HOW TO COMFORT THE SICK AND DYING

THE FIGURE IN the bed seemed so shrunken under the sheets it would have been easy for a visitor to think he'd stumbled onto the pediatric ward.

Of course he had not. Reuven Schweller—bearded, tzitzit fringes threatening to slip out of the waistband of his pants, a black yarmulke pinned to the top of his head making him look, he knew, like a caricature of something even without an artist's rendering—knew exactly where he was and why. He'd been sent by the Rebbe to make a sick visit to a man he didn't know. A dying man who surely wouldn't want Reuven there any more than Reuven wanted to be there. Why would he, Reuven coming in unasked, intruding on the man's potentially peaceful departure from the world and advertising a piousness which, if the dying man knew anything about it at all, positively shrieked the man's existence as an abomination. This was, after all, AIDS, and it wasn't from faulty blood. Whatever Reuven might try to do or say, the rules he was making himself live by, the backbone of his desperately rebuilt life taken on in hopes of lifting him out of his own drug-hazed despair not all that long ago, practically spat at the man's way of life. If rules could spit.

Reuven moved softly from the doorway to the chair at the foot of the bed, clutching his raincoat. This was his first sick visit; the Rebbe thought he was ready. Reuven wasn't so sure. Maybe if he was lucky the man wouldn't wake up, and he could leave. Though of course there was no such possibility. *One who leaves the bedside of the dying is worse than a father who denies his own child bread.*

A sigh flurried like a feather through the waifish form, stirring the sheet. It was only enough air for a bird. It was not enough for a man, even one so reduced—and disappearing.

The man opened his eyes. Two sunken windows. If ever the body receded so far that the soul was near enough to the surface to be clamoring to go free, it was now. "May I help you?" he said.

Reuven blinked himself out of his stare. Help him? He must look preposterous and hopelessly out of place, a full burst of health on his face, no yeshiva-boy pallor for him, a high school wrestling star once, getting back his old strength with vitamins, a strict vegetarian diet. What did he know about suffering? "I'm Reuven Schweller. I hope you won't mind a visit."

Nothing moved, only a small smile on the dust-dry lips. Did the body finally forget thirst? In order to simplify things, crumble more readily into the earth? "A rabbi," the man murmured. "Things must be bad."

"Oh no, no, you misunderstand." Reuven waved a hand. "I'm not a rabbi."

The eyes closed, the man's face so pale it was blending into the pillowcase. He looked all of seventy pounds, his hands lying on the sheet like two still fish. Was this dying, real dying? Not the dying to oneself that Reuven in his short life had tried two or three times already, this latest an attempt to make himself over out of some impossible need for atonement. And which, he was certain, wasn't working. "Not a rabbi?" the man said. "You just look that way because . . . ?"

Reuven looked down at his suit, dark and heavy, formal. He was twenty-nine years old. He hadn't worn a pair of jeans in three months.

"Doesn't matter," the man said. Reuven looked up. The man had opened his eyes again, pale green, or maybe it was gray or a distant blue, and pointed with one of the fish hands to his own chest, at the flimsy hospital gown that hung off his shoulders like a shroud. "Who'd call this dressing?"

Reuven tried to smile. What could he say? *I could have been you? What was it—freebasing? The downtown baths? The hollow-eyed girls on Fourth Street?*

The faded eyes closed, cheekbones suddenly too prominent, coming to the fore of the parchment skin as if announcing themselves: *Soon this is all there will be.* The cracked lips moved. "So, you've been assigned to cheer me up?"

Cheer? The Rebbe didn't say anything about cheer. *Bring a glass of water, smooth the blankets, whatever they ask. Small acts of kindness, like what a child would do.* And if not that, Reuven had thought, maybe a need for talk, expiation, unburdening the guilt over a wasted life. About this, he knew something. He fidgeted with the raincoat, looked at the bedside table, a plastic water glass. "Look, can I get you something? A ginger ale? The newspaper?" There'd be a vending machine, a gift shop. He could kill some time, bring back whatever it was, then go.

No answer. Maybe the man had fallen asleep. Reuven glanced at the window, the blinds so tightly closed it would have been impossible to tell if it was day or night. And nothing on the walls, no posters, no pictures, only a bolted TV perched like a huge intrusive eye.

"Why don't you tell me a story?"

Reuven turned back to the bed. A story? He was no storyteller.

The last story he'd told was the one he gave his parents years ago about his supposed respectable life. A made-up job description, social whirl, even a nicely furnished apartment which, from a distance of a thousand miles, they had no reason not to believe.

"So?" said the man. "You've got a beard and one of those little hats. You're supposed to know stories."

A hot flush rushed to Reuven's cheeks, he felt the old response heating up. *Fuck you, wise-ass.* He took a breath. Could the man see through him? Was the new persona melting away, Cinderella's footman reverting to a rodent at midnight? *I'm not really Reuven, you know. I used to be Robert. I was a small-time dealer, grew up in a split-level suburb. I'm not what you think.*

"So?" the man said.

"Right, okay. All right." Reuven ran his palms along his pants and glanced around the airless room trying to free-associate. He could imitate the style of the Rebbe, who could give a simple parable that illuminated the world. He stared at the blinds, a yellowish tinge to the slats. "Once there was a farmer. He had twelve daughters and twelve sons. He sent the daughters to get married and the sons to learn a trade. He gave them each ten rubles and told them not to come back until they had each doubled their money and accomplished their tasks.

"Years passed. Then one day the offspring began to trickle back to the farm. Each had doubled their money and accomplished their task. The boys had become traders and the girls had all married. The problem was, the brothers and sisters had all married each other. Seeing the holy bonds of matrimony used for such abominable unions, the father took a look at the last of the returning couples and dropped dead on the spot."

He stopped. It was as if a spell had overtaken him, a complete story rolling off his tongue, unbidden. And what was it? The worst depravity: an incest story. And on top of that, an insult to the dying man whose own unions had probably not been all that kosher either.

His raincoat was a humiliated heap on his lap. He made himself look away from the blinds and turn to the bed. Mercifully, the man was asleep. Reuven gathered up his coat and hurried out of the room.

HE HAD NEVER told his parents the truth. The dealing, conniving and lying, ripping off, one way or another, everyone he came into contact with. His cashing in on every meager friendship, every well-meaning gesture. He had never told anyone.

He stared out the grimy window of the Q-13 bus onto Bell Boulevard and watched the trails of belching exhaust on the other side. Nor had he told the Rebbe, though he suspected the Rebbe might have guessed. How could he not, the Rebbe a worldly man, glassy-eyed Robert Smith—like he was fooling anyone, Smith—arriving desperate and skinny, still shaking off the coke dream, bottomed out the day before in a filthy room over a girlie parlor on Tenth Street. It was not something the Rebbe had never seen before. The place they put Reuven, a young men's dormitory in the middle of the yeshiva grounds, was probably filled with guys like himself, though no one ever said. Reuven was not in a position to ask. It was his last chance, word of the Rebbe's willingness to take in strays, no questions asked, somehow having filtered through the fog that passed for Reuven's brain, taking hold long enough for him to get his stuff together, get in a cab, and ring the bell. Come to the study sessions, don't cause trouble,

and he could stay. He sat in the Rebbe's dark study, grateful for the lack of good light, and rummaged for his checkbook. *We don't want your money*, the Rebbe said, waving his hand, dismissive, as if the money, like Reuven, had come up from the sewer.

The bus jolted and stopped. An aroma of perfume. He shut his eyes. Someone sat down next to him, a woman, he was sure of it. The perfume, or maybe it was soap or shampoo, freshly washed hair. He turned to the window, breathed in deep, trying for the bracing sharpness of glass, something to cut into him. The Rebbe was no fanatic. *We live in the modern world, it's no sin to look at a woman.* But for Reuven it was sin. One look and he'd lose it all, any restraint, the capacity to stop himself. He'd be talking this one up, whoever she was, twenty years old or forty, it didn't matter, first laying on the charm like he used to, acting respectful, interested in their work, though most of the time he never even heard what it was. He'd ease her into a bar, nodding to this or that with pretend interest, his face operating under separate instructions—*now smile, now look concerned, now say, Wow, that's amazing*—a glass of wine, a few hits, his desperation rising, then to her place where finally he could screw her a couple of times, spew out his own particular brand of poison, then leave. They had all been the same to him, faceless women and girls: strangers he picked up in laundromats or on the street, his friends' girlfriends or wives, his cousins, Sheila and Mindy, at their brother's wedding, telling them in the bridal room during the reception that it was okay, they weren't really blood relatives. He had screwed them all. It didn't matter who they were or how he knew them. If he'd had a sister he'd have screwed her, too.

And now, how far had he come? Telling incest tales to the dying.

The woman shifted her position, he heard the crunch of shopping bags by her feet. Maybe a dress, a pair of pretty shoes, a gauzy blouse. The shampoo smell was everywhere, and it was coursing through him, the old urge. He could do it right now, this minute. Slip off the yarmulke, hide the fringes, or maybe none of that would matter, maybe she'd like it, kinky, weird. *Hey, I fucked this really religious guy today.* He squeezed his eyes tighter, leaned his face on the cold glass. *He who climbs up from sin stands higher than the righteous of the righteous.* Someone hit the buzzer. He opened his eyes. They were thirty blocks from his stop. Groping like a blind man, he stumbled past her out of his seat—dark hair, a tan collar of a tan coat—and as soon as the doors opened, he fled the bus.

DEATH DOES NOT take a vacation. He was expected to visit the man again, to go every day, Booth Memorial the Rebbe's beat. All the Queens hospitals were divvied up, one rebbe per hospital, so if one of the Rebbe's students failed to show, if Reuven didn't go back, Booth Memorial risked being assigned elsewhere, and this would not sit well with the yeshiva. Not that there was any shortage of places in Queens where one could go to comfort the sick and dying, starting with under the overpass to the Expressway a few blocks from them, where at least a dozen wasted alcoholics could reliably be found each night slowly killing themselves.

The last one out of the morning minyan, waiting for everyone else to leave, Reuven finished unwrapping his tefillin from his arm. He fumbled with the straps, tefillin a new thing for him, a couple of weeks, the leather leaving indentations in his skin, distorting the tiny needle marks. He'd gotten off easy with the needle business: he was

still alive. Some vestige of restraint, a muted impulse for life, had kept him from going further. Somewhere along the line he was forced to take notice: a Lubavich Hasid on the street told him he, too, was holy, that a spark of the Divine lived in the dark sea of his soul. Reuven laughed in his face. Two days later he sold a deadly dose of something to one of the girls downstairs. The next day he packed his things and took a cab to Queens.

He worked on the straps, rolling them clumsily, twice, three times, finally getting them into the velvet pouch, nervous, always nervous, with the little black boxes. What if the boxes were two-way? What if the one he wore on his forehead didn't just whisper its parchment contents to him—*You shall love your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might*—but sitting up there, next to his brain, was drawing his thoughts out, too, recording them in some ancient invisible script? What then? One more week of this, and the box would be bursting. And then one day it would explode, his treacherous questions exposed, hanging like a bloodied sheet in front of everyone in the morning minyan: What am I doing here? How can this ever make me holy? How can anything ever make me holy?

In the yeshiva cafeteria he pushed his breakfast tray along the metal counter, the choices paralyzing from behind the glass: French toast, English muffins, bagels, cold cereal. Should he take one of the breads? If he took bread he had to wash; had to go to the little sink by the wall for ritual handwashing, say a blessing, and utter yet a longer one at the end of the meal. But who was he kidding, pretending to piety when he couldn't even tell a simple story to a dying man or sit next to a woman on a bus like a human being?

He put his tray down at a crowded table, pulled up a chair. Next

to him Meir, his six-foot-five Talmud teacher, a onetime forward for YU, glanced over, took in the cup of black coffee, the skimpy bowl of Frosted Flakes. "Not hungry, Reuven? What—you don't like Mrs. Ostervitz's cooking today?"

Reuven made a weak smile, took a cold spoonful.

Meir's large hand came down onto Reuven's free one. "Listen, my friend. Don't expect miracles overnight. Or even in three months. It's a long haul, you'll see if it's for you." The hand lifted and Meir's chair scraped the linoleum. Reuven kept his eyes on his bowl. "There are no easy answers," Meir said, standing, his tray a ceiling over Reuven's head. "But you already know that."

IT IS BETTER to perform a good deed than to light a candle before God. The blinds had been opened. The man was awake. "Nice to see you, Rabbi."

Reuven moved quickly to the chair, his raincoat over his arm. *Rabbi.* The man was mocking him. He willed himself not to react. Besides, he knew the man's name now, had checked the little slot by the door, the Rebbe's anonymous instructions from the day before—*Room 210, B-Wing*—no longer sufficient. Now there was a face, a voice, a person.

And a name. Ash. A. J. Ash. The sound made Reuven shiver. Was the man Death itself? The Angel of Death warning Reuven that his own time was up? He shifted the raincoat on his lap and forced himself to start, say something. "Hey, how you feeling today, Mr. Ash?"

Ash nodded, pale hairs from the back of his head pushed up on the pillowcase, the room brighter, for the open blinds, than the day before. It didn't seem to matter that Reuven knew his name. Or that

yesterday he hadn't. A beam of light stretched across the linoleum from the window all the way to Reuven's chair, spring not far off, a blue sky and a warming sun. Ash would never again be outside to feel it.

"So," Reuven said, "where you from?"

"North Carolina." Ash put on a thick falsetto, exaggerated southern boy. "Ah'm from No'th Ca'linah, y'all." He wheezed badly, once, twice. It was an effort to speak, even without the theatrics. "But I'm no good-ole boy."

Reuven nodded. He had never been to North Carolina but he'd been to New Orleans. Mardis Gras, prostitutes, crab claws, lines of powder. He folded his hands, kneaded one of his fingers. He could use something like that right now. "So how come you don't have a southern accent?"

"How come you don't sound like *Fiddler on the Roof*?"

A cough, then another wheeze. Ash, the color of his name, wasn't interested in an answer. He tried to moisten his lips with his tongue. "You here to save my soul?"

"Oh no. Nothing like that." Fidgety, Reuven pulled the raincoat toward him in case any stray fringes had escaped, the white threads meant to direct the mind to heaven. Did people think he could possibly save anyone's soul?

"You don't do that? Only the Christians?"

"I can't speak for the Christians," Reuven said, and thought, *I can't speak for the Jews, either.* He glanced around: no plants, no futile boxes of candy. Did Ash have no friends, no other visitors? "Look, can I get you a drink? Tea? Orange juice?"

Ash ignored the question. "Had a Jewish boyfriend once. Jeff. Jeff Shulman." He closed his eyes. "Great cook."

The raincoat was slipping off Reuven's lap, obstinate, as if it didn't want to be there. Reuven pushed it to the side, stuffed it into the seat. "Oh? You like to cook?" Ash coughed again, deep and phlegmy, foamy yellow spittle seeping from the corners of his mouth. It was like a bad trip. Very bad. Reuven scanned the little bedside table—the plastic water glass, an untouched cup of green Jell-O. "You want me to get a washcloth or something?"

Ash took a shallow breath, then coughed again. The room seemed to smell of eggs, a sulfurous odor coming from Ash's body as though he were decaying, decomposing, before Reuven's eyes. Or maybe it was the smell of medicine. Reuven spotted a box of institutional tissues by the sink, glanced at the door—shouldn't there be a nurse somewhere, or an aide?—then got up and took a wad, leaned over Ash, and made himself dab at the drool. The egg smell rose up, stronger. What did Ash endure every day?

Ash, eyes closed, whispered, "Tell me a story about chicken soup."

Reuven's stomach pitched, a small roll. He looked down at Ash. Could this be a test? *This is your man?* Satan asked God, pointing at Job. *You think he's so upright, so righteous? Touch him and see what happens.* Reuven the vegetarian tossed the wad into the trash, sat down and closed his own eyes, and saw the soup: the pimply skin floating in the water, fat globules colliding and collecting at the top, the bones falling off the flesh and then bobbing, naked, in the pot—feet, claws, ribs. Then he saw the chicken running, its neck broken, and then headless, through someone's yard. He could be that chicken, running headless through life. Where, though, was the chicken's head now?

"Mmm, Shulman's soup," Ash said.

Reuven opened his eyes.

"So, Rabbi?"

Reuven took a breath, gazed around the cheerless room. What had he heard lately? There was no chicken soup in the Elijah stories, no soup in the Black Forest where the Baal Shem Tov had his visions. He looked at the window, at the neat lines of sunlight between the blinds, his mind aimless and wandering, his mouth leading, a mouth without a body. He was the chicken's head now.

"Once there was a man who loved to make soup, especially chicken soup. He made it for all his friends. But one time where he lived, there were no chickens. There were not even ducks or geese or turkeys.

"But there were lizards. Lots of them. Green, scaly lizards with long tongues and flapping tails. So he caught a couple and brought them home, dropped them in boiling water, added carrots, an onion, celery, and cooked it up. After removing the bodies, he served it to his friends. 'Wow! Great soup!' they exclaimed with gusto. Then they went on to tell him it was the best chicken soup they'd ever had."

Silence. His stomach was close to heaving right there on the floor of the sick man's room. He hadn't been able to stop himself. A story about lies; about perpetuating colossal, disgusting lies.

It was a curse. He couldn't open his mouth without the pestilence of his own life pouring forth. He forced himself to look at the bed. Ash's eyes were still closed, a faint whistling coming from his nose. Maybe Reuven would be lucky again; maybe Ash had fallen asleep.

"That was one sick dude," Ash murmured, nothing moving but

his chalky lips. "Sicker than me, I think." He took a few shallow breaths, pushed his words out with effort. "Come up with something a little different next time, will you?"

WHAT NEXT TIME? How could there be a next time? Reuven hid under his covers the next morning, his tefillin untouched on the dresser. He couldn't go out, couldn't go to the hospital, couldn't look into Ash's dying face and listen to himself mocking not only the sick man, who loved Shulman and his wonderful soup, but also the good intentions of the Rebbe and his other teachers. Innocent men who had no reason to care about him other than some stubbornly held belief in the worth of every human being. Even Reuven.

A door closed softly in the corridor outside. Someone leaving for a class, or a job, or wherever the other men went every day with their tormented souls. Privacy was an unspoken rule; no one intruded, asked personal questions, the burden of being yourself heavy enough without having to worry about what anyone else thought. He pulled the covers over his head—*All your deeds, do them with a pure heart*—opened his eyes to blackness. This was the color of his heart. He squeezed his eyes shut: darker still. The girl downstairs had been no more than eighteen, his sale an injectable cocktail he wouldn't have given to a dying horse. First they had sex, then he left her the stuff. At her bird weight, half her systems already shot, it was probably over in half an hour. Although it took until the next day for the police to come, find the body, the stench in the hallway like nothing he'd ever imagined.

He turned to the wall, the stink from that downstairs hall coming to him as though it were outside in the corridor now, and pulled

the covers down onto his face, trying for the smell of starched cotton. Maybe he could sleep.

Sleep? How can you sleep? the sailors screamed at Jonah, the sea a raging torrent. *It's your God who's making the storm! Get up and pray!*

Pray? What for? He held his breath against the remembered stench. There was a poison ocean inside him. What else could explain what was escaping his lips in Ash's room? It was his soul rising up and reminding him of who he was; who Reuven Schweller really was without the tzitzit and tefillin, without the Rebbe.

Get up! Pray to your God and make him stop!

But there was no stopping this. He forced the covers tighter onto his face and, like Jonah, tried to shut out the screaming.

NIGHT. HE HADN'T turned on a light. Quickly, he got out of bed, dressed, grabbed his coat. The corridor was empty, everyone at maariv or the evening classes.

He was starving. Out on Bell Boulevard he shoved his hands into his coat pockets, a package of crackers in one, kept for emergencies when he was too far from the yeshiva, not near a place where he could eat. In an instant he was inside the Bluebell Diner, under a *Take Out* sign.

"Help you with something?"

"Bacon cheeseburger."

The man behind the counter raised his eyebrows, glanced at Reuven's yarmulke.

"What are you looking at?" Reuven shot back. "A costume party, all right? I'm on my way to a costume party."

The man shrugged, went to the back. Reuven put his hands back

in his pockets as if he were hiding something on his fingers—an illicit wedding ring, a telltale stain. When he got his food he quickly walked around the side of the building to the alley, leaned against the brick wall, and took huge bites, like a thief, a dieter on a binge, no handwashing, no blessing, nothing. He ate as he felt, like an animal, expecting to be ill, the food grotesquely taboo. But it was delicious, so good he would have gone back and ordered a second if it hadn't been for the counterman's stare.

He left the alley, walking fast, the sky clear, the stars bright, unheard of in overly lit Queens. In a liquor store he bought a fifth of gin, no looks, whiskey permitted, the Rebbe's humorous story of being refused alcohol once on a plane, the stewardess certain that, as clergy, he wasn't allowed. *So many things from which to abstain, and the stewardess thinks of yet another!* He hugged the paper bag to his chest and hurried down the street.

There was plenty of room under the overpass, the headlights from the Expressway dizzily illuminating the dead ground. A few drunks huddled together by a stone divider no more than forty feet from him, warming themselves over a primitive fire. Two of them turned, gave him a quick look, turned back. Reuven sat, opened the bottle, took a long drink. They couldn't have seen him very clearly but even if they had, there, by the highway, appearance would mean nothing, his beard nothing, his suit nothing, even his tzitzit would mean nothing. Who would expect him to look heavenward now, nursing a bottle of cheap liquor among the used rubbers and ravaged cans and broken glass? Dope, too, if he wanted to look; if he wanted to put his nose down into the dirt like a dog and sniff, then stuff the unfinished ends of joints into his pockets, fill them if he wanted to.

The damp seeped through his raincoat. He twisted the bag

tighter around the bottle and took another drink. Why had the Rebbe sent him to the hospital? It was too soon. Certainly it wasn't some morality lesson: *There but for fortune go I.* That was not the Rebbe's way. *I don't change people. People change themselves. Or they don't.*

He took another pull, then another, the liquor burning his chest. The shadows by the pillar were moving, drifting in his direction. The drunks. After they took the girl's body away the police questioned him. Did he know her name? Had she ever mentioned parents, a home address? There was so much bodily damage—heart attack, needle tracks, a plastic bracelet, the girl was a diabetic—they weren't even going to try and name a cause of death. *What's the difference, eighteen, a wasted life.* And then, the two of them on the way out, their blue policeman backs to him: *He doesn't look so good, either. I give him six months.*

A rustling of paper bags, the rancid smell of clothes that never got washed. They loomed over him, four big men, the stink of booze and urine on their shoes, four men like trees. His breath turned shallow. Maybe they would kill him. He had a good watch and a wallet. People had been killed for less. It was a fair trade, his life for hers.

One of the men bent down, getting a closer look, almost sniffing him. Could he smell Reuven's foul meal, the oily coins in his pockets? The rot that had settled deep in his core and that now refused to be covered up by his feeble efforts at prayer and good deeds? The man leaned closer, the stench from his clothes, from his matted hair and partially open mouth seeming to hover around him like an aura, a haze that separated him from the black night and the world of men. Reuven didn't move, the sounds from the highway suddenly ceasing, the headlights gone, everything still except for the flickering of the fire, nothing in the universe but Reuven and the man and the watch-

ing stars. The man started to put out a hand. Reuven's chest pounded wildly. He could die from the feathery touch. Then the man seemed to change his mind, took the hand away, and the four of them stumbled on, moving aimlessly, not back to the stone pillar, not anywhere, just moving.

A truck rumbled on the highway. Reuven let out a breath. Above him clouds were moving in, a soft gray that was obscuring the retreating stars. Maybe the next day it would rain. He felt his heart slowing. Why was he still alive? How was he supposed to live?

He pulled himself up. The drunks were gone, the fire out, as if it might never have been there. He left the bottle upright on the ground—an offering—then reached into his pocket and found, not only crackers but, miraculously, gum. He had fouled his breath with forbidden foods and whiskey but now there was gum. Quickly, he unwrapped two pieces and stuffed them in his mouth, then immediately pulled them out—*He who subdues his impulses is called a man*—uttered the blessing before putting them back in.

The night had turned warm, a thin reed of spring floating in from somewhere, the smell of flowers. He took off his damp raincoat, dusted the dirt from his pants. Ash. He needed Ash. Needed to sit before that mirror face and listen to the truth of his life. And might not Ash also prefer having Reuven there to lying in bed alone, dying in a ten-by-ten room thousands of miles from wherever he had once called home? *One who visits the sick extends the boundaries of heaven.*

The sounds from the highway rang, vibrant, across the open ground. Reuven began to climb the embankment to Bell Boulevard and the Q-13 for the hospital, his coat joyful over his arm. *Within the sickness lie the seeds for the cure.* Quickening his pace, hurrying to get there while Ash could still be counted among the living.