The Ablemans and the Stricks

Our next-door neighbors to the left were the Ablemans. They were a family of Orthodox Jews who already had four children when we first moved in that September. Mrs. Ableman's mother also lived in the house, making it a very crowded place with all sorts of weekly activities and visitors. On any given summer night, and with windows wide open, men could be heard arguing *Talmud* and women engaging in loud conversations while intermittently reprimanding children. All of this went on in a manner oblivious to the fact that we lived close enough to get a constant earful, or that such behavior was a betrayal of the suburbanite commitment to private spaces. Perhaps the worst of this was the annual night during the week after the closing service of *Yom Kippur* when Mr. Ableman and his two sons would begin to build their *Sukkah*; they would hammer until midnight right under my parents' bedroom window, the old man shouting exasperated instructions in a high-pitched, raspy voice. Unlike our home, their model had a side porch that lurched impudently close to our yard. This area of their domain was forever strewn with curious objects—from used tires to broken shelf units lined with gardening tools, to picnic-table benches and rusty bicycles, to another set of shelves with a host of kitchen and household detritus that appeared to have been banished permanently from the house. In all, it looked like a country rummage sale. My father was forever bemoaning this mess, especially because his Wednesday evening, local patients had to walk by this refuse on their way to his office entrance at the back of our home.

Either because they knew we too were Jewish, but unobservant, or simply because neighborliness was not a value they had studied in their holy texts, Mr. Ableman and all his children were never friendly. They would often walk right by our house when we were outside and not even utter the first hello. Twice a day on Saturdays they'd march on their way to and from synagogue, the entire family accompanied often by friends, all of them dressed in suits and skirts. They would speak in hushed tones to themselves as they passed and ignore our presence. Perhaps this was because by the afternoon we were often riding bikes or loading-up the car for a drive, both of which, I knew even then, had to offend their sense of what a Jew was supposed to be. Nevertheless, on the rare occasion our family spoke about our Jewish neighbors, the consensus was that we all felt judged by the ongoing snub. Did they intend to make us feel guilty, or was

their silence a mark of the condescension with which the observant are often taught to regard Jews who don't live by the letter of the Law? Even though we were right next door, they must have perceived us as outside their community and thus invisible—something akin to the apathy I assume they also felt toward the *goyim.* To them, we must have been *Jewish goyim.*

We never doubted our Jewish identity. I was being sent to Hebrew school, we went to synagogue for "monthly family service" and all the major holidays, and my mother made continual note of the plight of Jewish history, which she routinely characterized as a legacy of suffering of which we were the most recent beneficiaries. Yet while we all went dutifully to services, my dad complained bitterly each time about how repetitive the liturgy was, how often we were made to stand up and sit down, and how long it all went on. "We should be like Protestants," he'd remark on our way back to the car, "in and out in forty-five minutes!" The mixed-message was made more complex by my Yiddish-speaking grandmother, who made me listen repeatedly to stories of pogroms she witnessed in her Lithuanian *shtetl*, *Varanova*. She ended these tales abruptly, paused with a haggard look, and said: "Dey beat-up all the Jews; dey steal from us and kill us; dey hate us. If a bully asks for your lunch-money, you give him; you give him and walk away." In general I was inculcated to believe Judaism was a heavenly-fortified set of ethical imperatives demanding self-sacrifice, compassion, tribal unity, allegiance to Israel, benign actions toward others—and guilt.

At *Temple Israel* Hebrew School on Wednesday afternoons and Sunday mornings, I became unexpectedly devoted to our Biblical history book. This was a hardback bound in yellow cloth with the words *Torah Stories* printed on the front. Below the title, a black-line drawing of Moses, holding the Tablets and looking grave, stared out like a pronouncement. What I liked best about the book was not its text, but how its sketched illustrations depicted dramatic moments that followed chronologically from Genesis to Deuteronomy. One of these graphics still rises in my imagination every time I think of those hours spent in boredom and misery listening to Mrs. Yoishpe drone on about Hebrew pronunciation or why we light candles on *Shabbat*. In an early chapter, half a page was devoted to a tableau of Abraham and Sarah leaving their homeland in pursuit of a holier place to live. They were shown as two small figures with a donkey trailing behind them while they moved across an immense desert landscape. The sun beat down on them,

and in the sky birds hovered ominously. Imagining the isolation, fear, and uncertainty of leaving home to wander without family made me feel a sense of dread I didn't get from the narrative itself, and I see now it was my first impulse toward understanding the meaning of *diaspora*. Years later, when I read W. B. Yeats' line "while all about it/Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds," from "A Second Coming," the older image arose in my mind again. To this day, watching birds circling in a barren sky suggests the grotesquery of carrion to me, where death is transformed further into the indignity of a carcass displayed for all to see. I suppose in the end the drawing did reinforce a religious message for me: that ugly mortality, at least, unites us all.

The only other book I recall from those years was one I returned to many times during the break from class when each student was given fifteen minutes to visit the library. There in the quiet of that empty room, I gravitated to an oversized hardback entitled *Lightening War: Six Days that Saved a Nation*. Sitting down and opening its pages, I drank in its glossy photos of tank battles and paratroopers reentering Jerusalem after the battle for the city. I was nine or ten, and without a sense of irony that the title was a translation of the German term *Blitzkrieg.* Nor had I any notion at that age of the wartime injustices committed by the *Haganah* against Palestinian villagers in 1948. Rather, the heroism I imagined on the parts of those soldiers, even then, had a compensatory justice in my mind, as if they'd revealed to the world Jews were not the cowards the Holocaust suggested—a sentiment reinforced often in my home. Lost in such dreams, the mandatory sentence of Hebrew school suddenly transformed into an elaborate fantasy about someday becoming an IDF soldier myself, and faded only when I returned to the classroom and our teacher's droning on about the fear of God, or Kashrut, or the pronunciation of prayers I rarely understood.

Our home—as irreligious at it may have been—also had its own version of arguments over faith-versus-deeds. On one memorable Sunday after school, as I explained my newly discovered doubt surrounding supernatural acts in the *Torah*, my mother turned to my dad and said, "hmm . . . I don't know—Marty, do you believe in God?" It struck me as odd that she appeared never to have asked him this before, as if they had never had a conversation between themselves about belief. My Father turned from the kitchen counter, looking somewhat guilty himself, and said, "who me?" He paused, struggled for words,

and then rejoined his answer with: "I don't know . . . believe in God? . . . I think I *fear* God." Since my dad was not a ponderous type—or any sort of theologian by a long shot—I believe he meant that he feared the onset of dire circumstances rather than the famous wrath of the Hebrew God. Yet I knew this fear didn't extend far enough for him to renounce drives in the country on *Shabbas*, or his country-ham and eggs for breakfast, or the occasional Texas Tommy (a hotdog split down the middle, loaded with cheese, and broiled to golden brown). Even with these *traefe* habits (into which my mom was forced to marry), however, I recognize now his response was one of the most honest philosophical things he ever said. Later in life, when I learned the Talmudic edict "The fear of God is the beginning of wisdom," recalling his unreflective conclusion that day reminded me of how sharp a mind he had when it came to getting to the point. The sensibility behind his comment remains for me to this day a rational interpretation of the maxim in that a healthy dose of caution in life is indeed wise. But despite his layman's teachings, and given all the Jewish trappings of our home, I remained throughout childhood dismayed as to why the Ablemans seemed not to care—or at least not to want to acknowledge—that we too were Jews.

The only exception to this was Mrs. Ableman. A petite, silver haired woman who always wore a kerchief around her head, she was prematurely wrinkled and seemed forever hunched under the load of children and household duties. But she also loved gardening and was always tending to a flowerbed in front of their porch. On occasion, she and my mom would share a polite word. She would offer her thoughts on children or the weather in gentle, whispered tones while she continued her spadework. To this day I recall her attempting to speak sweetly to me about my first grade experiences one afternoon while she planted spring bulbs. Her eyes betrayed the feeling that I was a handsome, quiet child and that this opened her heart to me without prejudice. She died suddenly and fairly young, however, and afterwards, as each of her children grew and left home, we never spoke to these neighbors at all. My dad remarked on more than one occasion about how Josh's allowing his gray beard to grow-out in mourning made him look like Moses (we assumed, against type, that he meant Charlton Heston). By adolescence, I recognized such derogatory comments as containing not only my dad's frustrations, but a whiff of embarrassment toward Josh's appearance in the eyes of our gentile neighbors as my dad perceived it. Later on, after Mr. Ableman was

living alone, there were just a few, rare occasions when he made contact. Two or three times during this period he rang our doorbell and asked if we'd watch his house while he was away visiting grandchildren. Although my father politely agreed, he'd grouse loudly afterward about the unmitigated nerve of the man, snubbing us the way he had for years and then asking for help, as if he'd been a fine neighbor all along. Although I understood how indignant my father was, Mr. Ableman's nonchalance also suggested that he seemed somehow unaware he was such an inconsiderate individual—as if he assumed we understood that his duties had been naturally elsewhere in this life, and rightfully so. That arrogance stayed with me a long time, even while I came, unexpectedly, to admire him as well.

Although I perceived Mr. Ableman as stern and cold, I also harbored the unsettling suspicion that he was a much more intellectual man than my father. He was not only an ardently observant Jew, but appeared to care little for money, status, or any of the niceties of polite society—the unstated social cocktail of our middle-class world. He and his family were unconventional—although completely unself-conscious about being so; they weren't in a manner rebelling against middle class values, but rather saw themselves as directed by an entirely different set of sacred commitments. I recall being astonished when, during one of our family's humorous conversations about our weird neighbors, my father remarked that Josh Ableman was probably operating on a different level than most of us; perhaps he was just smarter: he was a PhD in physics who worked at a government lab, and my Dad had heard he was both brilliant at what he studied and considered one of the most learned and pious among his ultra-orthodox community. When I saw these other dimensions of Josh's person, I began to gain a modicum of respect for him. I understood that, while my dad was forever ranting about the Ableman's obliviousness or rudeness, he must have felt on some level as well that Josh was a kind of authentic Jew who embodied the commitment and seriousness of a Jewish practice my father's family more or less abandoned a generation before he was born. Within a few years, I came to realize that, although my old man really couldn't stand Josh Ableman as a person, he ultimately forgave him his unfriendliness because he viewed him as some sort of sacred cow. Having served in World War II and lived during the Holocaust, it was beyond my father to truly hate another Jew in his heart—even if that Jew had no respect for him. So in the end, we became resolute toward the Ableman's refusal of what

Chadwell Lane represented about neighborliness and decency—a set of behaviors I now assume Josh would have seen anyway as *goyishe nachas.*

Later, during my graduate years at the local university, I was more than surprised one day to discover Josh haunting the campus library. Freed from the authority of my father's house and its middle-of-the-road purview, it seemed that in this atmosphere Mr. Ableman and I might be given a new license to relate to one another. I had just then been studying the history and racist limits of Liberal Humanism in literature and the rise of the Left as a critical force. But seeing Josh, I felt inspired to momentarily rebel against this postmodern-deconstructionist premise and act on my older belief (quixotic as it was) that difference between human beings can be bridged by simply being decent and humane; our brief, unprecedented conversation was in this way provoked by my decision to betray my father's grudge and see what it was like to speak to him. "Mr. Ableman," I began, "Neil Davison, I lived next door." I made certain I informed him that I was studying for a PhD in Literature. With an expression suggesting he'd noticed my person for the first time in his life, he launched immediately—without any polite questions about my family—into a discussion of which Western writers had been anti-Semites and which had written favorably about the Jews. I recall that raspy, weak voice lighting on Blaise Pascal as one of the only Christian thinkers he could name who seemed to admire Jewish ways. I was once again intimidated with his knowledge: in just a few minutes, he had summarized the attitudes of Aquinas, Luther, and Voltaire—figures, with the exception of the last, I was familiar with but hadn't studied. I compensated for this by making a point of asking about his children, and I was conscious of wanting to demonstrate to him that, while my father my not have been *frum*, at least he had taught me how to be a *mensch*. He was surprisingly affable, though, and I found myself wondering if all these years we hadn't noticed that, aside from his arrogance, Josh Ableman was also by nature simply shy.

But I felt only half-successful at redeeming this end of my past. I did convince myself, though, that I *had* at least confirmed to him that I was something more than just my father's son. But perhaps he didn't even care. I tried to disguise my defensiveness over my need to prove I had the makings of an intellectual, despite my petit-bourgeois beginnings. Even if it was noticeable, however, I doubt this meant much to him

either. Our parting also wasn't exactly a celebration of mutual respect, but I do recall him flashing a set of old, yellowed teeth before he turned to go—perhaps as an acknowledgement of my efforts to engage him; I don't think I'd ever seen him smile before this. Now that we had concluded the only substantive conversation that ever occurred between us, however, I left feeling somewhat proud, yet unfulfilled. If I had to describe that disappointment, I'd say it was like the moment a son finally recognizes he'll never be good enough for his demanding father. But I never had another encounter with him again and he died sometime between that meeting and the year I finished my program. Our family wasn't invited to the graveside or the *shiva*, but I remember being home for a visit and my dad mentioning Josh's death. He seemed genuinely saddened by it, as if Mr. Ableman had been an old friend all along. After all, he *had* lived next door for nearly thirty years. Despite how unapproachable his family had been, their presence nevertheless shaped who we had become living on that street during that era. I realized then that the Ablemans had been like some distant relatives who come for a short visit and then decide to stay: presumptive, intimately offensive, and grating—but relatives all the same.

On the other side our neighbors were the Stricks. Ironically, this equally eccentric gentile family of uneducated working-class people became closer to us than the Ablemans ever could. Mr. and Mrs. Strick had purchased their split-level, which was identical to ours, the year after we had. When they moved in, they already had one of their three grown daughters and her small child living with them. This pair, the mother and girl, the latter of whom was named Terri Tersio, became the conduit of my first knowledge of infidelity, divorce, and sexual curiosity. We had overheard my mother saying Mrs. Teriso "had left" her husband because he cheated on her, but couldn't image what this meant, beyond the fact she simply didn't have a husband and lived with her parents. Mr. Strick was a lower-level railroad clerk downtown; he sold tickets for the B&O railway at Union Station. He was a heavy-set man with a perfectly round beer gut. He wore black half-frame glasses, had a wide reddened nose, and seemed never without a day's stubble on his heavily jowled face. Every night before dinner he would sit on his stoop in his work-chinos and a sleeveless t-shirt and drink can after can of *Schaeffer* beer ("*Schaeffer* is the/one beer to have when you're having more than one"). He would look into the distance as he chugged another round, and as his buzz grew, would

become progressively friendlier to us as we played games below on the sidewalk. He would eventually gain a permanent grin and call to us to come over and visit. Even then we knew something was just *too* friendly about him for an adult, but in our youthful innocence, couldn't figure out why. He would ask us about school, our bikes, or if we had girlfriends and boyfriends at our age. Because he was a drunk, and a gregarious one at that, my mother didn't like nor trust him. She was forever telling us not to speak with him, or at least not to linger there. My father would smile and tell her that Bill Strick was just a harmless old lush. My mother, who was bounded by old-world fears she inherited from her immigrant mother, however, was certain that gentile men like Mr. Strick—uneducated, uncouth drunks—were capable of anything; in this instance the implication was child molestation, but in general she attributed to this profile to the root of all things that ruined the world: intoxication, violence, sexual immorality, slovenliness, and, always in the end, Jew-hatred.

Mr. Strick's wife, Ethel, was, conversely, a quiet, polite, kind woman. She was taller than him, a bit mannish looking, wore cat-eye glasses, and was forever seeing to the needs of her family. She was both loving and stern with Terri, who was older than me, but younger than my older sister, with whom she sometimes played. Being between our ages, however, Terri also liked to hang out with me. It was from her carefree manner, seductive looks, and overall comfort with herself and her body that I received the first experiences of what my father later suggested repeatedly as the more inherent sexiness of gentile women as compared to Jewish ones. I recall how thrilling it was to be alone with Terri on our backyard swing-set, just talking to her, with no other kids or grownups around; even at eleven years old, I was experiencing the thrill of an unconscious sexual tension. That vague feeling suggested a subtle danger and sense of freedom, on which I was of course too timid at that age to act. Terri would often compare our two families, and on occasion she suggested our differences had to do with ours being Jewish—a set of assumptions she must have learned within the walls of her home. But this sense of difference only added to my early feelings of sexual adventure; she was becoming to me the embodiment of the illicit desire my mother always assigned in full to gentiles of the Strick's ilk—which I was being raised to control and fear as unethical and destructive. I remember Terri was once fascinated after a bout of fitful laughter during which one of us

accidentally farted. She was surprised to discover my family used a different term to refer that particular bodily function: “You-all call them ‘farties,’ don’t ya; we jes’ call ‘em ‘stinkers’.” Even then she had a seductive smile, and talking about our bodies made me feel as if we had transgressed something forbidden and exciting.

Terri grew to be an olive-skinned teenager with feline green eyes, straight mousey-colored hair, a beautifully cleft chin, and an athletically slim body with small upturned breasts. I am certain that she began to drink and smoke pot while I was still playing my pretend army games with friends. By the time I graduated from elementary school at twelve, I was aware of my sexual attraction to her, and had even by that age masturbated to fantasies of her running naked through our backyard, her long hair flying behind. But by then she was already out of my league: she was soon acting mellow and self-consciously cool, which I now recognize as the assumed pose of a pothead. In my middle-school yearbook she wrote: “the world is full of wonderful deeds; do not grow up as one of its weeds” as a message to me from some worldly street-wisdom she believed she had gained by fifteen. I can’t recall much of her after that, except that she had an impressive roll of revolving boyfriends. I assumed from afar that she was having sex with these guys, and, aside from being envious of them, later on in life speculated she must have become pregnant, married, and divorced early in her life, just like her mother.

During the middle years of our childhood, Mr. Strick became friendlier with my younger brother and me. He would invite us into his house continually, and we would rehearse what our mother told us was polite ways of telling him no, such as dinnertime or other convenient excuses. Eventually, though, our curiosity and innocence made us accept the offer on more than one occasion. I recall entering the house for the first time and being amazed at its completely disheveled state; their living room (unlike ours which was off-limits to children) bore the telltale signs of regular daily use: TV trays left open next to frayed chairs, an ashtray or two filled with cigarette butts, and cat toys strewn about the carpet. The kitchen too spilled over with unwashed dishes, filled ashtrays, open magazines lying on the table.

One of the pretenses under which Mr. Strick was always inviting us into his home was an invitation to join him in his “hunting.” Since I imagined that someday, released from the confines of my mother’s

overprotection, I would be a soldier or a spy capable of handling an array of firearms, this was more than intriguing. Mr. Strick's version of hunting from his own home was unique, however. I have no doubt that, when younger, he actually hunted, although my own father's distance from even thoughts on this subject disallowed me to know exactly when and where he might have done so or what he may have killed. But on the occasions of his inviting us into his house, his "hunting" necessitated that we follow him upstairs and into his master bedroom's small bathroom. All the while his wife, lowering her voice, was saying things like, "Oh Bill, don't show them *that*," or "Now Bill . . ." But he told her to hush, and we followed him up the stairs. Once in the bathroom, our eyes became riveted to the sight of what appeared to be the first real rifles we had ever seen. Two of them lay propped in the corner of the cramped room, and Mr. Strick picked one up to demonstrate how he "hunted." It appeared that, when he was well lubricated, he found great joy in shooting at squirrels from this small, second-story window. We soon realized that the weapons were merely BB guns and not real rifles. After he got off a few rounds and was unsuccessful at hitting anything, he promised to allow us to shoot the guns from the window during our next visit. But on returning home and telling our parents of the wonders we'd encountered, my mother was furious, especially at my father's laughter. She commanded that we never go back to make good on his invitation. After that, though, I often noticed from the vantage of a hilltop in our backyard, the barrel of his gun emerge from the window and the sound of BBs ricocheting off whatever he had managed to hit. I never saw him actually kill a squirrel, and would have mostly been repulsed at the sight of the dead creature if he had; but I'll always remember the drunken delight he took in the possibility of being able to kill something right in his own backyard.

One Christmas after this, both Terri's mother and Mrs. Strick made a point of asking my mom to send us over for some holiday treats. My mother answered the invitation in polite but vague tones. But once the topic was brought up with my dad, he became insistent that such an invitation was a part of his own youth, and that this was the manner in which gentiles attempted to live out the spirit of their holiday. "It will be good for the boys," he said, "it's a nice tradition, go ahead kids, go on over." So we rang the Strick's bell and were invited into that same living room, now strewn with tinsel and bestowed with the first real Christmas tree we had ever seen beyond television and magazines. We were given cookies and eggnog, the

latter of which we sipped politely once, and then set down never to be attended to again. By this time in the day, late afternoon, Mr. Strick was full-on drunk. He was delighted we had come, and after some pleasantries suddenly said, “I know what you boys like, I besh you like skiing—you ever been skiing?” When we shyly answered no, he began to demonstrate by tilting in his chair one way then the other, his arms akimbo as if holding ski poles. He encouraged us to join him. Soon the three of us were pretending to ski down slopes, avoid this turn and that by almost crashing, and finally howling with joy as we all ended by wrecking completely. In his drunken state, Mr. Strick slid right into the imaginary world of children, and we couldn’t believe any adult could play this well. Mrs. Tersio looked on in delight, laughing with us, seemingly unaware that middle-class decency would have framed the entire scene as shameful—young children in the presence of someone so under the influence. This game escalated to the point where Mr. Strick actually fell out of his chair once or twice at the climatic crashes, during which Mrs. Strick said something to the effect of, “Now Bill, don’t get too riled up with these children here.”

After the game had reached its natural decline, Mr. Strick asked us if we had ever seen a gorilla. Catching ourselves from the silent wonder this crazy adult had produced in us, we politely attempted to describe such a beast we’d seen at the zoo. He said, “well, you never see-my-gorilla: you juz’ wait and I’ll go get him.” Again, Mrs. Strick registered her hesitation in some gentle warning such as, “Bill, you’re going to scare these children now,” while he moved nimbly for a fat man up the stairs, saying loudly over his shoulder, “now you jus’ wait and you’ll see a real gorilla. We were filled with an unprecedented mixture of glee, discomfort, and the novelty of it all while we waited patiently on their early-American plaid couch. To our shock, and then fear, Mr. Strick emerged from the bathroom at the top of the stairs without a shirt, his hair plastered down over his forehead, and his face screwed up in his best imitation of a simian frown. He held his arms wide apart at shoulder-height and his hands in the shape of claws and grunted as he pivoted down the stairs, into the living room, and toward us. Although initially I was frightened by the sight, I quickly told myself to calm down because it was, after all, just Mr. Strick. But I felt odd and embarrassed as well. My brother, three years my junior, who must have been about four-years-old at the time, felt no such reservations; rather, he apparently believed some sort of weird gorilla-man had entered the room,

clutched my arm, and began to shake and cry. Seeing this, Mrs. Strick reprimanded Bill for getting carried away again, and sent him back upstairs to get dressed. She comforted my brother, and politely suggested that Mr. Strick needed to rest now, and that perhaps we could take some cookies with us on our way out. When we returned home and told my parents and sister about our adventure, my father laughed so hard he could barely find the words he needed to ask follow-up questions, which in turn provoked my ten-year-old sister to begin laughing hysterically as well. But my mother was once again incensed; she said it was disgraceful for a man to act that way in front of children and that we were not to accept any more invitations from Mr. Strick. I believe I never entered that house again while the Stricks lived there.

In either case, there was no denying that the Stricks were the earthy counterpart to the Ablemans' sanctimoniousness, and that we were stuck right the middle. Our family looked and behaved, much more than either of theirs, like the middle-class ideal of *The Donna Reed Show* or *Father Knows Best*—although we put no real effort into being so. Besides, my dad had a raging temper and often barked violently at us, and my mother was perpetually worried and sullen at times—not exactly the era's Hollywood Wasp fantasy. And yet, as unfriendly as my father was with Josh Ableman, he found a kind of sanctuary in carefree workingmen like Bill Strick. But it was not that he exactly *identified* with him; my Dad was just as incapable as most other suited-types of living out his sensual desires at any given moment. Although he was controlling and unpredictable to us, he was also in many ways a *Walter Mitty* case, just like most fathers on that street. His one great episode of wild living had been the years he spent overseas in the Philippines serving in the Army-Air Corps during World War II. In basic, he'd been trained as a radioman-navigator-waist-gunner on B-25 Mitchells. But shipping out toward the end of the war in '44, after the U.S. had retaken the Islands in the Battle of Leyte, he never saw any action nor flew one live mission. He was nonetheless always proud that he had been stationed on a re-conquered Leyte; in an 8x10 glossy he had of McArthur wading ashore during his famous "I have returned" moment, he always told us he was the guy two aides to the left in the General's entourage—one among many war stories we believed for a long time. Nevertheless, his wartime experiences taught him discipline, independence, and camaraderie to the point where those years became the operative memories for him in lessons for my brother and me about proper

conduct and manliness; lessons such as keeping our room "policed" and not crying when he lost his temper with us. Yet, watching he and our neighbor tell stories to each other, you could see that, though Bill wasn't his twin, my father was more comfortable kidding around with a guy like Mr. Strick than he ever would have been in conversation with Josh Ableman. It was as if Bill allowed him to short-circuit something in his Jewish identity that would've filled him with guilt and resentment around Josh. Observing him in such moments became my first hint of how conflicted Jews can be toward other Jews, especially surrounding their own Jewishness.

Even though neither neighbor was a good match for my father, at least Bill didn't give him the feeling of being judged. As I grew, I realized that this was a pattern in my dad's comfort around friends; although my parents socialized exclusively with other Jewish couples, my father was often reluctant to participate in such evenings, and became reserved during the course of them. On more than one occasion I overheard him complain to my mom about how the men of these couples were always parading how much they thought they knew (mostly inaccurate), how much money they made (usually more than my dad), or just simply insulting one another humorously—to which my father rather took offense. But during his interactions with Bill, my dad became animated and open, and seemed to honestly enjoy the company. My father was not a man driven by competition or money; he maintained an air about him that suggested he was above the materialist goals and egotism that defined the masculinity of his own class. Because he'd always been an avid reader, he was in fact more cultivated and knowledgeable than most of these guys, but was afforded few opportunities in such an environment to demonstrate this. In the company of Bill Strick, though, he could laugh or reveal his lascivious side in dirty jokes, and occasionally go on to impress him with some chestnut about history or science. Because of this everyman's eruditeness, and because he was a medical professional, my father to guys like Bill was someone, I believe, to be admired, and Mr. Strick was one of the first in a series of such friends to call him "Doc." Because my dad had this image of himself as more cosmopolitan and yet more down-to-earth than the average guy of his second-generation Jewish milieu, he had a considered style that was not dictated by corporate America or the pursuit of wealth. For example, although he rarely drank, he had the notion that a gentleman always maintained a well-stocked

liquor cabinet. He also seemed to choose his friends without regard to their status or connections. Because of these attitudes, his rapport with Mr. Strick included his occasionally offering brands of whiskeys that Bill could never afford. This chumminess also led to one of the strangest events we ever experienced while living on Chadwell Lane.

One fall morning my brother and I awoke to my sister calling us downstairs to our front bay-window because she had noticed two police cruisers parked just across the street. Two officers, rifles in hand, were moving at quickstep up the Strick's lawn and into their house. This was when we were all in late childhood or early adolescence, around 1971 or thereabout. By this time, Terri's mother had remarried, and a younger sister who moved back in earlier with her fresh-out-of-the-navy newlywed husband had also come and gone, leaving just the older couple. Within a year or two, Mrs. Strick died of a heart attack, and Mr. Strick was suddenly left alone in his home for the first time in his adult life. Since he was retired by then as well, this lonely existence occasioned an increase in his drinking. Although we weren't aware of it at the time, Mr. Strick was in fact the first alcoholic we had ever known. His front-stoop evening beer was apparently just the aperitif portion of his nightly drinking, which was often followed by shots of *Early Times* bourbon. On the morning of the police cars, we stared in amazement: what could have happened? Had there been a robbery? Did Mr. Strick kill himself? Did he kill his daughter, who was just then home for the weekend? Much to our further astonishment, within a span of no more than twenty minutes, the two officers came out of the house with their rifles pointing at the ground. They were exchanging a few words with Terri's mother, and even laughing a bit in a disarming manner. Slinging their rifles, they walked back to the cruisers still talking to themselves and shaking their heads. They loaded up and drove up the hill and disappeared. We gawked in amazement and wonder.

Later that day, on the insistence of my mother, My Dad went over to see what had happed and offer his help if it was needed. He returned with the most fascinating story we had ever heard (which also occasioned our first knowledge about a strange thing called *delirium tremens*). It had been Mrs. Tersio who had called the police; her father had phoned her much earlier that morning while it was still dark. He claimed he was having trouble sleeping and thought he heard people whispering and moving about downstairs. On

working himself up to investigate, he said he had caught fleeting glimpses of smallish men, about a foot tall and in uniform, moving quickly about the downstairs rooms; eventually he told her he was certain that they were "little green men from Vietnam" attempting to infiltrate and take over the house. When she arrived, he was so agitated that she couldn't calm him down and decided to call the police for a lack of knowing what else to do.

Even after he had ceased to see the little green men, Mr. Strick was still so beside himself he refused to let his daughter leave. But because she now lived across town, and because she apparently didn't know what to do for him, she abandoned him for the weekend, promising to keep in touch. That Saturday night the phone rang just before we were to go to bed. I picked up the receiver to hear Mr. Strick's trembling voice ask for my Dad. I knew this was not the voice of the smiling man on the stoop, and I quickly handed my Dad the phone. After he hung up, he said, "Rosetta, Bill Strick needs me to come over, he's seeing things again." My mother was her old implacable self; she suggested he would go over there and get in trouble—maybe even be harmed—and that he should just call the police again. But my Dad was always more softhearted when it came to sympathy for people outside of our immediate family, even for strangers at times. One of his mantras was occasioned whenever we'd pass by a disabled person while riding in the car: "you see that—'there by the grace of God go I'—don't you ever complain or feel sorry for yourself. Can you imagine what life is like for that poor bastard?"

Now he strode right over, and we watched him from the window walk up the Strick's lawn and knock at the door. In a half-hour or so he returned in a curious mood. I'd never seen a person so ambivalent before; he didn't seem to know whether he should to laugh or cry. His face was simply blank. In narrating what happened, he broke into a slight chuckle while repeating Mr. Strick's description of the invaders, and although I recall feeling that this was cruel, his laughter was followed with a sigh of despondent awe. He told us that Mr. Strick was shaking all over as he opened the door and whispered, "Don't make any noise, they're back and they're all over the downstairs. They'll shoot, I swear, if they know I called you." Because he knew from his medical training that hallucinations were very real to the mind perceiving them, Dad said he could only humor Bill at first, saying things like, Bill, I'm sure they've gone now that I'm here." But

Mr. Strick was by that point raving. He began to cry and said he'd overheard them whispering that they had come to take away his daughters, and that he had sent all his girls away to keep them from such a horrid fate. He pleaded with my father to notify the army and have them dispatch a unit to expel the little men. In the middle of his tears, he stopped short, pointed down into the dark at the bottom of stairs, and whispered: "look, did you see that; there went two of them right under the couch . . . there, there—see that, there, behind the television." In the end my father had to lead him around the house by the hand like child, entering each room and proceeding to open closets and cabinet doors. The image of a grown man leading another around his own house while holding his hand would stay with me for the rest of my life. On opening each cabinet, my dad would say "look Bill, see—there's nothing there." My father ended the visit by putting Mr. Strick to bed; he fell asleep, thanking him profusely. Back home, my dad finished his story with a diagnosis: "Jeez, he's in bad shape . . . he's got the *DT's*; he needs treatment. I hope his girls take care of him."

After about a month of this, during which my father was called back to the Strick's several times, Terri's mother and her two sisters had Bill committed. I recall my mother's bitter retort that he had been abandoned by "those girls" in his hour of need—even after he'd supported them when they couldn't support themselves. It was curious that she always wanted nothing to do with the Stricks, especially after their mother passed away, yet felt she had the right to condemn the daughters as cold-hearted ingrates. I couldn't have an opinion on that, but I recall identifying with my Dad's sympathy for our neighbor, who was the first person I ever witnessed in the process of losing his mind. The house stood empty for several months; Mrs. Tersio stopped by now and then to tend to something or other, and if my parents saw her, they'd ask after Bill. Her reply was always "Oh, he's getting better, thanks." And in fact Bill returned to the house sometime that next winter. He looked a few pounds lighter but displayed a dour expression that suggested he'd never again be the jolly drunk we knew as little kids. My Dad had a few conversations with him about his health and well-being; Mr. Strick had been sent to a state mental hospital in the dubiously-named town of Sykesville, where they dried him out and, according to him, treated him very badly. Although my brother and I were now more afraid to talk to him than ever, I recall standing by my Dad's side while Bill ran on about how "shitty these niggers were up in Sykesville, and how they let him lie in his own mess for hours

before cleaning him up." The whole thing, he claimed, was a scam, and he didn't think he was any better, either." In fact, we were to find out in a few months that he went back to drinking soon after; I recall my Dad telling me he had a conversation with Bill in which he was certain he was drunk again, during which Bill choked-up and cried about how his daughters abandoned him. On hearing this, my mother's habitual bitterness about people and their conduct suddenly made more sense to me.

Several times during the next year Bill called my father because he was frightened to stay alone. My dad went over dutifully to calm him down and put him back to bed. Then a few weeks passed without a phone call and without much sight of Mr. Strick. One morning sometime after this we were awoken to the sound of an ambulance coming down our street and knew immediately it was for Bill; but, curiously, it stopped at the home of our neighbors on the other side of the Strick's house. When my Dad called them, the husband, Tom Donaldson, told him that Bill had contacted them the night before complaining of feeling unwell and having chest pain, and that they had subsequently invited him in to spend the night on their couch; early that morning, Tom discovered Bill awake and in severe pain. So he called Bill's physician, whose number Mr. Strick had given him the night before. Some time passed while waiting for the doctor to return the answering-service call. Then Tom noticed that Bill was unconscious and called an ambulance immediately. But by the time it arrived our neighbor was dead.

My father paused, his hand over the receiver, and said quietly, "Bill Strick died last night." At this, my mother began to cry, noting again how shameful his daughters had behaved. We huddled together at the kitchen table, and could overhear my father muttering responses on the phone: "Jeez . . . did he . . . oh, yes, well … no, no, you did the right thing." But when he hung up, he was angry and dejected. He turned to my mother: "why did Bill go to Donaldson's when all the other times he called me?" he asked. "If he was having chest pains, why didn't he just call me—he needed an ambulance right away." As he voiced the rhetorical questions, he began to stride back and forth between our foyer and family room, eventually traversing the entire length of the house. His voice grew angrier: at first at Bill, and then at Mr. Donaldson. Why had Bill insulted him that way? He could have taken better care of him than Tom Donaldson, whom my Dad was now calling that "stupid redneck." He should have called an ambulance as soon as he saw Bill

in pain. “What the hell did he call his doctor for?” For the first time in my life, I could see my father struggling to hold back tears. Although he did successfully, he remained unapproachable the rest of the day.

By evening, he’d become more reflective. He began to attribute the death to some kind of foreknowledge on Bill’s part—suggesting he made the choice that night not to bother our family because, somehow, he knew he was going to die, and that in his own way, he was paying tribute to my dad’s kindness by keeping him from suffering the guilt he may have felt at having a neighbor drop-dead in his house. But even at eleven years old, I understood through absorbing my mom’s opinions that it was Bill’s drinking and ungrateful children that were behind his death as much as it could have been some preordained fate. My dad’s last straggling comments that day indeed echoed mom’s sentiment about how Bill’s daughters “left him in the lurch.” After my parents attended his funeral, we rarely spoke about Bill’s death again, and over the course of the following year, the Stick household was put on the market and sold, and the Stricks soon enough faded as a topic of conversation from our lives.

But Neighbors’ ugly secrets often linger on the periphery of memory. As we grow, they also tend to lose their luster; looked back on, what appeared ominous in childhood often devolves into mere commonplace. Yet I understand now that Mr. Stricks’ death was an early harbinger of what I eventually understood about a uniquely human kind of suffering. To my knowledge, the next two set of neighbors to live in that house never knew much about Bill; how he had made us laugh, or how he came to frighten us—and we certainly never told them how he went mad, how his family abandoned him, and how he drank himself to death in the very home in which they now lived—or why my father always affected a condescending tone toward Tom Donaldson. I also suspect the Ablemans never knew much about the Stricks, nor had an inkling of how a kind old man, just two doors away, died such a sad, ignominious death.