

What We Talk About
When We Talk About
Anne Frank

Also by Nathan Englander

For the Relief of Unbearable Urges
The Ministry of Special Cases

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Anne Frank

Nathan Englander

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For Rachel E. Silver



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What We Talk About
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They're in our house maybe ten minutes and already Mark's lecturing us on the Israeli occupation. Mark and Lauren live in Jerusalem, and people from there think it gives them the right.

Mark is looking all stoic and nodding his head. "If we had what you have down here in South Florida . . .," he says, and trails off. "Yup," he says, and he's nodding again. "We'd have no troubles at all."

"You *do* have what we have," I tell him. "All of it. Sun and palm trees. Old Jews and oranges and the worst drivers around. At this point," I say, "we've probably got more Israelis than you." Debbie, my wife, she puts a hand on my arm. Her signal that I'm taking a tone, or interrupting someone's story, sharing something private, or making an inappropriate joke. That's my cue, and I'm surprised, considering how much I get it, that she ever lets go of my arm.

"Yes, you've got it all now," Mark says. "Even terrorists."

I look to Lauren. She's the one my wife has the relationship with—the one who should take charge. But Lauren isn't going to give her husband any signal. She and Mark ran off to Israel twenty years ago and turned Hassidic, and neither of them will put a hand on the other in public. Not for this. Not to put out a fire.

“Wasn’t Mohamed Atta living right here before 9/11?” Mark says, and now he pantomimes pointing out houses. “Goldberg, Goldberg, Goldberg—Atta. How’d you miss him in this place?”

“Other side of town,” I say.

“That’s what I’m talking about. That’s what you have that we don’t. Other sides of town. Wrong sides of the tracks. Space upon space.” And now he’s fingering a granite countertop in our kitchen, looking out into the living room and the dining room, staring through the kitchen windows out at the pool. “All this house,” he says, “and one son? Can you imagine?”

“No,” Lauren says. And then she turns to us, backing him up. “You should see how we live with ten.”

“Ten kids,” I say. “We could get you a reality show with that here in the States. Help you get a bigger place.”

The hand is back pulling at my sleeve. “Pictures,” Debbie says. “I want to see the girls.” We all follow Lauren into the den for her purse.

“Do you believe it?” Mark says. “Ten girls!” And the way it comes out of his mouth, it’s the first time I like the guy. The first time I think about giving him a chance.

. . .

Facebook and Skype brought Deb and Lauren back together. They were glued at the hip growing up. Went to school together their whole lives. Yeshiva school. All girls. Out in Queens through high school and then riding the subway together to one called Central in Manhattan. They stayed best friends forever until I married Deb and turned her secular, and soon after that Lauren met Mark and they went off to the Holy Land and went from Orthodox to *ultra*-Orthodox, which to

me sounds like a repackaged detergent—ORTHODOX ULTRA[®], now with more deep-healing power. Because of that, we're supposed to call them Shoshana and Yerucham. Deb's been doing it. I'm just not saying their names.

"You want some water?" I offer. "Coke in the can?"

"You"—which of us?" Mark says.

"*You* both," I say. "I've got whiskey. Whiskey's kosher, too, right?"

"If it's not, I'll kosher it up real fast," he says, pretending to be easygoing. And right then, he takes off that big black hat and plops down on the couch in the den.

Lauren's holding the verticals aside and looking out at the yard. "Two girls from Forest Hills," she says. "Who ever thought we'd be the mothers of grown-ups?"

"Trevor's sixteen," Deb says. "You may think he's a grown-up, and he may think he's a grown-up—but we, we are not convinced."

"Well," Lauren says, "then whoever thought we'd have kids raised to think it's normal to have coconuts crashing out back and lizards climbing the walls?"

Right then is when Trev comes padding into the den, all six feet of him, plaid pajama bottoms dragging on the floor and T-shirt full of holes. He's just woken up and you can tell he's not sure if he's still dreaming. We told him we had guests. But there's Trev, staring at this man in the black suit, a beard resting on the middle of his stomach. And Lauren, I'd met her once before, right when Deb and I got married, but ten girls and a thousand Shabbos dinners later—well, she's a big woman, in a bad dress and a giant blond Marilyn Monroe wig. Seeing them at the door, I can't say I wasn't shocked myself. But the boy, he can't hide it on his face.

"Hey," he says.

And then Deb's on him, preening and fixing his hair and hugging him. "Trevy, this is my best friend from childhood," she says. "This is Shoshana, and this is—"

"Mark," I say.

"Yerucham," Mark says, and sticks out a hand. Trev shakes it. Then Trev sticks out his hand, polite, to Lauren. She looks at it, just hanging there in the air—offered.

"I don't shake," she says. "But I'm so happy to see you. Like meeting my own son. I mean it," she says. And here she starts to cry, for real. And she and Deb are hugging and Deb's crying, too. And the boys, we just stand there until Mark looks at his watch and gets himself a good manly grip on Trev's shoulder.

"Sleeping until three on a Sunday? Man, those were the days," Mark says. "A regular little Rumpelforeskin." Trev looks at me, and I want to shrug, but Mark's also looking, so I don't move. Trev just gives us both his best teenage glare and edges out of the room. As he does, he says, "Baseball practice," and takes my car keys off the hook by the door to the garage.

"There's gas," I say.

"They let them drive here at sixteen?" Mark says. "Insane."

. . .

"So what brings you," I say, "after all these years?" Deb's too far away to grab at me, but her face says it all. "Was I supposed to know?" I say. "Jeez, Deb must have told me. She told me, for sure. My fault."

"My mother," Mark says. "She's failing and my father's getting old—and they come to us for Sukkot every year. You know?"

"I know the holidays," I say.

"They used to fly out to us. For Sukkot and Pesach, both. But they can't fly now, and I just wanted to get over while things are still good. We haven't been in America—"

“Oh, gosh,” Lauren says. “I’m afraid to think how long it’s been. More than ten years. Twelve,” she says. “Twelve years ago. With the kids, it’s just impossible until enough of them are big. This might be”—and now she plops down on the couch—“this might be my first time in a house with no kids under the roof in that long. Oh my. I’m serious. How weird. I feel faint. And when I say *faint*,” she says, standing up, giving an oddly girlish spin around, “what I mean is giddy.”

“How do you do it?” Deb says. “Ten kids? I really do want to hear.”

That’s when I remember. “I forgot your drink,” I say to Mark.

“Yes, his drink. That’s how,” Lauren says. “That’s how we cope.”

. . .

And that’s how the four of us end up back at the kitchen table with a bottle of vodka between us. I’m not one to get drunk on a Sunday afternoon, but I tell you, with a plan to spend the day with Mark, I jump at the chance. Deb’s drinking, too, but not for the same reason. For her and Lauren, I think they’re reliving a little bit of the wild times. The very small window when they were together, barely grown-up, two young women living in New York on the edge of two worlds. And they just look, the both of them, so overjoyed to be reunited, I think they’re half celebrating and half can’t handle how intense the whole thing is.

Deb says, as she’s already on her second, “This is really racy for us. I mean *really* racy. We try not to drink much at all these days. We think it sets a bad example for Trevor. It’s not good to drink in front of them right at that age when they’re all transgressive. He’s suddenly so interested in that kind of thing.”

"I'm just happy when he's interested in something," I say.

Deb slaps at the air. "I just don't think it's good to make drinking look like it's fun with a teenager around."

Lauren smiles and straightens her wig. "Does anything we do look fun to our kids?" I laugh at that. Honestly, I'm really liking her more and more.

"It's the age limit that does it," Mark says. "It's the whole American puritanical thing, the twenty-one-year-old drinking age and all that. We don't make a big deal about it in Israel, and so the kids, they don't even notice alcohol. Except for the foreign workers on Fridays, you hardly see anyone drunk at all."

"The workers and the Russians," Lauren says.

"The Russian immigrants," he says, "that's a whole separate matter. Most of them, you know, not even Jews."

"What does that mean?" I say.

"It means matrilineal descent, is what it means," Mark says. "It means with the Ethiopians there were conversions."

But Deb wants to keep us away from politics, and the way we're arranged, me in between them and Deb opposite (it's a round table, our kitchen table), she practically has to throw herself across to grab hold of my arm. "Fix me another," she says.

And here she switches the subject to Mark's parents. "How's the visit been going?" she says, her face all somber. "How are your folks holding up?"

Deb is very interested in Mark's parents. They're Holocaust survivors. And Deb has what can only be called an unhealthy obsession with the idea of that generation being gone. Don't get me wrong. It's important to me, too. I care, too. All I'm saying is, there's healthy and unhealthy, and my wife, she gives this subject a lot, *a lot*, of time. "Do you know," she'll say to me and Trevor, just absolutely out of nowhere, "World War Two veterans die at a rate of a thousand a day?"

"What can I say?" Mark says. "My mother's a very sick

woman. And my father, he tries to keep his spirits up. He's a tough guy."

"I'm sure," I say. And then I look in my drink, all serious, and give a shake of my head. "They really are amazing."

"Who?" Mark says. "Fathers?"

I look back up and they're all three staring at me. "Survivors," I say, seeing I jumped the gun.

"There's good and bad," Mark says. "Like anyone else." And then he laughs. "Though there isn't anyone else in my parents' place."

Lauren says, "You should see it. The whole of Carmel Lake Village, it's like a DP camp with a billiards room. They're all there."

"One tells the other," Mark says, "and they follow. It's amazing. From Europe to New York, and now, for the end of their lives, again the same place."

"Tell them that crazy story," Lauren says. "Tell them, Yuri."

"Tell us," Deb says. And I can see in her eyes that she wants it to be one of those stories of a guy who spent three years hiding inside one of those cannons they use for the circus. And at the end of the war, a Righteous Gentile comes out all joyous and fires him through a hoop and into a tub of water, where he discovers his lost son breathing through a straw.

"So you can picture my father," Mark says, "in the old country, he went to *heder*, had the *peyes* and all that. But in America, a classic *galusmonger*. He looks more like you than me. It's not from him that I get this," he says, pointing at his beard. "Shoshana and I—"

"We know," I say.

"So my father. They've got a nice nine-hole course, a driving range, some greens for the practice putting. And my dad, he's at the clubhouse. I go with him. He wants to work

out in the gym, he says. Tells me I should come. Get some exercise. And he tells me”—and here Mark points at his feet, sliding a leg out from under the table so we can see his big black clodhoppers—“‘You can’t wear those Shabbos shoes on the treadmill. You need the sneakers. You know, sports shoes?’ he says. And I tell him, ‘I know what sneakers are. I didn’t forget my English any more than your Yiddish is gone.’ And so he says, *Ah shaynem dank dir in pupik.*’ Just to show me who’s who.”

“The point,” Lauren says. “Tell them the point.”

“So he’s sitting in the locker room, trying to pull a sock on, which is, at that age, basically the whole workout in itself. It’s no quick business. And I see, while I’m waiting, and I can’t believe it. I nearly pass out. The guy next to him, the number on his arm, it’s three before my father’s number. You know, in sequence.”

“What do you mean?” Deb says.

“I mean, the number tattooed. It’s the same as my father’s camp number, digit for digit, but my father’s ends in an eight. And this guy’s, it ends in a five. That’s the only difference. I mean, they’re separated by two people. And I look at this guy. I’ve never seen him before in my life. So I say, ‘Excuse me, sir’ to the guy. And he just says, ‘You with the Chabad? I don’t want anything but to be left alone. I already got candles at home.’ I tell him, ‘No. I’m not. I’m here visiting my father.’ And to my father, I say, ‘Do you know this gentleman? Have you two met? I’d really like to introduce you, if you haven’t.’ And they look each other over for what, I promise you, is minutes. Actual minutes. It is—with *kavod* I say this, with respect for my father—but it is like watching a pair of big beige manatees sitting on a bench, each with one sock on. They’re just looking each other up and down, everything slow. And then my father says, ‘I seen him. Seen him around.’ The other guy, he says, ‘Yes, I’ve seen.’ ‘You’re both survivors,’ I tell them. ‘Look, look,’ I say. ‘The num-

bers.’ And they look. ‘They’re the same,’ I say. And they both hold out their arms to look at the little ashen tattoos. *‘The same,’* I tell them. And to my father, I say, ‘Do you get it? The same, except his—his, it’s right ahead of yours. Look! Compare.’ So they look. They compare.” And to us now, Mark’s eyes are popping out of his head. “I mean, think about it,” he says. “Around the world, surviving the unsurvivable, these two old guys end up with enough money to retire to Carmel Lake and play golf every day. So I say to my dad, ‘He’s right ahead of you,’ I say. ‘Look, a five,’ I say. ‘And yours is an eight.’ And the other guy looks and my father looks, and my father says, ‘All that means is, he cut ahead of me in line. There, same as here. This guy’s a cutter, I just didn’t want to say.’ ‘Blow it out your ear,’ the other guy says. And that’s it. Then they get back to putting on socks.”

Deb looks crestfallen. She was expecting something empowering. Some story with which to educate Trevor, to reconfirm her belief in the humanity that, from inhumanity, forms. So now she’s just staring, her mouth hanging on to this thin, watery smile.

But me, I love that kind of story. I’m starting to take a real shine to both these two, and not just because I’m suddenly feeling sloshed.

“Good story, Yuri,” I say, copying his wife. “Yerucham,” I say, “that one’s got zing.”

Yerucham hoists himself up from the table, looking proud. He checks the label of our white bread on the counter—making sure it’s kosher. He takes a slice, pulls off the crust, and rolls the white part against the countertop with the palm of his hand. He rolls it up into a little ball. He comes over and pours himself a shot and throws it back. And then he eats that crazy dough ball. Just tosses it in his mouth, as if it’s the bottom of his own personal punctuation mark—you know, to underline his story.

“Is that good?” I say.

“Try it,” he says. He goes to the counter and slings me, through the air, he pitches me a slice of white bread, and says, “But first pour yourself a shot.”

I reach for the bottle and find that Deb’s got her hands around it, and her head’s bowed down, like the bottle is anchoring her, keeping her from tipping back.

“Are you okay, Deb?” Lauren says. She’s got a hand on Deb’s neck, and then switches to rubbing her arm. And I know what it is. I know what it is and I just up and say it: “It’s because it was funny.”

“Honey!” Deb says.

“She won’t tell you, but she’s a little obsessed with the Holocaust. And that story, no offense, Mark, it’s not what she had in mind.”

Mark is staring back and forth between us. And, honestly, the guy looks hurt. And I should leave it be, I know. But I just have to go on. It’s not like someone from Deb’s high school is around every day offering insights.

“It’s like she’s a survivor’s kid, my wife. It’s crazy, that education they give them. Her grandparents were all born in the Bronx, but it’s like, I don’t know. It’s like here we are twenty minutes from downtown Miami, but really it’s 1937 and we live on the edge of Berlin. It’s astounding.”

“That’s not it!” Deb says, openly defensive, her voice just super high up on the register. “I’m not upset about that. It’s just the alcohol. All this alcohol,” she says, and rolls her eyes, making light. “It’s that and seeing Lauren. Seeing Shoshana, after all this time.”

“Oh, she was always like this in high school,” Shoshana says. “Sneak one drink, and she started to cry.”

“Alcohol is a known depressive,” Yerucham says. And for that, for stating facts like that, he’s straight on his way to being disliked again.

“You want to know what used to get her going, what would make her truly happy?” Shoshana says. And I tell you, I don’t see it coming. I’m as blindsided as Deb was with that numbers story.

“It was getting high,” Shoshana says. “That’s what always did it. Smoking up, it would just make her laugh for hours and hours.”

“Oh my God,” Deb says, but not to Shoshana. She’s pointing at me, likely because I look as startled as I feel. “Look at my big bad secular husband,” Deb says. “He really can’t handle it. He can’t handle his wife’s having any history of naughtiness at all—Mr. Liberal Open-Minded.” And to me, she says, “How much more chaste a wife can you dream of than a modern-day Yeshiva girl who stayed a virgin until twenty-one? Honestly,” she says, “what did you think Shoshana was going to say was so much fun?”

“Honestly-honestly?” I say. “I don’t want to. It’s embarrassing.”

“Let’s hear,” Mark says. “We’re all friends here. New friends, but friends.”

“I thought you were—,” I say, and I stop. “You’ll kill me.”

“Say it!” Deb says, positively glowing.

“Honestly, I thought you were going to say it was something like competing in the Passover Nut Roll, or making sponge cake. Something like that.” I hang my head. And Shoshana and Deb are just laughing so hard, they can’t breathe. They’re grabbing at each other, so that I can’t tell, really, if they’re holding each other up or pulling each other down. I’m afraid one of them’s going to fall.

“I can’t believe you told him about the nut roll,” Shoshana says.

“And I can’t believe,” Deb says, “you just told my husband of twenty-two years how much we used to get high. I haven’t

touched a joint since before we were married,” she says. “Have we, honey? Have we smoked since we got married?”

“No,” I say. “It’s been a very long time.”

“So, come on, Shosh. When was it? When was the last time you smoked?”

Now, I know I mentioned the beard on Mark. But I don’t know if I mentioned how hairy a guy he is. It grows, that thing, right up to his eyeballs. Like having eyebrows on top and bottom both. It’s really something. So when Deb asks the question, the two of them, Shosh and Yuri, they’re basically giggling like children, and I can tell, in the little part that shows, in the bit of skin I can see, that Mark’s eyelids and earlobes are in full blush.

“When Shoshana said we drink to get through the days,” Mark says, “she was kidding about the drinking.”

“We don’t drink much,” Shoshana says.

“It’s smoking that she means,” he says.

“We smoke,” Lauren says, reconfirming.

“Cigarettes?” Deb says.

“We still get high,” Shoshana says. “I mean, all the time.”

“Hassidim!” Deb screams. “You’re not allowed! There’s no way.”

“Everyone does in Israel. It’s like the sixties there,” Mark says. “Like a revolution. It’s the highest country in the world. Worse than Holland, and India, and Thailand put together. Worse than anywhere, even Argentina—though they may have us tied.”

“Well, maybe that’s why the kids aren’t interested in alcohol.”

And Yerucham admits that maybe this is so.

“Do you want to get high now?” Deb says. And we all three look at her. Me, with surprise. And those two just with straight longing.

“We didn’t bring,” Shoshana says. “Though it’s pretty rare anyone at customs peeks under the wig.”

“Maybe you guys can find your way into the glaucoma underground over at Carmel Lake,” I say. “I’m sure that place is rife with it.”

“That’s funny,” Mark says.

“I’m funny,” I say, now that we’re all getting on.

“We’ve got pot,” Deb says.

“We do?” I say. “I don’t think we do.”

Deb looks at me and bites at the cuticle on her pinkie.

“You’re not secretly getting high all these years?” I say, feeling honestly like maybe I’m about to get a whole list of deceptions. I really don’t feel well at all.

“Our son,” Deb says. “He has pot.”

“Our son?”

“Trevor,” she says.

“Yes,” I say. “I know which one.”

. . .

It’s a lot for one day, that kind of news. And it feels to me a lot like betrayal. Like my wife’s old secret and my son’s new secret are wound up together and that I’ve somehow been wronged. Also, I’m not one to recover quickly from any kind of slight from Deb—not when there are other people around. I really need to talk stuff out. Some time alone with Deb, even five minutes, would fix it. But it’s super-apparent that she doesn’t need any time alone with me. She doesn’t seem troubled at all. What she seems is focused. She’s busy at the counter, using a paper tampon wrapper to roll up a joint.

“It’s an emergency preparedness method we came up with in high school,” Shoshana says. “The things teenage girls will do when they’re desperate.”

“And we were desperate,” Deb says, as if everything’s already funny. “Do you remember that nice boy from Y.H.S.Q. that we used to smoke in front of?”

“I can picture him,” Shoshana says. “But not the name.”

“He’d just watch us,” Deb says. “There’d be six or seven of us in a circle, girls and boys not touching—we were so religious. Isn’t that crazy?” Deb is talking to me, as Shoshana and Mark don’t think it’s crazy at all. “The only place we touched was passing the joint, at the thumbs. And this boy, we had a nickname for him.”

“‘Passover’!” Shoshana yells.

“Yes,” Deb says, “that’s it. All we ever called him was ‘Passover.’ Because every time the joint got to him, he’d just pass it over to the next one. Passover Rand,” Deb says. “Now I remember.”

Shoshana takes the joint and lights it with a match, sucking in deep. “It’s a miracle when I remember anything these days,” she says. “I’m telling you. It’s the kids. After my first was born, I forgot half of everything I knew. And then half again with each one after. Ten kids later, it’s amazing when I remember to blow out a match after I light it.” She drops the one she’s holding into the sink, and it makes that little hiss. “Just last night, I woke up in a panic. I couldn’t remember if there were fifty-two cards in a deck or fifty-two weeks in a year. The recall errors—I’m up all night worrying over them, just waiting for the Alzheimer’s to kick in.”

“It’s not that bad,” Mark tells her. “It’s only everyone on one side of your family that has it.”

“That’s true,” she says, passing her husband the joint. “The other side is blessed only with dementia. Anyway, which is it? Weeks or cards?”

“Same, same,” Mark says, taking a hit.

When it’s Deb’s turn, she holds the joint and looks at me,

like I'm supposed to nod or give her permission in some husbandly anxiety-absolving way. And I just can't take it anymore. Instead of saying, "Go ahead," or "Let's do it," I pretty much bark at Deb. "When were you going to tell me about our son?" I say. "When was that going to happen? How long have you known?"

At that, Deb takes a long hit, and holds it deep, like an old pro.

"Really, Deb. How could you not tell me you knew?"

Deb walks over and hands me the joint. She blows the smoke in my face, not aggressive, just blowing.

"I've only known five days," she says. "I was going to tell you, obviously. I just wasn't sure how, or if I should talk to Treve first, maybe give him a chance," she says.

"A chance to what?" I ask.

"To let him keep it as a secret between us. To let him know he could have my trust, could be forgiven, if he promised to stop."

"But he's the son," I say. "I'm the father. Even if it's a secret with him, it should be a double secret between me and you. I should always get to know—but pretend not to know—any secret with him."

"Do that double part again," Mark says, trying to follow. But I ignore him.

"That's how it goes," I say to Deb. "That's how it's always been." And because I'm desperate and unsure, I follow it up with "Hasn't it?"

I mean, we really trust each other, Deb and I. And I can't remember feeling like so much has hung on one question in a long, long time. I'm trying to read her face, and something really complex is going on, some formulation. And then she just sits right there on the floor at my feet.

"Oh my God," she says. "I'm so fucking high. Like instantly."

Like, like,” and then she starts laughing. “Like, Mike,” she says. “Like, kike,” she says, turning completely serious. “Oh my God, I’m really messed up.”

“We should have warned you,” Shoshana says.

As she says this, I’m holding my first hit in, and already trying to fight off the paranoia that comes rushing behind that statement. Mark takes the joint back and passes it straight to Shoshana, respecting the order of things.

“Warn us what?” I say, my voice high, and the smoke still sweet in my nose.

“This isn’t your father’s marijuana,” he says. “The THC levels. It’s like, I don’t know, the stuff from our childhood? One hit of this new hydroponic stuff, it’s like if maybe you smoked a pound of the stuff we had when we were kids.”

“I feel it,” I say. And I do, in a deep, deep way. And I sit down with Deb on the floor and take her hands. I feel nice. Though I’m not sure if I thought that or said it, so I try it again, making sure it’s out loud. “I feel nice,” I say.

“I found it in the laundry hamper,” Deb says. “That’s where I got the pot.”

“In the hamper?” Shoshana says.

“Leave it to a teenage boy to think that’s the best place to hide something,” Deb says. “His clean clothes show up folded in his room, and it never occurs to him that someone empties the hamper. To him, it’s the loneliest, most forgotten space in the world. Point is,” Deb says, “I found an Altoids tin at the bottom, stuffed full. Just brimming with pot.” Deb gives my hands a squeeze. “Are we good now?”

“We’re good,” I say. And it feels like we’re a team again, like it’s us against them. Because when Shoshana passes Deb the joint, Deb says, “Are you sure you guys are allowed to smoke pot that comes out of a tin that held non-kosher candy? I really

don't know if that's okay." And it's just exactly the kind of thing I'm thinking right then.

"She's on Facebook, too," I say. "That can't be allowed, either. These are very bad Hassidim," I say, and we laugh at that. We laugh hard.

"First of all, we're not eating it. We're smoking it. And even so, it's cold contact, so it's probably all right either way," Shoshana says.

"'Cold contact?'" I say.

"It's a thing," Shoshana says. "Just forget about it and get up off the floor. Chop-chop." And each of them offers us a hand and gets us standing. "Come, sit back at the table," Shoshana says. So once we're up, we're back down again at the table.

"I'll tell you," Mark says. "That's got to be the number-one most annoying thing about being Hassidic in the outside world. Worse than the rude stuff that gets said is the constant policing by civilians. I'm telling you, everywhere we go, people are checking on us. Ready to make some sort of liturgical citizen's arrest."

"Strangers!" Shoshana says. "Just the other day, down here, on the way from the airport. Yuri pulled into a McDonald's to pee, and some guy in a trucker hat came up to him as he went in and said, 'You allowed to go in there, brother?' Just like that."

"Not true!" Deb says.

"True," Shoshana says.

"It's not that I don't see the fun in that," Mark says. "The allure. You know, we've got Mormons in Jerusalem. They've got a base there. A seminary. The rule is—the deal with the government—they can have their place, but they can't do outreach. No proselytizing. Anyway, I do some business with one of their guys."

"From Utah?" Deb says.

“From Idaho. His name is Jebediah, for real—do you believe it?”

“No, Yerucham and Shoshana,” I say. “Jebediah is a very strange name.” Mark rolls his eyes at that, and hands me what’s left of the joint. Without even asking, he gets up and gets the tin and reaches into his wife’s purse for another tampon. He’s confident now, at home in my home. And I’m a little less comfortable with this than with the white bread, with a guest coming into the house and smoking up all our son’s pot. Deb must be thinking something similar, as she says, “After this story, I’m going to text Trev and make sure he’s not coming back anytime soon.”

“That’d be good,” I say.

“Actually, I’ll tell him to come straight home after practice. Or I’ll tell him he can have dinner with his friends but that he better be here by nine, not a minute later. Then he’ll beg for ten. If I tell him he has to be home no matter what, we’re safe.”

“Okay,” I say. “A good plan.”

“So when Jeb’s at our house, when he comes by to eat and pours himself a Coke, I do that same religious-police thing. I can’t resist. I say, ‘Hey, Jeb, you allowed to have that? You supposed to be drinking Coke, or what?’ I say it every time. Somehow, I can’t resist. People don’t mind breaking their own rules, but they’re real strict about someone else’s.”

“So are they allowed to have Coke?” Deb says.

“I don’t know,” Mark says. “All Jeb ever says back is, ‘You’re thinking of coffee, and mind your own business, either way.’”

“What happens in Jerusalem, stays in Jerusalem,” I say. But they must not have that commercial there, because neither of them thinks that’s funny at all.

And then my Deb. She just can’t help herself. “You heard about the scandal? The Mormons going through the Holocaust list.”

“Like in *Dead Souls*,” I say, explaining, “Like in the Gogol book, but real.”

“Do you think we read that?” Mark says. “As Hassidim, or before?” He passes me the joint as he says this, so it’s both a little aggressive and funny at the same time. And then, because one doesn’t preclude the other, he pours himself a drink.

“They took the records of the dead,” Deb says, “and they started running through them. They took these people who died as Jews and started converting them into Mormons. Converting the six million against their will.”

“And this bothers you?” Mark says. “This is what keeps an American Jew up at night?”

“What does that mean?” Deb says.

“It means—,” Mark says.

But Shoshana interrupts him. “Don’t tell them what it means, Yuri. Just leave it unmeant.”

“We can handle it,” I say. “We are interested, even, in handling it. This stuff,” I say, pointing in the general direction of the Altoids tin, “has ripened our minds. We’re primed to entertain even the highest concepts.”

“High concepts, because we’re high,” Deb says, earnest, not joking at all.

“Your son, he seems like a nice boy.”

“Do not talk about their son,” Shoshana says.

“Do not talk about our son,” Deb says. This time I reach across and lay a hand on her elbow.

“Talk,” I say.

“He does not,” Mark says, “seem Jewish to me.”

“How can you say that?” Deb says. “What is wrong with you?” But Deb’s upset draws less attention than my response. I am laughing so hard that everyone turns toward me.

“What?” Mark says.

“Jewish to you?” I say. “The hat, the beard, the blocky shoes. A lot of pressure, I’d venture, to look Jewish to you. Like say, maybe, Ozzy Osbourne, or the guys from Kiss, like them telling Paul Simon, saying, ‘You do not look like a musician to me.’”

“It is not about the outfit,” Mark says. “It’s about building life in a vacuum. Do you know what I saw on the drive over here? Supermarket, supermarket, adult bookstore, supermarket, supermarket, firing range.”

“Floridians do like their guns and porn,” I say. “And their supermarkets.”

“Oh my God,” Deb says. “That’s like your ‘Goldberg, Goldberg—Atta’ thing. Just the same, but different words.”

“He likes that rhythm,” Shoshana says. “He does that a lot.”

“What I’m trying to say, whether you want to take it seriously or not, is that you can’t build Judaism only on the foundation of one terrible crime. It is about this obsession with the Holocaust as a necessary sign of identity. As your only educational tool. Because for the children, there is no connection otherwise. Nothing Jewish that binds.”

“Wow, that’s offensive,” Deb says. “And close-minded. There is such a thing as Jewish culture. One can live a culturally rich life.”

“Not if it’s supposed to be a Jewish life. Judaism is a religion. And with religion comes ritual. Culture is nothing. Culture is some construction of the modern world. And because of that, it is not fixed; it is ever-changing, and a weak way to bind generations. It’s like taking two pieces of metal, and instead of making a nice weld, you hold them together with glue.”

“What does that even mean?” Deb says. “Practically.”

Mark raises a finger to make his point, to educate. “Do you know why in Israel all the buses and trucks, why all the taxis, even, are Mercedes?”

“Because they give you a big guilt-based discount?” I say. “Or maybe because Mercedes is the best at building vehicles for the transport of Jews—they have a certain knack?”

“Because in Israel we are sound, solid Jews, and so it is nothing, even right after the war, for us to drive German cars and turn on our German Siemens radios to listen to the Hebrew news. We don’t need to impose some brand-based apartheid, to busy ourselves with symbolic efforts to keep our memories in place. Because we live exactly as our parents lived before the war. And this serves us in all things, in our relationships, too, in our marriages and parenting.”

“Are you saying your marriage is better than ours?” Deb says. “Really? Just because of the rules you live by? That makes a marriage stronger—just between any two random people?”

“I’m saying your husband would not have the long face, worried over if his wife is keeping secrets. And your son, he would not get into the business of smoking without first coming to you. Because the relationships, they are defined. They are clear.”

“Because they are welded together,” I say, “and not glued.”

“Yes,” he says. “And I bet Shoshana agrees.” But Shoshana is distracted. She is working carefully with an apple and a knife. She is making a little apple pipe, all the tampons done.

“Did your daughters?” Deb says. “If they tell you everything, did they come to you first, before they smoked?”

“Our daughters do not have the taint of the world we grew up in. They have no interest in such things.”

“So you think,” I say.

“So I know,” he says. “Our concerns are different, our worries.”

“Let’s hear ’em,” Deb says.

“Let’s not,” Shoshana says. “Honestly, we’re drunk, we’re high, we are having a lovely reunion.”

“Every time you tell him not to talk,” I say, “it makes me want to hear what he’s got to say more.”

“Our concern,” Mark says, “is not the past Holocaust. It is the current one. The one that takes more than fifty percent of the Jews this generation. Our concern is intermarriage. It is the Holocaust that’s happening now. You don’t need to be worrying about some Mormons doing hocus-pocus on the murdered six million. You need to worry that your son marries a Jew.”

“Oh my God,” Deb says. “Oh my God. Are you calling intermarriage a Holocaust? You can’t really—I mean, Shoshana. I mean, don’t . . . Are you really comparing?”

“You ask my feeling, that’s my feeling. But this, no, it does not exactly apply to you, except in the example you set for the boy. Because you’re Jewish, your son, he is as Jewish as me. No more, no less.”

“I went to yeshiva, too, Born-Again Harry! You don’t need to explain the rules to me.”

“Did you call me ‘Born-Again Harry?’” Mark asks.

“I did,” Deb says. And she and he, they start to laugh at that. They think “Born-Again Harry” is the funniest thing they’ve heard in awhile. And Shoshana then laughs, and then I laugh, because laughter is infectious—and it is doubly so when you’re high.

“You don’t really think our family, my lovely, beautiful son, is headed for a Holocaust, do you?” Deb says. “Because that would really hurt. That would really cast a pall on this beautiful day.”

“No, I don’t,” Mark says. “It is a lovely house and a lovely family, a beautiful home that you’ve made for that strapping young man. You’re a real *balabusta*,” Mark says. “I mean it.”

“That makes me happy,” Deb says. And she tilts her head

nearly ninety degrees to show her happy, sweet smile. “Can I hug you?” Deb says. “I’d really like to give you a hug.”

“No,” Mark says, though he says it really, really politely. “But you can hug my wife. How about that?”

“That’s a great idea,” Deb says. Shoshana hands the loaded apple to me, and I smoke from the apple as the two women hug a tight, deep, dancing-back-and-forth hug, tilting this way and that, so, once again, I’m afraid they might fall.

“It is a beautiful day,” I say.

“It is,” Mark says. And both of us look out the window, and both of us watch the perfect clouds in a perfect sky. We are watching this and enjoying this, and so we are staring out, too, as the sky darkens in an instant. It is a change so abrupt that the ladies undo their hug to watch, so sharp is the sudden change of light.

“It is like that here,” Deb says. And then the skies open up and torrential tropical rain drops straight down, battering. It is loud against the roof, and loud against the windows, and the fronds of the palm trees bend, and the floaties in the pool jump as the water boils.

Shoshana goes to the window. And Mark passes Deb the apple and goes to the window. “Really, it’s always like this here?” Shoshana says.

“Sure,” I say. “Every day like that. Stops as quick as it starts.”

And both of them have their hands pressed up against the window. And they stay like that for some time, and when Mark turns around, harsh guy, tough guy, we see that he is weeping. Weeping from the rain.

“You do not know,” he says. “I forget what it’s like to live in a place rich with water. This is a blessing above all others.”

“If you had what we had,” I say.

“Yes,” he says, wiping his eyes.

“Can we go out?” Shoshana says. “In the rain?”

“Of course,” Deb says. And then Shoshana tells me to close my eyes. To close them tight. Only me. And I swear, I think she’s going to be stark naked when she calls, “Open up.”

She’s taken off her wig is all, and she’s wearing one of Trev’s baseball hats in its place.

“I’ve only got the one wig this trip,” she says. “If Trev wouldn’t mind.”

“He wouldn’t mind,” Deb says. And this is how the four of us move out into the rain. How we find ourselves in the backyard, on a searingly hot day, getting pounded by all this cool, cool rain. It is, with the weather, and the being high, and being drunk, and after all that conversation, it is just about the best feeling in the world. And I have to say, Shoshana looks twenty years younger in that hat.

We do not talk. We are too busy frolicking and laughing and jumping around. And that’s how it happens, that I’m holding Mark’s hand and sort of dancing, and Deb is holding Shoshana’s hand, and also, they’re doing their own kind of jig. And when I take Deb’s hand, though neither of those two is touching the other, somehow we’ve formed a broken circle. We’ve started dancing our own kind of hora in the rain.

It is the most glorious, and silliest, and freest I can remember feeling in years. Who would think that’s what I’d be saying with these strict, suffocatingly austere people come to visit our house. And then my Deb, my love, once again she is thinking what I’m thinking and she says, face up into the rain, all of us spinning, “Are you sure this is okay, Shoshana? That it’s not mixed dancing? That this is allowed? I don’t want anyone feeling bad after.”

“We’ll be just fine,” Shoshana says. “We will live with the

consequences.” The question slows us, and stops us, though no one has yet let go.

“It’s like the old joke,” I say. And without waiting for anyone to ask which one, I say, “Why don’t Hassidim have sex standing up?”

“Why?” Shoshana says.

“Because it might lead to mixed dancing.”

Deb and Shoshana pretend to be horrified as we let go of hands, as we recognize that the moment is over, the rain disappearing as quickly as it came. Mark stands there staring into the sky, lips pressed tight. “That joke is very, very old,” he says. And then he says, “Mixed dancing makes me think of mixed nuts, and mixed grill, and *insalata mista*. The sound of ‘mixed dancing’ has made me wildly hungry. And I’m going to panic if the only kosher thing in the house is that loaf of bleached American bread.”

“You have the munchies,” I say.

“Diagnosis correct,” he says.

Deb starts clapping at that, tiny claps, her hands held to her chest in prayer. “You will not,” Deb says to him, absolutely beaming, “even believe what riches await.”

. . .

The four of us stand in the pantry, soaking wet, hunting through the shelves and dripping on the floor. “Have you ever seen such a pantry?” Shoshana says. “It’s gigantic,” she says, reaching her arms out from side to side. It is indeed large, and it is indeed stocked, an enormous amount of food, and an enormous selection of sweets, befitting a home that is often host to a swarm of teenage boys.

“Are you expecting a nuclear winter?” Shoshana says.

“I’ll tell you what she’s expecting,” I say. “You want to know how obsessed she really is? You want to understand how much she truly talks about the Holocaust? I mean, how serious it is—to what degree?”

“To no degree,” Deb says. “We are done with the Holocaust.”

“Tell us,” Shoshana says.

“She’s always plotting our secret hiding place,” I say.

“No kidding,” Shoshana says.

“Like, look at this. At the pantry, and a bathroom next to it, and the door to the garage. If you just sealed it all up—like put drywall at the entrance to the den—you’d never know. You’d never suspect. If you covered that door inside the garage up good with, I don’t know, if you hung your tools in front of it and hid hinges behind, maybe leaned the bikes and the mower up against it, you’d have this closed area, with running water and a toilet and all this food. I mean, if someone sneaked into the garage to replenish things, you could rent out the house, you know? Put in another family without even any idea.”

“Oh my God,” Shoshana says. “My short-term memory may be gone from having all those children—”

“And from the smoking,” I say.

“And from that, too. But I remember. I remember from when we were kids, she was always,” Shoshana says, turning to Deb, “you were always getting me to play games like that. To pick out spaces. And even worse, even darker—”

“Don’t,” Deb says.

“I know what you’re going to say,” I tell her, and I’m honestly excited. “The game, yes? She played that crazy game with you?”

“No,” Deb says. “Enough. Let it go.”

And Mark—who is just utterly absorbed in studying kosher certifications, who is tearing through hundred-calorie

snack packs and eating handfuls of roasted peanuts from a jar, and who has said nothing since we entered the pantry except “What’s a Fig Newman?”—he stops and says, “I want to play this game.”

“It’s not a game,” Deb says.

And I’m happy to hear her say that, as that’s just what I’ve been trying to get her to admit for years. That it’s not a game. That it’s dead serious, and a kind of preparation, and an active pathology that I prefer not to indulge.

“It’s the Anne Frank game,” Shoshana says. “Right?”

Seeing how upset my wife is, I do my best to defend her. I say, “No, it’s not a game. It’s just what we talk about when we talk about Anne Frank.”

“How do we play this non-game?” Mark says. “What do we do?”

“It’s the Righteous Gentile game,” Shoshana says.

“It’s Who Will Hide Me?” I say.

“In the event of a second Holocaust,” Deb says, giving in, speaking tentatively. “It’s a serious exploration, a thought experiment that we engage in.”

“That you play,” Shoshana says.

“That, in the event of an American Holocaust, we sometimes talk about which of our Christian friends would hide us.”

“I don’t get it,” Mark says.

“Of course you do,” Shoshana says. “You absolutely do. It’s like this. If there was a Shoah, if it happened again, say we were in Jerusalem, and it’s 1941 and the Grand Mufti got his way, what would your friend Jebediah do?”

“What could he do?” Mark says.

“He could hide us. He could risk his life and his family’s and everyone’s around him. That’s what the game is: Would he—for real—would he do that for you?”

“He’d be good for that, a Mormon,” Mark says. “Forget

this pantry. They have to keep a year of food stored in case of the Rapture, or something like that. Water, too. A year of supplies. Or maybe it's that they have sex through a sheet. No, wait," Mark says, "I think that's supposed to be us."

"All right," Deb says, "let's not play. Really, let's go back to the kitchen. I can order in from the glatt kosher place. We can eat outside on the grass, and have a real dinner and not just junk."

"No, no," Mark says, "I'll play. I'll take it seriously."

"So would the guy hide you?" I say.

"And the kids, too?" Mark says. "I'm supposed to pretend that in Jerusalem he's got a hidden motel or something where he can put the twelve of us?"

"Yes," Shoshana says. "In their seminary or something. Sure."

Mark thinks about this for a long, long time. He eats Fig Newmans and considers, and you can tell from the way he's staring that he's gotten into it, that he's taking it real seriously—serious to the extreme.

"Yes," Mark says, and he looks honestly choked up. "I think, yes, Jeb would do that for us. He would hide us. He would risk it all."

"I think so, too," Shoshana says, and smiles. "Wow, it makes you—as an adult—it makes you appreciate people more."

"Yes," Mark says. "Jeb's a good man."

"Now you go," Shoshana says to us. "You take a turn."

"But we don't know any of the same people anymore," Deb says. "We usually just talk about the neighbors."

"Our across-the-street neighbors," I tell them. "They're the perfect example. Because the husband, Mitch, he would hide us. I know it. He'd lay down his life for what's right. But that wife of his . . ." I say.

"Yes," Deb says, "he's right. Mitch would hide us, but

Gloria, she'd buckle. When he was at work one day, she'd turn us in."

"You could play against yourselves, then," Shoshana says. "What if one of you wasn't Jewish? Would you hide the other?"

"I'll do it," I say. "I'll be the Gentile, because I could pass best. A grown woman who still has an ankle-length denim skirt in her closet—they'd catch you in a flash."

"Fine," Deb says. And I stand up straight, put my shoulders back, like maybe I'm in a lineup. I stand there with my chin raised so my wife can study me. So she can really get a look in, and get a think in, and decide if her husband really has what it takes. Would I really have the strength, would I care enough—and it is not a light question, not a throwaway question—to risk my life to save her and our son?

Deb stares, and Deb smiles, and gives me a little push to my chest. "Of course he would," Deb says. And she takes the half stride that's between us and gives me a tight hug that she doesn't release. "Now you," Deb says. "You and Yuri go."

"How does that even make sense?" Mark says. "Even for imagining."

"Shhh," Shoshana says. "Just stand over there and be a good Gentile while I look."

"But if I weren't Jewish, I wouldn't be me."

"That's for sure," I say.

"He agrees," Mark says. "We wouldn't even be married. We wouldn't have kids."

"Of course you can imagine it," Shoshana says. "Look," she says, and goes over and closes the pantry door. "Here we are, caught in South Florida for the second Holocaust. You're not Jewish, and you've got the three of us hiding in your pantry."

"But look at me!" he says.

"I've got a fix," I say. "You're a background singer for ZZ Top. You know them? You know that band?"

Deb lets go of me, just so she can give my arm a slap.

“Really,” Shoshana says. “Try to look at the three of us like that, like it’s your house and we’re your charges, locked up in this room.”

“And what’re you going to do while I do that?” Mark says.

“I’m going to look at you looking at us. I’m going to imagine.”

“Okay,” he says. “*Ну*, get to it. I will stand, you imagine.”

And that’s what we do, the four of us. We stand there playing our roles, and we really get into it. We really all imagine it. I can see Deb seeing him, and him seeing us, and Shoshana just staring and staring at her husband.

We stand there so long, I really can’t tell how much time has passed, though the light changes ever so slightly—the sun outside again dampening—in that crack under the pantry door.

“So would I hide you?” he says, serious. And for the first time that day, he reaches out, as my Deb would, and puts his hand to her hand. “Would I, Shoshi?”

And you can tell Shoshana is thinking of her kids, though that’s not part of the scenario. You can tell that she’s changed part of the imagining. And she says, after a pause, yes, but she’s not laughing. She says, yes, but to him it sounds as it does to us, so that he is now asking and asking. But wouldn’t I? Wouldn’t I hide you? Even if it was life and death—if it would spare you, and they’d kill me alone for doing it? Wouldn’t I?

Shoshana pulls back her hand.

She does not say it. And he does not say it. And from the four of us, no one will say what cannot be said—that this wife believes her husband would not hide her. What to do? What would come of it? And so we stand like that, the four of us trapped in that pantry. Afraid to open the door and let out what we’ve locked inside.