balance figure at the right edge of frame.

Reverse on the class: staring.

... Okay?

Larry claps chalk dust from his hands.

... The Uncertainty Principle. It proves we can't ever really know. . . what's going on.

A bell sounds. The students start to shake off their stupor and rise. Larry projects over the wallah:

... So it shouldn't bother you. Not being able to figure anything out. Although you will be responsible for this on the mid-term.

The thinning crowd gradually reveals one person still seated:

Sy Ableman.

He wears a prayer shawl and yarmulka.

Larry does not seem surprised to see him.

. . . Did you follow that?

Sy Ableman

Of coss. Except that I know what's going on. How do you explain.

Larry

Well, it might be that, in, you know, in *L'olam ha-bah*—

Sy Ableman

Excuse me. Not the issue. In this world, Larry.

He nods at the chalkboard.

. . . I'll concede that it's subtle. It's clevva. But at the end of the day, is it convincing?

Larry

Well—yes it's convincing. It's a proof. It's mathematics.

Sy Ableman

Excuse me, Larry. Mathematics. Is the art of the possible.

Larry's brow furrows.

Larry

I don't think so. The art of the possible, that's. . . I can't remember. . . something else. . .

Sy Ableman

I'm a serious man, Larry.

Larry

I know that. So if I've got it wrong, what do I—

Sy Ableman holds up one hand to silence him.

Sy Ableman

So simple, Larry. See Minda.

Larry

I know, I want to see Minda! I want to see Minda! They told me that—ooph!

Without our having seen him rise or cross the room Sy Ableman has body-slammed Larry into the chalkboard. Now he grabs Larry by the hair and whips his head against the equation. As he slams Larry's head, again and again, the chalkboard chatters and the fringes on Sy's tallis dance.

Sy Ableman

See Minda! See Minda! I fucked your wife, Larry! I seriously fucked her! That's what's going on! See Minda!

LARRY

Very close on his eyes as they open. His head is on a pillow. Dull early light. A hissing sound.

Larry looks blearily over.

On the vanity table just outside the motel bathroom door sits Uncle Arthur's cyst evacuator. Its wagging hose snakes into the cracked bathroom door as the machine hisses.

MEZUZA

On a doorpost.

A hand enters to knock. A long beat. The person knocking gives up and his footsteps start to go away just as the door opens to reveal an attractive woman—the sunbathing neighbor, now wearing plaid shorts and a buttoned white blouse.

Her point-of-view: Larry, frozen halfway down the stoop, head turned back up toward the door.

Woman

Mr. Gopnik.

Larry

Oh. Hello, Mrs. Samsky. I knocked, and then thought you weren't here. I, uh. . .

Mrs. Samsky's voice is soft and breathy:

Mrs. Samsky

It just took me a second to get to the door. I was out back.

Larry stands nodding.

He seems to need prompting. Mrs. Samsky does:

. . . Can I help you? Wanna come in?

Larry

No, I—

One hand on the door, she steps back.

Mrs. Samsky

It's cooler.

Larry

Oh. Okay. I just wanted to let you know. . .

He is entering.

INSIDE

After the outside glare the house does indeed seem cooler. Larry looks around the living room, dim but neat. Wavering light sifts through closed vertical blinds which drift and click over floor-vented air-conditioning.

Mrs. Samsky closes the door, shutting out all sound from outside.

Larry

I've noticed that Mr. Samsky isn't around, and I—

Mrs. Samsky

He travels.

Larry

Uh-huh. Yeah, I never seem to see him, so I thought I should let you know, since you're somewhat new here, if you ever have, whatever, chores that you'd, um, or just help with something—I've decided to help others—you know, in a neighborly way. . .

She gazes at him with the least hint of a smile and waits for the speech to dribble away to silence. In the ensuing beat, quiet except for the clicking of the blinds, she is perfectly still. Finally, only her mouth moves:

Mrs. Samsky

How thoughtful.

Larry shrugs off the compliment.

Larry

Oh it's nothing. It's just good to know your neighbors. And to help. Help others. Although I don't care much for my neighbors on the other side, I must say.

Mrs. Samsky lets another smiling silence pass before responding.

Mrs. Samsky

. . . Goys, aren't they?

Larry

Mm. Very much so. Maybe it's not fair to judge; I have to admit I—

Mrs. Samsky

Won't you sit down?

Larry

Oh! Um. Okay. Thank you.

Mrs. Samsky

Iced tea? I have some.

She is already turning to the kitchen.

Larry

Okay. . .

He watches her and reacts to:

The backs of her thighs. The flesh retains the broad cross-hatch of her lawn chair.

She disappears into the kitchen, but calls out:

Mrs. Samsky

I don't see you around much, either.

Larry

Yes. Actually I haven't been home a lot recently, I, uh, my wife and I are, uh, well, she's got me staying at the Jolly Roger, the little motel there on—

Mrs. Samsky is reentering with two tall glasses of iced tea beaded with moisture. The click of the ice cubes joins the clicking of the blinds.

Mrs. Samsky

You're in the doghouse, huh?

She hands him a glass as she sits on the couch next to him, not invasively close, one bare leg folded onto the couch, the other draped over it.

Larry

Yeah, that's an understatement I guess, I—thank you—I, uh—

Mrs. Samsky

Do you take advantage of the new freedoms?

Larry stares at her. Mrs. Samsky gazes back. Her look displays equanimity; his, not.

Finally:

Larry

. . . What do you mean.

Her look holds for one more beat and then she swivels and opens the drawer of an end table.

She turns back with a joint.

Mrs. Samsky  
It's something I do. For recreation.

She lights it.

Larry  
That's. . . Marijuana?

Mrs. Samsky  
Mm-hmm.

She hands the joint over.

. . . You'll find you'll need the iced tea.

Larry handles the bitty cigarette with trepidation.

Larry  
Is it. . . well. . . okay. . .

#### THE VERTICAL BLINDS

Some minutes later. They drift and click in the air blown from the floor vents.

Larry stares at them.

After a long beat:

Larry  
Maybe Rabbi Scott was right.

Mrs. Samsky  
Who's Rabbi Scott?

Larry  
The junior rabbi.

Mrs. Samsky  
The junior rabbi.

Another long beat. Neither person feels compelled to speak as the blinds click.

The joint makes another trip back and forth.

Then:

... What did he say?

Larry

He spoke of... perception. All my problems are just...  
just a... a mere...

He trails off, listening.

... Is that a siren?

Mrs. Samsky

No. Some people get a little paranoid when they... Holy  
cow... That is a siren.

## OUTSIDE

The Samsky's door opens and Larry stumbles out. He stares.

The police car has stopped in front of his own house next door, lights still flashing. Two cops are going up the walk with Uncle Arthur between them in handcuffs.

Larry, stunned, walks woodenly toward his house.

Larry

Hey!

Neither the cops nor Uncle Arthur has heard. They have rung the doorbell and now disappear inside.

Larry projects louder—

... HEY!

—and starts to sprint. Mrs. Samsky has emerged from her house behind.

Larry takes the stoop steps two at a time. His door stands open and the theme from *F*



*Troop* issues from within.

Just inside the two policeman stand with their backs to us and handcuffed Uncle Arthur in between. The three men face Danny, who addresses them, projecting over the music from the TV.

Danny  
Sort of. He sleeps on the couch.

Larry  
This is crazy!

This brings the cops' look around. Uncle Arthur also turns, shamefaced, to Larry.

Cop  
Does this man live here?

Arthur  
I didn't know what to tell them! They asked for my address. . .

Larry  
It's just mathematics! You can't arrest a man for mathematics!

Arthur  
I didn't know whether to say I lived here or at the Jolly Roger.

Cop  
You know this man?

Arthur  
I figured this would sound more. . . I don't know. . .

Mrs. Samsky appears behind Larry on the stoop.

Danny  
Dad, why is Uncle Arthur in handcuffs?

Larry  
It's all a mistake. I mean, not a mistake, a, a—

Arthur  
Hello, Mrs. Samsky.

Larry  
—a miscarriage—

Cop  
Does this man live here?

Danny  
He sleeps on the couch.

Larry  
Look! What did he do!

Arthur  
Nothing! I didn't do anything!

Danny  
It folds out. Dad sleeps on a cot.

Larry  
You can't just—

Cop  
Sir, we picked this man up at the North Dakota.

Larry is brought up short.

Larry  
. . . The North Dakota!

Arthur  
But I didn't do anything!

Danny  
Dad, what's the North Dakota?

Cop  
Solicitation. Sodomy. Very serious.

Larry  
 . . . The North Dakota!

We hold on Larry's shocked reaction as we hear Danny, off:

Danny  
 What's Sodomy, Dad?

DON MILGRAM

He wears a black armband. He sits thinking, bouncing steepled fingers against his nose.

Finally:

Don  
 What does Arthur say?

Larry  
 He says he didn't do anything.

Don  
 Uh-huh.

Larry  
 He says. . . he just went in for a drink.

Don  
 Uh-huh.

Long beat.

. . . Does Arthur drink?

Larry  
 No.

Don  
 Uh-huh.

Larry  
 . . . He says he was confused.

Don  
 Uh-huh. Uh-huh. Well. The North Dakota. Well. You'll  
 need a criminal attorney.

Larry  
 Okay. Who's—

Don  
 Ron Meshbesh.

Larry  
 Is he good?

Don  
 Ron is very good.

Larry's gaze wanders. He becomes wistful.

Larry  
 I don't understand. He goes to mixers at the Hillel House.

Don  
 Mm.

A beat.

. . . I would call Ron Meshbesh.

Larry  
 Is he expensive?

Don  
 Ron is not cheap.

Don focuses on Larry. Cheerful change of subject:

. . . Danny's bar mitzvah is. . . ?

Larry  
 This week.

Don

This shabbas! Great!

He nods.

. . . It'll be okay. Try to relax, Larry. Try to relax.

#### MRS. SAMSKY'S BEDROOM

Larry is making strenuous love to Mrs. Samsky.

Mrs. Samsky

So good. . . so good. . .

She rolls on top of Larry to straddle him and, still humping, she lights a mentholated cigarette. Larry moans.

Larry

Oh my God, Mrs. Samsky. . .

Beyond her head Larry can see the low cottage-cheese ceiling of the bedroom. Outside we can hear Gar Brandt mowing the lawn.

Suddenly we hear muffled laughter and the front door opening.

Larry panics. He hisses:

. . . Who is it?

Footsteps are approaching along the hall. Mrs. Samsky doesn't react; she looks calmly down at Larry even as the bedroom door opens behind her and Clive Park walks in wearing a traffic mask. Larry is mortified:

Clive, please! Wait outside!

Mrs. Samsky blows smoke into Larry's eyes. The screen goes black.

Close on Larry as he opens his eyes. A shadow falls across his face.

His point-of-view: a wooden plank is just being slid into place over his head. The bang of hammer on nailhead. In the black:

Sy Ableman's Voice  
Nailing it down is so impawtant.

We hear the chanting of Kaddish and the sound of dirt hitting the top of the coffin. It drums a steady rhythm. Grace Slick's voice enters: "Somebody to Love." In a break in the vocals right before the chorus:

Mrs. Samsky's Voice  
It's something we do. For recreation.

On the chorus downbeat, a crescent moon pops into the black. Gar Brandt traverses the sky, pushing his lawn mower. A cow flies the opposite way. Stars twinkle. Sy Ableman walks across the sky dressed like a shtetl elder, a bindlestick over one shoulder.

Larry bolts upright in bed.

Sudden quiet.

Uncle Arthur is snoring in the tatty motel room's other bed.

A title burns in:

*Minda*

LARRY

He stands looking down in low shot. Above him is cheap Johnson-Armstrong dropped ceiling.

Larry  
Please. I need help. I've already talked to the other rabbis.  
Please.

Reverse shows an elderly eastern European woman seated behind a desk, looking up at Larry.

. . . I won't take much of his time. I need help. I need Minda. It's not about Danny's bar mitzvah. My boy Danny. This coming shabbas. Very joyous event. That's all fine. It's, it's more about myself, I've. . . I've had quite a bit of *tsuris* lately. Marital problems. Professional. You name it. This is not a frivolous request. This is a serious—I'm a serious—I'm, uh, I've tried to be a serious man. You

know, tried to do right, be a member of the community, raise the, raise the, Danny, Sarah, they both go to school, Hebrew school, a good breakfast. Well, Danny goes to Hebrew school, Sarah doesn't have time, she mostly. . . washes her hair. Apparently there are several steps involved. But you don't have to tell Minda that. Just tell him I need help. Please. I need help.

He lapses into silence, staring at the secretary.

She stares inscrutably back.

After a moment she rises, goes to the door behind her, opens it, shuffles into the dimness of an inner office.

Larry cranes to see past her. Her own body and the dimness interfere with a good view of the figure hunched behind the desk. The man is old and bent. His desktop is empty.

Murmured voices in Hebrew.

A clock ticks in the outer office. Larry looks around, waiting.

Mysterious Judaica adorns the outer office.

The old woman is shuffling back. She closes the door on the motionless rabbi and sits down, heavily, behind her own desk.

Secretary

The rabbi is busy.

Larry

He didn't look busy!

As she starts shuffling papers:

Secretary

He's thinking.

NIGHT

Sidor Belarsky comes in at the cut.

We are booming down on Larry, asleep in bed.

We hear weeping, soft, suppressed.

Larry stirs. He opens his eyes.

After a groggy beat he reacts to the weeping. He looks over.

Larry

Arthur . . . ? Arthur?

Arthur is a dim mound on the next bed. His weeping continues.

For no reason Larry continues to keep his voice to a whisper:

. . . Arthur. What's wrong?

No answer.

. . . Arthur. It'll be okay. Arthur. We'll get Ron Meshbesher. It'll be okay—

Arthur

AAAHHHHH!

Shocking loud, the scream is hard to interpret.

Arthur flings off his bedclothes. He leaps from the bed and runs to the door. In boxer shorts and undershirt he flings the door open and runs out of the room.

Larry

Arthur!

Larry leaps from his bed, also in his underwear.

He goes to the door but pauses, peering cautiously outside. Satisfied that the courtyard is deserted, he plunges into it.

## COURTYARD

The courtyard/parking lot is hardlit by ghastly mercury vapor lights. The pool, surrounded by chain-link fence, has been drained. Its white concrete interior is cracked



and weedy.

Uncle Arthur is hunched weeping in a corner of the pool enclosure.

Larry  
(*hissing*)

Arthur!

He opens the creaking gate and scurries over to Arthur.

. . . You've got to pull yourself together!

Arthur is suddenly angry. His voice bounces off the concrete:

Arthur  
It's all shit, Larry! It's all shit!

Larry  
Arthur. Don't use that word.

Arthur  
It's all fucking shit!

Larry  
Arthur! Come on!

Arthur  
Look at everything *Hashem* has given you! And what do I get! I get fucking shit!

Larry  
Arthur. What do I have. I live at the Jolly Roger.

Arthur  
You've got a family. You've got a job. *Hashem* hasn't given me bupkes.

Larry  
It's not fair to blame *Hashem*, Arthur. Please. Sometimes—please calm down—sometimes you have to help yourself.

Arthur

Don't blame me! You fucker!

Larry

Arthur. Please.

Arthur

*Hashem* hasn't given me shit. Now I can't even play cards.

He starts weeping again.

Larry looks around.

Larry

Arthur. This isn't the right forum. Please. Not by the pool.

Arthur weeps.

Arthur. . . It's okay. . . It's okay. . .

#### MORNING

Larry and Arthur are driving. We are looking at the two of them square through a windshield in which towering conifers stream by in reflection. It seems to be a glorious day.

Larry

Is this it?

Both men peer out.

Arthur

I think so. . . yeah. . . there. . .

He indicates the road ahead.

#### A SIGNPOST

The old-fashioned kind with wooden fingers pointing the different directions.

One points toward CANADA.

We tip off the sign as Larry's car passes and recedes. There is a canoe strapped to its roof.

## BOUNDARY WATERS

Beautiful, wooded, remote.

The car is parked at water's edge, having backed down a lane of two tracks worn through the undergrowth. Larry and Arthur are lowering the canoe into water.

Larry

Okay. . .

He straightens. Arthur straightens. Larry hugs him.

. . . Look. . .

They separate and Larry pulls a white envelope from his pocket and gives it to Arthur.

. . . This'll help you get back on your feet.

Arthur looks into the envelope.

Arthur

Oh my God. Where did you get this?

Larry

Doesn't matter. When you—

Arthur

This is a lot of money!

Larry

It should get you started.

Arthur

This is a lot of money! Are you sure you don't need it?

Larry

Arthur, I'm fine. Come on, get in. When you're settled. . .

Arthur climbs into the canoe.

. . . let me know how to get in touch.

He helps push the boat off. Arthur is twisted around, looking back. As he drifts off:

Arthur  
Are you sure this is okay?

Larry  
It's fine. It's fine. . .

Larry waves.

Arthur waves bravely back, then turns to pick up the oars. A couple of strokes and he turns back again with a last thought. He calls:

Arthur  
Larry. I'm sorry. What I said last night.

Larry  
I know. It's okay.

A lingering look from Arthur, and then he turns back to row.

A gunshot.

Blood spurts from the back of Uncle Arthur's neck.

He slumps forward, dead.

Voice  
Good shot!

Larry looks wildly around. He sees:

Gar Brandt and Mitch in their camo fatigues, hard to pick out in the foliage. They are looking off toward the canoe, Mitch just lowering his rifle.

Gar Brandt's look swings around, into the lens. He points at us:

. . . There's another Jew, son.

Mitch swings his rifle toward us.

He fires.

LARRY .

Gasping awake in the motel room.

He looks around.

It is dawn.

Arthur sits on the edge of his bed in his underwear, staring off into space, slackjawed, vacant-eyed, drained.

Larry gazes around the room, waiting for things to fall into place.

Finally, blearily:

Larry  
Were we. . . out at the pool last night?

Arthur, still staring off, responds in a flat, empty voice:

Arthur  
Yes. I'm sorry.

Larry blinks sleep away.

After a beat:

Larry  
It's shabbas.

Another beat.

Arthur heaves a deep sigh.

Arthur  
I'll go drain my cyst.

## RESTROOM

Day. A two-urinal, two-stall men's room of old tile and yellowed fixtures.

We are low. One of the stall doors is closed. Under it we see the dress shoes and dress pants of two young men standing inside.

We hear a long sucking inhale.

Ronnie Nudell's Voice  
Gimme that fucker.

A loudly projected echoing male voice:

Voice  
*Ya'amod hab'rayshit.*

## SANCTUARY

Danny, seated in the second pew next to his parents and sister and Uncle Arthur, rises and shuffles along the row to the aisle. His eyes are wide and red-rimmed.

The prelapped voice was his call to the torah. All eyes in the congregation, which fills the large sanctuary, are on him.

In great echoing silence he walks to the steps on the right side of the bema and climbs.

The right-side lectern is surrounded by a gaggle of old Jewish men. They busy themselves with the preparation of the pair of scrolls on the lectern, rolling them, pausing, rolling some more, muttering prayers, kissing the scrolls by means of their tsitsim. They pay Danny no attention.

Danny takes his place centered behind the lectern. His chin comes up to the bottom of the reading platform.

Men continue to mutter prayers around him. A pair of hands appear on his shoulders from behind. Danny looks down at the strange hands. They pull him back.

A foot drags a small riser out from under the lectern.

Hands push Danny up onto the riser.

Booming up on the torah scrolls, still being busily rolled.

Beyond it, a sea of faces.

The yad—a molded tin pointer—is thrust into Danny’s hand. The non-pointing end has a red silken tassel.

Danny looks at the bouncing tassel. He looks at the little pointing finger which is the business end of the yad.

Men mutter around him, each a different prayer. They dip and doven.

Danny watches himself point the yad down at the scroll.

The scroll is a dense swarm of Hebrew letters. Danny squints.

One voice separates from the murmurs around him. It chants, insistently, in a sotto-voce falsetto:

Voice

Nefesh echad shelchayim, yitzeh gamor shel effashot. . .

Danny is still staring at the end of the yad against the parchment scroll.

Someone’s hand enters and moves the yad to a different place in the text.

The voice repeats:

. . . Nefesh echad shelchayim, yitzeh gamor shel effashot. . .

Danny looks up from the scrolls.

In the congregation Ronnie Nudell sits hunched-shouldered and squished between his parents. He returns Danny’s red-rimmed slack-jawed stare.

The insistent voice:

. . . Nefesh echad shelchayim, yitzeh gamor shel effashot. . .

Danny looks over.

From the surrounding scum the prompter nods at him. He looks somewhat like Cantor Youssele Rosenblatt.

... Nefesh echad shelchayim, yitzeh gamor shel effashot. . .

Danny looks back down at the scroll. A hand enters to tap a pointing finger where the yad points.

... Nefesh echad shelchayim, yitzeh gamor shel effa—

Danny suddenly erupts:

Danny  
Nefesh echad shelchayim, yitzeh gamor shel effashot. . .

Prompter  
Mm-hm.

Danny continues to boom out the torah portion. He moves the yad along the line of letters.

In the congregation, Larry and Judith watch. We hear Danny chanting fluently and Larry squeezes the hand Judith has laced through his arm.

Juith whispers:

Judith  
I'm sorry that. . . things have been so hard for us. . .

Larry  
It's okay.

Judith  
Sy had so much respect for you, Larry.

He pats her hand.

A beat.

... He wrote letters to the tenure committee.

LATER

The congregation is loudly singing *V'Zos Hatorah*. A tallised man of late middle age



hoists the open scroll from the lectern and raises it high, turning his back on the congregation so that all may see it.

Danny has been ensconced in a highbacked chair upstage on the bema.

His point-of-view of the man holding the torah is close and steeply raked. The man is sweating. The heavy scrolls vibrate slightly from his effort to keep them aloft. As the congregation continues to sing he mutters under his breath:

Man

Jesus Christ. . .

LATER

Danny stands behind the left lectern facing Rabbi Nachtner who holds a small kiddush cup out to him.

Although Rabbi Nachtner seems to be addressing Danny, he is projecting loudly.

Nachtner

. . . taking your place as a member of our tribe. You will go and see Rabbi Minda after the service. You will celebrate in a reception downstairs in Schanfield Hall. And then you will be a member of B'Nai Abraham and of the Nation of Israel. Danny Gopnik, the Sisterhood makes a gift to you of this kiddush cup so that you will remember this blessed day on the next shabbas and the next, and on every shabbas of a long and fruitful life, and, until that wonderful day when you stand under the *chupa*, we say. . .

Congregation

Amen.

Danny, still red-eyed, tries to focus.

His point-of-view shows the kiddush cup large in the foreground, extended toward him by the Rabbi beaming above.

His own hand rises into frame to grasp the kiddush cup.

The congregation starts *Adon Olam*.

A DOOR

Creaking open. The cut has snapped off the robust *Adon Olam*, leaving sepulchral quiet.

Danny, clutching his kiddush cup, hesitantly enters the dim study. Minda's elderly eastern European gatekeeper closes the door behind him.

Minda is an old man staring at him from behind a bare desktop. His look, eyes magnified by thick glasses, is impossible to read.

Danny creeps to the chair facing the desk. He gingerly sits on the squeaking leather upholstery, self-conscious under Minda's stare.

Minda breathes regularly through his mouth. It is the only sound in the room.

A long beat. The two sit face to face.

Minda smacks his lips a couple of times, preparing to speak.

Another beat.

Finally:

Minda  
When the truth is found. To be lies.

He pauses. He clears his throat.

At length:

. . . And all the hope. Within you dies.

Another beat. Danny waits. Minda stares.

He smacks his lips again.

. . . Then what?

Danny doesn't answer. It is unclear whether the question was directed at him.

Quiet.

Minda clears his throat with a loud and thorough hawking.

The hawking abates. Minda sniffs.

. . . Grace Slick. Marty Balin. Paul Kanta. Jorma. . .  
somethin. These are the membas of the Airplane.

He nods a couple of times.

. . . Interesting.

He reaches up and slowly opens his desk drawer. He takes something out. He lays it on the bare desk and pushes it partway across.

. . . Here.

It is Danny's radio.

. . . Be a good boy.

#### LARRY'S OFFICE

Larry is at his desk sorting through mail.

Arlen Finkle (*off*)  
Danny was magnificent.

Larry looks up: Arlen is leaning in his accustomed spot in the office doorway.

Larry  
Oh. Thank you, Arlen.

Arlen Finkle  
*Mazel tov.* It was wonderful.

Larry  
Yes it was. Thank you.

Arlen Finkle  
Such a time of *nachas*, Larry. He's your youngest. You  
have to savor it.

Larry

I do. I will.

Arlen Finkle

See you at the staff caf.

Larry

Yes.

Arlen shoves off to go, but hesitates.

Arlen Finkle

I just. . . I shouldn't tell you. I'm not telling you officially.  
The tenure candidates aren't notified til Monday.

Larry

. . . Yes?

Arlen nods.

Arlen Finkle

You'll be very pleased.

Larry stares at him.

Larry

Thank you, Arlen.

Over his back as he goes:

Arlen Finkle

I didn't say anything. *Mazel tov.*

## HEBREW SCHOOL CORRIDOR

Distant thunder at the cut.

We are tracking behind Minda's female Caliban as she walks down the hall, stooped and shuffling. She holds a stack of papers in one hand.

## LARRY'S OFFICE

Mail in front of him.

He opens an envelope from RONALD MESHBER, ESQ.

In it are two pieces of paper. Topmost is a letter headed RETAINER AGREEMENT.

Underneath is an invoice. The amount: \$3,000.

Arriving rain begins to patter at the window.

#### HEBREW SCHOOL CLASS

The teacher, Mar King, leads the class in drill.

Danny has a book tilted towards him on his desktop. It hides his radio.

The door opens and the elderly woman shuffles to Mar King's desk. She hands him a paper from off her stack of copies.

Mar King puts on reading glasses and inspects it. As he reads thunder crashes, closer.

#### LARRY'S OFFICE

He fingers the invoice.

Close on a printed detail: *PAYABLE:* and, typed underneath: *Upon Receipt.*

Wind is whipping rain hard against the window.

#### HEBREW SCHOOL CLASS

Mar King taps on the desktop for attention.

Mar King

*Chaverim*, there's a tornado warning from the weather service. Rabbi Minda has decided to move us over to the basement of the shul. . . .

Hubbub in the classroom.

... *Shechet. Shechet.* We're gonna form two lines. This is orderly. *Hakol b'seder.*

#### LARRY'S OFFICE

He is staring down at his desktop.

Thunder.

He reaches up and scratches his nose as he stares at his desk.

On the desk: a ledger sheet with a list of students' names. Next to each name, a grade.

Larry drums his fingers.

He picks up a pencil.

He goes down to PARK, CLIVE. Next to it is an F.

He waggles the pencil, eraser-end thumping the sheet.

He erases the F. He enters a C.

The pencil leaves frame. We hold for a beat on the new grade.

The hand reenters. It puts a minus sign after the C.

The hand withdraws.

Larry closes the file. Just as he does so:

The phone jangles, very harsh.

Larry looks at it, frozen.

He lets it ring a couple times.

He reaches for it. He slowly picks it up.

Larry  
... Hello?

Voice  
Larry?

Larry  
... Yes?

Voice  
Hi, Len Shapiro.

Larry  
Oh. Hello Dr. Shapiro.

Dr. Shapiro  
Listen, *mazel tov* on Danny.

Larry  
Yes, thank you.

Dr. Shapiro  
Listen, could you come in to discuss these X-ray results?

Larry sits frozen, phone to his ear.

... Hello?

Larry  
Yes?

Dr. Shapiro  
Larry, could you come in and discuss these X-ray results?  
Remember the X-rays we took?

Larry  
... We can't discuss them on the phone?

Thunder. Pattering rain.

Dr. Shapiro

I think we'd be more comfortable in person. Can you come in?

A beat.

Larry

When?

Dr. Shapiro

Now. Now is good. I've cleared some time now.

#### TALMUD TORAH PARKING LOT

The students mill about. It is overcast dark, and extremely windy.

Someone is fumbling with keys at the shul.

Danny still has his radio with the earpiece in.

Everyone's clothing flaps.

Ronnie Nudell shouts above the wind:

Ronnie Nudell

That fucking flag is gonna rip right off the flagpole!

#### CAR

We are looking through a windshield lashed by rain at Larry, driving. His hands are clenched tight on the wheel. Wipers pump to keep up with the rain. The cars behind have their lights on. It has gotten quite dark.

Passing streetlights rhythmically sweep Larry's face, their light stippled and bent by the rain on the windows.

#### TALMUD TORAH PARKING LOT

Danny is looking across the lot in which orange school busses are parked. His head bobs in time to the music. His hair whips in the wind. A building roar, very deep.



We hear, very compressed, the beginning of “Somebody to Love.”

Danny sees a shaggy-haired youth among the milling students.

Danny

Hey! Fagle!

From behind Danny, over his shoulder: we see a funnel cloud in the middle distance.

A growing rumble. The tornado is approaching.

At the first downbeat of its chorus the Jefferson Airplane song bumps up full.

We cut to black, and credits.