

# THE CARD PARTY

by

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“Esther, turn off the water!”

Esther Meyer shuddered. Samara Klein’s voice had risen through the floor, as if from hell. Looking up from the dishes Esther was washing, she imagined her landlady, Samara—her moustache a coffee stain above her upper lip. *You’re worried about water?* Esther spit. *There’s water for you.* With the back of her hand she wiped the dribble from her chin; then she turned off the faucets, first the cold, then the hot.

It was September 1967, and the Meyers had recently moved into the Futurama development in East Flatbush. They couldn’t afford to buy so they rented an apartment in the Klein’s two-family house. In Washington Heights, where they’d lived in an elevator building, no one had complained that they were using too much water. And the walls there were like brick. But Esther’s husband Harry had said the neighborhood was changing. The *schvartzes* were moving in, the Puerto Ricans, too. There were a few Israelis sprinkled here and there, but for the most part, almost all the Jews were gone.

Esther went into the bathroom to turn off the water running in the tub. She had planned to take a soothing bath, but the hot water trickling in was barely enough to keep the water warm. There was so little humidity in the room, not one strand of her thick, blonde hair had frizzed. Yet, Samara Klein complained she was going to end up in the poor house from all the hot water the Meyers used.

“You bitch,” Esther said beneath her breath, wondering if Samara could hear her downstairs.

The Kleins spent most of their time in their finished basement, below Esther’s apartment, rather than above them in their duplex. Samara sat in front of her television, day after day, watching her stories and wringing her hands over the water swishing in the pipes. She heard everything that went on in the Meyer’s apartment, every sneeze, cough and fart.

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Last night Esther's teenage son, Jacob, had pointed his ass toward the door leading to the basement and let out a big one. Esther had held a dishtowel to her mouth to muffle her joyous squeals. Then her daughter had shouted, "Will you tell him to act normal?"

At 16, Helen didn't know how good she had it, living in a Futurama. She'd spent the summer lounging at the Sun & Swim Club in Canarsie. When Esther was Helen's age, she was at Club Auschwitz, bald without so much as one strand of hair, never mind Helen's rich, black mane. Sometimes Esther thought about sneaking into Helen's room while she slept and snipping it off. Just to teach her to appreciate her life.

This afternoon, Esther looked forward to the relaxation of her bath. Harry was at the shoe store he managed. Helen was staying late at school for a play rehearsal. Jacob was at his part-time job at Bailey's Haberdashery and, Esther prayed, not meeting the hoodlums he'd come in with in Washington Heights. But in the Futuramas he hadn't yet made one friend. When Jacob opened his mouth to complain, like he had that morning, yelling, "I hate living here!" the Kleins got an earful. Esther and Harry immediately tilted their heads toward the floor and said in unison, "*Sha*, not so loud."

Now, Esther put a bottle of frosted, pearl white nail polish on the edge of the tub, and poured *Jean Naté* bath beads into the water, turning the water aquamarine. Then she slipped out of her duster and hung it on a pink hook on the back of the door.

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Tonight, four couples from the Futuramas were getting together to play poker. Esther was pleasant to her neighbors, but she didn't want people getting so close they'd sniff around about Jacob. But Harry had insisted they attend the card game, since it was in the home of Sam Friedman, the president of the temple. In the shoe store, where Harry worked his partner charmed the ladies, running his fingers down the slope of their calves as he slipped the shoehorn between their heels and the leather pumps. At home, Esther ran the show. But at temple, Harry starred. Sam had given him the honor of blowing the shofar this past Yom Kippur; not to attend his card party would be an insult.

Sam and Gloria Friedman were the first couple to have bought a house in the Futurama development. As a builder, Sam often remarked that he wished he'd come up with the idea to turn the swamp land between Flatbush and Canarsie into two-family attached homes. Within three months the houses had all sold. On the south end of Brooklyn there was now a small suburb of tree-lined streets, with its own temple, public elementary school and

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library, and shopping center. Seventy-five percent of these homes were owned by Jewish families, and at least half were Holocaust survivors.

The Meyers had heard about the Futuramas from friends they'd summered with in the Catskills. One by one their friends were moving from their apartments in tenement buildings in the Bronx and Queens and Brooklyn, to houses they purchased in this new development. These modern homes with their Formica kitchen counters and built-in ovens were a chance to live a life of modest luxury.

Esther had no shame being a renter. But each time Harry made out a check to Samara and Murray for rent, he reminded her he had promised her a palace, and one day, she would have one.

"For what do I need a palace?" she'd say. Esther knew what was important in this life.

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Esther was about to step into the tub when she heard a rapping at the door leading to the basement. She slipped into her duster, fished a cigarette from her pocket, quickly lit it, and prepared to face Samara. Opening the door, she was surprised to see Samara's husband standing there.

"Murray," she said uneasily, holding her duster tight at the neck with her cigarette hand. She clenched her other hand in a fist, threading her thumb through her middle and index finger, and hid it behind her back. If Murray gave her the evil eye, the special fist would send it right back on him.

"Is everything alright?" she asked.

He smiled and leaned against the doorjamb, six feet tall and slender like a swimmer. "Samara's getting her hair done," he said. "She's at the beauty parlor in Mill Basin."

Esther snorted. To look at Samara, with her brown, greasy hair like a helmet around her head, you'd think she'd never seen a bottle of shampoo, never mind the inside of a salon. "Well I'm sure she'll be home soon..."

"We're going to the Friedman's tonight," he said, putting his left foot halfway into the apartment.

Had Esther known she'd be spending the evening with the Kleins, she'd have politely refused, regardless of what Harry wanted. "We'll see you there later," Esther said, motioning that she was about to close the door.

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“Samara tells me you girls are having a problem with the water,” he said.

Her face went blank. “The water?” She let her hand slip a bit, so that she wasn’t so closed up at the neck.

“The bathing. Samara says the water is going all night long.”

“We’re four people Murray. What do you suggest? Communal showers like in Auschwitz?”

“At least we were clean, eh, Esther?” he said.

She shuddered, recalling the way she’d huddled naked with the other women, the water pounding their heads like needles. “Those were the days, Murray?”

“But look where we are now...”

“Still no hot water...”

“Speaking of which...maybe you can cut down on the baths to every other day.”

Esther tightened her hold on the fabric at her neck. She didn’t have to give such a cheapskate a thrill. “You are with the SS, Murray?”

“You’re a jokester, eh, Esther? You know I took off \$20 from the rent, and threw in a paint job. For nice people we were happy to extend ourselves. We keep our mouths shut about Jacob...”

“What does this have to do with my son?”

“Esther, let’s be honest. Another landlord would throw you out with all his yelling.”

Esther’s fist was shaking wildly. “You think one day your Steven won’t give you trouble?”

“Take it easy...I’m only asking...”

“That we be careful with the water,” Esther said.

“Yes...that’s all.”

“This will buy you what? Another lamp for the mausoleum upstairs?”

“We hardly make anything on your apartment.”

Esther was fighting back an urge to tell him to look for another punching bag. They’d be out in the morning. But Harry would kill her, and where would they go?

“Don’t worry,” she said, swallowing her words. “I’ll tell Harry and the kids to watch with the water.”

Murray stood straight, removing his foot from the door, but held the door open with his elbow. “You’re a very beautiful woman Esther, do you know that?”

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An electric current shot through her. “What do you want?”

He smiled. “Maybe I can finagle something with the water if I can step inside for just a minute...”

“Please. I’m not ready for company...”

“Esther, you came to the door in a robe...nobody is home...what am I to think?”

Her fist was banging out a crescendo against her leg. “Listen, Mister,” she sputtered. “You want I should tell the neighborhood, ‘Murray Klein is a cheapskate...and a...a gigolo?’”

“You can’t take a joke, eh, Esther? I’m only kidding with you...”

“This is a joke? Watch me,” she said walking toward the telephone on the kitchen wall. “I’m going to show you another joke. I’m calling the Friedmans to ask if I can bathe in their house later because the Kleins...”

“Esther...I said I would finagle with the water. What more do you want? Give me a few seconds, I’ll make an adjustment with the pipes, and you’ll have your hot water.” With that, he let the door go and scrambled down the stairs.

Esther quickly locked the door. Then she released her thumb from her fingers, gave her wrist a good shake and rubbed her thigh. She had a black and blue mark there from years of knocking but she didn’t care. Her fist had served her well. Protected her from the filthy SS. Murray Klein was small potatoes compared.

She sniffed under her arms. A quick dunk wouldn’t hurt her. She turned on the hot faucet, and after a stream of tepid water, steam rose. Esther put a shower cap over her bubble hairdo, to keep it from frizzing. Then she stepped into the tub and let the heat wash over her. The water seemed to seep inside her pores, washing out the Murray’s of the world. She sighed, picturing them drowning in the tub, buried in the pipes after the water swooshed out and sucked them down the drain.

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Samara Klein’s scalp was on fire. She slid out from beneath the hairdryer, and untied the hairnet covering her curlers. “I’m burning up,” she said to the hairdresser, Marie, while tearing at her hair.

“Mrs. Klein, your hair is damp,” she said, feeling the ends of her dark locks. “Now stay still while I curl you up again.”

Samara flinched. Marie was fluttering around her, making her crazy with nerves.

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“You know us gals have to suffer to be gorgeous...”

“Suffer? You want I should tell you about suffering?”

“Please, Mrs. Klein, this is your day for pampering. Let’s get you back under the dryer for a few minutes,” she said through a mouthful of bobby pins. She turned the dial on the dryer down to warm, and set it for ten minutes.

Samara flipped through a copy of *Vogue*. The models who were skin and bones could never snag a man like her Murray. He was the handsomest man in East Flatbush. When she met him after the war, he was broken. His wife and son had been exterminated in the gas chambers.

Samara wasn’t a looker – she had a plain face; small brown eyes a bit too close, a yellowish hue to her complexion, thin lips. But she had the equipment to get a man.

In Poland, she’d spent ten months hiding in the home of a Catholic priest; unlike the other girls who were emaciated from the camps, she’d retained her plumpness feasting on bread and potatoes. The first night she and Murray had met at a café she took him to her room and opened her legs for him. He lost himself in the fleshy folds of her thighs and in the space between her ample breasts. By the end of a week, she had nursed him to health.

Opening her purse, she took out a Kleenex and dabbed at her neck. She was *shvitzing* under the dryer, and Marie hadn’t checked on her. Samara didn’t care. At the end of the day she had the prize. Two model children who didn’t make so much as a peep, not like Esther’s kids, and a husband who didn’t insist she work. Esther thought she was something with her blonde hair, and three-inch high heels from Harry’s store. She wore them even when she came down to the basement to do the wash. That was another thing Murray would have to talk to Esther about. So many loads for a family of four.

There was a light tapping on the dryer. “Mrs. Klein, you’re ready,” Marie said, smiling. She lifted the hood from her head. Marie took out her curlers, then combed dippity doo through her hair with her fingers. “A special occasion?” she asked. “Is it your anniversary?”

The Kleins never celebrated anniversaries and birthdays. Watching the stories on television was enough of a holiday. On the soaps, people survived brain tumors, car explosions, falling over cliffs. They even came back from the dead.

“We’re going to play cards,” Samara responded, looking at her watch. She tensed up knowing she would barely get home in time for *General Hospital*.

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Gloria Friedman snapped the ends of the white linen tablecloth so that it flew out in the air, then spread flat atop the card table. Earlier in the day she'd taken her good silverware out of the maple chest and placed it near the china on the credenza. It was the first time that people from the temple were coming over, and she didn't want talk afterwards that she didn't know how to entertain or keep a house.

She opened up a can of peanuts and filled two crystal candy dishes. Then she poured half a bag of almonds into two Lenox bowls and mixed them with plump, golden raisins. Her mouth watered. She slipped an almond into her mouth, bit down hard and went into the kitchen to put an apple cake in the oven.

Gloria had met Sam three months after arriving from Czechoslovakia, at a lingerie factory where she hoped to get a job as a seamstress. Sam was the office manager. When he shook Gloria's hand, he noticed the numbers tattooed on her wrist. Tears sprung to his eyes.

Sam, an American Jew, was single, and at 37 he thought his time had passed. On Gloria's third day at work he took her out for lunch to Horn & Hardart. She stared into the glass cylinders, mesmerized by the way the sandwiches and pies slid out on little trays. When they sat down at the table, he asked her, "Did your family come over with you?"

Gloria's hand trembled. She put down her sandwich and said, "My two sisters survived. One lives in Tel Aviv, the other in Haifa." She turned toward the window and watched the crowds of people. "Look the way they walk around. Laughing. Without burden. Life in America is good?"

Sam smiled. "Yes," he said. "Very good."

Three weeks later they married. Sam treated Gloria like she was a queen. He told her to quit her job and when she didn't, he fired her. When she became pregnant with Alan, their first child, he took her to Famous Restaurant every night and hired someone to clean the small apartment refusing to let her lift a finger.

Gloria was strong as an ox. In Czechoslovakia her mother had managed the family business, while her father spent much of his time studying. Doing nothing gave Gloria too much time to think. The birth of her children was a sweetness she never thought she'd taste. But Sam kept her like a tiger in a cage. He had left the factory and was making money hand over fist in real estate. He hired a maid to cook and clean. When their youngest started school Gloria had too much time again. Her thoughts swirled inside of her day and night,

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often she couldn't sleep. Once Sam had wanted to know everything, but she hadn't been ready to tell him. Now he was busy with this building and that one.

When they moved to the Futuramas she made herself up glamorous the way Sam liked. When he became President of the temple, he twirled her around the room and called her his first lady. The card party had been his idea. He saw himself as being an employee of God's. The Meyers and the Kleins had barely nodded at one another during the high holy days. Neighbors needed to stick together. Hadn't they learned anything after Hitler?

Gloria reached her finger in her mouth to pick out the bits of almonds stuck between her teeth. Then she opened the refrigerator. A large Tupperware bowl filled with raspberry Jell-O mold rested on the top shelf. Her cleaning lady had prepared it the day before. She sighed. There was nothing left for her to do but dress before her guests arrived.

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Tchava Saphirstein had four and a half fingers on her left hand. While helping her daughter Rosalie try on a wedding dress, her amputated finger stared up at her like a claw. The only value the useless digit had was to remind her from where she came.

One second she'd had five fingers, the next, half was gone. Cut off on a sawing machine in the munitions factory in Russia. It wasn't until two years later when she was in Brooklyn Women's Hospital after giving birth that she wept. And now here she was in the bridal department in Abraham & Strauss with Rosalie, just seventeen and almost a bride.

"This dress isn't me, Mom," Rosalie said, turning slowly in front of the mirror, her head twisted over her shoulder, so she could check herself from every angle.

"Let me see," Tchava said, admiring the Belgian lace neckline, and the way the scalloped edge against her pale complexion made her look like a porcelain doll. Rosalie would have a wedding to beat the band. Two hundred fifty people at seventy-five dollars a head at the new temple in Woodmere, Long Island. When the kids returned from their honeymoon, they'd live in a Futurama within walking distance. Tchava had picked out a plush, avocado green carpet for the house she was buying for them. She hadn't yet told Izzy.

Now, Rosalie checked the price tag on the dress and grimaced.

Tchava quickly flicked it out of her hand. "You are paying for this dress?"

"I was thinking of wearing a mini..."

"Maybe you'd like to wear dungarees."

Rosalie rolled her eyes. "You're being crazy."



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“This is Belgian lace. You know what I would give for a dress like this?”

Rosalie bit down on her lip. “It’s twelve hundred dollars...”

“For Belgian lace, you pay top dollar.”

“Mom...you’re giving us the wedding, a trip to Acapulco. We can’t take so much from you.”

“When Eli opens his law practice, he’ll give us legal advice for free. What do you think Rosala...my beautiful daughter?” Tchava stepped back and made a square with her fingers in front of her face, as if she were taking a photograph.

“Right at this moment, you look just like my sister Rosa,” she said.

“I look nothing like Rosa!” Rosalie exploded. Rosalie reached her arms back, but she couldn’t find the buttons running up the back. “Look at me...I’m Rosalie your daughter. I’m *not* Rosa.”

“Who asks you to be Rosa?”

Rosalie’s chest was heaving. “You do...every time you look at me...”

“If not for you, you think I would go on?” She put her hand under Rosalie’s chin. “What’s the matter with you today? You don’t like this dress. We won’t get it.”

Rosalie began to cry now and turned her face.

Tchava went to the rack and sifted through until she found a plain satin dress. She looked at the price tag. “What do you say, my daughter? Five hundred dollars. I can spend this much on you?”

Rosalie looked at herself in the mirror again then gazed over at her mother, her eyes resting on the sliced off finger.

“Can I still have this dress?” Rosalie asked.

“You have to ask me?” Tchava ran to hug her, then left to look for a tailor. She had lived for this moment. Rosalie, a beautiful bride, marrying a man who had a good future. Wait until she told the ladies at the card party about the dress.

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Esther slipped a white, cotton sweater that she’d crocheted over her head. It had three tiny, pearl buttons at the neckline and a sailor collar. Her skin was still tan from the summer, and her mocha skin-tone peeked through the spaces in the stitches. Then she stepped into her navy blue polyester slacks.

“What do you think?” she turned so Harry could see all of her.

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“My beautiful Esther,” he said. He went to the walk-in closet and scanned the floor and shelves. He looked for a good sixty seconds before handing her a pair of navy flats.

“Feel this,” he said, running his fingers over the shoe. “Like marshmallow.”

Esther stepped into the shoes, grateful he hadn’t insisted she wear spiked heels like on the holidays. Every season when a new shoe style came out, Harry turned her into a walking billboard. “You know...I wouldn’t mind so much if we didn’t go out.”

“You want to sit in the house and look beautiful for the four walls? People should say I keep you under lock and key?”

Esther admitted to herself that Harry had a good point. She picked up a white, cotton hanky from the top of the bureau and blotted her lips, then checked herself one more time in the mirror. She watched Harry’s reflection behind her.

He put on a light pink, short-sleeved shirt. The shirt brought an immediate blush to his cheeks, and he looked happy to be alive. He matched the shirt with a pair of black chinos and black leather loafers. Esther turned toward him and nodded her approval. Through the blinds she could see the headlights flip on in the driveway. “They’re going already,” she said.

“And we should too. The kids have what to eat?”

“For Helen I made Southern fried chicken, and Jacob can have a steak. Helen will put it on the broiler for him.”

Harry could hear Helen going “do it yourself,” and Jacob begging, “please” and on and on until she gave in just to stop the begging. Esther had spoiled him rotten and Harry had been unable to stop it. Helen would give them hell when they came home.

Harry helped Esther into her leather coat, and then put on his own. They stepped out the door, Esther carrying a white box containing a seven-layer cake from the bakery. Harry took out a pack of cigarettes. They each put a filter tip between their lips. Harry struck a match and lit the cigarettes. He took a deep drag, then blew circles of smoke.

“We’ll be peaceful tonight with the Kleins, Esther.”

She pinched his midriff and said, “What do you think, I was born yesterday?”

“Not you, Esther.”

They walked quietly past the neat row of houses. Identical replicas of one another, each house had a concrete patio in front of the tenants’ apartment, and upstairs where the landlords lived was a balcony.

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The leaves were turning gold and orange and most had fallen to the ground. They crunched under Esther and Harry's footsteps. When they'd first come to East Flatbush in the spring to look for an apartment, the cherry blossoms were blooming, tulips were growing, and Esther thought she'd arrived in the Garden of Eden. From ashes to a floral panorama.

Esther said, "I didn't tell you that Herr Murray stopped by..."

"Today? The rent is due next week. I have it ready for him."

Her left eye began twitching. "Never mind, it's nothing."

"It's something if you brought it up."

"Something about the windows. Forget it."

Harry tossed his cigarette on the sidewalk and crushed it with his heel. "You think Gloria will have a spread? I barely put two nibbles in my mouth."

"I could have made you a bagel," Esther said.

"I'm sure she'll have something...coffee...cake..."

"The president of the temple isn't going to have food? What are you worried about?"

"Who said I'm worried?" Harry said.

"And they'll have plenty hot water, too. Maybe I'll slip into the bathroom and take another bath..."

"Have you gone insane?" he said, beginning to sweat. "Maybe I should carry on too. You think I'm in one piece because I don't speak of the past? My mother and father were slaughtered like pigs." He spit into the gutter.

"Don't get so excited," Esther said.

"This is the house," Harry shrugged. "Remember, nothing with the Kleins."

Esther examined his face, and with her finger dabbed a drop of saliva from his lower lip. Then she wiped her finger on the side of her leg.

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When the doorbell rang, Sam Friedman was in the living room pouring schnapps for Murray Klein. Gloria was in the master bedroom, showing the ladies the chandelier lamps she and Sam had recently purchased. Tchava's voice was distinct above the others, the way she broke up her syllables like she was singing: "Izzy will be here later-er. How are the child-en?"

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Sam imagined Gloria getting a headache about now. She often complained that all Tchava talked about was her daughter. *Rosalie is engaged to a lawyer-er. Rosalie has a shape like a ballerina.*

Gloria was an active board member of the United Jewish Appeal, and every year she went to the US Masters. Once a week she read to an elderly blind woman. She was worldly and sophisticated and wanted to talk about her own interests. But when she was among the *greena*, conversations centered around the kids.

“Sam didn’t you hear the door?” Gloria asked, running to let in Harry and Esther.

Gloria put one arm around Esther’s waist and the other around Harry’s, and walked them to where the men stood by the piano, that took up one third of the living room. Sam and Murray were wearing black slacks with a sharp crease down the center. Sam wore a lemon yellow shirt, and Murray wore powder blue. When Harry joined them, wearing pink, the three men made a handsome sight in their pastels.

Samara pulled at her knit dress, as if trying to free herself. The fabric clung to her body, showing curves the other women had hidden beneath loose pantsuits. Murray had selected the dress from the back of her closet; the vibrant red squashed between drab dresses in beige and gray had been there for more than eight years, before their son Steven was born.

“Hello, neighbors,” Sam said, passing around small glasses. Then he lifted his own and toasted, “*L’chayim!*”

“*L’chayim,*” everyone repeated, then threw their heads back and swallowed. The warm liquid eased through his neck and shoulders, and he gave a slight shiver. He had a low tolerance for whiskey, especially schnapps, which went straight from his head to his toes. He gestured toward the table which was lush with fresh fruit and candy dishes which overflowed with nuts and raisins. There were two fresh decks of cards in the center. Everyone took a seat, marveling at the table. Only Izzy was yet to arrive; he had hired a new butcher, and had stayed late to oversee his first day.

Sam, at the head of the table, gazed at the faces surrounding him. He felt honored to have earned his neighbors’ respect. Living in the Futuramas, with so many survivors, he was confronted every day with his luck to have not gone through the war. He knew how easily he could’ve been born over there, not here in America. For that matter, anyone could have. But it was these people who were chosen. Sometimes he envied them for the miraculous

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way in which they had risen from Hitler's graveyard and gone on with their lives. Thinking of his evening's mission to teach them about neighbors helping one another, he felt foolish.

"Let's play cards," Sam said.

Esther reached for a deck and began to shuffle. "Gloria, the house is beautiful," she said, her eyes sweeping across the French provincial furniture, which had more delicate lines than her Italian provincial. "Where did you get these mirrors? They're antiques?"

Gloria smiled. Her house was her pride and joy. "We looked all over until we found them in Pennsylvania. They're more than a hundred years old."

"We came from old. I like moder-en," Tchava said, forgetting how taken she'd been just days before with the old-fashioned lace on Rosalie's wedding dress.

"They're not old Tchava, they're antiques," Esther corrected. "We're not on the shtetl anymore. It's very modern to collect antiques."

Tchava raised her eyebrows, then sorted her cards as Esther dealt.

"Your basement is finished?" Samara asked. She spread her cards out in one hand, and then felt her hair with the other, checking on how the beautician's work was holding up.

Sam's eyes opened wide. "Gloria did such a good job with the contractors, we could rent out the basement for weddings," he said.

Samara said, "We could play cards there. We're going to make for you such a mess."

Esther felt a twinge of pity for Samara. She had assumed the Kleins stayed in the basement to keep the upstairs from getting filthy. Now she wondered if Samara was still in hiding.

"What is a house for but to be dirty, eh?" Murray turned to Samara. "The kids leave crumbs all over the house."

Esther was about to say, 'Your kids aren't allowed upstairs in the house, what are you talking about?' but she caught herself. Instead she said, "My landlords' house is immaculate." In fact, Esther had never even seen the upstairs.

"Tonight, forget landlord, eh, Esther? We're neighbors," Murray said. He put his arm around the back of Harry's chair. "What am I saying, tonight? Have we ever treated you different?"

Samara gave Murray a quick, nervous look. Every night they leaned against the headboard, the only time they went upstairs, and discussed whether they would renew the Meyer's lease, when the time came.

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“Not once,” Harry answered. “Right, Esther, we fell into good hands.”

“Good hands?” she asked, remembering how close Murray had been only hours before, to putting his hands on her. Putting down her cards, she placed her left hand in front of her, then her right. “The only hands that are good are these.”

“Someone taught you right, Esther, eh? Be careful who you trust.” Murray reached into a candy dish, took a handful of peanuts and fed them into his mouth, one by one.

“You’re sure the peanuts are safe?” Izzy asked.

Everyone turned, startled.

“The door was open,” he said, slightly out of breath. “And you see, Murray, an unlocked door, but no one here is dead. Maybe the world is more safe than you think.” Izzy slipped off his overcoat, and Gloria ran to hang it up and lock the door. He sat down in the empty chair next to Tchava and lit a cigarette.

“How is the new butcher?” Tchava asked.

“Not a word of English, but he communicates perfectly with dead cows.”

“The chil-der-en are well, Gloria?” Tchava asked. “How is Jeanette...”

“Tchava, pass me some peanuts,” Izzy interrupted.

“Jeanette is at the top of her class,” Sam answered. Having observed this game so many times, he knew exactly how to play. “She was accepted at Barnard.”

“Barnard?” Tchava repeated. “She can meet a nice boy there?”

Gloria said, “She’s going there to learn. When she’s ready to meet a boy, she’ll meet a boy.”

Murray tossed a quarter into the center of the table. Esther took a quarter from her stack, and raised a nickel.

“Your wife is a card shark?” Murray winked at Harry. He tossed in a nickel and raised another quarter. Everyone but Esther folded. She tossed in another quarter.

“What do you have?” she asked.

Murray had three Jacks. Esther took the pot with a flush.

“And your daughter, Esther?” Tchava called from across the table.

“Helen? She joined this club, that club. She’s busy with her life.”

“My Rosalie has a friend who graduated from the same high school as Jacob. She doesn’t recall meeting him.”

“Tchava please,” Izzy said. “You’re with the CIA?”

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Esther folded her fingers and made her special fist, then looked at Samara who didn't lift her eyes from her cards. "Jacob graduated early...he skipped one grade."

"He's such a student?" Tchava said. "And he doesn't go to college?"

Esther's fist was hammering out a tune on the chair behind her. "He likes earning a wage..."

"There's nothing like a dollar in the pocket," Harry said.

"We didn't turn out so bad without school," Izzy said. He unbuttoned his cuff and rolled his sleeve. "Here's my diploma," he said, showing his tattoo.

Tchava folded her cards and stood. Her eyes were shining. She was lit up like a fire. "The chil-der-en are my diploma. Tonight I have the highest honors. Sam, you have Cherry Herring to celebrate?"

"Tchava, sit down," Izzy said.

"What's the matter with you? I have news."

"We have no news. We're here to play cards."

"I bought Rosalie's wedding dress today. Belgian lace with a six-foot train."

Izzy stood and put his hand on his wife's shoulder. He was a good six inches shorter than she. "You know how kids are; they change their mind every Monday and Thursday."

"This is for certain. Izzy...the dress is being altered..."

"Rosalie wants to tell her friends first...leave it be."

"Leave it be? Our daughter is getting married."

"Our daughter right now is wondering how her mother bought her a house without asking if this is what she wants." Izzy's voice was shaking. "And tell me, what were you planning, to give such a gift from yourself, without me?"

"Of course with you. I was going to tell you. When do we have a chance to speak?"

Sam leaned down to pick up his napkin. He knew he should do something about the scene between Izzy and Tchava, but he had no idea what. Living next door to Izzy and Tchava, he'd heard them argue many times. In fact, Izzy could be volatile. And it was always Rosalie they argued about.

"You want to speak, Tchava?" Izzy bellowed. "Speak to me about this. Do you ask yourself why Rosalie wants to marry already? At seventeen years old?"

"Tchava, Izzy, don't upset yourselves," Gloria said. "I'm sure you can get your deposit back. Isn't that right Sam?"

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“Rosalie and Eli are no longer getting married.”

Tchava’s eyelids began fluttering, as if she were about to faint. “What are you talking about?”

“The couple whom you bought the house from called and Rosalie answered the phone. She put two and two together, and realized what you did. Eli blew up. He told her, we’re moving to California, or the engagement is off...”

“And she told him what?”

“She said, ‘we’ll tell my mother she has to stay out of our lives.’ Eli told her ‘You’re afraid of her. You’ll never stand up to her...’

“Afraid of me! Tell me, Gloria, you don’t want the best for your chil-der-en?”

Gloria had barely let out a breath in the past few minutes. Jeanette was seventeen like Rosalie. She couldn’t imagine her deciding on a marriage partner. “Of course I want the best for my children,” Gloria said. “We all do.”

Harry reached into a crystal dish and snapped off a bunch of grapes. He’d been worried the Kleins would speak about Jacob’s wildness. Now he was reminded, nobody’s backyard was free from trouble. Esther with her pride had kept him from speaking honestly with people.

“What smells so delicious?” he asked. “Cinnamon, like Esther’s apple cake. Did she give you the recipe Gloria?”

“I baked two apple cakes from my mother’s recipe,” she beamed. “Tchava, help me in the kitchen.”

“The kitchen! I’m going home to Rosalie...”

Izzy grabbed hold of her arm. “So she can cry her eyes on your shoulder, or so you can cry on hers?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Every Monday and Thursday you’re crying about Rosa. I should have stopped this talk a long time ago.”

Tchava’s face crumpled in on her. “To who should I talk if not my daughter?”

“We do our best Tchava,” Esther said. She stood up and walked over to the piano bench. She sat down and hit keys aimlessly. “Helen wanted to take piano when she was a little girl, but she would have had to practice on a friend’s piano. We couldn’t afford to buy our own. She cried for weeks. We had a little bit of extra money we used to take the kids to



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the mountains every summer. We thought that was best, to give them fresh air. Every time we fight, she brings up the piano. If she had piano instead, she'd say we never took them to the country."

"We have good kids," Harry said, sitting down next to her. "You think it's so easy for them?"

"For them!" Tchava said, as if waking up from a trance. "I had such a wedding dress, or such a wedding like we planned? It was me and Izzy with his brother and sister, the only ones who survived. I was married in a dress five other girls wore. We had music? A five-course meal? A piece of sponge cake and schnapps. For my Rosalie I want something magnificent! This makes me a bad mother?"

Gloria brought out the cakes and placed them on the center of the table. The aroma of cinnamon and baked apples wafted through the room overtaking the cigarette smoke and Gloria's Chanel No. 5, the only thing about her which was overstated.

"Everyone, let's eat," Gloria said. "No more quarreling. Please."

Samara sat stiffly in her chair. She wanted to go downstairs, where it was like a cave. Surely peace would then be restored. "I would love to see your basement," she tried one more time.

"You came to America to hide in a basement?" Tchava asked her. "You are still afraid from Hitler?"

"Tchava!" Gloria said. "You don't have any scars? What do you think Esther, we came out of there normal?"

"Normal," she shook her head. "I didn't have one normal day in my life. Before Hitler, too. Believe you me."

"Is it better for our children?" Harry asked. "Right now, Helen and Jacob are fighting over who makes supper. Jacob will ask Helen a hundred times, until finally she does it. Esther spoiled him good. She does everything for him. Why? Because at home, this was how it was done. In America it's different. Do I stop her? I come home at night, and I want everything pleasant. The children pay the price for my silence."

"You're such a philosopher?" Tchava asked.

"He's right," Gloria said. "Look at our kids and look at the Americanas'. What do you see?"

Everyone was still as Sam cut the cakes, and filled each plate with a hefty slice. As

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Gloria sat, she said, “The Feldman’s next door...their daughter, Linda is in Boston, she’s studying to be a pediatrician. Our Jeanette is afraid of Manhattan and of her own brains. You think Linda is afraid? The Feldman’s son leaves the house in the morning, and they don’t hear from him till night. Jeanette calls me every afternoon when she doesn’t come straight home and says, ‘Don’t worry mom. I’m fine.’ Even with Yankee blood, my Jeanette is *greena*, through and through.”

“Our kids don’t suffer,” Samara said, looking at Murray.

He pushed away from the table, so that his chair tipped on its back legs. “You’re sure? When they’re not in school, they’re watching television in the basement. This is good?”

“And what bad can happen there to them...,” her hand flew to her mouth as she trailed off.

“Like to my first son, eh? This is what’s in your head?” He sat down hard, and banged his fist on the table.

Samara’s cheeks reddened.

“You can’t protect them from life,” Esther said. “Life is all around. Once they come out of you, that’s it. Even in the basement, who knows? You could have a flood.”

“They need protection from us, not from life,” Harry said. “Life will teach them plenty.”

Sam wanted to believe the war had taught his guests to believe in the preciousness of life. He saw that in Harry’s eyes when he was at temple. But Sam had never seen that in Gloria. Instead he had seen disappointment and resignation. Who was he to say what effect the war should’ve had? He was just a by-stander. Fate had dealt him a different hand.

Esther and Harry walked home, the Kleins several paces ahead of them. It was five blocks, and Harry wanted to feel the fresh air on his face. All day in the shoe store and then at the Friedmans, he was filled up with everyone’s chatter.

Most of the houses were dark inside. By eleven at night the Futuramas practically closed up. Harry gazed upward, then stopped dead in his tracks. “Look, Esala,” he said, pointing to a star, “You see over there?”

“What?”

“Tell me, when is the last time we looked at the stars?”

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“What are you talking nonsense,” Esther said.

Harry put his arm loosely around her shoulders, and kissed her cheek. “Come my beautiful Esala.” He reached for her hand, as if to dance. “You remember how to waltz?”

“Are you crazy...everyone in the neighborhood has to see us?”

“You think anyone in the neighborhood cares? And what if they do? The one who came from the same place as we did...maybe they’ll open their doors and dance, too.”

She stood still and looked in his eyes. “Tell me, my husband, look at me and tell me what you see.”

Harry gazed at her. “I see a skinny girl with thick, brown hair named Esther Gold, sitting by herself on a ship.”

“And what is she thinking?”

“She’s thinking ‘that’s a handsome man over there, in the gray suit. Maybe I should talk with him and see if he’s husband material.’”

Esther smiled and leaned into Harry’s embrace. When he touched her she felt clean.

“The kids are probably fighting...unless Jacob is out somewhere,” she said.

Harry’s arm tightened around her. “This is why we should dance,” he said, and he twirled her around so that she lifted off the ground.

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