The golem of Prague is really Rabbi Loew's secret lover. A scientist develops the "God spot" in patients' brains in order to create a messiah. A Talmudic scholar dates an escort. A Lubavitcher whose wife and children are taken away by God recreates his life as Job did. A former Mormon struggles to become a good Jew. A doctor combines canine genes with those of Jews to improve their chances of surviving a hostile world.

The Golem of Rabbi Loew

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Pronouncing the Apostrophe

After the salt water and horseradish and Dayenu, we sat around the table eating the meal. It was fun to come to Steven and Marty's metal house near City Park, not far from the cemeteries at the end of Canal Street in New Orleans. There was an "I Love Lucy" magnet on the metal hallway paneling, a gargoyle magnet on the metal kitchen wall, and a David magnet with assorted firefighter and doctor magnet clothes on the metal bathroom door. A mezuzah was attached by a magnet to the front door frame. Steven, Marty's lover of six years, was Buddhist but was the one who had prepared the seder.

"So there we were on the bus in Paris and these Muslims saw my Israeli army T-shirt and came up to me and said, 'We *fuck* Israelis.'" Marty calmly took another sip of wine. "So I just smiled and said, 'Some Israelis like that.' They didn't know what to say then."

I smiled and spooned another matzah ball out of my soup. I was relieved to be at a seder tonight. The last four years, my partner, David, and I had gone to seders with a family in the congregation he was close to before we met. The family liked me, but they certainly weren't going to invite me this year after my break up with David, and I wasn't up to a seder of my own yet. David had been so sick the four years we were together that we hardly ever socialized, but after we broke up a few months ago, I began trying to reestablish connections I had made in the past. After I had dated Marty a few times eight years earlier, he and I had become friends, except when David's misery made it impossible for us to have contact with anyone outside of the HIV clinic.

"Let's not talk about Palestinians tonight," suggested Marty's mother, Joyce. "I want to believe we do have a homeland that we can call our own."

"We're going to have to give up part of it," said Leon, Marty's father, "if—"

"No politics tonight," Joyce said. She turned to Marty and put her hand on his arm. "I saw termites swarming the other day. It seems a little early."

"Did you turn off your lights?" Marty asked, and she nodded.

"I guess y'all are okay here," I said.

"The addition is wood," said Steven, "and it's built right on the ground, so it's our Achilles heel."

"And the Gaza strip is Israel's."

"Leon, I said no more politics." Joyce turned to Marty again and then reached toward one of the bowls on the table. "This is excellent matzah ball soup. I think I'll get some more."

"Steven made it."

"It was the only way to get y'all to have a seder," Steven said. "I swear, y'all are a pathetic bunch of Jews, making the only goy among you prepare the meal."

"I couldn't cook as a goy," I said, "and I can't cook now."

"The rabbi accepted your conversion without making you learn at least one recipe for kugel?" asked Marty.

"He only made me promise to raise my kids as Jews."

"Easy promise."

"Well, we did name our cats Sarah and Akiva."

"Close enough."

"David won custody."

"Are you going to marry another Jew?" asked Joyce.

I smiled. "That's what the rabbi asked me. But I'm not at all sure I'm going to get married again to anyone."

"What did your family think of you converting?" Joyce asked.

"You mean the ones who know?"

"You didn't tell them?" asked Leon.

"My aunt knows. She doesn't have a problem with it. But when I broke up with David, my grandmother said, 'Now you won't have to go to that Jewish church anymore.' I told her I liked going, and she seemed worried. So I don't think she can handle it yet."

"She can handle your being gay, but not your being a Jew?" Marty laughed.

"Apparently, there are levels of apostasy."

"Seems like you're hiding to me," said Steven. "My family knows I'm Buddhist. They just have to live with it."

I shrugged. "Religion has given me a lot of pain. I'm not going to use religion to justify causing unnecessary pain to someone I love. She knows I still go to synagogue. That's enough."

"I notice you haven't drunk any wine tonight," Steven added. "Are you still Mormon underneath the kipa?"

I took another sip of grape juice. "My life began 36 years ago, and all of it is a part of me, including the good parts of

Mormonism. But the reason I don't drink is because I never have. Drinking moderately would be fine, but I don't know if I can be a moderate drinker. There may be some terrible flaw in my genes or personality I can't realize is there until it's too late. It isn't worth the risk to me. If I never drink that first glass, I'll never become an alcoholic. Life is hard enough without adding another obstacle. I can't afford any more vulnerable spots in my life."

"But wine is a part of Judaism," said Steven.

"He doesn't have to drink," said Leon. "He doesn't need to wear a yarmulke either. He just needs to live ethically."

"But it wouldn't hurt me to learn how to make challah. Maybe I could ask one of you to teach me sometime."

"Not any time this week," said Joyce. "But you can call me next week."

"I went to a Reconstructionist seder once," said Marty. "They had breadsticks."

"Breadsticks!" Leon looked more surprised to hear this comment than he had his son's response to the taunts on the bus.

"Why didn't you wear your yarmulke tonight?" asked Marty. "I thought you liked it."

"Well, I'm Touro, and you're Sinai," I said, naming the two Uptown Reform congregations in New Orleans to which we belonged. "I didn't want to come overdressed." Sinai was "more" Reform than Touro.

"Is it uncomfortable still going to Touro after breaking up with David?" asked Steven.

"David could hardly ever go, anyway, so people are used to seeing me without him. I need to try Gates of Prayer and Chevra Thilim and maybe some of the others, though. I went to the mikvah at Beth Israel in Lakeview when I converted, but I don't want to go to an Orthodox congregation."

Joyce and Leon then began talking of the changes they'd seen at Sinai over the years, the differences each new rabbi made, and some of the different things they'd seen at different seders. I couldn't help but think about how no matter where in the world I'd gone to a Latter-day Saint meeting, here in New Orleans, or when visiting friends in South Carolina or Los Angeles or Salt Lake, and even when living in Belgium for two years as a missionary, the meetings had been all but identical. That seemed like a good thing at the time, but now I liked the idea that people were allowed to evolve. Mormons did it, too, but it had to be an across-the-board evolution mandated by the president of the Church. Mormons would cringe at the wide diversity of thought allowed in Judaism, considering divergence an automatic sign of corruption, but I had seen for myself that Mormon theology could be corrupt even when everyone believed the exact same thing. When the rabbi had interviewed me before my conversion, I had asked, "What will I be expected to believe?" He'd laughed and said, "You don't even have to believe in God. No one is going to tell you what you have to believe here." It seemed like cheating, after the rigid rules I was used to, but I could have that again with the Orthodox if I wanted it, and I definitely didn't want it. I wanted to believe what made sense to me, whatever little that might be.

"These haggadahs are really different from the ones I've used the last few years," I said, knowing I had the plural form wrong. Was it haggadot? "I like them." I picked up the book still lying next to my plate and looked at the date of publication

in the back. 1923. There were some beautiful engravings throughout the book.

"We've had them in the family since I was a girl," said Joyce, "though every year we seem to have one less."

"What's the biggest difference in this one?" Marty asked me.

"It's Ashkenazi and not Sephardic," I replied.

"Most of us are, really."

We continued to talk for another hour or so, and as I stood up to leave, Steven asked me to call them so we could have Shabbat dinner sometime, or to call so Marty and I could go to summer services together. Services rotated among three synagogues in the summer, and I'd told them I usually chickened out going to new places by myself. I thanked Marty and Steven for the seder and felt relieved to find Marty still willing to accept me though I'd ignored him and everyone else for the last four years.

"I went to a couple of Lambda Chai meetings," I said at the door as Marty and Steven kissed me goodbye. I hadn't much liked those gay Jewish meetings, finding most of the men too cynical and bitchy, and nothing terribly Jewish about the meetings, but one man, who painted portraits on Jackson Square in front of the St. Louis cathedral in the Quarter, had seemed nice. "There's a guy who'd been studying to become a Baptist minister before he converted. He has a Buddhist lover. I'll have to get their number and give it to you. How many gay Jewish-Buddhist couples can there be in New Orleans?"

They laughed, and then I climbed into my car and chanted the Haftarah prayers as I drove back home. It was the first truly nice evening I'd had since David and I broke up. It felt good.

Maybe things would turn out okay after all. I wondered if a thank-you note was appropriate after a seder. I'd send one anyway. I felt so weak compared to other Jews who all seemed to know what to do, even if they were secular. I always felt like I was trying to catch up. With my tape of prayers and Hebrew songs in the car, I could go through much of a Shabbat service every day, but there were still 1500 services I'd missed while growing up in another religion. Listening to only one service over and over would never make up for that. It didn't really need to, but I found it irritating to be all set in synagogue for one version of "Lecha Dodi" only to hear another version I couldn't sing along with. There was no music to read, only words, so even my years in the Gay Men's Chorus didn't help. I just sat in the chapel feeling alien and hoping the feeling would one day end.

I drove up beside my apartment in the Marigny, the neighborhood next to the French Quarter, and hurried to the door, looking about to make sure no potential muggers were on the street. At least once a week, there was a mugging or a house burglary in the neighborhood. Looking over my shoulder had become second nature. I darted in quickly and shut the door. It was late, and I was tired, so I undressed as soon as I was inside and went to bed, saying one of my own prayers before falling asleep. My prayers at night consisted of pointing out to God that I was aware of at least ten specific, good things that had happened that day. Tonight, it was easy, and soon I was asleep.

In the morning, I peeked outside to see if anyone was on the street and then hurriedly threw my camera and overnight bag in the trunk. I hated having people see me pack and know I was going to be away for the weekend. My apartment had bars on the windows and a barred gate on the door, but it also had two wooden shutters over French doors in the bedroom. They

were only held shut by a metal bar in a slot like a latch on a screen door. The bar was heavier than a latch but was also looser. And the shutters were so old that there was plenty of space to slip in a wire hanger. It would be easy to pull the latch away even from the outside. I put a bookcase in front of the doors, but it wasn't so heavy that it couldn't be pushed away by a burglar because I didn't want it so heavy that I couldn't move it in case of a fire.

I was eleven when I'd seen the photographs of the burned men hanging out the barred windows of the UpStairs Lounge in the French Quarter, where an arsonist had killed 32 people by setting fire to the stairwell leading to the entrance of the second story gay bar. I'd vowed then never to live anyplace with bars blocking the exits, but when David and I had broken up in December, this converted corner storefront had been the only available place I could afford. It was only a foot off the ground and would be one of the first places to flood the next time we had a 15-inch rainfall. I remembered the last flood while David and I were living near Bayou St. John. By the light of Shabbat candles, since the electricity had gone out, we tried desperately to lift everything off the floor as the water came in under the doors and up through the tiles. That had been three years now, so it wouldn't be long before the next flood. I'd already experienced four "once in a hundred years" floods in my lifetime. I hoped I could find a better place before the next one, though that would mean moving yet again. David and I had lived in four different apartments together because he could never get along with our landlords, and now with this last move, I was tired of changing addresses and wanted to stay put.

Not wanting to leave for Mississippi right away this morning, just in case someone had in fact seen me pack the car, I read the paper and skipped my morning cereal, more to save

the calories than to keep a kosher Passover. I really didn't see how Frosted Flakes could be considered leavened bread. In fact, cereal seemed like such a fast meal that it represented exactly the kind of meal that should be eaten this week, food that could be prepared and eaten in a hurry. But then, sandwiches could be prepared quickly, too, so that alone wasn't a good criterion. I did want to eat differently this week, to remind myself of the occasion, but I wasn't sure it really mattered exactly what it was that I did eat. I had finished a loaf of bread yesterday, though, and was going at least to avoid that for the next several days.

I exchanged my bar mitzvah tape for my Reclaiming Shabbat and started off to Brookhaven. It had been hard for me to study for my bar mitzvah the year before. I rarely felt like studying anyway, so when I could force myself, I studied Organic Chemistry or Microbiology. I found that the only way I could make myself study the prayers, basic songs like "Mi Chamocha" or "Yedid Nefesh," and also my Torah and Haftarah portions, was to listen to a practice tape in the car. It took me twenty minutes to drive out to the University of New Orleans at the Lakefront for classes, twenty minutes to get back home, twenty more minutes to drive out to Southern University to teach, and twenty minutes to get back home from that. I went through a serious Celine Dion withdrawal, but my chanting was flawless.

Now I was trying to find a tape of all the other prayers I still didn't know. And I had looked for a tape of Passover songs but couldn't find one in time to be prepared for last night. No one expected me to know those songs, but it was embarrassing not to be able to chant either the Kiddush or the kaddish on Shabbat. I felt we should have been required to learn those prayers as well for the bar mitzvah, since they were important and a part of the weekly service, but we were Reform. I guess

the rabbi was scared of chasing away the adult b'nei mitzvah class. I had been scared myself, but I knew if I didn't do it before medical school, it would be years before I had another chance.

The Reclaiming Shabbat tape had two local cantors, a rabbi, and a woman, calling themselves Beignet Israel, making a pun by using the name of a French Quarter doughnut in place of the nearly identical sounding Hebrew word for "children." On the tape, they performed "Shalom Aleichem," "Mi Sheibeirach," "Adon Olam," and other songs that we sang in shul regularly. I wished "Shalom Rav" were on it. When our cantor sang, "tassim tassim l'olam," I felt such an incredible sense of peace that it alone made the unpleasant trek past the projects in Central City to the synagogue in my old car worthwhile. It had taken me a while to get used to the idea that in Hebrew, the apostrophe was pronounced. "L'olam" was not pronounced "lolam" but "luh olam." And of course, real Hebrew didn't even have vowels, so the writing was quite compact, even when tiny vowel marks were placed underneath or beside the main letters for those who couldn't manage the language without cheating a little. Listening to the songs over and over on the tape helped me be able to follow along in the prayer book with at least passing competency.

I drove west on I-10 through the cypress swamps to LaPlace and then took I-55 north further on through more swamps. I wished David were with me. He had to take extra morphine to handle the ride, so it was always a sacrifice for him to come. One summer, we'd picked blackberries together. We'd also picked and canned pears a couple of times. He was always a wreck for days after the exertion of a trip, but it was about the only time we ever got to do anything together. Of course, no one in such pain for so many years could stay nice forever.

David had started criticizing my relatives and his own relatives and everyone at synagogue and had become meaner and meaner to everyone. I was the last, but he finally just grew too mean to live with. I felt terrible leaving a sick man I had loved, but I just wasn't strong enough to take it.

Before long, I drove past Hammond, solid ground finally, where my aunt and gay uncle lived with their four children. I should have sympathized with Mark but was instead angry at him for marrying Brenda twenty years ago. Mark was much more homophobic than Brenda, who'd only two years ago found out about Mark, though I'd come out to her years before. I couldn't pity him, though, because I was too irritated with his praise for Rush Limbaugh or Newt Gingrich or Trent Lott or whoever the currently popular Republican bigot was. I was just glad I'd broken up with my fiancee′ in Belgium before I totally ruined her life. We still wrote, but at 38, she still hadn't married. I knew I wouldn't have fulfilled her life any more than Mark had fulfilled Brenda's. Brenda tried to take satisfaction in her children, but her oldest girl, Cathy, was a senior in high school, had gotten drunk this past New Year's, and I'd seen her partying heavily in the French Quarter on Mardi Gras. Brenda's only son, Samuel, however, was serving a mission now in Guatemala.

I had for years felt guilty about hurting Claire when I broke up with her after a three-year engagement. She was truly a wonderfully nice woman. We'd met when she was serving as a missionary in Brussels. We'd become good friends because so many of the other American missionaries spoke English and ignored the few Belgian missionaries, but I enjoyed speaking French once I knew it. And I also liked this woman. I never once heard her criticize another missionary, raise her voice, or even use bland expletives which all the rest of us used. We

began writing after we finished our missions, and I eventually decided that if I had to marry a woman, there wasn't a better one out there. "Had to" sounded so terribly unromantic and unfair to her, so I kept trying year after year to become heterosexual. I wanted to finish my degree in English before going back to Belgium to teach, so that gave us a few years to get to know each other better through weekly letters and bi-monthly phone calls, and time for me to keep fasting and praying for a miraculous transformation.

I'd had major culture shock when I arrived in Belgium, taking a year to adjust, and then I'd had culture shock again upon returning to America, requiring another six months to adjust to my own country. I'd gone back to Belgium for a summer to study more French and to be with Claire, and I felt torn between the two countries and cultures. When I saw *Greystoke*, I was amazed at how the preposterous story of Tarzan described my life. Because I'd experienced two worlds, I'd never really fit in again in either.

We decided to live in Belgium, though, and raise our children to be bilingual. But I kept postponing the time for my final return to Belgium, not wanting to marry until I knew I could stay married to a woman. When I finally realized it wasn't going to happen, I felt I'd wasted the best years of Claire's life. And perhaps I did. But at least I didn't waste twenty years of her life. My uncle had been more concerned about his own welfare than my aunt's and so had married her to save himself. He called my coming out a selfish act, but I think there was plenty selfishness to go around. Still, I thought about Claire every time I went up to Mississippi, every time I didn't go up with a wife.

The speed limit on the interstate was 70, but New Orleans roads kept my wheels out of alignment, so I rarely reached 70.

Still, after a couple of hours, I pulled off on the Bogue Chitto exit, and after another twenty minutes past farms and forests, I pulled up in front of my grandma's house. I sang one last "v'taheir libeinu" and stepped out of the car into the calf-high Easter grass ready for egg-hiding.

The paint had peeled off the porch, and the dog had scratched off the slats and screen on the bottom of the screen door, so the front door was closed to keep out the bugs. My grandma opened the door before I knocked, and I hugged her when I went in. She allowed the hug but could never initiate it. "How've you been?" I asked.

"Fine. And you?" She had lost weight and looked old for the first time at eighty-four.

"Did the acidophilus help any?" She'd taken antibiotics in January and then had diarrhea for two months.

"I never did get any. Annie Ruth had a headache when we went to town, and I hated to make her wait."

"Well, good grief, Grandma," I said, laughing. "After all the headaches she's given you over the years, you can make her wait one minute. What's she going to do, disown you?" I smiled, but I sensed that the real reason she hadn't pursued the acidophilus was because she didn't trust me enough to suggest something helpful. I wasn't in medical school yet, and her doctor hadn't said anything about "good bacteria."

"Well, you know how Annie Ruth can be." Grandma and Annie Ruth had had a tense relationship for the twenty-five years since she married into the family and converted, though Annie Ruth had mellowed a bit after adopting one baby, Albert, through the Church and another, Wayne, from her drug-using brother after he was put in prison for stealing. Andy and Annie

Ruth hadn't arrived with their two kids yet, but they lived only a mile or so away, on the next farm over.

We went to the kitchen, where Grandma checked the vegetables on the stove and the turkey breast and ham in the oven. Then she left the kitchen while I started washing the dishes in the sink. She came back a minute later with a $20 bill. "For gas," she said, looking around nervously as if to check if any of the rest of the family had shown up and might see. She'd been giving me "gas money" for years, and I was still so poor that I took it, feeling stupid when I did, feeling it meant that at 36 I still hadn't made the transition to adulthood. I tried to repay her by paying attention to her. I'd planted a crepe myrtle for her one year, some day lilies another, and had polyurethaned her wooden floors another time, but I never felt I did enough for her, since she always kept doing more for me.

"How's school?" she asked.

"Okay. Immunology's turned out to be a lot harder than I thought. But I have a great lecturer for Cell Physiology. That always makes it easier."

"Have you heard from the medical school yet?"

"I'm on the waiting list."

"You think you'll get in?"

"Eventually." I smiled. "I didn't do too well in the interview. I was too grim. It was only a week after I broke up with David."

"Oh."

My being an English instructor for ten years had never impressed anyone in the family, probably because I only earned between $6000 and $13,000 a year, depending on how many

classes I taught, only about $5000 a year since I went back to school myself. My sister Lisa had dropped out of high school and married a welder who had a Special Olympics medal. My sister finally earned her GED, divorced, and eventually became an LPN, but she never worked more than part-time and was very happy to quit work when she married her second husband, though he barely made enough to support her and her two youngest children.

My sister's oldest son had dropped out of school after ninth grade as well. He was a mechanic and always liked to talk about motors, with a smirk that suggested he was superior to "book learning" college folks. I never made an issue of the lack of interest in education most of my family shared, but I was certainly aware of it every time we tried to find common interests, and especially when they tried to make me feel stupid because I didn't know what kind of oil was best.

I'd always gotten along well with my mother, my Grandma's oldest child, but she'd died 15 years ago, right after I came home from my two years as a missionary. 43 had seemed middle-aged to me then, but that was younger than either of my partners had been when we met. My Dad, still a high priest in the Church, was the only real success in the family, as a contractor who owned his own house in New Orleans, plus a farm up here in the country. I could tell my Grandma hoped that I'd finally make it, too, that there'd be one less person she had to worry about.

The dog out front started barking, so Grandma went to see. It was Brenda and her family. They came in carrying clothes and went to claim the rooms they'd be staying in. Then everyone gathered in the kitchen, the two younger girls, Susan and Emma, 10 and 14, nibbling on homemade cookies from a

Tupperware container, bought when Brenda used to sell the plastic dishes at parties.

"Mark's first counselor in the bishopric now," Brenda announced.

"Oh, my God," I said. That meant he was second only to the bishop, who was the leader over the congregation. I guess it meant that Mark was no longer calling numbers he found on bathroom walls at the rest area. He'd told me several years ago about meeting someone at a hotel after calling a number, and being surprised to find the stake patriarch, the man ordained to lay hands on any member from seven or eight congregations in the area and pronounce their lineage through the Twelve Tribes and then state God's plan for that person's life. Mark hadn't talked to me for a few years now about his sexual struggles, but I could hardly believe he'd put them all behind him. "Do you want to be first counselor?" I asked. "It's a big job."

"Well, the other guy wasn't doing much with it, and I will."

"Besides," said Brenda, "it means I get released from being Relief Society president." She'd been the leader of the women's group in the congregation for two and a half years.

"Congratulations," I told her.

"Thank you. I've been ready to pass on that torch for a year."

Soon Grandma had food on the table, and after Emma said a blessing, "in the name of Jesus Christ," we began eating. The good thing about holidays was that so many people were there that I never had to say the blessing. I couldn't say the hamotzi, and I didn't want to pray in the name of Jesus Christ, so I was glad when someone else prayed instead.

We always passed food around to the right. I took some of the peas, green beans, corn, sweet potato casserole, and turkey, but passed the ham on by, hoping that with all the activity, no one would notice.

"Don't you want any ham?" Grandma asked a second later. She always looked so innocent, but her mind was always working at full capacity. It was hard not to be thankful for that.

"I've got plenty," I said. She looked worried, but while I was certainly not keeping kosher at home, I just couldn't bear to eat ham during a holiday. It was hypocritical, of course, since I knew damn well I was going to eat cake for dessert. So when I took seconds, I slipped a piece of ham on my plate. Grandma pretended she didn't notice, but I could see her relax. I felt bad either with or without the ham, but at least she felt better this way.

As we were finishing, my sister Lisa came with her husband and two youngest children, and Annie Ruth and Andy came with their two children. Wayne immediately started running through the kitchen and living room with a toy gun, pointing it at everyone and screaming with delight. It looked so much like the BB gun he'd received for Christmas that I kept expecting to be shot at any moment.

"I want to hunt some eggs!" Wayne shouted.

"Wait till after dinner," Annie Ruth said. "Sit down and eat your corn. You like corn."

"No!" He pointed and shot at his mother and ran back to the living room.

I vacated the table for the second shift before I had any dessert. Grandma came from the back porch pantry now with a carrot cake. "Don't you want some dessert?" she asked me.

I shook my head. "I know I'm going to eat too much later. I'm going to pass for now."

"There's chocolate cake, too. And lemon pound cake."

"Not just now, thank you."

"And condensed milk cake with coconut cream."

"I'm gaining weight just listening to you."

"There's strawberries and whipped cream in the refrigerator."

"Were you trained by the CIA?" I said, laughing. "Stop it!"

"Speaking of the CIA," Brenda said, "we just got a letter from Samuel."

"Why is that speaking of the CIA?" asked Annie Ruth.

"Because so many people think Mormon missionaries are CIA agents," said Mark, who'd served a mission in Japan.

"We had a kidnap threat in my mission," I said. "Some group called and said they were going to kidnap two missionaries and torture them until they confessed to being CIA agents."

"Did you hear about the two missionaries kidnapped in Russia last week?" Mark asked.

I nodded. "They were released?"

"Uh-huh," said Brenda. "Anyway, Samuel said he still hasn't gotten the peanut butter we sent him. It cost $32 to mail it. He *better* get it."

I started washing the dishes as the others continued talking and eating. I always felt bad that I didn't help with the cooking, but at home I ate cereal for breakfast, sandwiches for lunch, and

opened a can of vegetables for dinner. I did know how to wash dishes, however, and even though we used Styrofoam plates and plastic cups here, there were still a lot of utensils and pots and bowls to wash, more dishes than could fit on the drainboard.

Brenda's daughter, Cathy, talked about her boyfriend whose father piloted boats on the Mississippi River. Brenda talked about the boy in the next class over from the one she taught who was suspended for pushing another boy against a locker, Annie Ruth talked about the sale at the Cash N' Carry, and I looked out the window over the kitchen sink and watched Wayne chase the dog with his toy gun.

When I was a kid, I loved staying in the kitchen to hear the women talk. It was always about people and was so much more interesting than the men in the living room talking about tractors and sports. My brother-in-law now talked about deer hunting. Lisa's oldest boy, who hadn't come today, was 20. He and my Dad talked about tractor pulls every time they were together. And Mark usually wanted to talk Republican politics. But while I found the men's discussion these days as boring as ever, I also now found the women boring as well. That was surely more a comment on me than it was on them.

I hoped it simply meant I was depressed, that it didn't reflect a total disinterest in my own family. I felt bad that I didn't like them more than I did, since they were basically decent people. I'd had friends over the years from all walks of life and never felt particularly superior. Before I'd married, I had a wide circle of friends I saw regularly, a couple of doctors, a lawyer, a bookstore owner, a bartender, a landscaper, a cashier, and even an escort. There was only one thing I absolutely demanded out of a friend, and that was that he be a nice person. Nice. Not smart, not creative, not beautiful, though

all those things were great. But I absolutely needed to be around people who were nice.

My family wasn't *un*nice. They just didn't seem overly nice, either. They were just kind of there.

But then, I wasn't overly nice around my family myself, or even away from my family. I was just kind of there, too.

One of the most shocking things I'd discovered at the synagogue was that there were a great many Jews who were not particularly nice, who didn't even feel that niceness was anything worth aspiring to, and yet they were still dedicated to doing good things. I'd never seen arrogant creeps being good before. I wasn't sure I liked the attitude that it was okay to be a jerk as long as you supported good causes, but at the same time, there was such a serious, legitimate commitment to those good causes that I couldn't discount it. Jerks volunteered to help build houses for Habitat for Humanity. Creeps gave thousands and thousands of dollars to buy food for the poor or for a battered women's shelter.

It was comforting to realize I didn't have to be a great person in order to still be a good person, but at the same time, it seemed a shame that people couldn't be both good *and* nice. There were several members of my congregation, of course, who were in fact regularly nice: Emily, who volunteered with PWA's despite suffering from lupus; Alan, who gave me copies of pictures of me in my talis chanting my Torah portion, who took pictures of every adult b'nei mitzvah service for those participating; and Oscar, who always made a point of greeting me when I first started attending, even though he held tightly onto his wife as he did so, clearly afraid of my gayness.

I always tried to speak a few minutes each week with the nice people I knew, hoping some of it would eventually rub off

on me. As far as my family went, Brenda and I could only talk if no one else was around, but someone else was always around, so while I liked her, I still felt I could only rarely truly communicate with her. My Dad was nice financially. I knew he helped my sister out often and knew he'd be there for me if I asked, but he was never there emotionally, so I still had kind of an ambivalent feeling toward him. But my Grandma, her I liked for real. She was a doormat in a lot of ways, but then so was I. Despite everything, though, despite the total ordinariness of our family, she managed to love all of us equally. I had a respect for her that made me pay attention to her even when I tuned out the others.

I only visited my Grandma four times a year, for Easter, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and once in the summer. It was only during the summer visit when I was able to talk to her. She knew I wrote down every story she told me, and she'd write notes between visits so she could remember anything new. She'd told me about her baby brother dying of diphtheria when she was a little girl, about her oldest sister being her first grade teacher, about another sister who bled to death during a tonsillectomy, about her mother keeping the quilt she was working on strung up on slats she could lower down from the ceiling when she had a few minutes to work on it, about the time her mother shot a neighbor trying to steal her corn, about the time Grandma saw a rabid dog and lifted her cousins onto the hood of a car to get them out of the way, and about the time she tried to get a job in town and my grandfather had a fit.

She'd tried to join the Church twenty-five years earlier when the rest of the family had, but my grandfather brought home a six-pack of beer and said, "The day you join that church is the day I start drinking." So she'd waited until after he died of lung cancer from smoking before she looked into it again. She

also told me about the time she and her next youngest sister came in the house one day after visiting a neighbor, and when she went in the bedroom and looked in the mirror to start changing back into work clothes, she saw the reflection of a man underneath her bed. Still wearing her good dress, she grabbed her sister and said, "Roberta Lee, we forgot to milk the cows." She pulled her puzzled sister out of the room and ran to get help. Every bit of that I found fascinating, and I dreaded holidays because I knew it meant that the only thing she'd say was, "Don't you want another piece of lemon meringue pie?" And that this would still be the most interesting conversation of the weekend.

I often thought that if given the opportunity, my grandmother could have really been somebody. Then I felt bad for not already considering her "somebody." She would have done something with opportunities if she'd had them, though, and most of the rest of us had done nothing, except perhaps for my Dad, who was on the other side of the family. The rest of us had so deliberately chosen our mediocrity that it was suffocating at times to be around the whole family and realize that. Even now, I myself had never actually done anything with my life. I was always just about to. In one more year I'd be going to my 20th high school reunion, and if I was lucky, I'd be just about to *start* medical school, while everyone else would be only a few years from retiring. Being around my family felt like a high school reunion, too, and always made me see how little I'd done with my life.

It might have been different if I could at least have talked to my family, felt that we had at least accomplished friendship. But I used to feel trapped with my family, feeling that I couldn't talk about anything gay, but even when I finally did, no one was

any more interested in that than I was in hearing about that new paint job my nephew had done on his pickup truck.

At the synagogue, no one particularly wanted to hear about my Mormon past, and though Brenda and Mark knew I'd converted to Judaism, they weren't particularly interested in hearing about that. No one wanted to hear about Biochemistry, not even other biochemistry students. Even when I felt I really understood a complicated molecular pathway and its regulation and could even draw every molecule in the pathway, I never felt smart enough to ever do research, so I felt too intimidated to talk to my professors, who I was sure would see me as a peasant. And no matter how much science I learned, I wasn't at all sure how I would do in medical school, especially with those awful 36-hour shifts at the hospital. I needed nine hours of sleep now. How could I ever really survive and become a doctor? I spent 27 hours a week teaching or tutoring, 12 more working in a bookstore, and God only knew how many more in class, lab, or studying. And yet during none of that did I feel very connected to anything.

No one at school or the synagogue or even in the family wanted to hear about the patchwork quilts I made. Brenda and I had been very close growing up since she was only a few years older than I was, and we could sometimes talk about teaching, but that story was so old now that I didn't even want to talk about my own miserable experiences teaching college students who had a 4th grade reading level, much less hear of her 5th graders with a 1st grade reading level.

But I had enjoyed the seder the other evening. I hadn't completely connected there, but I'd come close a couple of times. And when I could chant during services and sing along with songs that didn't even have a printed transliteration, I felt close.

I had asked the chair of the foreign languages department at UNO last year if Hebrew could be offered as an independent study, and he said no. I went back a few weeks ago to beg. With all the other things I had to do, I knew I wouldn't learn Hebrew unless my GPA was dependent on it. It turned out that Hebrew had been offered as part of the "Critical Languages" program for two semesters now, so I could take it as an independent study after all. Only the teacher was moving and they didn't have another one yet and didn't want to look for one until they had at least two students signed up. So I'd made fliers and put them on bulletin boards across campus. And one prissy, arrogant girl in several of my classes the past few semesters came to class one day wearing a shirt advertising the Henry S. Jacobs camp, a Jewish summer camp not far from Brookhaven, so I asked her as she was inserting a thread through a beating frog heart if she'd like to learn some Hebrew. She didn't seem particularly enthused, though my timing was perhaps a bit off in the asking.

Last Friday, I'd mentioned the class to Tom, another gay member of Touro. He'd been studying Hebrew for years with his partner and when I mentioned the class said he thought he might apply to teach the independent study. I hoped it would all somehow work out. My learning Hebrew wouldn't make anyone's life better, which was my criterion for deciding if an act was religious or not, but it would make me feel better, and I needed something right now to give me a little comfort. I doubted I'd ever want to make aliyah to Israel, but I wanted to know the option was there. And I wanted to be able to follow the services completely. I needed a lot more practice even just to read the letters, much less understand what I was reading.

"Why don't you fill up that pan with water?" Annie Ruth asked, standing next to me at the sink. "Are you sure that's a good way to wash dishes?"

I was too surprised to answer, but I couldn't help but raise one eyebrow, and she walked off.

Soon everyone had finished dinner, and the adults and older kids hid eggs for the younger kids. Grandma had boiled three dozen eggs the day before, and Wayne had come over yesterday to color them, breaking only four this year. It didn't take long today before several eggs turned up missing, and the dog ran off with a couple. I hid eggs in easy places, on tree branches or on car hoods in plain sight at eye level, but no one looked at eye level when hunting, so mine were still the last to be found. My sister's 11-year-old pouted when she couldn't find enough, and then my aunt's 10-year-old became mad that everyone was helping my sister's girl find eggs. Claire had written a few months ago saying how sad she was that she might not ever have children. I told her that I had felt the same for years but now saw childlessness as a blessing. That probably wasn't very comforting, but I felt more and more glad all the time that I didn't have children, though in a sense this fact separated me from most of humanity, made it impossible for me to connect in a fundamental way that almost everyone else shared. I wondered if this was why I felt so distant from my relatives.

My sister Lisa and her family left before supper, loading an old hutch they found in the feed room of the barn onto the back of their pickup truck. They also took large portions of each cake and half a ham. If I was lucky, there wouldn't be much food left to take when I started for home the next day. Not only did I always gain a couple of pounds each time I visited, but Grandma also sent enough home with me to put yet another pound on me there. Battling my weight had been a constant

struggle for me since I was eleven and spent two weeks in the country with my aunt and grandparents. We'd had hot dogs and homemade ice cream every day. When my Mom returned to pick me up, she gasped that I'd gained so much in so short a time. I was "husky" throughout junior high and pudgy throughout high school. I had lost weight in Belgium, about the only missionary in my mission to do so. I gained it back when I came home. Then at 24, after I graduated with a degree in English, I went on a major diet.

Actually, I fasted for 30 days over three months, praying for God to change me into a heterosexual. But I figured while I was fasting, I ought to walk a few miles a day as well, since that was how I'd lost weight in Belgium. It was a commandment to keep our bodies healthy, and since I obeyed just about every other commandment, I figured my failure in this area must be why God hadn't "healed" me yet. So I went from 190 pounds to 140 in about four months.

The world changed for me almost overnight. People were nicer to me, wanted to talk to me, wanted to be my friend. I recognized instantly the superficiality, that they liked me because I was attractive, though I was the same person as always. But at the same time, it felt good to be liked for any reason. For perhaps the first time, I felt as if I had crossed into another dimension. In this parallel universe, I was now a part of the world, part of the mainstream. Then I came out and left the mainstream, but there appreciation for my body only became stronger.

That was such a good feeling that I'd worked hard to maintain my weight in the succeeding 12 years. I went up to 150 a few times and had to work back down to 140 again. I hated seeing even one pound added to my weight but absolutely freaked whenever I reached 150. I didn't dislike overweight

people and found many heavy men attractive and likeable. I also argued in defense of overweight people every time I heard a thin person make some ridiculous comment on a subject they couldn't possibly know anything about. But the idea of *me* being heavy again was terrifying. I was already on the edge of society in so many ways. I couldn't face the idea of being pushed totally aside again. But it was a constant battle. A constant, every day, continual, never-ending battle. So much energy for such a stupid issue. So many hours that could have been used for something useful devoted instead to superficial self-esteem.

And I still ate two pieces of cake after supper tonight. The coconut cake with condensed milk poured into fork holes, with whipped cream on top, was impossible to resist two meals in a row.

Andy and his family finally left for the evening, but even just Mark and Brenda's three girls were getting to be too much. I had given up the idea of children when I came out at 25, but I'd thought about it again after a gay couple and a lesbian at the synagogue shared custody of a child. To raise my child as a Jew might make the journey worthwhile. But when I was actually with children for a few hours, I was glad I hadn't yet met a Jewish lesbian I liked enough to really do it.

Around 7:30, I'd listened to as much bickering as I wanted to hear. "I guess I'm going to head on to Dad's," I said.

"You're not going to stay here?" Grandma asked. There were three bedrooms and six people, but I knew she felt slighted that I preferred my father's cabin to her house. I didn't dislike her place, but there was, after all, only one bathroom, and even it didn't have a shower. Grandma always acted surprised, though I'd been staying at Dad's place for the last couple of

years when I visited, so I knew she wanted me to sleep here. That made me feel bad, but not bad enough to stay.

"I'm going to study for an Animal Physiology exam I have this week."

"Aren't you going to be scared all by yourself over there?"

"I like it. Shivering burns calories."

"Doesn't it get dark out there in the woods? You're not afraid to be alone?"

"Dad leaves a gun for me."

"Ooooh." She shook her head slightly, worried.

"We haven't seen the place since it was a barn," Mark said. "Mind if we come along to look?"

"Sure." Emma was in the bathtub and the other two girls were in the kitchen, so they didn't ask to come along as well.

"You want to bring some cake to eat later?" Grandma asked as I walked onto the porch.

"I already ate that piece. But thanks." I smiled, thinking that maybe the reason I'd always liked her was because she was so much a Jewish mother without realizing it.

I drove first, Brenda and Mark following me in their minivan. In just five minutes, we pulled through the open gate on my father's land, drove down a pine needle-covered gravel driveway and up to a small wooden home. I'd been to Dad's place so rarely that I didn't even remember the structure as a barn. There was an old feeding shelter just off the driveway in the woods that David and I joked about using for a sukkah, though technically sukkot couldn't be permanent structures.

"How long's he had this cabin?" Brenda asked as we walked up to the front door, using the light from my headlights to show the way.

"He finished it with Karen," I said, remembering his third wife, from New Orleans, whom I'd liked quite a bit. After her father died, though, she'd suddenly become very Catholic, and Dad finally couldn't take it. His second wife had been Mormon but had been a major bitch, a Relief Society president who gossiped about all the secrets she knew, so Dad had gone after sweetness the next time. This last time, he went for a country girl, deciding that a common background was the safest bet, and it seemed to have worked out well enough these past few years. Libby was Baptist, as my Dad had been raised, so while neither of them went to church often, they didn't seem to have any conflicts there.

I gave Mark and Brenda a tour of the two tiny bedrooms, tiny kitchen, closet laundryroom, and living room with a free-standing iron fireplace with a pipe leading through the roof. The wood was unfinished all throughout the house, giving it a rustic look I liked. Though I'd grown up in the city, I sometimes felt more at home up here, even though every time I actually met anyone here, I was glad I lived in the city.

"He's got central air and heat?" asked Brenda, pointing to a thermostat.

I nodded. "This place is a lot nicer than my apartment," I said. Dad always did quality work. I had planned to have him build a house for me one day, but it would be several years yet before I could afford that, and Dad would be retiring in two more years, and then moving up here permanently. I smiled, remembering the rough house plans I'd drawn when I was sixteen, shortly after I'd been ordained a priest by my father,

and shortly after I'd read Anne Frank's diary. I'd drawn plans to include a secret room large enough to hide a family of Jews. If Jews never needed it, I could just hide valuables, or the year's supply of food the Church told us to keep, an idea I still thought useful. Now even if I could have my Dad build a house for me, though, the hidden room would be pointless, unless people came to take Mormons away, or some other group.

"Would you hide me if people came to round up Jews again?" I asked, perhaps a little too abruptly.

Brenda and Mark both stared at me a moment. "Of course," Brenda said.

"Would you hide me if people came to round up gays?" I continued.

Brenda started to speak but stopped. Then Mark said, "I doubt it would be safe at our house."

"Would your friends hide Mark?"

"I believe so."

I wondered if those days would ever really come. It seemed so impossible, and yet the Holocaust had happened so recently that I personally knew two women who'd survived Auschwitz-Birkenau. Thinking about the future in any context was difficult. I could rarely see more than a year or two down the road. As a Mormon, I would never have imagined myself a Jew. As an English instructor, I would never have imagined myself in Biology.

I'd started back in college four years ago to begin work on my prerequisites for medical school, just after David and I became partners. I'd thought about it for a couple of years before that but was too afraid of the change it would demand. I

hadn't had math since 10th grade and never had any physics or chemistry. I'd hated dissecting frogs in high school. I didn't know if I could handle medicine.

Unfortunately, David had no insurance and wasn't happy with the care he was getting at Charity hospital. I didn't think he would still be alive by the time I was finally a physician, but it seemed the only way to ensure that we'd have the money to take care of him, or at least be able to understand the medical literature enough to decide what the best treatments were.

And yet, that was only part of the reason I signed up for remedial math and started my life over again. A bigger reason, one I didn't tell anyone, was simply that I was so tired of being poor. I wanted to build a custom home with a hidden room. I wanted to have a career that paid enough that I could escape the country if the fundamentalists took over. I wanted a job that would be in demand so I could make a living wherever I ended up after fleeing.

When the rabbi interviewed me before my conversion, he asked if I was willing to face another Shoah if it came to that. As a Mormon, I'd been led to believe we might face that ourselves. Our history wasn't as awful as Jewish history, of course, but Mormons had their pogroms, too, kicked out of state after state, their crops and homes burned, their temple destroyed, their prophet tarred, feathered, and shot. It was legal in Missouri to kill a Mormon up until I was in high school. I'd long believed I might have to face real persecution for being a Mormon. I personally had never suffered more than being spit on a few times. Of course, there was the man in Brussels who'd come after me with a knife, but he'd been easy to outrun, so I'd never felt truly scared by him. Still, I was always aware that it was possible Mormons might face real trouble again one day, so

I'd often read books about the Holocaust just so I might perhaps be better able to deal with it if it ever did happen.

Then when I came out as gay, I read about Nazis killing gays, too, and I knew most religious people in America hated us. I'd once seen the bumper sticker, "Kill a Queer for Christ." So when I came out, I told *everyone*. I wrote letters to the paper about gay rights. I wanted to make sure my name was on someone's list, so I wouldn't have the option of "passing." I'd know I had to fight.

But as a Jew who'd watched *Schindler's List*, I knew that the rabbi's question was more than just theoretical. Still, what I told him was, "I had a friend who was stabbed to death two years ago by a gay basher. Anyone coming for you would be coming for me, too. But yes, I'm prepared to face another Holocaust."

"You won't have to," he replied. "Not in America."

Even if he was right, I needed to become a physician so I could have enough money to help rescue other Jews elsewhere if it ever came to that. I was still terrified of the responsibility of other people's health, but I'd met so many mediocre doctors over the years that I honestly thought I could do as well as most and hoped I could do better. I'd also seen so many injustices in the system that I hoped to have some power to help reform health care. I'd read several books about interns and residents and dreaded those impossibly miserable years that had to come before I'd become a physician. The one good thing about being an older student, though, was the realization that four years would fly by, even miserable years. The down side to that realization was the feeling that life was passing me up before I'd managed to do anything. Even though I now recognized how many Jewish names were listed as donors to various charities,

the charities rarely included environmental concerns, issues which I very much wanted to donate to. I dreamed of being able to buy a huge chunk of land and planting it with trees. I definitely wanted to give more than $10 a year to Israel to plant a single tree. There was so much I wanted to do but would never be able to do as an English instructor.

"One good thing about Mormon families," said Mark, "is that among all the returned missionaries, we know enough languages to be able to run somewhere if we have to."

"But America is Zion," said Brenda. "We won't have to leave here."

"Spoken like someone who fits in," I said. "The rest of us have to at least consider the possibility. Apparently even first counselors think about it sometimes."

Brenda looked at Mark. "Is that why you keep telling me to learn a language?"

He laughed. "No. I just think it's fun to feel more connected to the world as a whole."

"I don't want to connect to the world. I have a hard enough time connecting to myself."

"I have trouble just switching to dialect when I come to Mississippi," I said, laughing. "Which reminds me. I better 'cut off' my headlights before my battery runs 'plum' empty."

Brenda and Mark followed me outside. "I'm not sure you got the dialect right," Brenda said.

"I told you it was hard."

They left back for Grandma's house, and I went inside and luxuriated in the total silence of the place. There was no phone and no T.V. I really had brought my notebook to study for class,

but I knew once I was here that I wouldn't study. I sat on the sofa and looked around the room just enjoying the atmosphere. A 150-year-old Bible was on the coffee table, next to a ceramic pitcher in a basin. A calendar of John Deere tractors hung on the wall. I'd made a quilt of a tractor plowing a field and given it to my Dad for Christmas the year before. It was the first present I'd ever given him that I could tell he liked. He kept it at Annie Ruth's house. My Mom's old quilts were here.

I looked around a few more minutes and then went out to the car to unpack. It was a little eerie, hearing footsteps passing in the dark and assuming they were the calves Dad had bought a few weeks earlier.

Back in the cabin, I took out *In the Beginning* by Chaim Potok and read for a couple of hours before going to bed. It was pitch black even after I let my eyes adjust, so I had to leave a light on in the other bedroom as a night light. I loved being out here in the country, but every time I was here, I thought of how far away the police were, even if I had a phone to call 911. There had to be rumors about my Dad's queer boy, and even though my father was well-liked, I couldn't help but worry sometimes. If a couple of drunk good ole boys ever decided to come fuck the fag, I hoped I could keep my wits about me. The gun was in the corner by the door leading to the bathroom. I tried to forget about that and instead I thought about yesterday's seder for a while as I lay in bed, and I eventually fell asleep.

The next morning, I went back to Grandma's for breakfast—sausage and homemade biscuits. She offered some pear preserves David and I had given her.

Brenda and her family went to church in town, as did Andy and his family. Grandma hardly ever went, attending only long enough after her baptism ten years ago to be able to go through

the temple and be "sealed" to the family. She was still basically Methodist, however, always asking why the Mormons didn't believe in the Rapture. When I told her I'd been excommunicated, she said, "Oh, dear. I don't even know if the Mormons are right, but I figured if I joined like the rest of you did, we'd all at least end up in the same place."

I helped Grandma make some potato salad, took a picture of her at work in the kitchen, and then I washed dishes before everyone arrived for dinner. I had only turkey today, but I again ate pieces of two different cakes for dessert. Then around 2:00, I gave Grandma a hug and told everyone goodbye. "You're leaving so early?" asked Grandma.

"Yeah, I've got to finish filling out an application for Charity hospital. I keep putting it off. I'm going to volunteer one afternoon a week in the emergency room."

"Oh, my. What will you be doing?"

"Probably not much. But it's a pretty unhappy place. David was there for almost two days straight once. I figure I need to show the medical schools I know what I'm getting into."

"Oh, dear."

I really hardly ever did any volunteer work, and even then it was usually one-shot deals, like cleaning up after the AIDS walk, or planting trees on neutral grounds. But I had a couple of free afternoons each week despite my bizarre work schedule, and I wasn't studying like I should be, so I figured I might as well volunteer. So far this semester, the only volunteer work I could claim was helping the curve in Immunology class. My overall GPA after four years was around 3.8, but I had a B-average in Immunology and might get a C if I wasn't careful.

"You can't fill out the application tonight?" Grandma rarely begged, and I again felt bad for disappointing her, but I felt I couldn't really connect with her while everyone else was there anyway.

When we were alone, she might ask if I was still HIV negative, or ask which of us in the relationship was "the man," looking confused when I explained we both were. She might ask what I thought of Wayne, or of Annie Ruth. When everyone was together, she was a completely different person, existing only to serve. If we were alone, she'd easily let me help her in the kitchen, and we'd talk as we worked. When everyone was there, she'd say, "Don't you want to let me do those dishes?"

When we were alone, we could talk about God, and about life, and about death. "I don't want to go like my mother," she'd told me. Her mother had a stroke and was bedridden for a year before she finally died. My own mother had gone quickly in comparison, suffering a mere six weeks of absolute misery with leukemia before she too had a stroke and died.

"I hope you die in your sleep, Grandma."

"I do, too."

We might say little more than that, but we had that conversation about death almost every time I came up by myself. She said I was the only one in the family who would talk to her about it. It seemed ridiculous to me to pretend she wasn't going to die, and if talking about her hopes for an easy death comforted her in the meantime, it seemed cruel not to allow her the release.

She wanted to know what I expected in the afterlife, if I thought I could still be with them when I died, considering I was gay. "I honestly have no idea what to expect," I told her

once. "All I know is that it had better be worth all this trouble, or I'm going to be mad."

I had said it jokingly, but she replied in all seriousness, "I hope so, too."

As a Mormon, I had believed the traditional story, that we were here on Earth to be tested, and if we passed, we would have the opportunity for eternal progression and eventual godhood, after which we'd create worlds and allow others the same opportunity. For the past ten years, I no longer had any clue what to expect. I had read Harold Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* long before I met David and converted, and it had seemed like the first halfway acceptable approach to God, eliminating most of the stupid things people said about Him. But there had to be some point to believing in God, and I didn't know what that point was. Just believing was meaningless.

My rabbi had told me lots of Jews didn't believe in an afterlife at all. If this life were all we got out of being created, though, I didn't see how creation was doing any of us much of a favor. There *had* to be something more. The rabbi's explanation was to ask what a goldfish would say it wanted of heaven—clean water, plenty of fish food, and no mean fish to eat him. The fish, he said, was incapable of comprehending that it could ask for more. It couldn't comprehend Beethoven or Mozart or anything beyond its own highest experience. Likewise, we humans could have no concept of how truly wonderful the afterlife would be. And a merciful and loving God would see to it that all except perhaps the most rotten of us would receive it.

But that answer was every bit as unsatisfying to me. If we received such an incredible afterlife almost universally, what was so bad about murder? All we really did then was help

people leave a mediocre and often horrible life for a beautiful one. If the afterlife was really so incredible, why not help everyone cross over to a spectacular existence?

It didn't make sense that we ever had to be here in this life, now, unless this life itself mattered in some way. Why make us come here at all if the plan was to give us eternal bliss? Did we need 80 years of misery so we'd appreciate it? Then why did some people only live for a few months or even just hours?

It just didn't make sense. Life had to have some meaning. There had to be a point. And it absolutely had to be important that we *do* something while we were here, though that still wouldn't explain infant mortality. This life might only be a fleeting part of our overall existence, a mere apostrophe in a long word. But the apostrophe was there for a reason. Ignoring it changed the word entirely. There had to be more to life than just passing through.

But what were we supposed to do? "Make the world a better place." It sounded so trite, and that answer raised a dozen more questions, but it was the best thing I could come up with so far. Somehow, before I died and passed on to whatever lay ahead, I had to do something to make life better for others.

I looked at my Grandma. I wanted to make the world a better place, so I was leaving early in order to disappoint her. Good grief.

"I need to take a long walk to work off this cake," I said. It was a lame excuse, and she knew it, but I'd write a long letter this week, and maybe I'd paint her living room when I came up this summer.

"You want me to pack you some before you go? There's a whole German chocolate cake out back no one's even touched yet."

"No. I can't afford the calories. It's too hard to resist if I have it with me." I hugged her again and went out to my car.

Grandma stood on the porch to watch me leave. I backed up by the old dairy barn, waiting for Wayne to run past, chasing a one-eyed cat with his gun, and then I started down the driveway, waving to Grandma as I went around the bend. As awkward and unpleasant as I often found these family holidays, I always felt a certain pain as I left that I felt at no other time. I hoped Grandma would stay healthy for however much longer she'd be here. I hoped I could find a way someday so that despite my disappointing her regularly, I could still make her feel special.

I pulled onto the road, drove past the neighbor's twin silos, and let out a long sigh. Then I turned my tape louder and tried to sing the words whose meaning I didn't even know.

Two hours later, I was in New Orleans, and after I unpacked the car, I took a walk through the Marigny and the Quarter, hoping to walk a good 90 minutes or so to burn off at least one piece of cake. Walking past Good Friends, I saw lots of men wearing outrageous hats for the Easter bonnet contest. I waved at a couple of guys I knew and walked on, starting to feel comfortable again in my old neighborhood. After I'd walked long enough to work off the guilt of that fourth piece of cake, even if not all of its calories, I headed back for the Marigny. I always walked against traffic, as it gave me an opportunity to cruise drivers heading toward me. David and I hadn't had sex the last couple of years we were together since he always hurt so much, and I hadn't wanted to even consider dating again

after a second failed relationship. But I did want to have sex again sometimes now that I could, and though street contacts were rarely satisfying, I did occasionally pick someone up.

I wasn't particularly in the mood this afternoon, but as I crossed Elysian Fields, a cute Hispanic man drove past and smiled. I smiled back, and a block later, he drove by again and again smiled. He kept circling me until I reached my apartment a few blocks later, and when he paused as I reached my door, I nodded, and he found a parking place.

When he came up to the door, however, I realized that he wasn't Hispanic after all. He looked Middle Eastern. He smiled, and he didn't seem to notice the mezuzah on the doorpost, the one David had bought for me the day I went into the mikvah, so I let him in. He instantly began fondling me, and I fondled back, but we were in my living room, with my menorah only a few feet away. Surely, he saw it.

He grabbed my behind. "I'd really like to fuck you," he said, squeezing my cheeks.

I sighed. This was not going to work. "I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't have led you on. I'm really not much in the mood today."

He instantly grew cold. "Okay."

I led him back to the door, and he left without looking back. He might have been a perfectly decent man, I realized, but what if he had in fact noticed that I was a Jew? I didn't buy into the sexism that even lots of gays demonstrated, that being a "bottom" was

somehow inferior to being a "top." I liked both, and had been mostly a bottom with my first lover and mostly a top with David. I could adapt when I needed to. But I didn't want to take

the chance that this guy was a Muslim, and that he felt superior while fucking a Jew. Some Israelis didn't like that. I couldn't have enjoyed the experience wondering the whole time what he was really thinking. Of course, maybe I'd just missed a good chance to connect with a Muslim, or simply a good chance to connect with another human being. I shook my head. Life had last been simple when I was ten years old. I'd had a quarter of a century since then to get over that fact, and yet every day it still seemed an amazing discovery.

I'd probably never fit in with the gay community since I never went to bars, hating the smoke and the loud music. I'd never fully fit in with Jews even if I ended up knowing more Jewish history or Hebrew than many of them. And I was sure I would never be a typical medical student or doctor. Of course, I never really had fit in anywhere during my life. I had always simply hoped I would. But I was just going to have to accept that other people were always going to see me as peculiar. Maybe that wasn't so bad. Regardless, it was simply going to be so. At least as a Jew, it was okay to think for myself. I didn't really have to fit in to still fit in.

I filled out my application to Charity and stamped the envelope, setting it on top of my bookbag so I would remember to mail it on my way to school tomorrow. Then I watered my potted trees in front of the living room window: two pecan trees, two pear trees, a walnut tree, an oak, and a cypress, all grown from seeds I'd gathered. Someday, I'd have land to plant them on. I wished I at least had a porch or balcony to keep them on so they could get full sunlight. I took one of them with me now and placed it on the sidewalk to catch the late afternoon sun, and I sat on my front steps with my Animal Physiology notebook. Renal function. Okay. I turned on the switch to that

part of my brain, took a deep breath, and started studying what I needed to know.

The Golem of Rabbi Loew

Rabbi Judah Loew was a lonely man. Part of this was because he was the chief rabbi of Prague, and great men are always kept at a distance by those who admire them. People are a little afraid of these men. Part of it, too, was because he was very intelligent, and while he was also humble, very intelligent people often find it difficult to commune with the masses. And part of it was because his wife, Pearl, while a diligent homemaker and mother, was simply not the love of his life.

Rabbi Loew had five children, and he loved them all. But Pearl spent more of her time with them than he did. He spent much of his time in classes with his students instead. His oldest daughter, Miriam, had married the best student, a dedicated young man named Isaac, and Rabbi Loew loved Isaac as well.

But this was where the trouble began. Rabbi Loew felt such a deep kinship with his son-in-law and spent such a great deal of time with him that he began feeling more lonely than ever.

What Rabbi Loew wanted was to spend his nights as well as his days with a man like Isaac.

Rabbi Loew knew that what he wanted was a terrible sin. The Torah said so. Thus, the rabbi prayed fervently for many months to be delivered of his evil passion.

But one day, in the early part of 1560, something else terrible happened that would change the rabbi's life forever, and the lives of those in his community.

"Rabbi, have you heard?" It was Yudl, the blacksmith.

"What is it, Yudl?"

"They say that a little gentile boy is missing. They say the Jews have killed him to put his blood in the matzoh for Pesach tomorrow. They say they are going to search the ghetto until they find the boy. What are we to do?"

Rabbi Loew frowned. This was not the first time the Blood Libel had afflicted his people. On many occasions, dozens of Jews were killed in revenge for these supposed murders. How was he to protect his people this time?

"I will pray to heaven, and our Maker will deliver us."

"Rabbi, Pesach begins tomorrow. The raids could commence at any moment."

"We will be delivered."

Rabbi Loew closed the door to his study and prayed. He had prayed this passionately before, for God to send him a golem. The rabbi had asked for a soulless man to be brought to life, just for him, someone he could be with but whose soul would have already departed, so that the rabbi could not corrupt him as he might a living man. Rabbi Loew felt that in this manner, he could have the company he so desired, without sinning quite so much, and without causing another Jew to sin as well.

The rabbi's studies told him that a man having a sexual relationship with another man was not forbidden so much because it was a sinful act in itself, but because God wanted to distinguish the Jews from other peoples. But for whatever reason, if it was forbidden, Rabbi Loew would not do it, unless God could send him a man without a soul, and he prayed for a miracle every day.

But now Rabbi Loew doubled his efforts. He prayed even more fervently for his people to be protected from their current threat.

When Pearl came up later to announce that the evening meal was ready, Rabbi Loew sent her away and continued his prayers. He must receive an answer before morning.

He prayed hour after hour, sending his pleas to heaven. Finally, though, he fell asleep on the floor of his study.

But there, he had a dream. He would find a lifeless man on the bank of the Moldau River, and he would write the letters EMET on the man's forehead with clay from the ground, and spelling "Truth" in this manner would bring the man to life. This golem would help protect the Jews.

It wasn't the exact golem the rabbi wanted, but he knew it was more important to save the community than to appease his personal desires.

Because the Jews were not allowed outside of the ghetto during the nighttime hours, Rabbi Loew had to wait until morning before taking Isaac with him to the river's edge. They did indeed find a large dead body on the bank, just as the rabbi knew they would.

Isaac put his hand on Rabbi Loew's arm. "Father, we should leave quickly. If we are found beside this dead man…"

"Do not fear. It is the will of heaven. I have dreamed it. Look at the yellow circle on his sleeve. He is one of us. This man will help deliver the Jews of Prague."

Isaac looked at his father-in-law worriedly but did not dare contradict the man. Rabbi Loew knelt beside the corpse and dug

his finger into the mud next to him. He carefully wrote upon the man's forehead and then leaned down over the man.

He'd hoped for such a long time for a golem to be his companion that he desired terribly to kiss the still figure, even with Isaac looking on. He touched his lips to those of the dead man, and then an inspiration came upon him. He forced his breath into the mouth of the man. He did it again and again as Isaac gasped beside him.

But then the golem coughed and opened his eyes.

"May the heavens save me!" said Isaac fearfully. "You've brought a man to life. You've breathed life into him, just as God did with Adam."

Rabbi Loew looked up at Isaac, who was staring at him in awe.

"It was God's breath coming through me. I'm no Creator. But this man will be a Savior to us."

"A Savior? Is this the Messiah?"

"No, Isaac. Just a man to help us in these difficult times."

The man on the embankment was looking up wonderingly at Rabbi Loew. The rabbi felt a sudden wave of compassion for the soulless creature who was sent to serve him and the other Jews of Prague. He brushed his hand across the man's forehead and nodded kindly at him.

"Come, Isaac, help me to sit this man up."

The two men put a hand under each of the hulking man's shoulders and helped him to an upright position. The man looked around in confusion.

"What is your name?" asked the rabbi gently. He expected the man no longer had a name, but he wanted to be sure.

The man stared at him.

"From whence do you come?" asked Isaac. "Can we help you to your home?"

The man stared but said nothing.

"Can you speak?" asked Rabbi Loew uncertainly. He hadn't expected that, but perhaps without a soul, the body was incapable of speech.

The man looked at him a moment and then slowly shook his head.

"But you can hear me?" asked the rabbi.

The man looked at him another moment and then nodded slowly.

"May God preserve us!" breathed Isaac.

"That is exactly what is going to happen," said Rabbi Loew. He turned back to the man. "Your name is Joseph. You will live with me. But we need you to help us."

The man looked at the rabbi and again nodded.

Rabbi Loew explained the danger the Jews were facing and told Joseph he must inspect every cart and bundle that came into the ghetto that day. The rabbi suddenly suspected that one golem would not be enough, but then he repented of his doubts. God had sent this creature, and God would help the man to do what must be done.

Rabbi Loew stayed with Joseph all day. There was more than one road into the ghetto, and the rabbi was not secure in his knowledge of which entry to monitor. He prayed and felt that it

was the main entrance which carried the danger, and he posted Joseph there and then stood off to the side and watched.

Joseph moved as if he had inspected carts all of his life. Since his life had begun only that morning, perhaps it was true. Without a word, Joseph stopped every cart that approached the ghetto, and every person carrying a bundle. All of the merchants instinctively feared his huge presence, and they meekly allowed Joseph to search their belongings.

Joseph searched cart after cart throughout the day, and bundle after bundle, but he let everyone pass into the ghetto. The afternoon sun was sinking low in the sky, and Pesach would be starting soon. Would Joseph be able to prevent a disaster?

Just then, Joseph turned to look at Rabbi Loew, and he gave the rabbi the slightest hint of a smile. Rabbi Loew's heart began beating a little faster, and he suddenly knew that everything would be all right.

Late in the afternoon, two Gentiles entered the ghetto with a cart on which lay the carcass of a pig. What were those men doing bringing something so unclean into the Jewish neighborhood? Most Gentiles went around the ghetto rather than through it, even if entering the ghetto would make their journey shorter. It irritated Rabbi Loew that these men were bringing swine among his people, even if their final destination lay elsewhere.

He wanted to hurry the scowling men along, but Joseph stopped their cart as he had everyone else's. Rabbi Loew felt the tiniest flash of irritation. It was possible to be too dedicated. People had said it of the rabbi as well. And anyone could see at a glance that there was no place to hide a dead child in this cart.

At least the golem was being thorough, however. Rabbi Loew supposed it would not hurt to slow these goyim in their journey, annoy them just enough that they would choose a different route the next time.

But what was Joseph doing now? He seemed to be prying into the carcass itself. He would have to go to the mikvah to purify himself before he could partake of the seder this evening.

Rabbi Loew watched as Joseph reached his hand into the belly of the pig and slowly pulled out a child's arm. He continued tugging, and the arm was followed by the body of a young child.

"Stop! Cease what you are doing!" shouted one of the goyim.

The other man began running, but there were several onlookers, and Rabbi Loew quickly ordered them to grab hold of the two men. Then he sent Shmuel, the fishmonger, to run and bring back a policeman. The rabbi was a bit fearful that the police would believe whatever story the men concocted, but when two policemen arrived a few minutes later, they saw the evidence clearly and took the two criminals away, with their heads hanging down in despair.

The rabbi, however, was experiencing great joy. "Joseph! Joseph! You have saved us! Let us hurry now to the mikvah and then let us enjoy the wonderful seder Pearl has prepared for us!"

Rabbi Loew grasped Joseph by the hand and led him through the streets until they arrived at the mikvah. He told Joseph to undress and did the same, and they both stepped into the pool of water and immersed themselves.

Rabbi Loew looked over at Joseph, who seemed a near perfect example of God's supreme creation. The rabbi

remembered his sinful desire for a golem to grant him the company he craved, but he had to admit that the Master of the Universe had seen the truer need that existed for a golem, to serve all the people and not just the rabbi.

Rabbi Loew looked again at Joseph sitting beside him in the water. Perhaps simply being able to enter the mikvah together regularly would be all the company the rabbi would need. He already felt a deep kinship with this man. Purifying themselves together was a closeness he'd never felt before with anyone else. God had answered his prayers, after all, as well as they prayers of his people. He felt happier than he had felt in many, many years.

"You have brought a guest home for the seder," said Pearl as the two men walked into the house. "What a blessing for us."

Pearl had prepared a lovely meal, and though she seemed initially disturbed by Joseph's dumbness, and had to scold the two youngest children who giggled at it, the meal went well and lasted into the late hours as they recited the Haggadah. The deliverance of the Eygptian Hebrews had never had as much meaning for Rabbi Loew as it did tonight after the ghetto's narrow escape and with his own liberation from the bondage of loneliness.

"Where will our guest sleep?" Pearl whispered after the children were in bed. "We have so little room now with Isaac and Miriam's little baby."

"I will prepare a blanket in my study."

"But Judah—"

"Tomorrow I will buy a small cot and put it in my study for him. Joseph will stay there for the time being."

"How long—"

"Dear Pearl, Joseph has been sent to us by our Eternal Father." He leaned over and whispered into Pearl's ear. "He is a golem. God has brought him to life to protect the Jews of Prague."

Pearl gasped but nodded. "I will treat him as I would treat Isaac or anyone else who joins our family."

"That is good, Pearl. You are a kind woman."

"And you are a great man."

"It is God who is great."

Rabbi Loew brought a pillow and two blankets to his study and motioned for Joseph to follow him. As he prepared a place for Joseph to sleep, the silent man began undressing. Rabbi Loew realized he would need to find some new clothing for the large creature. He would need more than what he was wearing today. The rabbi would see to it in the morning.

"You will sleep in my study, Joseph," said Rabbi Loew, "among the Torah and Talmud and every other sacred book I own. You have been created especial by the Almighty, and it is appropriate that you rest among His writings."

Joseph lay on one blanket and pulled the other up to his chin. It barely covered him. Then he moved his lips as if to speak. But Rabbi Loew could hear nothing. Joseph moved his lips again and then beckoned for the rabbi to lean down. Rabbi Loew knelt on the floor and put his ear next to Joseph's mouth. Would the creature be able to speak only to him, only in private?

Rabbi Loew could feel a soft wind against his ear but could still hear nothing. Disturbed, he turned his face toward Joseph's,

and as he did so, his nose brushed against Joseph's. He should have pulled back, but he was captivated by seeing the young, strong face so close. He looked into Joseph's eyes.

They wrinkled a little at the corners, and Rabbi Loew realized that Joseph was smiling. Suddenly, the rabbi felt a hand on the back of his head, and he felt Joseph pulling him even closer.

They kissed. It was a long, sultry embrace of lips. Rabbi Loew could not pull away with Joseph's hand behind his head. But he did not wish to pull away.

After a few, lingering moments, Joseph released him, and Rabbi Loew stood back up, resting one hand on his desk to steady himself.

"Joseph, you have been sent by God. He has created you to comfort me. And I will ask God's help in comforting you as well." He bowed his head slightly and left the room.

The rabbi joined Pearl in their room, his mind in a fog. God had not only performed one great miracle today, he had performed two. Rabbi Loew wasn't certain how much of the story he could tell his students, but he wanted the Jews of every generation to know at least part of the magnificent mercy God had shown his followers.

As the days passed, Rabbi Loew told his best students that he and Isaac had formed the golem out of clay and performed secret rituals and offered special prayers to bring him to life. Only Isaac knew what really happened, and he agreed that Rabbi Loew's story was better for the people. Otherwise, they might believe Joseph was simply a waylaid traveler they'd rescued, or an imbecile who'd wandered in from another town,

or some terrible sinner cast out from another community who had then lost his speech as a punishment from God.

Rabbi Loew worked hard to see that Joseph continued to be a blessing to the Jews of Prague. He assigned Joseph to carry water every day for the sick and the elderly. Joseph stood guard at weddings. He roamed the streets and was seen continually by the people, which both comforted them and reminded them to behave justly. Joseph caught young boys trying to steal apples from the fruit vendor. He captured a gonif trying to run off with some of the cobbler's tools. He assisted Yudl, the blacksmith, in his shop after the man was beaten one evening by goyim.

Joseph was loved by many, respected by others, feared by some, and tolerated by the remainder of the population. But Rabbi Loew was greatly admired, and no one spoke against Joseph in public, whatever they might say in private.

Every week, Rabbi Loew took Joseph to the mikvah, and every evening after they'd purified themselves, Rabbi Loew would remain a long while in his study with the creature, and he would always leave with a serene, thoughtful smile on his face.

One day as another Pesach approached, Joseph became very agitated. He took Rabbi Loew by the hand and led him to the kitchen, where Pearl was preparing some matzoh. He pointed to the bowl, pointed to his mouth, and then held his stomach with an agonized expression on his face. He repeated these actions three times.

"Dear husband, what can be the matter? Has poor Joseph lost his senses?"

"No, Pearl," said Rabbi Loew. "He knows of trouble afoot." The rabbi put his hand on Joseph's arm. "Joseph, have you seen something? Have you overheard something?"

Joseph nodded vigorously.

"Is there some kind of danger to the people?"

Joseph nodded vigorously again.

"Can you prevent something bad from happening? Can you show me where to go to warn others?"

Joseph grasped Rabbi Loew's hand firmly and pulled him forcefully out of the house. He led the rabbi quickly down the street and around the corner to the bakery Abraham owned. Joseph pushed the door open with one hand and pulled the rabbi in after him with the other.

He pointed to the matzoh baking and held his stomach with a pained grimace on his face. Then he pointed to two new workers the rabbi had never seen before.

"Abraham," said Rabbi Loew, "may I ask who those two gentlemen are?"

"Why, they're goyim from outside the ghetto. I made sure they had no leaven anywhere on them. But my regular bakers have become ill, and I need to prepare a great deal of matzoh in a very short time."

"Abraham, these men are plotting something. Perhaps they did smuggle some leavening in with them to ruin our seder."

Abraham called the two men over, and instantly, Joseph pointed accusingly at them. He towered over the two men, and after only the slightest questioning, they blurted out the entire story. They had brought poison into the bakery and were going to contaminate all the matzoh. They'd seen Joseph nearby as they talked about it on their way to the bakery, after having sickened the regular workers, but they hadn't thought the dumb man could understand them.

Rabbi Loew stepped outside and ordered a young boy to fetch the police, and soon the men were carted off to jail. It was a difficult Pesach the first few days, with not enough matzoh to satisfy the stomachs of those in the neighborhood, but Joseph had saved the people again. Rabbi Loew offered up his thanks to the Creator yet another time for his mercy in sending a golem to protect them.

The rabbi felt a little proud that it was his very own special friend who had done such a good deed. He sometimes called his special friend his husband in his private thoughts. But was it possible to have both a loving wife and a loving husband? Since Joseph was not really alive, Rabbi Loew felt secure that he was not sinning with the man. He simply felt very grateful every week that God had provided a way to allow his heart to be full without degrading his body. Their lovemaking would have been a sin had Joseph been a true man rather than a special creation. To his surprise, Rabbi Loew found himself becoming more tender toward his wife now that he had Joseph for himself. And he dedicated himself ever more to his studies and his rulings, so he could be worthy of such a profound gift as the golem.

Rabbi Loew's children were growing. He was able to marry off another daughter to the tailor's son, and arrange a marriage between one of his sons to the butcher's daughter. Miriam and Isaac now had two children of their own. They lived with Rabbi Loew and his wife, but the other married children had moved into their own abodes. Still, Joseph continued to sleep in the study, and Rabbi Loew continued staying late with him one evening a week.

Joseph shoveled snow and helped stack firewood in the winter. He helped repair roofs and build carts any time of year he was needed. Joseph helped hang signs and sweep trash from in front of the people's shops. Rabbi Loew forbid anyone to pay

Joseph for his work. The rabbi felt that since the golem was sent as a gift from God, he was to be used to help all of the Jews equally whenever possible, in whichever way he could. Rabbi Loew in turn felt it was his personal obligation to provide for the creature. Even though Joseph was not technically alive, he did eat a great deal to support his large frame. Rabbi Loew sometimes wondered at that, but he supposed this was simply a minor trial to remind him of the great blessings which had been bestowed upon him.

One day a few years later, about seven years after the golem had first come to life, Joseph created another commotion. After the miraculous deliverances during the two Passovers, Rabbi Loew was quick to understand that something was amiss, especially since it was only a day before Yom Kippur.

Joseph took several books from the rabbi's library and carried them to the kitchen. He put three books standing on end, and then placed a single book flat on top as if to make a roof. He pointed to the flame Pearl was using to cook with, and then pointed to the little structure on the table. Next, Joseph opened one of the books and pointed to the Hebrew letters and then toward the door.

Joseph grasped Rabbi Loew by the hand and pulled him down the street to the synagogue. He pointed at the building and then waved his fingers upward. It was clear to the rabbi immediately what the danger was.

"Is someone going to burn the synagogue?"

Joseph nodded.

"Can you find the man?"

Joseph looked uncertain and then shook his head.

Rabbi Loew quickly called ten men from the congregation and posted them at different locations in and around the synagogue, telling them they might have to wait many hours before anyone came, and they had to remain alert.

Rabbi Loew was grateful that Joseph was such a fixture in the community that people continued to talk in front of him as if he weren't there. The rabbi had at first found Joseph's silence a difficulty but he realized yet again that this was indeed a blessing, that it made people forget the golem was nearby observing and hearing everything. It was what enabled the golem to serve so faithfully.

Late in the night, Yudl saw two Gentiles enter the synagogue, and he called out an alarm. The other men all rushed over and caught the two criminals. As before, the Jews were fortunate to have a policeman respond who believed their tale and arrested the men. The synagogue was saved, and though the ten men who'd stood watch were exhausted as well as famished because of their fasting for the Day of Atonement, when the congregation heard of what had transpired, everyone seemed to dedicate themselves toward being more observant and faithful in their prayers and commitments.

That evening, when Rabbi Loew brought Joseph to the study, he could barely keep his eyes open. He knelt beside the golem to kiss him good night, and he fell down right on top of the creature, immediately deep in sleep. He did not feel the golem stroking his hair gently during the succeeding hour.

When Rabbi Loew awoke in the morning, he realized that Joseph's arms were locked across his back as he lay on top of the man. When the rabbi began to stir, Joseph opened his eyes and smiled brightly. He raised his head and kissed Rabbi Loew

on the lips. Rabbi Loew wondered how he would ever be able to sleep in his own bedroom after this.

"It must have been very uncomfortable for you last night," said the rabbi.

Joseph continued smiling and shook his head. He held Rabbi Loew tight against him for a moment and kissed him another time. Then he stroked the rabbi's cheek softly.

"Joseph, would it displease you if I stayed with you again some night?"

Joseph shook his head.

"Can I stay with you this evening?"

Joseph nodded.

Just then, the rabbi had a terrible thought. "Joseph, how long will you be mine?"

Joseph put his right finger on his left shoulder and slowly drew his finger the length of his arm to his fingertips. Rabbi Loew wasn't quite sure what that meant, but it seemed to signify something good and bountiful.

From that night on, Rabbi Loew began sleeping in the study with Joseph. Pearl never made a comment, and Isaac never said a word about it, either. Rabbi Loew could not understand why it had taken him seven years to begin remaining with Joseph through the night. He sensed that perhaps it was because Jacob had been required to work seven years for Leah, and so the rabbi needed seven years of anticipation as well.

Despite his weekly mikvah and special sessions with Joseph, actually staying the night with him was somehow an entirely different experience. After they retired for the evening, Rabbi Loew spoke to Joseph at length of his boyhood, his

studies, his ponderings about God and the Torah, and of his feelings for Joseph. When he looked at Joseph's face while he spoke, he realized that Joseph was communicating fully with him every day. The rabbi knew completely what Joseph was thinking. It was because their two souls could speak to each other in the realm of spirits.

But one day as Rabbi Loew was contemplating this, he had a sudden, terrifying thought. If the golem had no soul, what would happen when Rabbi Loew died? Would the creature "live" indefinitely and continue to assist the Jews of Prague throughout time? Or would Joseph cease to exist? Rabbi Loew was not certain what the world to come might offer, but he desired to be with Joseph in the next life as well. Yet if Joseph had no soul to cross over into that next world, would Rabbi Loew ever see him again? Would they be separated eternally?

This idea was too much to bear, and Rabbi Loew began fasting one day each week, beseeching God to impart to Joseph a soul. The rabbi realized that if this request were granted, he would no longer be able to spend the evenings with Joseph. Their lovemaking would then become a sin.

Would it still be possible to love so fully, so completely, if they were never allowed to express their love in its entirety? Was the choice before Rabbi Loew either that he must give up the man he loved or to give up love itself? He now understood what his forefather Abraham must have felt when asked to kill the son who was to beget him multitudes of descendants. Yet God had provided an escape then. Perhaps he could do so again now.

Surely, if loving a soulless creature could be so beautiful, loving a man with a rich, deep soul would be even more

beautiful. The Torah said differently, and the Torah was God's word. But Rabbi Loew wondered.

Rabbi Loew did not let his worries hinder his happiness. He was nearing sixty, and yet when he was with Joseph, he felt as giddy as a schoolboy. His students often commented on how young he seemed. Joseph continued to serve, helping Chayim the woodworker construct furniture, and Elihu the tinsmith make kettles and cups. Rabbi Loew sent the golem to assist any man in the neighborhood who was sick and needed a temporary worker, and he made sure to send Joseph for a little while to people in all parts of the ghetto, so no one would feel neglected, and everyone would be aware of God's love for them.

A few boys still tried to steal pears or plums, just to tease Joseph. But the months and years passed with no other grave threat to the community. The highlight of the week for Rabbi Loew continued to be immersing himself in the mikvah with Joseph. The golem's purity then seemed almost tangible.

One day, late in the fall of 1574, Rabbi Loew and Joseph hurried home after their purification and took off their heavy coats in the house. Pearl was sitting at the table alone.

"What is it, Pearl? You look unsettled."

"I have a pain in my arm," she said simply. "It runs to my chest. It makes me very tired."

"Shall I call for the doctor? Do you need attention?"

Pearl looked up at him sadly. "I no longer need attention. But I thank you for what you have been able to give me during our many years together. I might have desired more, but it has been sufficient." She grimaced and rubbed her chest.

"Oh, Pearl!"

"Do not worry, Judah. It has been a privilege to live in the same household with the chief rabbi. We have raised good children and grandchildren. I do not mind what lies ahead."

Rabbi Loew knelt beside her and held her hand tightly.

"I—I do not fully understand these things, though I am married to a learned man. But Judah…" She paused as another flash of pain streaked across her face. "Judah, you must ask Isaac and a few of your other trusted students. You must ask them…"

"Ask them what?"

"To hold the chuppah over you and Joseph. Once I have gone away, you must be joined together under the wedding canopy."

Rabbi Loew nodded. He thought he should feel ashamed that Pearl knew everything. Then he realized it was good that his wife knew his deepest secrets. It made him feel suddenly close to her, almost as close as he felt to Joseph.

"Yes, my wife, I will do as you say."

Joseph had been standing nearby silently, but now he knelt down as well and kissed Pearl on the forehead.

When he pulled away, Pearl's eyes were glazed and distant. Rabbi Loew wiped his face and tore the right side of his shirt. He hesitated a moment and then tore the right side of Joseph's shirt as well.

It was too late in the afternoon to bury Pearl that day, but the community buried her the next morning, and Rabbi Loew's son said the kaddish. The rabbi and Joseph and Isaac and Miriam and the other children removed their leather shoes during the week of mourning, wearing simple cloth slippers.

Joseph seemed to want to comfort Rabbi Loew, but the rabbi knew he must abstain from his usual marital relationships during shiva.

How odd, he thought, to even have to consider that while mourning his wife. He was too humble to think seriously that he might be worthy of polygamy like some of his esteemed ancestors. The idea did cross his mind at one point that he wasn't truly polygamous, however. He only had one wife. It was simply that he also had one husband. It seemed to him exactly the finest way to live, and he forgot at times that had Joseph been human, it would have been forbidden.

It struck the rabbi that Pearl had died seven years after he had begun spending the nights with Joseph. Was this God's way of denying him Pearl, the way Jacob had been denied Rachel for so long? Was the rabbi being punished for not appreciating his Leah enough? Or was this God's way of giving Joseph to him fully, the way Rachel had finally become Jacob's after fourteen long years?

After the week of mourning, Rabbi Loew had a difficult decision to make. Did he dare, as Pearl had suggested, ask his most devoted students to marry him and Joseph? Was it even acceptable to marry a golem, even if it weren't a man? Rabbi Loew knew that Isaac had long ago assumed the truth. Yet to act blatantly might bring disaster.

And would marriage make a difference in the eyes of God? Rabbi Loew was already quite certain he was not sinning. So what did it matter that he and Joseph did not legally belong to one another? Once Rabbi Loew died, the marriage would be null and void in any case.

Yet somehow, somehow, marriage *felt* like an eternal commitment, and Rabbi Loew wanted some small hope that he would be with Joseph forever.

"Joseph," asked the rabbi one night in their study, "would you like to be wed?"

Joseph looked at Rabbi Loew blankly.

"Would you like to be mine in the world to come?"

Joseph pointed to the yellow circle on his shoulder, tracing the circle with his finger over and over. He stopped with his finger at one point on the circle, shook his head and frowned, and then moved his finger further along and stopped again. He again shook his head, and then he moved his finger round and round the circle several more times, nodding and smiling. Rabbi Loew understood.

"Eternity has no beginning and no end. You are wise, Joseph."

Joseph smiled and pointed to Rabbi Loew and then touched the rabbi's head and the rabbi's chest over his heart.

"We will wait until a month has passed, and then I will say something to Isaac." They couldn't participate in any events or meetings with music for thirty days after Pearl's death. Rabbi Loew wasn't sure if there would be any music for himself and Joseph, even if Isaac and the others he was contemplating talking with would agree to a secret ceremony. But waiting at least thirty days seemed prudent in any event.

"Joseph, I asked God to bring you to me, and He did. I cannot believe He will forbid us from revealing His miraculous mercy to the most dedicated of my students. It is only in this way that we can pass God's wisdom along to future generations.

After I am gone, they will be able to speak freely of God's compassion."

Joseph pulled Rabbi Loew to the cot, and they made love slowly and with deep consideration for one another.

It was the last evening they were ever to spend together as one, however. The next day, around midmorning, Chayim the woodworker came running up to the rabbi.

"Rabbi Loew! Rabbi Loew!"

"What is it, Chayim?"

"Someone has stolen all the oil for Hanukkah! The three barrels are missing! The first night of the festival is this evening! Whatever shall we do?"

"Do you know where Joseph can be found?"

"I saw him leaving the ghetto as I made my way here."

"Let us see if we can find him," said Rabbi Loew calmly. Joseph had saved them in the past, and though there was no physical danger this time, only inconvenience, the rabbi was again amazed at how the hatred of the Gentiles would lead them to try to disrupt even a minor holiday. He smiled, thinking about how much the Gentiles were unknowingly devoting themselves to the study of Judaism, just so they could keep up with all the various Jewish festivals and holidays, even if simply in order to hinder them. Perhaps it was God's way of letting hatred have at least some small beneficial purpose.

Rabbi Loew and the other men who followed him outside the ghetto asked at every corner if anyone had seen a large Jew hurrying by. Some people refused to answer them and a few even spat at them, but most meekly offered whatever aid they could.

Within twenty minutes, the rabbi and the other men came upon Joseph beating against a heavy wooden door. Rabbi Loew put his hand on Joseph's shoulder, and he ceased pounding.

"Chayim, fetch a policeman."

The woodworker hurried off.

"Gentlemen," called out the rabbi loudly in the direction of the building. "A policeman is on the way. It would be best if you opened the door and let us retrieve what is rightly ours." He felt generous today and decided that if the men returned the oil willingly, he would not have them arrested. Perhaps they would understand then that the Jews were a good people and desist on their own from wreaking further havoc among them.

A moment later, the heavy door opened, and two men stepped out nervously. One of them motioned toward the open doorway, offering to allow Joseph to pass inside freely.

Rabbi Loew smiled. Hanukkah was a time to celebrate the fact that the ancient Jews had not assimilated into Greek culture. Even now, if worthy Jews resisted present-day "Greeks," they would continue to be preserved and blessed. The rabbi briefly wondered if the love he and Joseph shared was "Greek," but he shook his head. True love between souls was the most Jewish thing of all.

Yet Joseph didn't have a soul, so could their love be Jewish? Could their love be true? Now that Pearl was gone, Rabbi Loew would have to pursue these questions more fervently.

As soon as Joseph passed Rabbi Loew and entered the building, one of the goyim suddenly reached back and pulled the door shut and locked it with a key. Then both men quickly ran off.

How childish, thought Rabbi Loew. He sent Abraham the baker after the men so that the police would be able to apprehend them after all. Then he called out to Joseph. "Find the oil so that we may depart as soon as aid arrives."

A moment later, however, someone in the gathering crowd shouted. "Look! There is smoke!"

Rabbi Loew turned to look. Out of the one tiny window in the building, smoke was starting to drift out. With a sudden, horrible realization, the rabbi understood what the treacherous men had done. "Yudl! Go fetch an axe! Quickly!"

Rabbi Loew pushed against the door without effect. He called the other Jews with him to help push on the heavy wood, but the door would not move.

"Good people!" shouted the rabbi to the crowd of Gentiles looking on. "Bring a heavy piece of furniture with which we can ram the door! Quickly! There is a man inside!"

No one in the crowd moved, and Rabbi Loew noticed with horror that smoke was now billowing forcefully out of the single small window. Joseph began pounding on the door from the inside.

Rabbi Loew's heart was beating faster and harder. "Joseph! You are strong! You can break open the door!"

Rabbi Loew thought how reckless it was to start a fire anywhere in the city, one that might spread quickly to other structures. It seemed that Gentiles would even risk hurting themselves just for the opportunity to hurt the Jews. But his only real concern now was for the golem.

There was a gasp from the crowd, and Rabbi Loew looked up to the window. Tiny flames were now reaching outward. The pounding from the inside of the building became louder.

"Joseph!"

The flames issuing from the window were now large and deafening. There was a tremendous roar coming from inside.

"Joseph!" The rabbi pulled against the door with all his might. "God in heaven! Please grant me strength! Joseph!"

There was a sickening squeal from inside, followed by a strangled cry, barely audible over the crash of the flames. "Judah!"

The rabbi stopped. Had Joseph spoken? He began pulling at the door frantically, clawing, punching, kicking, scratching. He lost the nails on two of his fingers, blood dripping onto the door.

"Joseph!"

There was no longer any pounding on the other side of the door. Finally, though, townspeople began arriving with buckets of water. Three buildings burned to the ground before the flames were extinguished, but the city itself was spared. Rabbi Loew sat morosely in the street, watching the activity, feeling a great emptiness and wondering why God had not allowed the entire city to be reduced to ashes.

By late afternoon, the crowd had dispersed, but Rabbi Loew continued to sit in the street. He was motionless, staring at the blackened wood. Isaac stood near the rabbi, afraid to approach him.

After a very long while, Isaac touched his sleeve. Disconsolate, the rabbi turned his head upward to look at Isaac.

He let out an agonized scream and tore his shirt on the right and also on the left. He pulled a handful of hairs out of his beard. He pulled a handful of hairs out of his head. He beat his chest with one fist, over and over.

"Come, father, we must return to the ghetto before sunset." He reached down and took Rabbi Loew by the arm. The rabbi rose slowly and trudged haltingly back to his home.

The one mirror would have to be covered again, but when Rabbi Loew saw it, he reached out and struck it with his fist, shattering it. Isaac tried to bind his bleeding knuckles.

There was talk all over the ghetto that evening about how the golem had been destroyed, and the people wondered if it was a punishment, if they had been too wicked and unfaithful. They prayed devoutly for forgiveness for whatever sins they might have committed. And though there was a severe shortage of oil, every single hanukiah burned continually for the next eight days.

"It is the golem who has done this for us," the people said. "It is a sign that God still loves us."

Rabbi Loew was the only Jew in the ghetto who did not light his menorah, but Isaac lit it for him.

As the days and months passed, the people quickly adjusted to life without the golem. They took it as a sign that they were no longer in danger. The Gentiles had been appeased and would no longer torment them. Life was good.

Rabbi Loew spent many hours alone in his study. He would pick up a book to read, put it down, and take up an article of Joseph's clothing. He would lift it to his lips and kiss it, raise it to his nose and inhale deeply.

He could not forget the anguished cry he'd heard at the end. Joseph had spoken. Did it mean he had finally been allowed to become human? Had Joseph died a real man and not a soulless creature? And was that a good thing? Had he become alive only to die a moment later in the most terrifying and brutal of ways?

Rabbi Loew woke up many nights with visions of flames before his eyes. He felt the flames in his heart. He felt the flames in his soul.

Had his love for Joseph been a sin, after all? Was killing him God's way of keeping the rabbi from following the ways of the goyim? The golem had been sent to save the Jews of Prague. Had he now been taken to save Rabbi Loew's soul?

Rabbi Loew knew he'd face an eternity in the flames which had taken Joseph, if only he could have the golem with him a little longer. He tried to bargain with God, day after day after day, pleading for damnation, if only it would bring the man back.

Eventually, however, Rabbi Loew resumed his duties as chief rabbi. He taught his students, he led the prayers, he offered rulings on disputes, and he performed weddings and wrote learned tracts.

Whenever he saw a chuppah, though, he had to battle mightily to smile and be happy for the young couples.

Rabbi Loew fell asleep on his knees in his study, night after night, but there was never another dream telling him to go to the river. He went anyway many times, but the banks were always deserted.

Miriam took over the cooking, and her children were now almost grown and becoming fine young men and women. Isaac was becoming a great leader in his own right.

Rabbi Loew smiled at Sabbath meals and on holidays, and he continued to study the Talmud and go to the mikvah. He persisted in doing these things for many, many years, and all the Jews of Prague loved and respected him more every day. The people talked continually of what a great scholar the rabbi was, how wonderful it must feel to be such a righteous man.

Rabbi Loew smiled when he heard these things and bowed his head politely.

Then he would return to his study and sit by himself for hours in the empty room, for the next seven years that passed, the next fourteen, for the rest of his life, a lonely, lonely man.

The golem of Prague is really Rabbi Loew's secret lover. A scientist develops the "God spot" in patients' brains in order to create a messiah. A Talmudic scholar dates an escort. A Lubavitcher whose wife and children are taken away by God recreates his life as Job did. A former Mormon struggles to become a good Jew. A doctor combines canine genes with those of Jews to improve their chances of surviving a hostile world.

The Golem of Rabbi Loew