

## The Bris

WHEN MARCUS PACKED FOR FLORIDA, he harbored no illusions about what would happen when he got there. His father's liver soon would fail, and, without a transplant, he couldn't survive the week. "Why waste a miracle on an elderly man like me?" his father scoffed. He pooh-pooed the new liver as if it were a slightly used sports car Marcus insisted he buy. "At least let me put your name on the waiting list," Marcus said, but his father blew raspberries through the phone. "Give that same liver to someone young, and he or she could get another fifty years out of the goddamn thing."

And so, with a heavy carry-on and an even heavier heart, Marcus flew to West Palm Beach. He rented a car and drove to the hospital in Boca Raton where his father had been taken after his last collapse. As he checked in at Registration and followed the arrows to the room, he prepared for the likelihood that in another few days he would be arranging his father's

funeral. What he couldn't have predicted was that first he would be called on to arrange his father's *bris*.

"Your *bris*, Pop?" Marcus laughed, although his father rarely joked; for a former hotelkeeper in the Catskills, he was a singularly humorless man. His request that Marcus find a *mohel* who would circumcise him before he died could only be an effect of the drugs he was taking or the poison seeping from his liver. "Don't worry, Pop. All of that was taken care of a long time ago."

His father waved a bloated yellow arm. Hooked up to an IV, he reminded Marcus of an inflated creature in the Thanksgiving Day parade. "A lie," his father gasped. "Everything has been a lie."

"What, Pop? What lie?" If there was one thing Marcus knew, it was his father didn't lie, any more than he ate shellfish or pork. When Marcus was a boy, his father made such a *megillah* about never telling lies or playing tricks that Marcus imagined he must have been the victim of some terrible prank or hoax. That his guileless, defenseless father had been wounded by someone's lie made Marcus resolve never to lie himself. When he started his first accounting job in Manhattan in the eighties, he couldn't bring himself to fudge even the tiniest account his employer expected him to fudge. A quarter of a century later, he still had trouble living in the world of shaded truths most New Yorkers lived in.

"Don't talk to me about lying," he told his dad. "You're the most truthful man I know."

His father squinched his lips and shrugged, a gesture meant to convey he wasn't the saint everyone took him to be. "They won't let me be buried—" He sucked oxygen from the tube inside his nose. "In the plot. Beside your mother."

Marcus was seized by the premonition that his father was

about to reveal a sordid and completely out-of-character affair with the woman who used to be the social director at the family's hotel. While Marcus's mother was still alive, his father treated Liddy Newman's voluptuous advances as a burden to be endured rather than a pleasure to be pursued. But Marcus's mother had dropped dead of a heart attack while working in the kitchen one particularly stressful night when Marcus was fifteen, and he'd never understood how or why his father found the self-control not to fool around with Liddy after that.

When his father finally sold Lieberman's—gave it away was more like it, to a group of Brooklyn Hasids who promised they would use it as a camp for retarded teens, then used it as a getaway for themselves—he moved to a retirement community in Boca, where the widows hounded him so ferociously he took a few to lunch. Maybe he took a few to bed. But how could that deny him the right to be buried with Marcus's mother?

"The cemetery," his father rasped. In his younger days, he had been a tall fair broomstick of a man, with mild blue eyes and a generous expression—he'd reminded Marcus of a scarecrow begging the crows to take his corn. But this last bout of hepatitis had puffed his face and limbs and turned his irises and skin such a bilious yellow-orange he looked as if vandals had stuffed him with extra straw and jammed a rotting pumpkin on his neck.

"The cemetery," Marcus repeated dully, the reality sinking in that within a few days both his father and his mother would be lying in the ground.

Although apparently not together.

"The cemetery is only for Orthodox Jews." Marcus's father's hand drifted to his groin, which he clutched as if it pained him. "And that is something I am not. Not only am I not an Orthodox Jew, I am not a Jew of any kind."

Marcus hadn't been aware he'd been holding his breath until he let it out. "Pop, if you haven't been a good enough Jew, no one ever has." He recited his father's acts of charity—his quiet beneficence to the poor, his selfless attentions to Marcus's mother and her parents, the litany of favors he had extended to the guests, employees, and various hangers-on at Lieberman's Mountain Rest.

His father chopped off the recitation. "None of that is relevant. You might as well say actions such as these make a man a good Christian."

Marcus rubbed his eyes. He had been up late the night before deciding whether to propose to his girlfriend, Vicki, despite her desire to have a child, something Marcus was loath to promise. His flight from LaGuardia had left at six. On the plane he couldn't sleep, mostly because the harried young man beside him couldn't control his son. The boy kept vaulting Marcus's knees and bounding down the aisle, colliding with the flight attendants; Marcus took this as a sign that he was too old to have a child. Not that Vicki had made having a child a prerequisite to getting married. But how could he live with the knowledge that he'd deprived the woman he loved of what she wanted most?

"I wasn't born a Jew," his father cried. "And I never converted. It was such a little thing. But I couldn't face the prospect of anyone coming near me with a knife. The very thought made me woozy."

The force of his father's revelation set in. Short and solid as he was, Marcus swayed like a beachfront high-rise in a hurricane. He sat heavily on the bed. "This isn't making sense. All these years and, what, you've only been pretending to be a Jew?"

His father nodded and turned away. What little Marcus knew of his father's early life came back to him. Orphaned

young, he'd deserted his rural Texas town to escape "a lack of opportunities" that Marcus had always assumed to be the result of anti-Semitism. His father lied about his age, enlisted in the Army, spent two years overseas, and suffered a minor wound. A veteran at nineteen, he'd landed in New York and found a job in the garment district, winding ribbon on cardboard spools; he'd gone to school at night and earned his diploma, then used his GI loan to finance a few semesters at NYU, after which he'd taken a summer job waiting tables in the Catskills, where he fell hopelessly in love with the owners' daughter, married her, and never left. Now, as Marcus listened to a revised and expanded version of those events, he understood that the astonishing gaps in his father's history—Marcus never had seen a photo from the years before New York, never had met a Texas relative—disturbed him so much he'd never dared to ask for an explanation.

In truth, his father had been the only child of narrow Baptist parents who were indifferent to his survival, let alone his desire to find a less restricted, warmer, more cosmopolitan way of life. "It was one of those Christian homes where the only book is the Bible. They were scornful of anything that brought comfort to a boy. Music. Art. A kind word. A pat on the shoulder. One time, my father found a drawing of a pretty girl, a classmate, I had sketched in a notebook. It wasn't meant to be crude. I had never seen a naked female and I was trying to visualize . . . My father beat me and broke my hand." He teared up even now. "To draw a beautiful girl is a sin, but breaking a young boy's fingers isn't?"

He took another gasp of oxygen. "That was the first instance I ran away. I hid in the back of a bus to Lubbock, which was the nearest big town, and I sneaked in a theater to see my first show. I was so sick with guilt that before the picture started I

needed to go to the men's room and vomit. But it was entirely worth the fear. The movie was a Marx Brothers feature. Can you imagine what it was like for me to see those four brothers act in such a way? In the movie, the brothers live in a made-up country, but in my mind, they might have lived on Mars."

That his father had once had his hand broken for sketching a female classmate and run away to see *Duck Soup* filled Marcus with a pity so profound it nearly burst his chest. Certainly, this explained why his father used to drop whatever he was doing, even on the busiest weekend of the year, to turn on the little black-and-white set in Marcus's room and spend two hours watching whatever Marx Brothers movie happened to be on. Until now, Marcus had attributed his father's fondness for the Marx Brothers to the fact that only these four comedians could make him laugh. And yet, thinking back on those afternoons when he and his father had sat at the foot of Marcus's bed watching *Horse Feathers* or *A Night at the Opera*, he felt sadly left out, as if his father and the Marx Brothers, instead of playing their tricks on some overly zealous cop or a wealthy snobbish matron, had been playing a trick on him.

His father wiped his eyes. "You can imagine the beating I got when I returned home. My father could only think I had gone to town to visit a house of prostitution. Prostitutes! It had taken all my courage to sketch that naked girl! I can't imagine how I made it through another year in that house. But where was I to go? This is a terrible thing to admit, but I was glad there was a war. How else could I have gotten away so young?"

Here, the new version of his father's autobiography merged with the version Marcus already knew. "I was so tall I had no trouble passing for two years older. But what a shock, meeting those older men. The way they cursed! What they said about women! Imagine what I felt, finding myself among people who

believed Christ was no more than a carpenter who had lived in Galilee a long, long time ago." Not that the conversion had been immediate. He'd simply felt so much more at home among the Jews he met in the army and in Manhattan that he absorbed their culture and religion, their love for music, art, and books. "I had been told that Jews were stingy. But to my way of thinking, they gave too much of everything. They talked too loudly, too much. They studied too hard, made too much fuss about their health, about everyone's health, about this or that injustice. They made a lot of money, but they gave so much away. And food! The mountains of food they ate! It came to me that Christians lied about Jews to hide their own guilt at being so stingy, not only with their money but with their love."

He hadn't taken the job at Lieberman's with the intention of passing as a Jew. It was just that once he got there, everyone assumed he was one.

"I told your mother. *She* knew the truth. And I would have converted. For your mother, I would have done anything. I *wanted* to be a Jew. In my heart, I already was one." He rose from his pillow. "But every time I thought of being circumcised . . ." He turned a paler shade of yellow. Beads of oily sweat popped out on his brow. "Your mother, *oleha ha sholem*, took pity on my dilemma. She wanted to be married to a Jew, but she loved me too much to insist I suffer anything I couldn't suffer willingly."

It came to Marcus that he'd never seen his father's genitals. For all the years they'd shared a house, for all the times they'd changed together in a locker room, he'd never caught his father naked. If Marcus thought anything, it was that his father was excessively shy or afflicted with some embarrassing deformity—his balls were strangely shaped, his penis small or oddly

bent. The realization that his father's obsessive modesty had been a deliberate sham made Marcus feel as foolish as a *shittel* wife who's just learned that she's been the dupe of a Yentl-like deceiver, so ignorant of the facts of life she couldn't figure out that her "husband" was a woman dressed up as a man.

His father's eyes were closed. The tracings on the monitor flowed as quietly as the ripples on a pond. Marcus jostled his father's hip. "Pop, it's all right. Whatever it is, I forgive you."

Without opening his eyes, his father patted Marcus's hand. "For your forgiveness I thank you. But what I need from you now is not your forgiveness but your help."

Not ask his forgiveness? He remembered all those Saturdays when his father had carried him to *shul*, slipped a yarmulke on his head, wrapped him in a *tallis*, then sat beside him on the bench and helped him follow the Hebrew prayers. (Did his father even know how to read Hebrew? When would he have learned? More likely, he'd glanced at their neighbors' books, spied the right page, and followed as best he could.) When Marcus had lost his faith and considered canceling his bar mitzvah, his father listened to his objections and quietly and persuasively reinstated his belief, if not in God, then at least in being Jewish. None of this had done Marcus any harm. Yet there seemed something unsavory about these acts having been performed by a gentile. It was as if a man pretending to be a doctor had removed Marcus's appendix, and even though the operation had proved a complete success, Marcus couldn't help but be shaken to learn that the surgeon had been a quack.

"In other ways I'm not a coward," his father said. "In the war, I ran across a field while bullets were being shot and dragged a man to safety. I saw terrible bloody sights a man ought never see."

A long time went by. The elderly man in the next bed passed gas so forcefully that Marcus jumped. "Oy, *gevvalt*," the man moaned. "Tell me, dear God, what I did to deserve such misery!" As if every human fart were under God's control.

Marcus plucked a Kleenex and wiped his father's brow. His father opened his eyes and pressed Marcus's palm to his lips. "You are a good boy, and I am sorry if I failed you. What little I know about being a parent I had to teach myself. My own father cared only that I never drink or dance. He died a few months after I ran away. My mother couldn't be bothered to make inquiries. She died when you were four. Who was there to say I wasn't actually a Jew?"

The onslaught of revelations, including a gentle grandmother who'd still been alive in Texas when Marcus was a child, rendered him mute. He wanted to get away and think. Or rather, he wanted to call Vicki and ask her what he ought to be thinking. "Pop," he said, "this isn't doing either of us any good. Why not take a nap? I'll drive to the condo and eat a bite, then I'll come back and see you later."

His father grabbed his wrist—it felt as if Marcus were being touched by a rubber glove full of lukewarm water. "We don't have much time."

"Time? Time for what? Don't tell me that you intend to get circumcised now."

"That is exactly what I do intend."

"Oh, Pop, can't we just get the folks who run the cemetery to make an exception? Would they actually refuse to allow you to be buried with Mom?"

"Of course they would refuse! Ahavath Yisroel is only for Orthodox Jews. And to be an Orthodox Jew, a man must be circumcised. The night before the funeral, the members of the burial society must sit up and wash the body, and the individuals

on that particular committee would immediately notice what was what. If they made an exception for me, why not make an exception for everyone?" He shook his head miserably, the plastic tube from the oxygen mask waving like a tusk.

Marcus had never seen his father's face so troubled. His lips were dry and rough and he kept licking them as he spoke. "Pop, I don't get it. Why did you bury Mom in Bubbe and Zayde's plot if you knew you wouldn't be allowed to be buried there with her?"

The tracings on the monitor erupted, as if a meteor had hit the pond. "You know how much your mother loved her parents! How could I deny her the right to spend eternity beside them?" And—what he didn't mention—how much he'd loved them, too, the Jewish parents he'd never had. "They gave us those spaces as a wedding gift. If we'd refused to be buried in their plot, we would have needed to explain the reason. I was still a young man. I thought I had all the time in the world. I assumed there would be advances."

"Advances? You were expecting the doctors were going to come up with a pill you could swallow and your foreskin fell off? Believe me, Pop, that sort of research is not high on the list of medical priorities." The mere mention of someone's foreskin falling off caused his head to swim. The two times he'd been invited to a *bris*, Marcus had needed to sit on the stoop outside until the cutting part was over. "There's no use discussing it. Your body couldn't stand the shock."

His father wrapped his hands around the rail and pulled himself to sit. "I'm going to die anyway. I might as well die a Jew."

"Pop, I can't."

"Have I ever asked anything? Have I ever, in all your years, asked you a single thing?"

No, Marcus thought, he hadn't. His father had taught him how to swim—albeit so Marcus could supervise the hotel pool—and his happiest memories were of his father and him washing off the stink of serving the evening meal by taking a midnight dip. His father had bought a book and used it to teach the two of them to hit a tennis ball on the single cracked court at Lieberman's. True, this was partly so Marcus could provide a partner for the guests, but he and his dad had enjoyed many a cutthroat set in the mystical pre-dawn hour before the guests got up and started clamoring for their lox and eggs. His father had given Marcus everything a father could give—and what a mother could give as well. He had cooked for him and cleaned. He had nursed Marcus through the mumps, mononucleosis, diarrhea, and upset stomachs. Marcus felt like a gambler who could never repay his bookie. Better to change your name and run away, start a new life, put your debts behind you.

Which, except for the name change, was exactly what Marcus had done. He'd moved to Manhattan, gotten his degree in accounting, and set up the kind of life in which he was free from obligations, even to himself. Rather than cook, he ate out. He sent his dirty clothes to a laundry and hired a maid to clean. He lived within his means and paid off his college loans. For Christ's sake, he didn't even own a cell phone. He owed nothing to anyone. Except, it seemed, his father.

"Pop, if the people in the burial society see a recent scar, won't they be suspicious?"

His father held up a finger, as if Marcus had finally asked a question worth answering. "If the foreskin has been removed and the survivors of the deceased can provide a certificate of conversion, the officials must accept that the individual is a Jew. As it happens, I have a friend who is a rabbi. Twice a week

I attend the services that Rabbi Dobrinsky conducts at the condo *shul*. Three times a week, we play tennis as partners. At first, he wasn't so enthusiastic. But I kept speaking from the heart and he began to see my point. Also, I agreed to leave my money to his synagogue. If you add your plea to mine, he won't refuse."

Marcus was incensed that his father had pledged his few hard-earned dollars to bribe some unscrupulous rabbi into performing a rite he ought to perform for free. He wondered if his father meant that he, Marcus, ought to add his own money to his father's "donation" in the hope that this larger bribe would persuade the rabbi to do their bidding.

"Once the rabbi is on board," his father went on, "all that remains is finding a *mohel* who will perform the circumcision."

"Sure," Marcus said, "that's all. And who do you suppose is going to circumcise a dying man?"

His father motioned toward the cart beside the bed. Marcus opened the little drawer and found a newspaper clipping about a pediatrician named David S. Schiffler, who, in his spare time, performed ritual circumcisions for the newborn Jewish males of Boca Raton. "That's quite an interesting sideline," Marcus said. "And lucrative as well."

"Don't make fun. You think a man like this, a professional man, needs what he earns performing a *bris*? He donates his fee to the Boca March of Dimes. Also, he is performing a service for the community. He comes in the home, but he does the procedure in a sanitary modern way, the baby isn't traumatized."

Marcus was about to remind his father that he wasn't a baby when a nurse bustled in.

"Now we will be having a soothing, refreshing bath," the woman said with a Jamaican lilt. "We can't let a man get all smelly, now can we?"

"The rabbi," his father said. "You can find him on the tennis court. He plays a doubles match at four."

The nurse drew the curtain around the bed. "First we will wash down as far as possible." She dipped a sponge in a pan of soapy water and squeezed out the excess. "Then we will wash up as far as possible." Giggling, she reached for his father's gown. "And then we must wash possible!"

As thoroughly as it irked him that a stranger would get to view what had been hidden from him for so long, Marcus was horrified at the prospect. In his mind, his father's penis grew and grew until it was a pointy-headed rocket zooming toward outer space. Before the nurse could expose his father's "possible," he dashed out in the hall. Weaving to avoid the patients and their relatives, who hobbled along the corridors three- and five-abreast, he headed for the lobby. Outside, he found his car and reached for the key, only to find the clipping about Dr. Schiffler still crumpled inside his fist.

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During his father's previous bouts with hepatitis, Marcus had become acquainted with the route from the hospital to the condo. Still, he lost his way. He pulled off on the shoulder near an intersection where a cheerless man in overalls was selling the *Homeless Times* and a girl in a green bikini hawked hot dogs from a cart. The father he had known for forty-eight years was dying, as was the father who'd grown up in a poverty-stricken Baptist town and had his hand broken for drawing a picture of a girl, then glimpsed redemption in a universe ruled by Groucho Marx. In the months and years to come, whenever a question about this genteel Texas father sprang to Marcus's mind, there wouldn't be a soul to answer it.

How could such an honest man have lived such a whopping lie? And how could he have made such a *tzimmes* about the shame a lie could bring? Then again, who else was qualified to issue such a warning? For thirty-three years, the poor man had lived without sex to avoid the need to explain to a Jewish woman why he wasn't circumcised. Marcus almost wished his father had been the kind of man who would sleep with a woman he had no intention of ever marrying. *Oh, Pop, wasn't the urge to make love stronger than your fear of having your foreskin cut off?*

He knew he ought to go. With the way the retirees down here drove, if he sat here long enough someone would plow into him. Bits of red plastic from an earlier victim's taillights still littered the intersection. But Marcus couldn't move. His poor mother! It must have made her sad to know she wasn't married to a Jew. Or a man who loved her enough to face his worst fear for her sake. How isolated she must have felt, how cut off from her parents.

Unless her parents knew. How could they not have known? Now that he thought about it, his father didn't look Jewish. His name was James Sloan. What kind of Jew is named James Sloan? There had been so few available Jewish men during the war that Marcus's mother was twenty-seven when she met his father, six years older than her suitor. How could his grandparents have objected to a handsome generous man who was willing to marry their spinster daughter, live a Jewish life, and run the hotel they all loved? The only detail they hadn't guessed was that, unlike most American men, their son-in-law wasn't circumcised. Marcus did the math. Was it possible his father had only been forty-three when Marcus's mother died? Then again, Marcus had been so absorbed in pretending his mother's death hadn't nearly killed him that he'd barely noticed his father's grief, let alone his age.

Once a week, on Sunday, after the guests checked out, they'd driven to the little Jewish cemetery on the outskirts of town, where Marcus had shuffled down the path with the feigned indifference of an adolescent hiding his bitter urge to fall on his mother's grave and weep. Even now, he sometimes rented a car and drove up to visit the plot where his mother and grandparents lay beneath a monument engraved with the family name. Most of the surrounding monuments also bore the names of Catskills resorts, which reinforced Marcus's notion that owning a hotel and serving people killed you. Certainly it had killed his mother. She might have been overweight, but trying to feed two hundred and fifty guests without a salad man or a dishwasher would have killed a much thinner woman with a healthier, younger heart.

Yet who was he to say? His mother had loved running Lieberman's so much that if such interments had been permitted, she would have asked to be buried on the front lawn. Marcus missed the hotel, too. Whenever he visited his mother's grave, he sat with his back to his grandfather's headstone and imagined they were waiting for his father, the way they used to wait for him to finish some repair or settle a dispute and join them in the dining room for the *ever Shabbos* meal.

And his father had screwed it up. He'd had thirty-three years to muster the courage to check into a hospital and allow the doctors to trim his foreskin—under anesthesia, after all—and he'd put it off and put it off. Maybe it wasn't only the fear of the operation. Maybe he hadn't been able to face the idea of giving up that last little bit of the man he used to be.

But did his father actually believe this Dr. Schiffer would agree to perform a circumcision on a dying man? For a moment, Marcus wondered if a *mohel* would circumcise his father *after* he was dead, but the notion made him ill.

The homeless man tapped on his window and Marcus shook his head to indicate he didn't want to buy a paper. It bothered him that the guy wasn't allowed to beg but had to pretend to sell a newspaper no one wanted to read. These days, no one was allowed to give anything away for free, not even charity. Marcus saw the girl in the green bikini pointing to her cart and miming the act of eating a hot dog, so he pulled onto the road again. He was hungry enough that he could have wolfed down several hot dogs, but he didn't want anyone to think he was one of those men who would buy a woman's wares so he could look down her cleavage when she leaned in the window and set his hot dogs in his lap.

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The condo development where his father lived was populated almost exclusively by Orthodox Jews. No rules excluded gentiles, but what Christian would want to settle in a place where the country club served heavy kosher meals and the tennis courts and pool were locked from sundown Friday to sundown Saturday and nearly all the residents attended services at the dump concrete synagogue within the development's walls? While the guard checked Marcus's name against a list, he felt the impulse to reveal his father's lie. He couldn't have said why. He felt no less Jewish than before. He had inherited his *zayde* Lieberman's dark Hebraic looks. That his mother had been a Jew guaranteed that Marcus would be certified as a Jew by even the strictest rabbi. He had attended Hebrew School, well, religiously, and—thanks to his father—had been circumcised and bar mitzvahed. His father had lived a completely Jewish life for seven decades. How could this one act of sacrifice—which most Jewish men had undergone when they were

eight days old and drunk on the Manischewitz the *mohel* had given them to suck from a bit of cloth—count for so much?

The guard waved Marcus through. Of course he wouldn't reveal his father's origins. He didn't wish him any harm. As for his father's right to live in this development, God would be issuing His eviction notice soon enough.

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Marcus parked in his father's space and let himself into the condo, which was stuffy and stank of mold. His father had never been a hoarder and, in recent years, had given away most of what he owned. Every time Marcus flew down for a visit, he flew back to New York with a moth-eaten cardigan or a set of wooden shoe-trees or a box of jellied fruit slices some kindly female neighbor had given his father for Passover the year before. Little remained on the condo's shelves except the novels of Leon Uris, some kitschy figurines of Jewish peddlers, and his grandparents' brass menorah. Marcus turned on the air conditioner, but the unit was so palsied his khakis and shirt were plastered to his skin before the place cooled down. The apartment, which until then had held only pleasant associations, now harbored a sinister possibility in every nook, as if the harmless geckos flitting here and there might suddenly hiss and bite.

He looked up Dr. Schiffler's number, picked up his father's rotary phone, and dialed. When he finally got through, he told the receptionist he needed to discuss a circumcision. "There are . . . let's call them complications," Marcus said, and she agreed to let him speak to the pediatrician at 6:15, when his regular appointments were done.

Marcus lingered by the phone. If only he could talk to Vicki.

But he needed to get to the tennis courts in time to catch Rabbi Dobrinsky before his doubles match.

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The air was so humid Marcus could hardly catch his breath. He crossed the parking lot and reached the pool, which shimmered seductively in the sun, then walked along the path that skirted the development's man-made lagoon. The water was a sludgy brown that concealed who-knew-what creatures. Alligators? Snakes? From earlier explorations, Marcus knew the shore was lined with the mounds of fire ants. Yet he entertained the fantasy of running down the bank and diving in.

Finally he reached the tennis club, whose palm-shaded courts and coolers of icy water beckoned like an oasis. Marcus had played his father here three times, and all three times he'd lost. As kind as his father was, he turned fiendish on a tennis court. No matter where Marcus hit the ball, his father, with his willowy arms and legs, managed to reach it and return it. Even in his seventies, when his ground strokes had lost their force, he could still slice a ball so deftly that it traced corkscrews in the air before landing just shy of Marcus's racquet.

He stepped into the clubhouse and the air conditioning froze his sodden clothes. Beyond the racks of colorful nylon shorts, he found a woman in her fifties standing behind a desk. She had brassy red hair and blue-framed glasses. Racquet-shaped earrings dangled from her ears.

"Excuse me," Marcus said. "I'm looking for Rabbi Dobrinsky. My father said he always plays a doubles match at four."

The woman startled Marcus by reaching across the counter and taking his hand in hers. "You must be James's son. How is

he? What a dear man. Please, next time you see him, tell him Rita Crookstein sends her love."

She wasn't his father's type, but it pained Marcus that Rita Crookstein probably felt real affection for his father and had little or no idea why he never asked her out. The clubhouse door swung open and three leathery, fit old men came in. All three wore white shorts, white polo-shirts, white cotton knee-highs, and bandages and supports around their limbs. Two of the men had fluorescent green yarmulkes bobby-pinned to their hair.

"Excuse me," Marcus said, "I'm looking for Rabbi Dobrinsky."

The shortest of the three lifted the tinted lenses that were clipped to his regular frames. He looked Marcus up and down.

"My father is in the hospital," Marcus said. "He's very ill. He sent me to ask a favor."

The rabbi took out a handkerchief and blew his nose. "I'm sorry he's in the hospital. But your father already asked his favor, and already I told him no."

Marcus rose to full height. Even at five-foot six he was taller than the rabbi. What kind of spiritual leader would act in such a peremptory way to the son of a dying man? Extortionists like Dobrinsky were exactly the reason Marcus didn't belong to a congregation. You joined, and right away someone demanded to see your tax returns and dunned you five percent, then hit you up for pledges to the building fund and the mortgage fund, donations to the UJA, service on committees. In return, all you got was a seat for Rosh Hashanah and a place to say *kaddish* when one of your parents died. Like Diogenes with his lamp, Marcus longed to find a spiritual leader who didn't see his position as an opportunity to take advantage of a person in need.

"My father told me you'd consented—" He glanced at the other men, who were making a show of examining a rack of shirts. "To do what he asked."

The rabbi unzipped his racquet. "Your father believes what he wants to believe." He said this in such a loud voice the other men and Rita Crookstein couldn't pretend they hadn't heard. "What I told him was, I will come when he is dying and offer what prayers I can. If he takes this to mean I will issue some sort of paper that says he is a Jew, he is badly misinformed."

"But if a dying man wishes to convert to Judaism? If he wishes to be buried beside his wife? After all, my father lived most of his life as a Jew."

Dobrinsky bounced his racquet against his fist. "I have known your father nine years. We play tennis. We play golf. We discuss politics and theology. More than that, we are friends. So, you don't think it's a shock, all of a sudden he tells me he's not a Jew? Against non-Jews I have nothing. But against non-Jewish friends who pretend to be Jewish . . . Pardon me if I do not believe that the reward for so many years of deceit should be an easy deathbed conversion." The rabbi flipped down his lenses and started toward the courts.

"Rabbi Dobrinsky." Marcus raised his voice. "My father is dying. You say he is your friend. Yet you can't find it in your heart to stretch the rules?" Something came back to him from his years in Hebrew School. "I thought any rule could—and should—be broken to save a dying man."

Rabbi Dobrinsky stopped. "To *save* a dying man. Not hasten his death. If this truly were a matter of bringing about *shalom b'et*, peace in the family . . . But it is only about allowing your father the convenience of being buried as a Jew."

"But think of the peace it will bring my mother. Think of the peace it will bring me!"

"I am not entirely without sympathy for your case. *Your* case, not your father's. But a conversion must come about as a complete change of heart. The act of circumcision, followed by

immersion in the ritual bath, the *mikveh*, must be experienced by the convert as a blessing. Your father wants his conversion should entail a sleight of hand. He wants the *mohel* and I should say *abracadabra* while he's lying there unconscious and suddenly he's a Jew. And not just any kind of Jew, but an Orthodox Jew, an observant Jew—"

The telephone rang and Rita Crookstein answered it. "Yes," she said, "the three of them are here. I'm so sorry. I'll let them know." She hung up and primed her hair. "Rabbi Dobrinsky? That was Mr. Markowitz. His wife suffered another stroke. He's calling from the hospital. He can't make your doubles match today."

All three men looked as disappointed as if the messiah weren't coming. Then they turned to Marcus.

"If you are your father's son," Dobrinsky said, "you know your way around a tennis court."

Marcus almost said no, but his vanity wouldn't allow it. "I play, but tennis wasn't on my mind when I packed to come down here." Nothing his father owned would fit. The sneakers would be too tight, and the ancient racquet his father still played with was made of some heavy metal Marcus could barely lift.

Dobrinsky motioned to the desk. "Racquets she has plenty." He looked at Marcus's feet. "Size nine, a common size. There is a dress code at this club, but I am sure you will find a suitable shirt and shorts in Ms. Crookstein's lost and found."

"You expect me to play tennis at a time like this?"

"Let me put it this way. If you fill out our fourth, I will see what I can do about your father's request."

It took Marcus a while to get the rabbi's point. Already this Dobrinsky had extracted a donation to his *shul* from Marcus's father. Now he was trying to extract a doubles game from Marcus. "Fine," Marcus said, "but only for an hour."

"An hour is all we play. In case you hadn't noticed, we are not such young men." He introduced Marcus's partner, Victor Eisen, and the rabbi's partner, Isaac Karsh. Rita Crookstein loaned Marcus a shirt and shorts. The racquet's frame was dented, as if someone had smashed it against the court, and the strings were strung too loose, but as keyed up as he was, Marcus felt confident he could beat the rabbi and Isaac Karsh with a fly swatter.

Yet once they were on the court, he muffed shot after shot. The ball failed to clear the net or went sailing out of bounds. He dribbled in serves so weak they could have been returned by a crippled Girl Scout. Sweat cascaded down his brow and made the racquet slip inside his grip. He rarely played on clay, and this threw off his rhythm. His opponents' yarmulkes were the same fluorescent green as the balls and misled his gaze. (No doubt this was intentional. Who had ever seen yarmulkes in such an obnoxious hue?) Worse, his mind was on his father. Marcus would have given anything—gallons of blood, a kidney, the very marrow from his bones—to save his father's life. Instead, he had been asked to play a game of tennis in the Florida heat so his father could have a *bris*, and this he couldn't do.

In no time, Marcus and his partner were behind five games to love. Marcus found it difficult to hit his most powerful shots against two such frail old men. What if Rabbi Dobrinsky ran for a shot and fell? What if Isaac Karsh suffered a heart attack and died?

Nor was Marcus's partner in healthy shape. When Dobrinsky tossed up a lob, Eisen shaded his eyes, scuttled backward like a crab, then shrugged and let the ball drop without trying to smash it. "Stenosis of the spine," he explained to Marcus. "I lean too far back, I could snap something in my neck and be paralyzed for life." When Eisen played

at net and a shot came whizzing toward him, he stepped aside and let it pass. Worse, he was nearly deaf and couldn't hear the strategies for a comeback Marcus whispered in his ear when they switched sides between games.

Karsh was no Rod Laver, but Dobrinsky must have known he was giving Marcus the weaker partner. Marcus suspected the rabbi would try to cheat, but if anything, he was a stickler for the rules. Repeatedly, he called foot faults on Marcus, which no one had ever done, and questioned his every call, demanding to see the skid marks for any shot that landed anywhere near a line. Marcus got so rattled he and his partner lost the first set six games to love, then started going under in the second set.

"Either you're not much of a player," the rabbi gloated, "or you're not trying your best. I won't even consider doing what your father asks me to do unless you win two games."

Marcus was enraged. The rabbi had mentioned nothing about how many games he needed to win to fulfill their bargain. As Dobrinsky prepared to serve, Marcus bent low, weaving and bobbing, forgetting everything except his desire to smash the return of serve crosscourt as deep as possible. The rabbi tossed the ball, and the serve came looping high and wide with a devious slice. But Marcus had played enough games against his father, who used a similarly deceptive spin, to know what to do. He let the ball drop, drew his racquet back and down, then whipped it across his chest.

The rabbi, who had come to net for what he assumed to be a winner, took Marcus's return in his face. His glasses went flying—the tinted lenses came off, as if a bird had lost its wings in flight—and he dropped to his knees and screamed.

Eisen helped him to a chair. Karsh doused a towel with water and laid it across the rabbi's eyes.

Marcus crouched beside the rabbi. "Are you all right? Can you see?" He was appalled at what he had done but couldn't keep from glancing at his watch; there was less than an hour before he was due to meet Schiffler. "You have to admit, I satisfied what you asked. If I get a *mohel* to perform the *bris*, will you sign a certificate of conversion?"

The rabbi raised his fist. "Not in a million years! This is the Almighty's way of reminding me what happens to those who turn a blind eye to deception."

"Oh come on," Marcus scoffed. "You can't seriously believe—"

The rabbi peeled off the towel, and Marcus could see red skid-marks above and below the eye. "No," he said, "I don't. But you knocked some sense back into me. I can't be party to more betrayals. I love your father. He is a very good man. But I will not sign some phony document of conversion." Squinting, he peered from the teary eye, moaned, and shook his head. "And now will someone please drive me to the emergency room before I lose what little sight God has seen fit to spare?"

\* \* \*

Blinding a rabbi was no small matter. Had Marcus helped his father's cause or ruined it? He didn't have the time to carry out his usual calculation as to who owed what to whom. If Schiffler performed the circumcision, the burial society might assume the wound had been the result of a medical procedure in his father's final days and see no reason to ask for a certificate of conversion.

He removed his borrowed clothes, stepped into the shower, and lathered up. He soaped his belly and then his balls. How could the sight of his own circumcised prick not remind him

of his father? What a little thing to have one's foreskin snipped off. Then again, what if Vicki asked that he chop off his little finger? Would he be able to do it?

No. Not even for Vicki. Did that mean he didn't love her? What would Vicki do for *him*? He'd toyed with the idea of asking her to lose a few pounds. Paula, his ex-wife, had been Manhattan thin, which at the time had turned him on. He'd never imagined he could make love to an overweight woman. But Vicki's extra weight served as an aphrodisiac. Marcus would catch himself thinking about all those rolls of flesh, the pillowed breasts and rounded thighs, the soft warm welcome of her vagina, and he would find that he was hard. Even now, his prick reared its foamy head. He worked it in his hand, then braced himself and came; a sad spurt of semen spattered the wall as Marcus wept and cursed.

By that time, he had less than ten minutes to put on his clothes and drive across town in rush-hour traffic to speak to Dr. Schiffler. He arrived twenty minutes late, parked, and ran inside. The waiting room was full; the doctor had been delayed by an emergency and was running late. Marcus was glad he hadn't missed his appointment, but it seemed a punishment that in a city reserved for the very old he should be compelled to spend an hour in a room full of kids.

He took the one remaining seat. Scattered around the carpet were miniature trucks and buses with bobble-headed passengers that fit on the pegs inside. On a table the height of Marcus's shin sat an elaborate wire structure along which a pixie-ish Hispanic child of indeterminate gender slid colorful wooden beads. When Marcus was young, doctors had provided nothing to keep a child amused except tattered copies of *Highlights*, whose goody-goody articles and harsh black-and-white illustrations had irritated him to tears; it wasn't bad enough

you needed to get a shot, you also had to be subjected to pious sermons by a poorly drawn bear.

He tried to read a magazine, but the articles on newborn colic and toddlers' tantrums made him sweat. His mind wandered to his daughter, who lived on Staten Island with her mother. He loved Michelle. But she was tied up in his mind with the grudge his ex-wife held against him for not providing enough help around the house or enough money to support them. Marcus had waited to marry until he'd found a wife as self-sufficient as he was, independent to the point of fierceness, a lawyer whose job it was to ferret out fraud in the banking system of New York State. But his plan had gone too far. The day they'd moved in together, Paula had tacked up a chart on which they could record how much time each of them spent doing chores. Likewise, she insisted they spend exactly the same amount on necessities for the apartment. Marcus could understand why a woman of Paula's generation would fear that her talents might be wasted in the service of her husband's career. But he wasn't an ambitious man. He had grown up with a father who wasn't ashamed to lift a mop. The very fact that Paula felt the need to keep track of what Marcus did or didn't give made him surly and defensive.

Strangely, after the divorce, Paula's scorekeeping had grown even more precise. The amount for Michelle's upkeep was deducted from Marcus's bank account, but Paula—who earned as much as Marcus—demanded that he pay extra for his daughter's ballet and karate lessons and her stays at summer camp, and she kept track of every minute he spent with their daughter, offering monthly statements of both accounts, until Marcus felt as if the girl were a commodity in which he had purchased so many shares.

It struck him that his marriage, like most of his friends' marriages, had failed because each member of the couple had been so wary of being asked to give more than his or her fair share. What he loved about Vicki was her generosity. Like Paula, she worked hard. She was the founder of a bakery that sold muffins and croissants to yuppie groceries around the city. (As her accountant, Marcus had advised her to use less expensive ingredients, to which Vicki had replied that she would rather not bake at all than sell pastries made with axle grease masquerading as a dairy product.) But her philosophy seemed to be that if two people loved each other, they did everything possible to make each other happy. She assumed that Marcus was as generous as she was, and her love and good opinion kindled in his heart a desire to give.

"Mr. Sloan?"

Marcus looked up. The waiting room was empty. The receptionist led Marcus to an office in which a weedy pope-eyed man sat behind a desk. The diplomas on the wall were surrounded by photos of Dr. Schiffer handing oversized checks to the chairpersons of Boca charities, snapshots of children's circumcision ceremonies, and thank-you letters from grateful parents. The doctor shook Marcus's hand. "I understand this has something to do with a circumcision. With complications, you said? An interfaith marriage, I take it? Perhaps your wife and in-laws are upset or confused about the ritual?" The pediatrician smoothed his tie, which was printed with those colorful costumed children found on products sold by UNICEF. "Tell me about your problem and I will do everything I can to make this event a *simcha*, even for the non-Jewish individuals involved."

Buoyed by Schiffer's open-mindedness, Marcus related his quandary, although even as he spoke he wondered what kind

of madman would be telling such a tale. Usually, when he entered a doctor's office, it was in his capacity as an accountant and the doctor was the one who had something unsavory to explain. Now Marcus was the *shnorrer*. It wasn't a position he favored. In high school, they'd read a play in which Marcus had found a line that encapsulated his own philosophy: *Neither a borrower nor a lender be*. Yet here he was, begging favors from everyone he met. Only the fact that he was begging these favors on his father's behalf lent the begging some nobility.

The pediatrician picked up a pencil and, to Marcus's amazement, used it to clean his ears. He wiggled the pencil briskly, as if to dislodge the screwy request, then said he couldn't possibly circumcise a dying man. "I would need to put your father under general anesthesia, and between that and the procedure, I would be hastening his death. I might even kill him outright. The hospital would never allow such a thing. And my conscience would not permit it."

Marcus was reluctant to push the matter further, but he had already invested so much time in his scheme, he tried another tack. Perhaps Dr. Schiffer might be willing to perform the circumcision on his father at home? "Not under general anesthesia, but the way you do it with babies. I mean, maybe we could get him drunk?"

The doctor glanced around as if he expected Alan Funt to step out of a closet and ask him to smile. "You aren't serious. Are you? What do you think I am? I could lose my license for a stunt like that!"

Marcus raised his palms. "The joke of a desperate man. I appreciate your taking the time to listen." He reached in his pocket and removed his checkbook. "I don't suppose a donation would change your mind?"

Schiffer looked around again. By now he seemed frantic, as if he were being set up for a sting.

"What I mean is, in return for taking up your valuable time, I am happy to write a check to your favorite charity. But maybe you would prefer I send it directly to the March of Dimes rather than making it out to you?"

The doctor smiled wanly. "Yes. Certainly. Thank you. I must have misunderstood." He rose and held the door. "I'm afraid my receptionist has gone home for the day. Just follow the signs to the waiting room, then let yourself out."

Retracing his steps, Marcus passed a nurse's station on the top of which sat a cardboard box of lollipops, a pad of the doctor's letterhead, and a stack of bandages and gauze. He didn't yet have a plan. But the moment he placed the lollipop, the letterhead, and the packet of gauze in his trouser pocket, the plan began to sprout.

\* \* \*

He found his father sleeping. His skin glowed eerily against the sheets.

"Mr. Sloan?"

Marcus turned. His father's gerontologist beckoned from the hall. "I'm glad you were able to get here in time." Marcus was suspicious of any doctor who worked in Florida—they seemed a pack of jackals that had migrated south to take advantage of the dying Jews—but his father's gerontologist, Dr. Pevsky, was a compassionate warm-hearted man. Boyishly thin and sweet faced, with stooped shoulders and curly silver hair, he gave the impression of eternal youth combined with extreme old age, as if he had taken on himself the burdens of his patients. "I'm sorry to have to tell you, but it doesn't look

good. We don't usually suggest this, but if he continues to refuse the transplant, which, to be honest, I completely understand, there isn't anything we can do for him here. I was wondering how you would feel about taking your father home."

*Home to die*, the doctor meant. Marcus's stomach shrank. He had never seen anyone die. The night his mother's heart gave out, he had been at a rock concert in Monticello, his parents having granted him the evening off from his job as headwaiter in the children's dining room. At the time, he'd been relieved that he hadn't seen his mother's corpse, but later he regretted that he hadn't had the chance to ask her forgiveness for all his snotty backtalk. And the chance to say good-bye. He wasn't about to make the same mistake with his father. *Good-bye, Pop, forgive me. Good-bye, good-bye, good-bye.*

The doctor lifted his hands. "Of course, there's always the hospice center. But in your father's condition, it won't be more than a few days. And having him die at home might have certain advantages."

*Advantages*, Marcus thought. "Yes. I would prefer that my father die at home."

The doctor seemed taken aback at how quickly Marcus had agreed to his suggestion. "If you're sure. Perhaps you need a few days to consider all the options? Make certain you're up to the strain? Although if you do choose to take your father home, a visiting nurse will stop by every afternoon to help you keep him comfortable." He gripped Marcus's hand, and Marcus was touched to see that the corners of his eyes were wet.

Marcus went back inside the room and sat by his father's bed, stroking his yellow arm. Just as he was about to leave, his father's eyelids fluttered open.

"Hey, Pop. It's Marcus."

"Your mother . . ." He used his tongue to wet his lips. "I dreamed Claire was here. Beside me. In this bed."

Marcus shrugged to say *who knew?* "How would you like to go home?" He could see this information flatten his father's face. "Of course, if you'd rather stay here . . . Or we could move you to a hospice."

His father shook his head. "Home. No hospice." Again he licked his lips. "And the other? Dobrinsky? Schiffer?"

Marcus fought his qualms and lied. "Everyone's on board. When the time is right, they've all agreed to do what needs to be done."

His father sank back and closed his eyes. Marcus was surprised he didn't ask for details. He probably didn't want to know.

The wife of the man in the next bed reminded her daughter-in-law to bring a box of cookies for the nurses.

"What Mom is really saying," the son chimed in, "is if you bribe them with cookies, they'll come running faster if Dad needs help."

"And what's wrong with that?" the mother asked. "Just don't get the cheap ones from Publix. Go to that nice bakery in the mall. Get some elephant ears and a pound of *rugelach*. Don't skimp, we shouldn't look cheap."

Just as Marcus thought he could stand the conversation no longer, his father opened his eyes and asked, "What about the woman?"

"Woman, Pop?"

"The baker."

Marcus assumed his father was referring to the conversation about the cookies. But his father made a wavy shape in the air with one hand. "*Zafzig*," he said, and Marcus knew he meant

Vicki. It wasn't hard to see why his father liked her. Marcus cooked so rarely he owned only two pots, but in honor of his father's visit to Manhattan, Vicki had prepared a magnificent meal, beginning with a mushroom barley soup whose flavors brought tears to his father's eyes and ending with a peach strudel so rich Marcus's father had felt impelled to kiss Vicki's hand. In Boca, Vicki had taken one peek in his father's cupboard and immediately gone out shopping; she'd returned with six bags of staples and a selection of gourmet items that Marcus was sure his father would never eat, although the next time he came to visit, all these items were gone.

"I like a woman who's got some meat and potatoes on her bones," his father had often said, a preference borne out by the fact that Marcus's mother had been anything but svelte. Which, no doubt, was why Marcus used to be attracted to skinny women. Who wanted to think he was making love to his mother?

"Marry her!" his father whispered hoarsely. "Marry that girl today!"

And Marcus didn't argue. Instead, he waited until his father's eyes had closed, got in his car, and drove as quickly as he could back to the development.

The drive seemed to take forever, as did placing the call to Vicki. *Come on*, he thought, *come on*, urging the signal north.

"Sweetheart!" she cried, her voice clotted with whatever pastry she'd been tasting. "I've been thinking about you and your father all day. How did it go? How is he?"

And out it all came, in a wholehearted, uncensored way that Paula never would have allowed. Not that she wouldn't have cared. But she would have been waiting for her turn so she could tell him what had gone wrong at her office that day.

"Oh, Marcus," Vicki said, "I can't think of anything more

upsetting. Do you want me to come down there? I could hop on the next plane."

Oh no, he said, she shouldn't even think of coming down. Whatever his father asked, Marcus had to be the one to do it. Still, Vicki's willingness to listen calmed him. When they had exhausted every possibility for solving his father's problem and had hashed out at least a few of the implications of his father's revelation about not being Jewish, Marcus felt stable enough to ask what was new with her.

"Nothing you need to worry about. That new guy I hired left a stack of towels too near the stove. You can imagine all the smoke. We lost most of a day before we could get back in the kitchen."

It touched him that to avoid upstaging his trials in Florida, she had minimized what must have been a frightening event and a serious financial strain. "I love you," he said.

"I love you, too," she said, which was followed by a pause in which she must have been wondering what he had decided about getting married. "I miss you. Call me anytime."

He almost blurted out that if having fifteen children was the price he had to pay for keeping her in his life, then fifteen children they would have. But she took another bite, and the sound of her mastication prevented him from saying any more than "I'm sorry about the fire" before he hung up.

\* \* \*

The next morning, the ambulance drove up and the EMTs unloaded Marcus's father and carried him to his room. As his father lay in the musty condo drifting in and out of sleep, Marcus sat beside him, unable to think of anything except how much he owed this man and how little he could do to pay him

back. Maybe that was the source of the resentment in so many families. The parents stewed about how much they had sacrificed for their kids while the children chafed at being saddled with all that guilt. What changed the equation for Marcus was his newfound understanding that his father hadn't sacrificed quite as much as Marcus had always thought.

For an entire day and night, his father barely surfaced from the depths. Marcus couldn't focus enough to read *Exodus* or *Reader's Digest*. He ripped the skin from a blister he must have gotten playing tennis. He bit the cuticles around his nails, peeled the calluses from his feet. To keep from giving himself a whole-body circumcision, he rummaged through the drawers. To find what, a cache of gay porn? A syringe and a vial of heroin? In the bathroom, Marcus found nothing more questionable than a pack of bubble-gum flavored floss; in the den, nothing but an envelope whose contents verified that his father had indeed left half of the few pennies in his account to Rabbi Dobrinsky's *shul*. Marcus didn't mind about the money. What made him feel cheated was the wealth of information his father would take to his grave. How had Marcus's grandparents ended up in Texas? What country had they come from? Had any of Marcus's ancestors fought in the Civil War, and, if they had, on the Northern or Southern side? What had his father's baptism been like? Had he grown up eating pork, and, if so, had he liked it?

In the kitchen drawers, Marcus found plastic forks and coupons and a stack of Christmas cards from a man who appeared to be his father's buddy from the war. The man's greetings seemed effusive. Had the sender of these cards been the soldier his father had saved? Marcus would need to let him know his father had passed away. But the cards were bare of envelopes. Hoping to find an address book, he emptied the

drawer. At the bottom lay a directory of Jewish services in Boca Raton. Marcus thumbed the pages, and there, under RITUAL CIRCUMCISIONS, he saw a list of three *mohels*.

The first number was disconnected, and whoever answered the second number didn't have a clue what a *mohel* was—the directory, Marcus saw, was five years out of date. But the third *mohel* not only answered, he said he would be happy to meet with Marcus that afternoon.

"To tell the truth," he said in a heavy old-world accent, "business hasn't been so good." He laughed a wheezy laugh. "I have nothing on my agenda. I am not the type to play tennis or golf."

"I'll be there in an hour," Marcus said. When the visiting nurse stopped by, he was halfway out the door before she set down her bag.

The address the *mohel* gave him was in the only shabby section of Boca that Marcus had ever seen. The crooked mossy lanes were lined with stunted palms and flimsy pastel cottages that hadn't been painted since the fifties. Marcus's knock echoed, and when the old man let him in, the un-conditioned air, laden with pipe smoke and the odor of salted fish, nearly knocked Marcus out. By the time the *mohel* had led him to his "study"—a tiny room with a folding metal chair, a child-size desk, and shelves and shelves of books in Hebrew—Marcus was already soaked. The man offered him a glass of hot tea, but the idea of drinking anything hot appalled him. "Nothing, I'm fine, but thank you."

The *mohel* sat heavily. "*Mazel tov* on the son." He slapped his thighs, his rheumy eyes shimming. But as Marcus explained the details of why he'd come, the *mohel* bowed his head—his beard brushed his chest, which was bare to the sternum, the shirt unbuttoned to either side. After Marcus finished, the *mohel*

lifted his chin and stroked his beard. "So, this is quite a situation you've gotten yourself into. I suppose you would pay a considerable sum to convince me to perform this *bris*."

Why, the wily old bastard! Of course, given the man's poverty, such a shakedown made sense. The *mohel's* shirt was so old the fabric had turned as yellow as Marcus's father's skin. His trousers were threadbare, and he wasn't wearing shoes; his cheap white cotton socks had a hole in each big toe.

The old man grinned—gray teeth, gums an unhealthy brown. "I suppose a successful man like you has a fair amount of money in his wallet."

As a matter of fact, he did. On his way to the airport, Marcus had stopped at an ATM and withdrawn five hundred dollars, of which he'd spent only forty. He removed the wad of cash and held it toward the *mohel*. In a way, it would be a *mitzvah* to give a bribe to such a poor man. Pediatricians like Schiffer probably were putting their more traditional counterparts out of business.

Slowly, the *mohel* stood. He held out a thick-nailed hand and made a gimme-gimme motion. When Marcus didn't move, the hand darted out and snatched the cash. Marcus jumped back, and the *mohel* startled him even more by dashing the money to the floor and stomping on it as if it were a roach. With one white-socked foot planted across the bills, the *mohel* began to shout. "To be a Jew there are no shortcuts! God demanded that Father Abraham be circumcised at ninety-nine, and because Abraham agreed, God told him that his seed would be as numerous as the sands on the beach. Abraham didn't try to sneak out of the operation. He didn't wait until he was dying and no longer conscious of the pain. Think of all the pain *one* child can cause. How should Abraham have become father to *millions* of Jews with no pain at all?" Shakily, the *mohel* bent,

scooped the money in his fist, and shook it at Marcus. "Get out, and take your filthy money with you!"

A moment later, Marcus stood by his car, holding the bills and trembling. It was a relief to be outside, but he was dizzy and out of breath. How was it fair to punish a person for handing over a bribe he'd been finagled into offering? And that speech about Father Abraham . . .

He dropped to his knees. *Oh, God, don't let me pass out here.* He glanced at the *mohel's* house and saw the curtain flicker. The heat blared. A lizard skittered past his hand. He touched his forehead to the sidewalk, fighting the urge to crawl back to the *mohel's* house, scratch at the door, and beg to be let back in.

That's when he heard the voice. Or rather, a wordless chant, a honeyed vibrating hum. He looked up at the sun, whose rays poured down and blinded him, wave after wave of light and heat and hum. He understood what he understood. Things were what they were. His father was what he was. *Oh, God*, he thought, *thank you.* He staggered to his feet, brushed the broken seashells from his palms, found a sprinkler on a ratty lawn a few houses down, wet his face, then drove back to his father's condo to wait and let whatever might happen happen.

\* \* \*

He resumed his bedside vigil. And the longer he sat, the more he came to see that unless he took matters into his own hands—literally—neither he nor his father ever would have a chance to be at peace. He wanted desperately to talk to Vicki, but if he spoke to her now he would feel compelled to reveal his plan, and she would tell him that he was nuts.

"Claire!" His father's arm flailed across the mattress, groping for his wife. Then "Reuven!" and "Hattie!"—Marcus's

grandparents' names. "Reuven! Hattie! Claire!" Soon he would slip below the surface a final time. The visiting nurse arrived and left. The evening stretched ahead.

Marcus got a tumbler from the kitchen, then found his father's stash of Manischewitz and carried the bottle and cup to his father's room. He shook his father's arm. "Dad? It's time. Wake up."

Remarkably, his father opened his eyes. "Time? Schiffler's coming?"

Marcus held out the cup. "He told me to get you good and drunk."

Though his father looked frightened, he tried his best to smile. "Sure, I'm a regular *shikker*," he said, and Marcus had to laugh. Neither of his father's two religions, the real or the adopted, encouraged the use of alcohol. But Jews allowed themselves a sip of candyish wine to commemorate important rites. His father gulped down the Manischewitz, then motioned for Marcus to pour another cup and slugged that one down, too. He closed his eyes and lay back, a purple moustache above his lip, and soon he was sound asleep.

Marcus counted to a hundred, then clapped his hands by his father's ear. When his father didn't stir, he went to the den and rummaged through the trousers he had worn to visit Schiffler. He found the items he had pilfered from Schiffler's office and laid them next to his father's bed, then took a very long breath, peeled back his father's sheet, and lifted his gown.

There it was, neither overly large nor small, not so badly wrinkled, an orange-yellow mouse curled up in its nest of silky white hair. The foreskin dangled like the tip of an un-inflated condom. Intellectually, Marcus knew this was the natural state of the male organ, but the hood on his father's penis seemed

somehow devious, as if it were hiding something. And the penis as a whole was nothing like Marcus's own.

*How can you be my father? How can I be your son?*

So it was with anger as well as love that he gripped his father's cock and twisted it, this way, then that, and then for good measure he twisted it again, as if, by sheer force, he could twist off his father's foreskin. Tears rose in his eyes. *I'm sorry*, he thought, then opened a pack of gauze. Clumsily, he stuck a pad to either side of his father's cock, which was red now as well as yellow, and wrapped the whole thing in tape so it stood away from his father's groin like an obscenely prominent erection.

Marcus printed a few hasty lines on the pediatrician's letter-head, then set it beside the lollipop.

His father jerked awake. He looked up at Marcus with pleading, befuddled eyes. "So?" he said. "Is it done?" Gingerly, he caressed his swaddled cock.

Marcus nodded.

"The pediatrician? Schiffler?"

Again Marcus nodded. Maybe, if he didn't speak, he couldn't be accused of lying. Then again, what was so awful about a lie? Maybe the immorality lay in whatever cowardice the lie was meant to hide.

"It hurts," his father said, "but not nearly as bad as I thought it would." His father smiled—a genuine smile this time—and Marcus's heart fluttered.

He handed his father the lollipop. "Here. He said you were such a good patient you deserved a treat."

His father took the candy by the stick and waved it. "A fine man, didn't I tell you? A real *mensh*." A look of concern crossed his face. "What did he charge? I wouldn't want the fee should come out of your pocket."

Marcus picked up the sheet of letterhead and passed it to his father, who passed it back and motioned that Marcus should read what it said aloud.

"One adult circumcision, local anesthetic. Fee: contribution in the amount of \$500 to the March of Dimes of Boca Raton, Florida."

His father beamed. "See? This is how a real Jew behaves." He closed his eyes to savor the bliss not only of waking to find himself circumcised but also receiving proof the world held righteous men. Then he opened his eyes and moaned. "Did he by any chance leave something for the pain?"

Marcus hadn't planned another lie, but this one came out as if he'd scripted it. "Not with the shape your liver is in. Schiffler said even one Tylenol might finish you off."

His father shrugged. "My comeuppance for waiting so long. Soon the pain won't matter." He closed his eyes and, still smiling, drifted back to sleep.

Marcus used the chance to call Dobrinsky. "You can come or not come, but there isn't much time."

The rabbi's answer was noncommittal. "I'm not forgetting you nearly blinded me."

"Rabbi Dobrinsky, my father is dying. I'm calling to inform you of his condition. If you can see your way toward coming, my father would be obliged. If you can't, we'll get along without you." He hung up and went back in.

His father was awake. "I was thinking. A convert is supposed to bathe in the *mikveh*. Of course, if it's too much trouble . . . But even a dip in a tub or pool . . ."

Marcus went to the window and peered between the jealousies. The sun was almost down, but the streetlights gave off the same yellowish glow as his father's skin. "Sure, Pop. It won't be official, but we'll do the best we can." Tenderly, he

wrapped his father in the sheet and lifted him in his arms. His father was so full of fluids he nearly sloshed, but Marcus had little trouble carrying him across the lot.

Unfortunately, the pool was locked. Marcus could have scaled the fence, but not while carrying his father.

He continued along the path. His father looked up with a quizzical expression, then shrugged and turned his face against Marcus's chest. Marcus saw the rabbi walking toward him. Dobrinsky wore a white shirt, dark pants, a white yarmulke, and street shoes, as if death, like tennis, had a dress code. If not for the eye patch, he might have looked like a rabbi. But the closer Dobrinsky came, the more Marcus felt pursued by a shifty old pirate determined to steal the treasure from his arms.

Marcus veered off the path, his feet sliding on the stiff slick grass. Peering at the shadowy ground to avoid stepping in a nest of fire ants, he approached the lagoon. Something in the distance splashed—a frog, he hoped, or a turtle. To be a true *mikveh*, a body of water had to be free flowing, which Marcus doubted this lagoon to be. Then again, all water came from somewhere. And flowed to somewhere else.

His shoes filled with sludge. Another step and he sank in to his calves. His father opened his eyes and looked up. Marcus looked up, too. The sky was wild with stars, the kind of spectacular array Marcus never saw in the city.

He dipped his father in the lake and bathed him the way a parent bathes his child. The way, if all went well, Marcus would soon bathe the child to whom his wife gave birth.

The sheet absorbed the sludge, and the burden in his arms grew so heavy he could barely lift it. What a bother it would be to disinter his mother and her parents from their plot at Ahavath Yisroel and move their remains to a more ecumenical

cemetery where his father could join them, along with Marcus himself, and Vicki, and whatever children they might have, and, for all Marcus knew, his daughter and former wife. Let everyone in the world who wanted to be buried in the Sloan-Lieberman family plot be buried at his expense. The more guests checked in, the merrier it would be.

Above him, on the bank, Dobrinsky slipped and cursed, although the curse, being in Yiddish, sounded more like a blessing. Dobrinsky limped down to the shore and stood beside Marcus, then he adjusted his eye patch and started chanting a Hebrew prayer whose melody and words Marcus had never heard. Nothing the rabbi said or did now would exert the slightest effect on his father's religious status. But the simple fact of the rabbi's presence might bring his father peace, and for that Marcus was glad.

*Oh Pop, Marcus thought, you were such a generous man. Why did you stop a few millimeters short of doing all you could? Because even if a person was asked to cut off his foreskin, or, for that matter, his entire cock, he needed to give and give and give, no matter how frightened the giving made him, no matter how much it hurt.*

Marcus raised his face to the star-drenched sky, and even as the rabbi sang whatever prayer he saw fit to sing, Marcus composed his own prayer of thanks for having been allowed to repay even a small part of the debt he owed his father. Although really, it didn't make much sense to keep track of such matters, any more than it made sense to measure what the sun and stars gave a person as opposed to what that person gave to the sun and stars.