



## Prayers for the Living

By Alan Cheuse

### First Chapter

"It's an old story, darling, so don't get offended."

"I'm not offended."

"I'm sorry I brought it up."

"Don't be so sorry."

Mrs. Bloch touched a hand to her auburn hair, a surface so carefully crafted that it appeared to be an object made of stone or dark-stained wood that had been constructed elsewhere and then placed atop her wrinkled forehead.

"Now I've hurt your feelings. I'm sorry, Mrs. Bloch."

"Why should it hurt my feelings to hear someone's name mentioned, Mrs. Pinsker? I want the best for my son and if that arrangement makes him happy . . ."

"Mrs. Bloch, I was only bringing up the example of . . ."

"Of what?"

"Of a mother-child . . ."

"A mother-child what?"

Mrs. Pinsker looked up from her coffee cup and gave a sign with her large, red-rimmed eyes that it was not safe to speak.

"Girls?" said the same black, gray-haired, stick-thin waitress in a white



uniform who attended them each week.

"It's the unofficial member."

"The ex-ofisho," Mrs. Bloch said, trying to remember a phrase that she had heard her son Manny use when speaking about temple activities.

"More coffee?" the thin black woman asked, her voice as much of a mask as her face.

"Girls, she calls us," Mrs. Pinsker said. "If she wasn't as old as us I'd get insulted."

"How are you, sweetheart?" Mrs. Bloch asked.

"Same. Same as ever. More coffee?"

"And a doughnut," Mrs. Bloch said. "Don't you think I ought to have a doughnut?"

"I vote you should have a doughnut," Mrs. Pinsker said.

"Something sweet always cheers me up," Mrs. Bloch said.

"I didn't know you were depressed," Mrs. Pinsker said.

"You think talking about my son's mistress makes me happy?"

"You said if it made him happy you didn't care."

"I don't," Mrs. Bloch said.

"Girls?" the waitress insisted.

"Sweetheart, a doughnut please," Mrs. Bloch said. "A doughnut to make me happy."

"He doesn't make you happy?"

"Not when he's sick."

"You said Doctor Mickey said he wasn't sick."

"Not physically sick. He's confused, darling. Why else would he fall? Why



else would the world go dark for him? Dark, he said it went all dark. And on top of this he has a mistress, a married woman . . .”

“A widow. So she’s excused.”

“So she’s excused. But he’s got her. But if you think of it . . .”

“Think of what?”

“It’s almost part of his job.”

“Florette?”

“Because of her . . . you know?”

“Because of the Holocaust, you mean?”

“That’s what I mean. Because she was in the concentrating camp, because she came to him for help.”

“You know all this?”

“I know more than you think, more than Manny thinks, and what I don’t know I imagine.”

“You’re telling me you make it up?”

“What I make up usually turns out to be very close to what’s true. Very close.”

“Then make up, make up,” said Mrs. Pinsker. “He’s my rabbi, so I’m entitled to know what’s going on with him.”

“You’re entitled. For you, darling, I’ll talk,” Mrs. Bloch said. “For the leading lady in the grandmothers’ club, for one of the founding members that you are, I’ll talk. Talking will help me, I’m sure. Talk, Doctor Mickey always says, talk away.”

“What a darling man,” Mrs. Pinsker said.

“His mother Mrs. Stellberg is very proud of him, and so would his



grandmother be proud if she was still alive.”

“Do you know if she’s alive?”

“How could she be alive? Is your mother at our age? Is mine? But I’ll ask. I’ll ask him. I’ll get personal from my side of it for a change. He knows more about me, about my family, than anyone else—because I talk to him—but I don’t want nobody else should know.”

“But you’re telling me now.”

“Grandmother to grandmother I’m telling you.”

“You’re upset. I can tell.”

“How can you tell?”

“Your hand trembles when you lift your cup. Ten times a minute you wipe your lipstick with a napkin. Normally you don’t do this.”

“So I’m upset.”

“So you’ll talk.”

“I’ll talk.”

“Your food,” said the waitress from over Mrs. Bloch’s shoulder, and with a birdlike quickness set the dish on the table and stepped away.

“Who does she think she is? A princess? If I was a waitress I would be more polite.”

“Maybe she is better than us,” Mrs. Bloch said, her viscous upper lip curling back in a smile.

“Don’t get funny. So tell me the story.”

Mrs. Bloch held the pastry up in front of her.

“What are you doing? You’re studying it?”

“I’m thinking.”



“Thinking what?”

“I told you. It’s an old story and I’m remembering it, darling. You want to hear it from the beginning?”

“From the beginning? From the creation of Adam and Eve? No, thank you, that part I’ve heard.”

“No, from Minnie and Jacob, that’s what I was thinking. From the creation of Minnie and Jacob.”

“For that you need to study the doughnut? Better you should get one with a hole in it, so you can look through the hole to the other side.”

“The other side? I’m seeing the other side without closing my eyes, without a magical hole in a magical doughnut.”

Mrs. Bloch took a bite out of the pastry. She chewed for a moment, and then said through a mouthful of dough, “Don’t look so impatient, it’s a long story, I need my nourishment.”

“You said old story, not long.”

“Well, what’s old? What’s long? As long as it’s good.”

“Well,” said Mrs. Pinsker, “how could it not be good? You’re sitting here, you lived, that’s it. A happy ending. I can tell. You’re smiling again, darling.”

“And I shouldn’t smile when I’m thinking about the beginning?”

“But so tell me what was going on with his accident.”

“With Manny’s fall?”

“No, with the president of the United States. With George Gershwin. Of course, with your Manny.”

“With my Manny it was an accident.”



“I was there, I could see, a man trips, a man stumbles, but I mean he’s all right? He’s not sick? A man just doesn’t all of a sudden tumble down after all these years for no reason. Look, everybody has reasons but not everybody falls down. So tell me his reasons? What’s the matter? He’s got a disease? He’s got troubles with you-know-who?”

“I told you, nothing. He’s got nothing. Nothing is wrong. He told me earlier in the day he had a little headache.”

“Headache? It’s a tumor, maybe?”

“Please darling, I told you, it was nothing. He had a little headache. In the hospital, after his accident, lying there, he told me everything. Ever since his father died, a long time ago, we’ve been very close, you know . . .”

“I’ve heard, I’ve noticed.”

“So you’ve noticed. So I’ve been like his concudante, do you know what I mean?”

“Do I know? Do I know? Don’t I have children of my own? Don’t I hear all the stories, all the troubles?”

“If they talk to you, you’re lucky. If they don’t, you’re happy.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Mrs. Bloch. So tell.”

“What what?”

“You’re telling me about his accident.”

“His fall.”

“His fall. And later his summer and his winter and his spring? Keep talking.”

“Very funny. Summer, winter, whatever. I’m telling you he had his summer later in life than most boys, with this business he was making. And good for



him, because early in his life, times were rough for him when he was a little boy, when my Jacob passed away . . .”

“That’s the beginning you were talking about?”

“That’s it.”

“So you’ll tell me that later. But now I want to hear the middle. The part I saw. Because even though I saw it I didn’t know what I was seeing.”

“Typical.”

“What do you mean, darling, typical? You think I’m blind or something? I was there, I was looking down from the upstairs . . .”

“From up there we get a good view, don’t we, Mrs. Pinsker?”

“The grandmothers see everything, sure. So I was up in the balcony watching, like in the old days, when I’m up there watching the stage show at the Roxy . . .”

“Looking down at the stage show, of course. So you don’t think I remember those things? And let me tell you what I remember . . .”

“I’ll let you.”

“Thank you, darling. And I’ll tell you. What I remember is looking down from the balcony of the old shul on my old street, peeking from behind the curtain they put up around us to keep us ladies from looking down.”

“They put up a curtain?”

“You were so far ahead of everybody you never had no curtain? In some places I hear, of course I never saw, they had a wall. And you could make eyeholes and peep through. They had their old ways. In the old country. And some were not so bad and some were not so good. I’m telling you, my Manny banged his nose against it when it came time for him to stay



downstairs with the men. He didn't want to leave me, the boy was such a good one. And he had to go to school? Same trouble. He didn't want to leave me. Such a good boy. But what you were asking, that comes later and you were asking about his accident."

"His fall."

"It was an accident."

"But it comes first, not later."

"First I'm telling, but in his life it comes later."

"Don't confuse me, just tell me."

"I'm telling you. Just the way he told me."

"His concudante? Like the confessor?"

"You mean like the Catholics? God forbid."

"If He forbid we wouldn't have the Catholics."

"Don't joke when I'm thinking about this."

"Thinking to you is like praying? I shouldn't disturb you?"

"I'm just trying to get it right."

"Look, darling, sip a coffee, calm a little, and tell me what happened."

"When he fell? It was awful. Remember, it was the high holidays, Yom Kippur, the very last day of the ten days of penitence, when it comes time for God to decide which book He wants to write our names in for the coming year—the Book of Life or the Book of Death."

"Stop with the Sunday school lecture already and tell me what happened."

"So I'll tell. So Manny woke up that morning, he told me later in the hospital . . ."

"He tells you everything? Ah, I should be so lucky. My boys, they never talk.





And you know why?”

“Why?”

“Because they are terrible talkers. They are like . . . like Moses’s brother Aaron, he talks with pebbles in his mouth. They have stories, believe me they have stories just as good as your Manny’s, but they can’t say them because they can’t talk so good. Book of Life, Book of Death? They could write books themselves, believe me, if they could only write.”

“Now your turn to stop.”

“So I’ll stop. You want me to stop? I’m not offended. So. I stopped.”

“You better keep stopping or I can’t tell you.”

“All right, all right, so go on.”

“I’ll go on. Please. Let me clear my throat. Aherm. Aherm.”

So he woke up that morning feeling, he said, very very strange, not in the usual way as though something is going to happen—because you know when you feel that way it never does—but strange because he had the idea that something already had taken place, that something in his life had been decided for him. Do you know? As though God had written in the book already, and he didn’t know which one. Except he didn’t think of it that way except to explain it to himself, the feeling that something had already gone past him. Or something had been lost.

He went looking, first for his good soft-soled shoes because this was another day of standing all morning and afternoon and he wanted to be as comfortable as he could make himself, and these it appeared he had misplaced. He went up to the top of the house, and down to the study, his



library, even to the basement, and he couldn't find the shoes. It got so he was cursing, because who wants to stand all day in uncomfortable shoes on top of everything else—the fasting, the hard work of leading the service, the looking down into the faces of the congregation and feeling his fatigue rise in him like water crawling up to the brim of a glass—and then of course he felt terrible because he was cursing over nothing but a stupid pair of shoes. When he had so many other more important things to worry about, I don't have to tell you, he was worrying about her, about both hers, the mother with the problem in the store—you didn't hear? I can tell by your look you never heard, well, so later I'll tell you, but not now because I don't want to be distracted—and the other her, the daughter with the problem with the boy—both hers, her and her. To think, women give him such trouble when all his life while growing he didn't have no problem with me . . . don't laugh, don't laugh or I'll close my mouth!

So . . . down the stairs, up—he can't find the shoes, and then he feels a headache coming on, from the fasting probably, he figures, an ache so big it's like one of those dark summer thunderstorm clouds you see blowing in over the water at Bradley Beach, and he shudders when he thinks what he's doing with his life, with his congregation, with his business, because after all what is he? Can he stand every weekend in front of the temple crowd and make his sermons and still go in twice a week to the city to work with his brother-in-law in the holding company? He's wandering around the house, thinking to himself, I've lost more than my shoes . . . and if I find them how do I find what else I've lost?

He's in the kitchen, he's looking behind the desk in his study, he's on his



hands and knees snooping behind the couch and you know what he finds there? He finds a pair of panties the size the same as both hers wear because the daughter has now reached the point where she has the same hips as the mother, and the same hair, as you know, but God forbid the same disposition, there it's maybe too early to tell, and so anyway, he says to himself, on top of everything else, what's this? What's this? and he stuffs the panties in his pocket and keeps on looking, the panties in the pocket along with a piece of glass he carries with him all the time, a souvenir, a piece of glass shaped like a Jewish star, and about this don't ask a question, because I'll explain in a while if you want me to, or maybe even if you don't, because it's a story from the beginning, and this I'm telling you now comes from the middle—and God forbid we should see the end.

So he's on his hands and knees and feeling the first drummings of the headache and the first winds of the dizziness, and then he's up again, shouting for Maby, and where is she? Who knows, taking a bath? She takes so many baths you'd think she got herself dirty like a baby when the truth is ever since the business in the store—and I'll tell you, I'll tell you—she doesn't go out at all except when he says you absolutely have to, only to services, not even to temple affairs—so she doesn't answer, and he calls for Sarah. Sarah! he calls, and where is she? Outside on the back porch playing, would you believe this? Playing her guitar! And singing, on the holidays! He can't believe this either!

Sometimes I feel  
Like a motherless child.



Not a bad voice, and on other days he might have stopped and thought to himself, My daughter, with such a good voice, but the song, oi, the song it gives me heartache.

Sometimes I feel  
Like a motherless child.

A nice song, an American song, because in the old country we had our mamas, we knew our mamas, and if we sang we sang to celebrate our mamas, not to tell the world we got lost, except, of course, for later, for the ones that got lost in the Holocaust, but that's another story. Here she is, singing the song of the lost child, she's strumming good, she's singing strong and loud, and he goes charging off after her, not knowing exactly where she is, following the music, the song.

Sometimes I feel  
Like I'm almost gone.

"How can you do it to me on a day like this?" he growls at her when he bursts out onto the back porch.

"I'm playing my guitar," she says. "I'm not out in public. I'm on the porch. Am I embarrassing you?"

"The porch is public," he says, trying his best to keep his voice down. "The porch is outside. The porch is the world. Go inside, young lady, and get



ready for temple.”

“I am ready,” she says, poking a finger at one of the guitar strings.

“Are you?” And he yanks out of his pocket the panties he found under the sofa and says, “Put these on if you’re so ready!” And throws them in her face.

“That’s . . . disgusting!” she says to him, her face covered over as if with a veil. And she snatches them up and flings them over her shoulder into the garden.

“Pick those up,” her father says.

“Pick them up yourself, Rabbi,” she says. And she plucks a loud thirrum with two fingers on the guitar.

Maybe if she had only been insolent, just mean, nothing else would have happened. But she added that title, Rabbi, and it did something to his temper, to his mind. Fathers and daughters! What a story, an old story, ach, and a bitter one, bitter, bitter, bitter. So. She called him what he was, and that changed it all. Why? Even now I’m still finding out, after he’s telling me all, after she’s talking to me, this poor old grandma with the bad eyes, and they’re talking to her, but to each other do you think they’re talking? You can imagine. Look! He reaches over, and she cringes, like a dog fearing a smack, but he doesn’t want her, no, he grabs the guitar and even as she’s screaming, “No! No!” up he hurls it, and it sails end over end, making a strange shape in the air as it spins, and it comes down, like a filmy piece of silk or nylon but also like the thing of wood it is and smash! onto the walk beyond the porch steps, and it splinters, breaks into pieces.

What a way to start the holiest of holy days! Everyone already feeling tired



and irritated, because of the fasting, because of the heat—always in Jersey it's hot like summer in India when the high holidays come around—and his breath stinks in his own nose, and now he's got this to contend with! As if everything else weren't enough, as if the life he's made hasn't been enough, as if he doesn't want to pick it up like that guitar and throw it into the air without caring where it comes down in pieces! He can barely stand up to it, and he says, holding down his voice as best he can, but you can hear it trembling—I heard it trembling because this was when I opened the door and came onto the back porch . . . “Little girl,” he is saying, “little girl . . .” And you can imagine what this did to her, this girl growing up so quick, her life like a merry-go-round ride, going around in circles at the moment but moving, quickly, quickly—don't I know what it was like? But she had stung him with that word, the piercing word, Rabbi, though how could she know? Maybe her instincts told her? Was that how she stabbed right through? He was thinking about his life, on this holy day, on the day when God's moving finger or pen or whatever He writes with, maybe even now a typewriter or a computer, when He—or She or whatever God is these days—marks in the Book of Life or the Book of Death, he's been thinking, wondering, pondering, sweating in his brain, milking his thoughts, should I go on with this farce—wait, all this will come to you—should I go on with it? or should I get out? All week long, all day long the day before, and all night lying there in a sweat, alongside his sleeping beauty, the woman dead to the world from all the pills she takes so she can sleep, should I? shouldn't I? What could the daughter know of the father? She couldn't know, the children never know until it's too late. Even now do you think he knows about me?



his own mother? and did I know mine?

I'm telling you, the whole world works backward in reverse, that the parents should know of the children all the time and be unable to do anything and the children know only when it's too late! And even more than the parents of the children it is the grandmother who knows triple trouble, because she knows her troubles and the children's and the children's children's, and thinking about it, talking about it, gives me such a headache I'm telling you that if there is a God in heaven—and don't be shocked that I say something like this, because today you hear a lot worse from smarter people than me—but if there is, He must have the biggest headache of all from knowing everything backward, forward, past and future, but then if He's so great I suppose He can make for Himself the biggest headache powder, no? Poor little girl turning big girl who I rocked in my arms when she was a newborn, how could she know what she had said?

"You are going to pay for this," my Manny shouts, "you are going to pay! You little . . . little . . .!"

Please don't say something terrible! I call out to him in my mind. And maybe he hears, because he turns and goes back inside, walking around me to do it, like I'm a stranger, "Excuse me," he says, and goes upstairs to his dressing room—because by this time it's separate bedrooms for them, which, Sarah told me, is very troubling to her for not-so-obvious reasons, and he reaches into his pocket and takes out his favorite piece of glass and sees his finger all slashed from it, and he goes into the bathroom to wash off the blood and put on a little bandage, and there he finds her, Maby, throwing up into the bowl. I'm telling you, it's early morning and this man



has already had quite a day.

He didn't say: "You're not sick, are you? Poor dear."

He said: "You're sick again and today of all days?"

"It's the heat," she said, in that voice like a sound trying to shrink back into itself, the voice that came out to shrink only when she was in one of her states. "I was taking a bath and the heat got to me, Manny. It made me ill."

And this was a big difference between them, my son and my daughter-in-law, him saying sick and her saying ill, a difference in upbringing, her from the fancy Cincinnati school, him from where we came from, from Second Street, from the old rabbi's school, some finishing school that was! When I first saw her, with her red hair, the pale pink face, I asked myself, this is one of us? But then I learned . . . too much I learned, if you ask me.

"You know what just got to me?" he says to her. And he launches into a tirade against the daughter, telling about the guitar, about her curse—he took it that way—upon him.

"I don't want to hear!" Maby says, spitting up more into the bowl. "Just leave me out of it, do you hear? Leave me out."

"She's your daughter as much as mine," he says, "and she's insolent and cruel and . . ."

She spits up more into the bowl.

And with his bleeding finger, he grabs from the medicine chest a little bandage, and he walks out into his own room.

This was how he started that day. If you think it got any better, guess again, darling, guess again. You were there. You saw the moment. And there were other moments behind the big moment, I'll tell you. Here is what it was.





First he's dressed quicker than you can say Jack Ribicoff and then he's standing at the front door calling back to me.

"Ma," he's calling, "Mama, tell Maby to get after Sarah to get ready because I'm on my way."