

Free Fruit for Young Widows

By Nathan Englander

When the Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser took control of the Suez Canal, threatening Western access to that vital route, an agitated France shifted allegiances, joining forces with Britain and Israel against Egypt. This is a fact neither here nor there, except that during the 1956 Sinai Campaign there were soldiers in the Israeli Army and soldiers in the Egyptian Army who ended up wearing identical French-supplied uniforms to battle.

Not long into the fighting, an Israeli platoon came to rest at a captured Egyptian camp to the east of Bir Gafgafa, in the Sinai Desert. There Private Shimmy Gezer (formerly Shimon Bibberblat, of Warsaw, Poland) sat down to eat at a makeshift outdoor mess. Four armed commandos sat down with him. He grunted. They grunted. Shimmy dug into his lunch.

A squad-mate of Shimmy's came over to join them. Professor Tendler (who was then only Private Tendler, not yet a professor, and not yet even in possession of a high-school degree) placed the tin cup that he was carrying on the edge of the table, taking care not to spill his tea. Then he took up his gun and shot each of the commandos in the head.

They fell quite neatly. The first two, who had been facing Professor Tendler, tipped back off the bench into the sand. The second pair, who had their backs to the Professor and were still staring open-mouthed at their dead friends, fell face down, the sound of their skulls hitting the table somehow more violent than the report of the gun.

Shocked by the murder of four fellow-soldiers, Shimmy Gezer tackled his friend. To Professor Tendler, who was much bigger than Shimmy, the attack was more startling than threatening. Tendler grabbed hold of Shimmy's hands while screaming, "Egyptians! Egyptians!" in Hebrew. He was using the same word about the same people in the same desert that had been used thousands of years before. The main difference, if the old stories are to be believed, was that God no longer raised His own fist in the fight.

Professor Tendler quickly managed to contain Shimmy in a bear hug. “Egyptian commandos—confused,” Tendler said, switching to Yiddish. “The enemy. The enemy joined you for lunch.”

Shimmy listened. Shimmy calmed down.

Professor Tendler, thinking the matter was settled, let Shimmy go. As soon as he did, Shimmy swung wildly. He continued attacking, because who cared who those four men were? They were people. They were human beings who had sat down at the wrong table for lunch. They were dead people who had not had to die.

“You could have taken them prisoner,” Shimmy yelled. “Halt!” he screamed in German. “That’s all—halt!” Then, with tears streaming and fists flying, Shimmy said, “You didn’t have to shoot.”

By then Professor Tendler had had enough. He proceeded to beat Shimmy Gezer. He didn’t just defend himself. He didn’t subdue his friend. He flipped Shimmy over, straddled his body, and pounded it down until it was level with the sand. He beat his friend until his friend couldn’t take any more beating, and then he beat him some more. Finally, he climbed off his friend, looked up into the hot sun, and pushed through the crowd of soldiers who had assembled in the minutes since the Egyptians sat down to their fate. Tendler went off to have a smoke.

For those who had come running at the sound of gunfire to find five bodies in the sand, it was the consensus that a pummelled Shimmy Gezer looked to be in the worst condition of the bunch.

At the fruit-and-vegetable stand that Shimmy Gezer eventually opened in Jerusalem’s Mahane Yehuda market, his son, little Etgar, asked about the story of Professor Tendler again and again. From the time he was six, Etgar had worked the *duchan* at his father’s side whenever he wasn’t in school. At that age, knowing only a child’s version of the story—that Tendler had done something in one of the wars that upset Etgar’s father, and Etgar’s father had jumped on the man, and the man had (his father

never hesitated to admit) beat him up very badly—Etgar couldn't understand why his father was so nice to the Professor now. Reared, as he was, on the laws of the small family business, Etgar couldn't grasp why he was forbidden to accept a single lira from Tendler. The Professor got his vegetables free.

After Etgar weighed the tomatoes and the cucumbers, his father would take up the bag, stick in a nice fat eggplant, unasked, and pass it over to Professor Tendler.

"Kach," his father would say. "Take it. And wish your wife well."

As Etgar turned nine and ten and eleven, the story began to fill out. He was told about the commandos and the uniforms, about shipping routes and the Suez, and the Americans and the British and the French. He learned about the shots to the head. He learned about all the wars his father had fought in—'73, '67, '56, '48—though Shimmy Gezer still stopped short of the one he'd first been swept up in, the war that ran from 1939 to 1945.

Etgar's father explained the hazy morality of combat, the split-second decisions, the assessment of threat and response, the nature of percentages and absolutes. Shimmy did his best to make clear to his son that Israelis—in their nation of unfinished borders and unwritten constitution—were trapped in a gray space that was called real life.

In this gray space, he explained, even absolutes could maintain more than one position, reflect more than one truth. "You, too," he said to his son, "may someday face a decision such as Professor Tendler's—may you never know from it." He pointed at the bloody stall across from theirs, pointed at a fish below the mallet, flopping on the block. "God forbid you should have to live with the consequences of decisions, permanent, eternal, that will chase you in your head, turning from this side to that, tossing between wrong and right."

But Etgar still couldn't comprehend how his father saw the story to be that of a fish flip-flopping, when it was, in his eyes, only ever about that mallet coming down.

Etgar wasn't one for the gray. He was a tiny, thoughtful, bucktoothed boy of certainties. And, every Friday when Tendler came by the stand, Etgar would pack up the man's produce and then run through the story again, searching for black-and-white.

This man had saved his father's life, but maybe he hadn't. He'd done what was necessary, but maybe he could have done it another way. And even if the basic schoolyard rule applied in adult life—that a beating delivered earns a beating in return—did it ever justify one as fierce as the beating his father had described? A pummelling so severe that Shimmy, while telling the story, would run Etgar's fingers along his left cheek, to show him where Professor Tendler had flattened the bone.

Even if the violence had been justified, even if his father didn't always say, "You must risk your friend's life, your family's, your own, you must be willing to die—even to save the life of your enemy—if ever, of two deeds, the humane one may be done," it was not his father's act of forgiveness but his kindness that baffled Etgar.

Shimmy would send him running across Agrippas Street to bring back two cups of coffee or two glasses of tea to welcome Professor Tendler, telling Etgar to snatch a good-sized handful of pistachios from Eizenberg's cart along the way. This treatment his father reserved only for his oldest friends.

And absolutely no one but the war widows got their produce free. Quietly and with dignity, so as to cause these women no shame, Etgar's father would send them off with fresh fruit and big bags of vegetables, sometimes for years after their losses. He always took care of the young widows. When they protested, he'd say, "You sacrifice, I sacrifice. All in all, what's a bag of apples?"

"It's all for one country," he'd say.

When it came to Professor Tendler, so clear an answer never came.

When Etgar was twelve, his father acknowledged the complexities of Tendler's tale.

"Do you want to know why I can care for a man who once beat me? Because to a story there is context. There is always context in life."

"That's it?" Etgar asked.

"That's it."

At thirteen, he was told a different story. Because at thirteen Etgar was a man.

"You know I was in the war," Shimmy said to his son. The way he said it Etgar knew that he didn't mean '48 or '56, '67 or '73. He did not mean the Jewish wars, in all of which he had fought. He meant the big one. The war that no one in his family but Shimmy had survived, which was also the case for Etgar's mother. This was why they had taken a new name, Shimmy explained. In the whole world, the Gezers were three.

"Yes," Etgar said. "I know."

"Professor Tendler was also in that war," Shimmy said.

"Yes," Etgar said.

"It was hard on him," Shimmy said. "And that is why, why I am always nice."

Etgar thought. Etgar spoke.

"But you were there, too. You've had the same life as him. And you'd never have shot four men, even the enemy, if you could have taken them prisoner, if you could have spared a life. Even if you were in danger, you'd risk—" Etgar's father smiled, and stopped him.

“*Kodem kol*,” he said, “a similar life is not a same life. There is a difference.” Here Shimmy’s face turned serious, the lightness gone. “In that first war, in that big war, I was the lucky one,” he said. “In the Shoah, I survived.”

“But he’s here,” Etgar said. “He survived, just the same as you.”

“No,” Etgar’s father said. “He made it through the camps. He walks, he breathes, and he was very close to making it out of Europe alive. But they killed him. After the war, we still lost people. They killed what was left of him in the end.”

For the first time, without Professor Tendler there, without one of Shimmy’s friends from the ghetto who stopped by to talk in Yiddish, without one of the soldier buddies from his unit in the reserves, or one of the kibbutzniks from whom he bought his fruits and his vegetables, Etgar’s father sent Etgar across Agrippas Street to get two glasses of tea. One for Etgar and one for him.

“Hurry,” Shimmy said, sending Etgar off with a slap on his behind. Before Etgar had taken a step, his father grabbed his collar and popped open the register, handing him a brand-new ten-shekel bill. “And buy us a nice big bag of seeds from Eizenberg. Tell him to keep the change. You and I, we are going to sit awhile.”

Shimmy took out the second folding chair from behind the register. It would also be the first time that father and son had ever sat down in the store together. Another rule of good business: a customer should always find you standing. Always there’s something you can be doing—sweeping, stacking, polishing apples. The customers will come to a place where there is pride.

This is why Professor Tendler got his tomatoes free, why the sight of the man who beat Shimmy made his gaze go soft with kindness in the way that it did when one of the *miskenot* came by—why it took on what Etgar called his father’s Free-Fruit-for-Young-Widows eyes. This is the story that Shimmy told Etgar when he felt that his boy was a man:

The first thing Professor Tandler saw when his death camp was liberated was two big, tough American soldiers fainting dead away. The pair (presumably war-hardened) stood before the immense, heretofore unimaginable brutality of modern extermination, frozen, slack-jawed before a mountain of putrid, naked corpses, a hill of men.

And from this pile of broken bodies that had been—prior to the American invasion—set to be burned, a rickety skeletal Tandler stared back. Professor Tandler stared and studied, and when he was sure that those soldiers were not Nazi soldiers he crawled out from his hiding place among the corpses, pushing and shoving those balsa-wood arms and legs aside.

It was this hill of bodies that had protected Tandler day after day. The poor Sonderkommando who dumped the bodies, as well as those who came to cart them to the ovens, knew that the boy was inside. They brought him the crumbs of their crumbs to keep him going. And though it was certain death for these prisoners to protect him, it allowed them a sliver of humanity in their inhuman jobs. This was what Shimmy was trying to explain to his son—that these palest shadows of kindness were enough to keep a dead man alive.

When Tandler finally got to his feet, straightening his body out, when the corpse that was Professor Tandler at age thirteen—“your age”—came crawling from that nightmare, he looked at the two Yankee soldiers, who looked at him and then hit the ground with a thud.

Professor Tandler had already seen so much in life that this was not worth even a pause, and so he walked on. He walked on naked through the gates of the camp, walked on until he got some food and some clothes, walked on until he had shoes and then a coat. He walked on until he had a little bread and a potato in his pocket—a surplus.

Soon there was also in that pocket a cigarette and then a second; a coin and then a second. Surviving in this way, Tandler walked across borders until he was able to stand straight and tall, until he showed up in his childhood town in a matching suit of clothes, with a few bills in his pocket

and, in his waistband, a six-shooter with five bullets chambered, in order to protect himself during the nights that he slept by the side of the road.

Professor Tendler was expecting no surprises, no reunions. He'd seen his mother killed in front of him, his father, his three sisters, his grandparents, and, after some months in the camp, the two boys that he knew from back home.

But home—that was the thing he held on to. Maybe his house was still there, and his bed. Maybe the cow was still giving milk, and the goats still chewing garbage, and his dog still barking at the chickens as before. And maybe his other family—the nurse at whose breast he had become strong (before weakened), her husband who had farmed his father's field, and their son (his age), and another (two years younger), boys with whom he had played like a brother—maybe this family was still there waiting. Waiting for him to come home.

Tendler could make a new family in that house. He could call every child he might one day have by his dead loved ones' names.

The town looked as it had when he'd left. The streets were his streets, the linden trees in the square taller but laid out as before. And, when Tendler turned down the dirt road that led to his gate, he fought to keep himself from running, and he fought to keep himself from crying, because, after what he had seen, he knew that to survive in this world he must always act like a man.

So Tendler buttoned his coat and walked quietly toward the fence, wishing that he had a hat to take off as he passed through the gate—just the way the man of the house would when coming home to what was his.

But when he saw her in the yard—when he saw Fanushka his nurse, their maid—the tears came anyway. Tendler popped a precious button from his coat as he ran to her and threw himself into her arms, and he cried for the first time since the trains.

With her husband at her side, Fanushka said to him, “Welcome home, son,” and “Welcome home, child,” and “We prayed,” “We lit candles,” “We dreamed of your return.”

When they asked, “Are your parents also coming? Are your sisters and your grandparents far behind?,” when they asked after all the old neighbors, house by house, Tandler answered, not by metaphor, and not by insinuation. When he knew the fate, he stated it as it was: beaten or starved, shot, cut in half, the front of the head caved in. All this he related without feeling—matters, each, of fact. All this he shared before venturing a step through his front door.

Looking through that open door, Tandler decided that he would live with these people as family until he had a family of his own. He would grow old in this house. Free to be free, he would gate himself up again. But it would be his gate, his lock, his world.

A hand on his hand pulled him from his reverie. It was Fanushka talking, a sad smile on her face. “Time to fatten you up,” she said. “A feast for first dinner.” And she grabbed the chicken at her feet and twisted its neck right there in the yard. “Come in,” she said, while the animal twitched. “The master of the house has returned.”

“Just as you left it,” she said. “Only a few of our things.”

Tandler stepped inside.

It was exactly as he remembered it: the table, the chairs, except that all that was personal was gone.

Fanushka’s two sons came in, and Tandler understood what time had done. These boys, fed and housed, warmed and loved, were fully twice his size. He felt, then, something he had never known in the camps, a civilized emotion that would have served no use. Tandler felt ashamed. He turned red, clenched his jaw tight, and felt his gums bleeding into his mouth.

“You have to understand,” Etgar’s father said to his son. “These boys, his brothers, they were now twice his size and strangers to him.”

The boys, prodded, shook hands with Tendler. They did not know him anymore.

“Still, it is a nice story,” Etgar said. “Sad. But also happy. He makes it home to a home. It’s what you always say. Survival, that’s what matters. Surviving to start again.”

Etgar’s father held up a sunflower seed, thinking about this. He cracked it between his front teeth.

“So they are all making a dinner for Professor Tendler,” he said. “And he is sitting on the kitchen floor, legs crossed, as he did when he was a boy, and he is watching. Watching happily, drinking a glass of goat’s milk, still warm. And then the father goes out to slaughter that goat. ‘A feast for dinner,’ he says. ‘A chicken’s not enough.’ Professor Tendler, who has not had meat in years, looks at him, and the father, running a nail along his knife, says, ‘I remember the kosher way.’ ”

Tendler was so happy that he could not bear it. So happy and so sad. And, with the cup of warm milk and the warm feeling, Tendler had to pee. But he didn’t want to move now that he was there with his other mother and, resting on her shoulder, a baby sister. A year and a half old and one curl on the head. A little girl, fat and happy. Fat in the ankle, fat in the wrist.

Professor Tendler rushed out at the last second, out of the warm kitchen, out from under his roof. Professor Tendler, a man whom other men had tried to turn into an animal, did not race to the outhouse. It didn’t cross his mind. He stood right under the kitchen window to smell the kitchen smells, to stay close. And he took a piss. Over the sound of the stream, he heard his nurse lamenting.

He knew what she must be lamenting—the Tendler family destroyed.

He listened to what she was saying. And he heard.

“He will take everything” is what she said. “He will take it all from us—our house, our field. He’ll snatch away all we’ve built and protected, everything that has been—for so long—ours.”

There outside the window, peeing and listening, and also “disassociating,” as Professor Tendler would call it (though he did not then have the word), he knew only that he was watching himself from above, that he could see himself feeling all the disappointment as he felt it, until he was keenly and wildly aware that he had felt nothing all those years, felt nothing when his father and mother were shot, felt nothing while in the camps, nothing, in fact, from the moment he was driven from his home to the moment he returned.

In that instant, Tendler’s guilt was sharper than any sensation he had ever known.

And here, in response to his precocious son, Shimmy said, “Yes, yes, of course it was about survival—Tendler’s way of coping. Of course he’d been feeling all along.” But Tendler—a boy who had stepped over his mother’s body and kept walking—had, for those peasants, opened up.

It was right then, Professor Tendler later told Shimmy, that he became a philosopher.

“He will steal it all away,” Fanushka said. “Everything. He has come for our lives.”

And her son, whom Tendler had considered a brother, said, “No.” And Tendler’s other almost-brother said, “No.”

“We will eat,” Fanushka said. “We will celebrate. And when he sleeps we will kill him.” To one of the sons she said, “Go. Tell your father to keep that knife sharp.” To the other she said, “You get to sleep early, and you get up early, and before you grab the first tit on that cow I want his throat slit. Ours. Ours, not to be taken away.”

Tendler ran. Not toward the street but back toward the outhouse in time to turn around as the kitchen door flew open, in time to smile at the younger brother on his way to find his father, in time for Tendler to be heading back the right way.

“Do you want to hear what was shared at such a dinner?” Shimmy asked his son. “The memories roused and oaths sworn? There was wine, I know. ‘Drink, drink,’ the mother said. There was the chicken and a pot of goat stew. And, in a time of great deprivation, there was also sugar for the tea.” At this, Shimmy pointed at the bounty of their stand. “And, as if nothing, next to the baby’s basket on the kitchen floor sat a basket of apples. Tendler hadn’t had an apple in who knows how long.”

Tendler brought the basket to the table. The family laughed as he peeled the apples with a knife, first eating the peels, then the flesh, and savoring even the seeds and the cores. It was a celebration, a joyous night. So much so that Professor Tendler could not by its end, belly distended, eyes crossed with drink, believe what he knew to have been said.

There were hugs and there were kisses, and Tendler—the master of the house—was given his parents’ bedroom upstairs, the two boys across the hall, and below, in the kitchen (“It will be warmest”), slept the mother and the father and the fat-ankled girl.

“Sleep well,” Fanushka said. “Welcome home, my son.” And, sweetly, she kissed Tendler on both eyes.

Tendler climbed the stairs. He took off his suit and went to bed. And that was where he was when Fanushka popped through the door and asked him if he was warm enough, if he needed a lamp by which to read.

“No, thank you,” he said.

“So formal? No thanks necessary,” Fanushka said. “Only ‘Yes, Mother,’ or ‘No, Mother,’ my poor reclaimed orphan son.”

“No light, Mother,” Tendler said, and Fanushka closed the door.

Tendler got out of bed. He put on his suit. Once again without any shame to his actions, Tendler searched the room for anything of value, robbing his own home.

Then he waited. He waited until the house had settled into itself, the last creak slipping from the floorboards as the walls pushed back against the wind. He waited until his mother, his Fanushka, must surely sleep, until a brother intent on staying up for the night—a brother who had never once fought for his life—convinced himself that it would be all right to close his eyes.

Tendler waited until he, too, had to sleep, and that's when he tied the laces of his shoes together and hung them over his shoulder. That's when he took his pillow with one hand and, with the other, quietly cocked his gun.

Then, with goose feathers flying, Tendler moved through the house. A bullet for each brother, one for the father and one for the mother. Tendler fired until he found himself standing in the warmth of the kitchen, one bullet left to protect him on the nights when he would sleep by the side of the road.

That last bullet Tendler left in the fat baby girl, because he did not know from mercy, and did not need to leave another of that family to grow to kill him at some future time.

"He murdered them," Etgar said. "A murderer."

"No," his father told him. "There was no such notion at the time."

"Even so, it is murder," Etgar said.

"If it is, then it's only fair. They killed him first. It was his right."

"But you always say—"

"Context."

“But the baby. The girl.”

“The baby is hardest, I admit. But these are questions for the philosopher. These are the theoretical instances put into flesh and blood.”

“But it’s not a question. These people, they are not the ones who murdered his family.”

“They were coming for him that night.”

“He could have escaped. He could have run for the gate when he overheard. He didn’t need to race back toward the outhouse, race to face the brother as he came the other way.”

“Maybe there was no more running in him. Anyway, do you understand ‘an eye for an eye’? Can you imagine a broader meaning of ‘self-defense’?”

“You always forgive him,” Etgar said. “You suffered the same things—but you aren’t that way. You would not have done what he did.”

“It is hard to know what a person would and wouldn’t do in any specific instance. And you, spoiled child, apply the rules of civilization to a boy who had seen only its opposite. Maybe the fault for those deaths lies in a system designed for the killing of Tendlers that failed to do its job. An error, a slip that allowed a Tandler, no longer fit, back loose in the world.”

“Is that what you think?”

“It’s what I ask. And I ask you, my Etgar, what you would have done if you were Tandler that night?”

“Not kill.”

“Then you die.”

“Only the grownups.”

“But it was a boy who was sent to cut Tandler’s throat.”

“How about killing only those who would do harm?”

“Still it’s murder. Still it is killing people who have yet to act, murdering them in their sleep.”

“I guess,” Etgar said. “I can see how they deserved it, the four. How I might, if I were him, have killed them.”

Shimmy shook his head, looking sad.

“And whoever are we, my son, to decide who should die?”

It was on that day that Etgar Gezer became a philosopher himself. Not in the manner of Professor Tendler, who taught theories up at the university on the mountain, but, like his father, practical and concrete. Etgar would not finish high school or go to college, and, except for his three years in the Army, he would spend his life—happily—working the stand in the *shuk*. He’d stack the fruit into pyramids and contemplate weighty questions with a seriousness of thought. And when there were answers Etgar would try employing them to make for himself and others, in whatever small way, a better life.

It was on that day, too, that Etgar decided Professor Tendler was both a murderer and, at the same time, a *misken*. He believed he understood how and why Professor Tendler had come to kill that peasant family, and how men sent to battle in uniform—even in the same uniform—would find no mercy at his hand. Etgar also came to see how Tendler’s story could just as easily have ended for the Professor that first night, back in his parents’ room, in his parents’ bed, a gun with four bullets held in a suicide’s hand—how the first bullet Tendler ever fired might have been into his own head.

Still, every Friday Etgar packed up Tendler’s fruit and vegetables. And in that bag Etgar would add, when he had them, a pineapple or a few fat mangos dripping honey. Handing it to Tendler, Etgar would say, “*Kach*, Professor. Take it.” This, even after his father had died. ♦

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The Wig

Colors and styles, she takes note of. Hemlines, accessories, heel width and height. Also, that the girls get taller every month, bonier and more sickly looking. Ruchama had quite a figure herself as a girl, kept it until the first three children were born. But never, from the age of twelve, was she without a chest and a bottom. She really can't imagine how these fence posts manage to sit down.

It's hair that Ruchama is studying. She goes through the new *Bazaar* page by page. The magazines are contraband in Royal Hills, narishkeit, vain and immodest, practically pornographic. But she needs to keep up. Her customers will bring her pictures like these, folded up small and stuck into wallets, bra cups, pulled from under the wigs they wear. And they expect Ruchama to be familiar. They are relieved when she takes a wrinkled photo, nods with confidence, and says, "Yes, again they are highlighting bangs."

Ruchama has come into the city for the silk caps onto which she and Tzippy—best friend and right hand—knot the hair. The newsstand is at Twenty-third and Sixth, convenient to her supplier and far enough from Royal Hills, oddly enough located, that she will not see anyone she knows. She flips through the magazines between Jamal's stand and the trash basket on the corner. She pays for her browsing rights, forces Jamal to accept the crumpled bill she drops on the counter when new issues arrive. She thinks this appropriate. For she would take them home if she could and knows that, if a famil-

iar face appears in the crowd, she'll drop the magazines in the basket and fall in with the flow of foot traffic, crossing whichever way the walk sign allows.

She does not spot anyone. She finishes flipping through the magazines. She places them, one by one, back in their slots on the rack. Good as new.

Tzippy carries a box of braids down the inside stairs to the workshop.

"New hair," she says, and drops the UPS package on the separating table.

Ruchama spits three times to ward off the evil eye. Whenever a box of braids arrives from Eastern Europe there is always a shadow, a gloomy revenant. Tzippy drinks her tea. Ruchama pinches the flat of a double-edged razor blade between her fingers and with three quick passes sets the tape on the box whistling and folds open the cardboard flaps.

Taking out a braid, Ruchama pulls her thumb across a blunt end, letting the tips fan back with natural spring. Like a paintbrush. Good and thick. She holds it up to the light, checking color. She and Tzippy never refer to colors by their useless names. They have learned from disappointments, stood united before a red, red wig they had spent two months creating while a client screamed at them, literally screamed, "Does that look red to you?" They had squinted, moved closer, adjusted lamps. What else was it but red? They have learned. There are over one million shades of auburn, two million meanings for "chestnut brown." They now work in similes: "Darker or lighter than pumpernickel bread?" "Newsprint black? Or black like black beetles in black ink?"

Judging the braid she holds, Ruchama places it in one corner of the vast separating table. From there they will build outward, creating a map of color and length and curl.

Tzippy puts down her tea and reaches into the box. "Wet wood spoons," she says, displaying her choice. That is exactly the color. Ruchama is always amazed by her accuracy.

Tzippy begins unraveling the braid, brushing through the hair with her fingers and burying her face in it. She is smelling for a past, sniffing out the woman's shampoo and sweat, the staleness of cigarettes or the smoke that drifts down from some factory nearby. She breathes deep. She is onto a scent, a wind from a village, a mist of perfume.

"They are paid top dollar," Ruchama tells her.

"Women with choices leave their hair to be swept off salon floors," Tzippy says.

"Maybe these women are more prudent."

"With such hair?" Tzippy waves the braid's open end at Ruchama. "These are women who have to sell some part of themselves and this is where they begin. This one," she says, sniffing again, "is on break at a bottling plant thinking of her lover. She sold her hair to pay his gambling debts and she wonders now where her hair is and where that bum has gone."

"My own life is depressing enough, Tzippy. Why must you make it like we're scalping orphans?"

"A teenage girl," Tzippy says, "a girl with everything she needs. Only, there is a used scooter her parents won't buy her and a boyfriend she lusts after who lives all the way on the other side of the lake."

"You've been reading novels again, Tzippy. Don't tell me there isn't a romance hidden under your bed."

The front room gets natural light from the windows that open onto the cellar well. The room is carpeted and painted and, in front of the long windows, there is a pair of comfortable chairs. There are stools and a counter, and on the counter mirrors—one standing on a silverplate base and an assortment of hand

mirrors that Ruchama has no real attachment to, though it is intended to appear to customers that she does.

Ruchama finds it difficult to live up to the expectations of the room. She is more comfortable in the back with Tzippy on the cement, hair-strewn floor of the work space.

Nava Klein is sitting on an overstuffed chair in front of the window. Tzippy sits on a stool, her feet resting on the crossbar. Ruchama stands; she looks better standing, her dress hanging loose off her chest, concealing. She has not sat down in front of Nava Klein in at least half-a-dozen years.

The whole back wall is covered with framed photographs of wigs on Styrofoam heads. Nava is pointing to one. "Third in," she says. "That's got to be Aviva Sussman." Ruchama's work is so distinct, you can pick out half the neighborhood.

"You can't tell me that's not Aviva's hair."

"Please," Tzippy says.

Nava grimaces, turns her attention to Ruchama.

"I saw your oldest," she says. "A real beauty and such a rail. She reminds me of you when you were that age. You were striking, striking as a girl." Nava sighs, signals with her head to Tzippy, as if she were not part of the adult conversation. "Only Tzippy stays the same, her hipbones pushing at the front of her skirt. The rest of us ragged old women have to hide behind our daughters' good looks."

Nava shakes her head. "How do you do it, Tzippy? Where in Brooklyn is your fountain of youth?"

Tzippy blushes. Ruchama wants to scream. Every compliment the woman gives releases a dandelion's worth of barbed spores. Tzippy looks great because she is barren. Her figure has been spared because her womb has walls of stone. And Ruchama, she is a proud mother. Of course she is, with six wonderful children and a chin to show for each one.

"I've an appointment a week from Thursday with Kendo of Kendo Keller's," Nava says. "He is going to advise me. And

then, of course, he'll style the wig. It's not you, Tzippy. You're a natural. A brilliant stylist. The best of the sheitel machers. But this isn't exactly Madison Avenue. It's only that I want a more contemporary look this year. So vain."

In the mirror that night, Ruchama takes her face off, rubbing hard, removing makeup, working at the base that catches like grit in the folds of her skin.

She used to be the prettiest, prettier than Tzippy and Nava. They all three used to play together in Tzippy's room. They tried on clothes and dreamed of marriages—to brilliant scholars flown in from Jerusalem, handsome princes who would sit in the back of deep studies while Jews the world over came to their doors begging wisdom, advice, a blessing in exchange for a kiss on the hand.

They do come from around the world. But not for Shlomi, not for her husband. They circle the globe to see Ruchama, because they are trapped in their modesty and want to feel, even as illusion, the simple pleasure of wind in their hair.

Menucha, the littlest, is splashing in the tub next to Ruchama. Ruchama begs quiet when Menucha squeals. She quizzes the child on body parts while taking off her makeup, testing to see where the girl has and has not scrubbed. "Ears?" she says. "Elbows? Belly button. Toes."

Shlomi is home from the study hall making noise in the kitchen. Cabinets slam. A pot hits a countertop, a pan strikes a burner. The new rules of her home. Six children, and for the first time all are out of the house during the day. Menucha in first grade and Shira, the oldest, in tenth. For once Ruchama can work uninterrupted, and her taste for independence has spread. She has instituted small chores for Shlomi. She asks now that he heat his own dinner and wash his own dishes, as well as the stray glasses and spoons that accumulate

between the children's dinner and bed. Over this he makes a production.

To take off her makeup slowly, to look in the mirror and be sad, that's all she wants. Shlomi calls out questions, makes comments to reiterate his helplessness. "Where is the dairy sponge?" "This soap is no good!" Ruchama doesn't respond, does not care where the soap falls short in his eyes. He trays up her kitchen to spite her. He is forever putting meat silverware in the dairy sink.

He calls up: "Are there any dry dish towels?"

She screams so that Menucha stops splashing, her little arms frozen in the air. Ruchama screams with murder in her voice, her own hand checked in midmotion, a dollop of face cream on the pads of her fingers. "Reach down," she yells, "pull open the towel drawer, and look." She spreads the cream under her eyes. It is nice and cool. "When the drawer is open," she screams, "bend over and open your eyes."

She waits for him to ask where, in their house of sixteen years, is the dry-dish-towel drawer.

When Louise arrives there are kisses and hugs. She peels off her gloves, undoes a silk scarf with a pull. Tzippy and Ruchama have a crush on her. She is their only secular client, the only one to traipse down the stairs in plunging necklines and smart man-tailored slacks. She reminds Ruchama of the pretty ladies who stand in department stores spraying perfume.

Louise has a daughter their age, yet, Ruchama thinks, she looks younger than Nava. It is only the thick, tired veins on the backs of her hands and the carefully organized hairline that give her away. Louise takes Ruchama's arm and kisses her again.

"I've done it," Louise says. "You'll both be furious, but don't feel bad. I couldn't tell my husband—not about the wig and not about the money." Louise unzips her pocketbook.

"Our thirtieth anniversary. My present from Harold. A stunning necklace he picked out himself. Pawned. I sold it away."

"You didn't," Tzippy says. Her expression is embarrassingly happy. She is a fan of intrigue.

"I did," Louise says. "A purchase must be paid for."

"Credit," Ruchama says dryly. "I offered you credit."

"I know, dear. But it's not right. I went and pawned it and told Harold that the clasp broke and that I had put the floater on my to-do list but hadn't let the insurance man know. 'Off premises' doesn't cover it, and Harold would never fake a claim." She takes an envelope from her purse and extends her arm with impelling force. "Here," she says, passing off the envelope, thick with fifties, to Ruchama.

When she made her first appearance she had, in the same businesslike fashion, pulled a different envelope from her purse. "You must be Ruchama," she had said. "These are pictures of me when my hair was as it should be. I want my wig like that, but better." Ruchama had fallen in love with her right then. A woman who can present an envelope with such confidence can get anything done in this world. "My daughter says you are the best and the most expensive. That's what I want. No bargains. I want it to feel so horribly overpriced that I'll be convinced it's good." Then Louise struck a pose in those smart slacks—one knee locked, the other bent, one foot straight, the other pointing out—exactly as Ruchama would have liked to if she were permitted such a thing. "If my daughter hasn't told you, I'm being attacked by menopause and it's taking my hair, and both my doctors admit I am, in reality, going bald. Give me whatever you've got, I told them. If it kills me, that's fine. I'll take six gorgeous months over one hundred years of what's in store." She had then presented a locket. Pried it open. There was a curl pressed inside. "My baby hair. Russet. Virginal and fine. Match it. That is the color of my wig."

And now, months later, Ruchama locks the money in the

strongbox and locks the strongbox in her desk. She takes out the pictures and the locket and goes over to the cubbies. She takes down Louise's wig on its Styrofoam base. It is majestic. She brings it out and Louise presses her hands to her head.

"Oh, yes," she says. "That is me." She messes up her own hair, so carefully sprayed in place. "This is not me, that is. You've got it there. Now give it up."

They seat Louise on a stool and fit the wig on her head. She leans in to the standing mirror. Ruchama and Tzippy hover behind, hand mirrors poised. Louise does, truly, they all agree, look spectacular. She spreads the old photos out on the counter. She goes back and forth between the mirror and the pictures. She opens the locket. "Russet," she says. She puts it around her neck and turns to face the women.

"Goddesses," she says. "Miracle workers. I feel like I have my life back, my youth. I'm nineteen years old again," she says. "And I am beautiful."

The new issues are at least two weeks away, but there are things Ruchama wants to double-check, an idea or two that she has. She takes the magazines off the rack with a nod.

"Sold your copies," Jamal says. He is on the same side of the stand, stocking mints and chocolate bars where they are low. "Same issue, different copies."

"I'll pay again, if that's what you're getting at."

She reaches for her purse.

"Teasing," he says. "Help yourself. No camp for the kids this summer, is all."

They used to dream of being fashion models, Tzippy and Nava and Ruchama. They had plans. They would take only modest jobs, stroll down the runways with floor-length skirts and high-collared shirts, sleeves that buttoned at the wrists. They would be sensations. They walked the length of Tzippy's

room, spinning in front of her full-length mirror, spotting their heads to catch themselves in the turn.

She finds the advertisement, the one she was thinking of, a woman turning in a New York street, her hair in an arc, banana curls, full and light.

She presses the magazine down on the counter. She presses a finger to the page. Jamal looks.

"That's what my hair was like," she says, "when I was a girl."

"Hmmm," he says, "nice." He folds an empty carton. Stops to rub his hands together, blows into them against the cold. "Looks nice now," he says, "plenty nice."

Ruchama goes red. This is what familiarity breeds.

"A wig," she says to Jamal. "I'm wearing a wig."

"I'll tell you," he says, "looks for real. I wondered, too. You dress Jewish and I wondered. All the other Hasid ladies wear wigs and scarves and such. And I'd wondered what's with you."

"Human hair," she says. She is proud. "A good-quality wig and you should never be able to tell. They wear poor quality, the others. Acrylic fibers. Junk stuff. Wigs made from recycled cola bottles and used plastic bags."

The advertisement stays with Ruchama: this young woman spinning in a New York street. It's an ad for shampoo. The woman has caused a traffic jam by half raising her finger for a taxi. Everyone is watching her from the sidewalk. She is smiling and so is all of New York. Even the cabdrivers—white and handsome, all with a slight scruff—are smiling. They laugh as they lock fenders trying to give this woman with the long, lovely hair a ride.

Ruchama wants to feel sexy like that, to chuckle at the bedlam her beauty causes. How nice it would be to arrive at shul looking trim and with the long, beautiful hair of her youth, to see Nava's eyes widen and for the men to stand on tiptoes try-

ing to peek into the women's section and for the rabbi to stamp a foot and the gabbai to slap the bimah, for people to hiss for quiet as she takes her seat. She'd have her oldest save one right in front of Nava. All would whisper. Is that mother or sister? they would want to know.

Shlomi will be home late. It is his night to help clean at the yeshiva. There he can push a broom. She decides to put on her sexy skirt and wait up. It's formfitting but not wholly immodest; it falls, just barely, on the permissible side of the line. She puts it on but cannot close the button—does not get the zipper high enough along to try. She throws it into the back of her closet. She tiptoes to the bathroom, all the children asleep. She touches up her makeup and puts on a nightgown; she gets under the covers and pretends to sleep. She leaves the lamp on next to Shlomi's bed. Ruchama does not say her prayers.

Shlomi comes into the room and makes an attempt at quiet. At the first noise, the jiggling of keys being removed from a pocket, Ruchama sighs and throws down her blanket as if waking.

She tries hard to be enticing. Shlomi is not having it. When he gets into his bed she reaches over and strokes the inside of his arm. He takes her hand, squeezes it. "Good night," he says, and switches off the light.

That he's not interested is fine.

That she's not interested is what she is burning to tell him. She'd rather pull the man who delivers groceries upstairs, all muscular and sweaty in his hard-work way. She'd rather have sex with him and scream out loud instead of worrying with every breath that she'll wake the children along the hall.

She turns to her side. She puts a hand between her thighs and presses the one hand with the other, squeezing her thighs together and rocking herself. The half of her thoughts connected to Shlomi and anger and the skirt in her closet she forgets, focusing on the grocery-boy and the cabdriver models and fingers in her hair. She is alone with her thoughts, rocking.

Shlomi switches his light on. He shakes her shoulder, speeding up her rhythm, interrupting.

"Ruchie, you promised."

"I did no such thing."

"Either way, it must stop. It's an abomination."

"Where is it written? For a man, yes. For a woman—seedless as a supermarket grape—it's fine. Go ask your rebbe. He'll tell you. Tell him what your wife does and ask if it's allowed."

"Ask him? God forbid."

"You should have been Christian," she says. "An expert at avoiding earthly pleasures."

"God forbid. How you talk!" She turns to see that he has clasped his hands to his ears like a child. She clasps her hands deeper into her crotch. All of his passion trapped between those ears, she thinks, and rocks and rocks and rocks herself to sleep.

"You have zero choice in the matter. She's out there waiting. She's talking about four wigs by Pesach. We're talking about twenty thousand dollars."

"I can't do it, Tzippy." Ruchama is sitting at her desk, going over some accounting. "I can't face Nava now. I'm too weak for her compliments. She'll praise me into the grave today. I'm telling you."

"I told her you were on the phone to Israel."

"Tell her I went to the city. I'll go for real. I have errands."

"You were just in the city yesterday."

"So? It's so out of the ordinary? People don't go in every morning? The subway driver doesn't cross the river ten times in a day?"

Nava is in the deep chair by the window. She is wearing an Armani suit tailored to the knee. Too short, by far. She has new

boots on and a new bag rests on the floor. Ruchama keeps her eyes moving, doesn't lag over a single item to avoid giving Nava satisfaction.

"I was telling Tzippy—" Nava says, pauses. "Any news from Israel?"

"No," Ruchama says. "Raining in Jerusalem," she says.

Nava shifts, moves the new bag onto her lap. Ruchama looks out the window.

"I was telling Tzippy, Kendo is an absolute genius. Part hair designer, part philosopher. 'Tell me about the best hair,' he said. 'Talk.' And you know what I told him, Ruchama? I told him about your wedding day. I told him how you were the first to marry and how you had the most perfect hair, how it made you who you were, a girl and a woman, religious and wild. And then I told him how you cut it off for your wedding. I cried mixed tears at your bedekken. Here was the miracle of marriage and the sadness of your lost hair. You were so beautiful before. A perfect-looking thing."

"Thank you," Ruchama says. She moves to the chair next to Nava's and drops deep into the seat.

"So we follow this trail," Nava says, leaning forward. "We go off in search of the ideal me. And we find her. And she has long hair. That is where the true me lies. Of course, I can't just appear with long hair. It's immodest enough to start with. But to shock people on top of it is inconceivable. 'Not a problem,' he says. A genius. 'Four wigs,' he says. 'The same hair, the same color. Only different lengths. We will mock the natural process of growth. Wig by wig.' That's his plan. 'Slowly,' he says, 'naturally. Wig by wig, reclaiming freedom.'"

Nava leaves. Ruchama is still splayed in the chair. Melted.

"I'm sorry," Tzippy says. "Go to the city now. I'll finish the list for today."

"That's OK."

"You go," Tzippy says. "It'll do you good."

The streets fill up with evening traffic. Jamal exits the kiosk and puts on a surplus pea coat. Ruchama is at the corner flipping through the magazines.

"Night guy's here," Jamal says. He buttons his coat. "Have a good one."

"You too," Ruchama says.

"New issues come tomorrow. Next day at the latest."

"I'll make an effort," she says. Their conversation is split by the rattle and clatter of a dolly as it fails and then manages to make its way onto the curb. There is a potted tree on the dolly, and the tree seems to lunge at one and then the other of them, directed by a reckless driver and undirected by a clattery and wandering wheel. "Fucking tree," the driver says as he passes. Ruchama follows him, takes a step and then two. She is mesmerized.

He has, unconditionally, the most beautiful hair she's ever seen. Completely tamed, completely full. He has a mane of curls the color of toasted bamboo that runs down to the middle of his back and ends in a deep, blunt ridge. The curls are singular, full and moist, and they stack well. A head of hair with personality. She is obsessed, she knows. But the obsession is not what makes his hair beautiful; it is the obsession that makes her take notice of hair when she has nearly been bowled over by an amuck and wayward tree.

"That's the kind of hair," Ruchama says to Jamal, pointing.

"Damn nice," Jamal says. "Make a hell of a wig, I'd bet."

"It would make a half dozen," Ruchama says. She keeps an eye on the tree as it darts back and forth above the crowd. "I have a room where clients wait. Two big chairs in front of two tall windows. No views." She hands the magazines to Jamal. "A tree might look nice in between."

Ruchama follows him to a jungle on Twenty-eighth Street, where the tree disappears into a storefront thick with tropical foliage. There is a path down the middle. Ruchama steps in, and a pair of birds start from a bush and fly toward an empty cage. The man works the tree off the dolly with a thud.

"Nice tree."

"Return," he says. "Designer lady wanted an orange tree for the lobby. Says I didn't tell her it won't have oranges until summer." The man wears a metal stud through his chin. It moves up and down when he speaks, freezes when he doesn't—like permanent punctuation. A stainless-steel period under his lip. "No such thing as a used tree," he says, "but I'll give you a deal on it if you want."

"Are you here in the morning?"

"Every morning."

"I'll be back tomorrow with cash."

A homeless man begs a dollar as Ruchama climbs out of the subway on Twenty-third. She usually gives, always gives, but she has all her deposits with her, including Louise's envelope with four thousand dollars in cash. Morning rush hour has barely started; it's not the time to open her purse in the street. She clutches her bag, moving on toward the newsstand. "That's OK," the homeless man yells after her. "I forgive you because you pregnant."

The magazines are up against the stand, tied in bales. Jamal pushes a box cutter toward her, and she pushes a crumpled twenty-dollar bill his way.

"You do the honors," he says. Ruchama rubs a hand to her face; she still has sleep in her eyes.

It's unseasonably warm and cloudless. Ruchama sits on the

sidewalk like the homeless man and leans her back against the newsstand. She is looking for her advertisement. She crosses her ankles, turns her face to the sun. It's been ten years, twenty, since she's sat on the ground.

The shampoo girl is there right after the contents page. She has been bobbing for apples at the state fair. She has failed to snatch an apple with her delicate mouth. She is pulling her head from the barrel, and her drenched hair follows, caught in an arc above. A rainbow streaks the glimmering hair and the splash of water that will rain on the gathered crowd. Everyone is smiling. The carny in the booth is handing the woman a teddy bear anyhow. All the other carnies in the surrounding booths are also reaching out with prizes. They are all white men, handsome, with a slight scruff. One, she remembers, was driving a cab.

Ruchama looks off down Sixth Avenue and loses herself in the traffic moving toward her. It is the coming Passover and she has the long hair of her childhood. Everyone is out in front of shul, talking, making lunch plans on the front stoop. Nava is there in a gaudy creation; she is wearing the first of her new wigs. A car will race by, souped up like a gangster's, and the young handsome man in the passenger seat, a strong arm hanging out the window, will whistle in a lewd manner. Ruchama, startled, will blush and spin, her hair opening up in the turn like a peacock's fan.

"I sell plants and bushes and trees. I sell peat and mineral-enriched soils. For one hundred dollars you can have a dozen calathea. I will do you a deal on orchids."

"You have your earrings and your tattoos," Ruchama tells the plant man. "You have nice features and are tall and slim. You have plenty to make them look. You don't need the hair."

"I've had it forever," he says. "It's defining."

"Of course it is. Do you think I do this every day? From Eastern Europe; from Poland; that's where I get my hair. Never from the street. If not for one hundred dollars, how much is not-for-sale hair worth?"

"You know," he says, "I'm thinking you're a freak."

"Yes," Ruchama says, "we are both freaks, you and I. It is only that we are different in different ways. So tell me. Two hundred dollars, five hundred dollars?"

"One thousand dollars, two thousand dollars. It doesn't matter. I'm not selling."

"I have four thousand dollars here," she says. "In cash. You can have it all."

And then, with finesse, with Louise in her mind's eye, she pulls the envelope out of her purse and sticks it in his hand. "I have brought my own scissors, you only need to sit down."

"Damn," he says, counting. "Why don't I just keep it? Why don't I just pretend I never saw you and keep the money and the hair?"

"Because it's America," Ruchama says. "You will sell me your hair, you will deliver the tree, and if you keep the money I will bring the police and you will give it back. That is the wonder of this country. Jews have rights; women have rights. Maybe you will keep the money anyway, as a challenge. And maybe when the police come, I will tell them you took five thousand, not four. And they will believe me because I have no hole in my lip and because five is a more logical number."

Ruchama pulls out the scissors like a threat. He looks at her and pockets the envelope. Ruchama searches the jungle for a chair.

When the tree arrives, Ruchama locks the door of the workroom with Tzippy out on the other side. She told Tzippy about the tree, an extravagant and spontaneous purchase. She lied to

her about the bank deposit and is not sure from where the money to replace it will come.

Tzippy bangs on the door.

"He wants to know where to put it."

Ruchama screams through, "He knows, and you know: between the two chairs." Ruchama is dizzy. She told Tzippy that she is locking the door because of a spate of robberies, deliverymen scouting out the businesses they deliver to and stealing everything inside. She told Tzippy that she met a lady photographer at the supply store who had her whole studio cleaned out by the bike messenger who picked up the film. She had let him linger and drink water from the cooler.

"He wants an extra two hundred dollars, Ruchama." Tzippy is knocking again. "He says you promised him an extra two hundred dollars for delivering the tree."

"No such thing was promised."

"Ruchama, you open this door."

"Give him a hundred and tell him to go away."

"Open this door."

"Give him the hundred and then he will go."

How she has come to love the nights. The minute the last child sleeps, she is down in the basement. The nights used to be so long, and now she sees they are as short as the days.

Without Tzippy there gossiping she gets real work done. She takes over the separating table, laying out the hair, curl by curl. She knots like a demon. It has been aeons since Ruchama made herself a wig. Lately she's been going around in the irregulars with their bald spots and cowlicks, sporting the flawed models they cannot sell.

The year is crowded with holidays. Passover is already bearing down. This keeps her from napping, from wasting time with sleep. When she cut his hair, she secured and then

numbered each of the curls separately, like the bricks of a museum-bound temple. This way she could reconstruct them just so. To be perfect, hair must sit just right around the head.

They have nothing to show Nava. They have fallen behind. Ruchama is half mortified and half happy. She would like to fall further behind, leave Nava wigless, forced to show up at shul on the holidays with a bathing cap stretched over her head.

Ruchama moves out front. Tzippy follows with a tray of cookies and tea. Nava is fiddling with the leaves of the orange tree, careful of her nails. She snaps off a leaf.

"It does wonders," she says. "I never told you, but this room was always so depressing. Still. If it's an orange tree, where are the oranges?"

"Not until summer," Ruchama says. "Tricky indoors."

"Shouldn't there be little green marbles or something? With an orange tree you sort of expect—"

"Yes," Ruchama says, "you do. About expecting, I owe you an apology. The hair is late. There is nothing yet to show."

"Ruchie, it's been weeks." Nava bends the leaf in half, snaps a crisp seam down the center.

"We've been crazy," Ruchama says. "We're overwhelmed." Tzippy dips a cookie into her tea.

"I've a right to be mad," Nava says. She faces Ruchama, reaches out, and rests a hand on Ruchama's hip. "But—and you know I only have compliments for you, only compliments—but it shows on your face, Ruchie. You look terrible. You're running yourself into the ground, and I don't want to be the reason. It's not too late to take my order elsewhere if you'd feel better about it. Kendo Keller has a man."

Ruchama *would* feel better about it. "Maybe you should," she says.

"Ruchama!" Tzippy bursts out only with her name. Ruchama understands. There is their reputation. There is the money. And, open wide before her, is all that freed-up time.

"Maybe you should," Ruchama says. "You've always been so understanding."

Tzippy has taken to watching from a distance. She no longer stands at Ruchama's desk with her tea or leans over her shoulder at her worktable. She holds her mug with two hands now and sips from it—watching. She steals glances, averts her eyes. She does not correct Ruchama when she makes mistakes, does not fix them either, but leaves them out in places where Ruchama will find them. It annoys Ruchama to come upon the hair she was supposed to use for the Berger wig coiled neatly on the edge of a shelf, to find the caps she sized wrong placed in the wicker basket under her desk.

Tzippy has even taken to putting things down when she means to pass them. She places the pincushion next to Ruchama instead of handing it to her. The phone rings for Ruchama, and Tzippy does it again. She carries over the cordless and puts the phone down at Ruchama's side.

"Why must you do that?" Ruchama says. She covers the mouthpiece, wants to know who's on the line.

"The messenger."

Ruchama looks at the receiver and shuts it off. "I told you never to give me that man," she says. The telephone rings again.

"Answer it," Tzippy says. "He calls ten times a day. You answer it and talk to him and then to me. I want to know why the deliveryman is so concerned about an orange tree with no oranges."

Ruchama answers the phone.

"Hello," she says. "No," she says. She walks to the back corner of the work space, the unused corner with the old storage

closet where her wig is hidden. "Leave me alone," she says. "Not another cent," she says. She hangs up again, then raises her voice. "Not another penny more for that damn tree."

It is like facing her mother when she discovered Ruchama's lipstick, like sitting in the living room with both her parents after she was caught on the date Tzippy had arranged—spotted by her own father while walking down King Street and talking to a boy. Ruchama figures she is ruined and will have to tell all.

Tzippy has dragged her out to the front room and put her in a chair. She sits in the other one and talks to Ruchama around the narrow tree trunk.

"I haven't said a word, not to another soul." Tzippy is enjoying this, Ruchama thinks. She has always resented working for Ruchama and here is her chance to take control. "You doze during the day. You forget. Anything you touch has to be redone. You chased off our best client and an old friend. You chased off a woman with tons of money and a big mouth. You haven't paid the bills—don't think I didn't notice. Tell me, Ruchama, before you destroy the business that supports both our families. Open up before you destroy a friendship spanning thirty years."

Ruchama can't face her; she turns to the standing mirror and turns again to the wall of photos.

"If I must," Ruchama says, and she looks one second into the future, and then she is at the state fair bobbing for apples. And she does not, cannot, ruin the surprise. "I kissed the tree man," she says. Something so unbelievable, it's believable. Something to appeal to Tzippy's mischievous side. "He kissed me and I let him. Not once, but twice. Twice when I went to the city for supplies."

"No," Tzippy screams, hands to her mouth. She tucks her legs under her and hangs over the arm of her chair. "You didn't."

"I didn't want to, but I did."

"Shlomil!" Tzippy says. "A gentile, Ruchama. And half your age. You didn't. Your children. The man has a ring in his lip."

"Ice cold," Ruchama says. "Ice cold and red hot."

"It must stop, Ruchama."

"That is what I keep telling him."

"But he won't listen," Tzippy says. "He is so full of lust. He knows it can't be but won't listen. He wants you to meet him once more. To tell him you can't do it while looking deep into his eyes."

The admission changes everything. Tzippy works twice as hard as she ever did. Ruchama need only stay alert enough during the days to retell the lie again and again. She makes up tiny details that she adds to each version. Tzippy's hands fly as she listens, wide eyed, stopping only to gasp. She advises Ruchama against it again and again, then she plots out their future if they should decide to run away. "Would he convert, do you think? Would he look nice in a beard?" Tzippy passes things into Ruchama's hands, lingering now, offering a moment of warmth and support. She passes everything except for the phone. She hangs up on the deliveryman, who calls again and again. Sometimes she rushes out hushed advice before cutting the line. "Let it go," she says. "I know it hurts," she tells him, "but it cannot be."

Ruchama feels less guilt than she'd imagined. It's Tzippy's own fault for buying into such nonsense. And it's not without purpose. A few more weeks. One month to Passover. The wig is almost ready.

It's 8:30 in the morning when Ruchama finishes the wig. Passover is ten days away. The wig is heavier than any she's ever made, an intense and copious thing. Ruchama doesn't

usually shave her head, but the vanity of such hair calls for compensation. Ruchama plugs in the electric clippers, nicks herself on the first pass.

She fits her hands into the cap and stretches it round her scalp. It holds tight. She drops her head between her knees and, using her fingertips to keep the wig in place, flips her head and feels the whole weight of the hair swinging up and over, curl after curl hitting against her back.

She forgives every flaw in the mirror. Her eyes are blood-shot and swollen, but she doesn't see it. She is amazed at how utterly striking, how truly gorgeous, is this mane of perfect hair. The weight alone, that comforting weight, the safety of the curls framing her face. It is majestic. She can't wait to sit down in front of Nava, to shake out her hair and have it pour into Nava's lap over the back of her seat. The commotion. Ruchama will get her whispering. The men will hiss for silence, and no one will talk about how she's let herself go ever again. Nava will see Ruchama's face framed like a maiden's. She will remember who is most beautiful.

Ten days is a long time. A person can die in an instant. A fire can burn up a house and a basement and a storage closet with a hidden wig. Maybe she will wear it on Shabbos. Ruchama picks up a hand mirror, turns slowly on a stool, leaning back, admiring. She will go to the city now. She will try it out.

The train is filled with late-morning commuters. Ruchama can sense them peering over their papers, can feel the men staring as they blow on their coffee, steadying briefcases between their legs.

Ruchama has Jamal's twenty-dollar bill ready, crushed in her palm. She tries to remain nonchalant, to keep the excitement from flushing her cheeks.

Before he gets to make conversation, Ruchama drops the money, grabs the magazines, and turns her back on Jamal.

"Well all right," Jamal says. "Looking fine."

"Sorry, what?" Ruchama says, turning up her nose, her first flirtation in years. She hurries to the side, unsuccessful at keeping the blush down. She can feel him leaning over the counter.

"A beauty," he says. "Come on back so I can have a real look."

Shlomi should say such a thing. Let them all call her back to see what they've been missing. She opens a magazine. She is searching for the new shampoo advertisement, somehow expecting to find herself on the page. The woman is there, playing in Central Park, hanging upside down from the monkey bars. There are many fathers in the park that day. Ruchama winks at the picture, as if they are compatriots. She and Ruchama, both cursed with gorgeous hair and the ceaseless attention it draws.

Ruchama faces up Sixth Avenue as she reads, a stray curl, then two, blown back by the wind. And then she is off, walking down King Street in her mind. All eyes are upon her, admiring. A young woman strikes her husband for turning his head. The baker comes out to the sidewalk and hands her a layer cake with a chocolate shell. The traffic on King Street slows. And then she processes it in the distance, not on King Street but on Sixth. Traffic *has* slowed. A thicket of young shrubbery has sprouted up in the middle of the street. Cars honk; a bus swerves, dodging. The bushes are on a dolly. Abandoned. She draws focus, looks closer. On Twenty-fourth, at Billy's Topless, his big bald head sticking up like a lightbulb, a bright idea moving over the crowd.

She calms herself with a breath. He only wants to see, to see up close. That is what she tells herself. He is walking over to admire her craftsmanship, and that will be that. Tzippy is right; they always must wonder what has become of their hair. They sell it to feed children. To pay gambling debts. Because they are sick of the flower shop and hold cash in their hands.

The Wig

Jamal will protect her. He calls around to her right then, another flirtation.

The deliveryman gets closer and crosses his arms in the air. "Money," he calls, without picking up speed. He is half a block away, and his steady pace terrifies her, the walking so much more definite than if he were to run. "I need more money," he yells. Ruchama has worked this out a thousand times, picked this corner for just such a reason. Far enough away. If she spots a familiar face . . .

She drops the magazines into the trash basket, looks up at the walk signal, and is already moving into the flow of foot traffic. People are turning round, stepping aside to let her through.

Ruchama picks up her pace when she hits the opposite curb. She chances a quick glance. He is almost upon her.

"You stole my hair," he screams. "She stole my hair."

Ruchama puts a hand to her head and pulls off the wig. She stuffs it into her bag and clutches the bag to her chest. A mess of curls snakes out over the sides. Ruchama can feel people looking, the whole of the city watching.

Worth every penny and every shame, she thinks, for one slow spin, hair on her head and mirror in her hand, leaning back, beautiful.