The Universe, Concealed

This story is for Ellen Geist, in memory of her son Jesse.

August 1, 1999 By Richard McCann

My friend Helen and I are rowing a boat on Eagle Lake. It's almost dusk, but Helen is wearing her swimsuit because she's working on a tan. She has brought along her bottle of Hawaiian Tropic suntan oil and a Panasonic cassette player made of cheap, white plastic, like a teenage girl's. As we row, we listen to *The Torah Tapes*, which Helen has secured from a Hasidic man who runs a shop on Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. He also sells special *yahrzeit* candles, she tells me, although she prefers the ordinary kind that come in blue paper wrappers, available in regular grocery stores. She says they remind her of the Dixie cups of vanilla ice cream her father brought her when she was a girl in Livingston, New Jersey.

"Be neither sad nor regretful," says Rabbi Ezekiel Stollman. Rabbi Stollman's our invisible passenger, the one whose voice we strain to hear when the Panasonic's batteries are running low. On *The Torah Tapes*, he speaks in a kind of up-and-down chanting. He says that sadness is arrogance and vanity. The things that sadden us are actually blessings, he says, coming to us from a universe that's concealed.

While Rabbi Stollman talks, I feel the rhythm of rowing—the bending forward, and then the long leaning back, pulling the oars through water—as a kind of secret davening. Helen sits across from me, adjusting her swimsuit's straps. "You think I'm getting too much sun?" she asks.

For several days now, since coming to the Eagle Lake Lodge and Cottages, where we plan to spend a week, we've been making a list of the things we would see if the concealed universe were suddenly and astonishingly revealed to us. At the top of the list, we have written *UV rays*.

Beneath that we have written Joshua, the name of Helen's 12-year-old son, who died a year ago, and then the names of my friends who have died—*Jim, Edward Marcellus, Larry, George, Darnell, Allen, Ricardo, Stanley, Paul, Jaime,* my brother *Davis, Billy, Mathias,* and, most recently, *Francisco*.

Helen says we should also make a list of the things that we hope will remain concealed forever. At the top of that list, she says, she'll put the cotton prosthesis she was given after her mastectomy, not long before Josh was killed. On a third list, a list of things that are generally concealed but that we believe might be revealed to us with a minimum of effort if we put our minds to it, we plan to write: *penises*.

It’s not surprising that we should take an interest in men’s zippers, says Helen, since we’re both descended from tailors who labored long hours in sweatshops. As for us: We labor in an editorial department, where our coworkers keep handing us grim, full-color brochures that advertise budget holidays that they believe Helen and I should take together. And who could blame them for wanting holidays from us? Even as spiritual projects, we must be tiresome, since we spend so much of our time discussing the lives of people who are dead.

“You have to admit one thing,” the coworker who shares my cubicle said to me one day while we were standing at a lunch counter waiting for a clerk to bag our take-out orders. “When it comes to the dead, there are simply more of them than there are of us.”

And although I saw at once the point that he was driving at, as sensible and tactless as it was, I thought, *Well, yes, that’s it exactly, especially when you’ve lost the people you loved best—so many, in fact, that you couldn’t possibly find a rental hall large enough in which to entertain them, other than the one inside your stunned but festooned head…*

Then I thought of my mother, who outlived almost everyone she knew and who solved this problem like a genius simply by allowing herself to become demented. Not long after my brother Davis died she began calling the people in the nursing home by the names of people who were dead. Once she introduced me to the nurse as her mother. Over and over, she kept saying to the nurse, “Have you met my mother yet?” Evidently this nurse had been around the block, because she didn’t miss a trick. She took one of my hands in hers and said, “Tell me, has your daughter been a good girl today?” And I thought, *Well, yes, in fact, she has, and she was always more like a daughter than a mother anyway….*

In this way my mother went on for years, descending from her seven heavens—from Machon, with its caverns of storm and noxious smoke, and from Araboth, which contains the dew that will one day revive the dead—only to accuse the nurses of stealing her brassieres.

But this isn’t what Rabbi Stollman has in mind when he explains the Torah, even though he, too, must explain the nature and meaning of the concealed universe by telling stories. In one of his stories, the ancient Jews are praying for the Creator’s blessing, which they ask to come in the form of rain, since they are suffering from terrible drought and famine. So it rains. It rains so much that their crops are destroyed. It rains so much that their beasts of burden are drowned in the fields. Then, says the rabbi, just as everything is almost lost, the Jews assemble again, with their heads bowed in submission, like beggars standing in a door. “Thank You, O Lord!” they start to pray. “Thank You! You can stop! We’ve had enough blessings!”

“Make no mistake,” says the rabbi. “The Creator takes an interest in prayers.”

Even here at the Eagle Lake Lodge and Cottages—“AAA-Approved, Special Senior Rates, In-Room Phones and TV Lounge” —there are many blessings. In the cluttered gift shop in the lobby, for instance, there are brightly painted iron trivets to bless the homes they’ll one day decorate, and seated in the pine-paneled dining room there are numerous old ladies, most of them widowed,

who bow their Christian heads in silence to bless their dinners. Rabbi Stollman would be impressed, we tell ourselves, if he were to see the old ladies as they congregate each night on the screened-in porch, in their Adirondack chairs, praising the things the revealed world has given them to gaze upon: hummingbirds, for instance, and fireflies rising from the honeysuckle bushes, and the deer that sometimes come along the shore at dusk to drink from Eagle Lake.

But tonight Helen and I are sitting in the dark, where the old ladies can't see us, down on the dock in folding chairs. We are staring at the deep blue line where the lake becomes sky.

"Tell me about the first time you met Francisco," Helen says.

I am remembering how as a child my brother Davis liked to hide at night in the shrubs by our front porch. When someone walked by, he would whisper, "Who goes there?"

Davis is my brother who died four years ago. I whisper into the water—"Davis? Who goes there?"

But Helen wants me to tell her about Francisco, every detail. How I still drank back then, when I was living in Germany, translating NATO manuals for the U.S. Army. And how what felt like an urge for the English language suddenly led me to the airport in Frankfurt, which led to a drunken weekend in Dublin, which led to an even longer bender in Galway, until one night I found myself propositioning a sailor who was pissing into the harbor from the edge of the quay. And how a penitential journey to the Aran Islands led to a terrified week of white-knuckled sobriety, which led to a boozy overnight ferry ride to Cherbourg, which led to a morning train to Paris with the sun in my eyes the whole way. And how that whole journey only returned me to the sort of single room I had been trying to escape, and how that room then led me to a run-down porno theater on Rue Vivienne, where a Filipino man in a white shirt was sitting in silence beside me, solemnly stroking me through my pants.

That was Francisco, I tell her. Even before he had a chance to unfasten the buttons on my fly, I came.

This is the part of the story Helen likes best—the sweet, pre-AIDS mess I make in my drawers; a kind of "meeting cute," as she calls it, like on a sitcom. But these days, I suppose, the underwear would be marked biohazard.

She also likes the part where Francisco and I leave the dirty movie theater and go to the Cinema DeLuxe, a revival house, to see *West Side Story*, and the way we walk home later, along the Champs Elysées, singing "I Feel Pretty." I never returned to Germany.

But as I talk I am thinking *Helen, there are parts I have not told you, things I still conceal.* The drunken nights along the Boulevard Raspail and the shame of my desire. The sullen fights and rages. The catacombs of tenderness and the brittle apologies.

And the way I left him, in a drunken panic. And the way his letters kept following me back to

America saying, “Save me.” Each time I opened one, I felt as if the knife were slitting the envelope into a mouth.

“Well,” he said after we slept together again a few years later, when I visited Paris. “I guess we’ve said quite enough for ourselves already. In the old days.”

Oh, I thought, *in the old days*… But now, if one wanted, how would one get back there? Ring the bell, monsieur—the green iron gate on Rue de la Campagne Première. Then up five steep flights to the small room beneath the eaves where those two ghosts still live—*I love you, I love you*.

But I tell none of this to Helen. We didn’t know each other’s dead, so we are still able to invent them.

I tell her that I loved Francisco. I tell her it is terrible he died alone.

I tell her that it is terrible he died in that terrible apartment, in that terrible district near the airport, north of Paris, in that squalid suburb, that sort of *petite Afrique* to which the French consign their dark-skinned foreign workers. Terrible, that his body went unclaimed for three days. Terrible—well, hardly *comme il faut*.

But I see Helen leaning forward in her folding chair. “It’s my turn,” she is saying. “I want to tell about Josh.”

She leans back. “Josh told me he wanted to become a doctor when he grew up,” she says. “The week before my mastectomy, he told me that he wanted to become a doctor so he could cure cancer. He even showed me that he’d gone to the public library to check out a chemistry book.”

She says she can remember the book’s exact title, which was Organic Chemistry, although it was out-of-date and totally useless. But of course she didn’t tell this to Josh.

She liked to watch him while he read. She liked to watch him as he diligently studied *Organic Chemistry*, sitting in his straight chair at the dining-room table, drinking glass after glass of iced water. He was drinking so much iced water, she says, because the first brutal heat wave of summer had just begun and the air conditioner in the living-room window was broken.

All evening, Helen has been abstract and unsettled, her voice taut with anxiety, and I can see that telling her own story isn’t helping her, that it is taking Josh away from her again instead of restoring him. How could it be otherwise? Tomorrow is the first anniversary of Josh’s death.

According to the Hebrew calendar, Helen has told me, Josh died in the year 5754, on Tisha B’Av, which also happens to be the solemn fast day of mourning commemorating at least eight calamitous tragedies, including the destruction of the first and second temples, the expulsion of the Jews from Spain, the mass suicide of the Jews of York and the initiation of the deportation of the Jews from the Warsaw Ghetto. These, says Helen, are precisely the sort of “ortho-facts” that

make one realize that Hasidism is simply a brilliant cover for obsessive-compulsive disorder, given "its passion for counting and numbers. For instance, according to the *Likutei-Amarim-Tanya*, the 613 organs of the soul are clothed in the 613 commandments of the Torah, which are further subdivided into 248 "organs," or positive precepts, and 365 "sinews," or prohibitions. The whole thing started with Adam, who contained 248 limbs (including parts of limbs) in his initially blameless human body.

This methodology suggests, says Helen, that all inquiries into the nature of the soul are essentially obsessive and autopsical.

But Helen herself believes in the revelatory power of numbers. For instance: Josh had an IQ of 158, which means that he was his school's brightest pupil.

He owned 323 baseball cards. Helen knows this because she counted and alphabetized them shortly after he died.

He lived—in this world, at least—for a total of 4,752 days, including three leap years.

And, above all, this: The week of the third blistering heat wave—the week that her veins sclerosed from her second cycle of intravenous chemo, the week that Josh was killed—Helen yelled at him twice for not having fixed the air conditioner in the living-room window. He had said he would fix the air conditioner in the living-room window.

"Go ahead and yell at me if you want," Josh had answered her the first time.

"You're just yelling at me because I'm the only one who's here with you now."

To prove this punishing point to her forever, the next time Helen yelled at her son, God let him die.

As for that point, Helen says, it needs no proving. After all, we are sitting on this dock because he's dead.

She walks to the edge of the water. "Did I tell you what I told the Hasid in West Side Judaica the day I went to buy the *Tanya*?" she asks. "I told him I was thinking of becoming a Hasid, since I no longer trusted horoscope books. I told him I'd actually been quite a devoted reader of Linda Goodman's *Sun Signs*—at least until my son was hit by a car. I said, 'Now tell me, she was Jewish, wasn't she? You know, Goodman. Reformed, maybe? Reconstructionist?'"

She steps back from the water—*Who goes there, in the dark*?

When she turns to me, her face is bloated with sorrow. "I think I want to go to the bar now," she says.

The bar is the one spot to which I won't follow her, not even tonight. But I follow her up the hill, through a stand of pines and past the occasional wooden cottages whose porch lights dimly illuminate bags of garbage and beach towels draped on clotheslines to dry. When we come upon the lodge, I see the old ladies have retired for the night, their white chairs in straight rows glowing in the dark. In the taproom window a blue neon sign advertises: Genesee Beer.

"I can't believe you're really an alcoholic," Helen says as we cross the lawn toward the front door. "It's insane. Everyone knows that Jews can't be alcoholics."

"I'm not a Jew," I say. "I'm gay."

We separate in the lobby.

But I'm not ready to go upstairs to bed. For a while, I sit on an overstuffed sofa, its back cushions pinned with yellowing antimacassars, reading back issues of *People* and *Adirondack Life*. When I look up, I can see through the open door to the taproom; I can see Helen sitting on a bar stool, her legs crossed, talking with one of the summer sportsmen who sometimes come here to drink, a man in an expensive fisherman's vest.

Because I know some things that Helen has told me, I imagine I can see what this man cannot. I can see the way she fiddles with her lavender blouse, for instance, nervously revealing and concealing a small part of her recently reconstructed breast; and I can see the way she adjusts her neckline, checking to see that it shields the small, puckered surgical scars that make her self-conscious. "Just a few dents in my flesh," she told me one day, as if her creator had accidentally marked her with his thumb—*as if we were clay, as if we were dust.*

In a few months her plastic surgeon will complete the reconstruction of the nipple, what she calls "the frosting on the cake."

I watch as she leans back on her bar stool and laughs. She hoists her cocktail glass into the air, as if making a toast.

Tomorrow at breakfast, I think, *she will recount this whole thing for me*. "Did you get a load of that guy?" she'll ask. "Right out of *Yankee* magazine—or maybe L.L. Bean—what do I know from the goyim? Did you see me drinking a gimlet?"

"That must have been the Purple Lady in the bar last night!" she'll exclaim, speaking of herself in the third person, as if she were a victim of multiple personality disorder. She'll erase the night by working it up, by laughing at it, while we sit together at the breakfast table, spooning jam onto our English muffins.

And why should she say more? It's true: "In the beginning was the Word." But sometimes, says Rabbi Stollman, an unhappy person can best work his way toward God by being silent, just as a hungry person can work his way toward God by delaying his meal. I know what Helen's doing.

But when I look up again, I see she is touching the man's hand. She has grown serious, and I can tell from the way he studies her, with a convolution of sympathy and horror—a grim expression that I can recognize, having so often received it myself—that she is telling him how Josh was crossing Eighth Avenue, turning to wave to the friend who'd just called his name: "Josh!"

How the van was speeding and quickly bearing down. How the impact. How his glasses. How he was thrown.

How he rose and stood again for a moment.

How he fell. How blood. How his blue shirt. How the sirens and the stretcher.

How it happened. The whole story.

It is time for me to go upstairs.

I turn out the light. On the way up, I stop at the refrigerator the manager has placed in the stairwell and take out my medicine. On the door of the fridge, he has hung a sign: Please date food. *Oh, no*, I think each time I see it, *God willing, I'd really rather date a man…*

But I suppose the other guests have already guessed that.

I know what I would guess, if I were one of them, and if I happened to open the small, brown paper bag that contains the clear glass vials: New drug. Limited by federal law to investigational use only. For subcutaneous injection.

And what would I say if one of them were to ask me? "Oh no, dear sir or madam, certainly not that—not that disease at all, I assure you!"

Is it true, what I tell myself? That if I were pressed to say this, I'd rather stand with the dead?

I go upstairs to my room. I sit on the bed and mix the recombinant with sterile water, as the study nurse taught me, and draw the solution into the syringe. I swab my thigh with alcohol. When I'm done, I lie down.

Then it's quiet, except for an occasional loon calling from the lake. I lie still and try to masturbate. *Here is his body, silvery like water… And here is what he felt like, the smooth, warm chest… Francisco, the audible pulse at his wrist, restored… And he says…*

But it doesn't work. I turn on the bedside lamp.

I imagine Helen in the bar downstairs, feeding quarters to the jukebox, dancing with the man in the fisherman's vest. What does it matter if she prepares for Tisha B'Av not by fasting but by flirting and having a few drinks more? She's already reduced her level of happiness, as Rabbi

Stollman says one must in the days preceding Tisha B'Av. Perhaps the management should post a sign by the gate to the lodge to protect the innocent from straying up our driveway: Caution. Mourners ahead.

For a long time, I sit awake, thumbing through a magazine, until I hear Helen coming down the hallway, fumbling in her handbag, as if drunk, searching for the key to her room.

The next morning Helen doesn't come down to breakfast. I sit in the dining room, watching the old ladies as they congregate on the screened-in porch, where they'll spend their morning painting rocks to look like ladybugs and mice. Mrs. Chandra, a widow originally from Bombay, is standing among them, talking to her son Sunil, who has come to visit her. Sunil is slender and graceful, in a white linen shirt, not much more than 20.

"Sunil can stay only two days," his mother said, introducing him to Helen and me the previous morning, "because he's very busy in his business, as is proper." When he shook our hands—solemn, courteous—he looked at us directly, smiling, although as soon as I looked back at him, he quickly lowered his eyes.

"Do you think he might be gay?" I asked Helen.

"You're daydreaming," she said. She said she doubted the Diaspora was now leading Jews and queers to Eagle Lodge, ourselves excluded.

One of the widows, a straggler, stops at my table on her way from breakfast. "Where's your wife this morning?" she asks.

"Sleeping, I guess," I say.

I watch as she crosses the room toward the lobby, where she checks her mail at the desk. When I look back out to the porch, Mrs. Chandra and her son are gone.

I sit alone in silence, looking through a back issue of *Family Circle*. For a while I close my eyes and attempt to imagine a white light traveling through my body, as a book on creative visualization has instructed me, through the complicated circuits of my arteries and veins, with healing warmth; and then I attempt to imagine that Francisco and I are once again sitting in the sunlight on a bench near the Orangerie…

But what I recall is the day I learned that Francisco had died.

I was at work when I received the phone call from Paris. Seven words, one for each day of the de-Creation: *"Oui, monsieur. Je comprends. Certainment. Au revoir."*

I hung up. I rode the elevator down to the street and began to walk home from Hudson Street, 100

blocks to the Upper West Side. The whole way, as I walked, I kept thinking one thought: *I am walking the way a survivor walks, one foot in front of the other, deliberate, on his own two feet, alone.* The farther I walked, the more it seemed as if I'd walked so long that I had outlived almost everyone—even the people around me on the street seemed dead somehow, though still alive.

"It isn't just Francisco," I told Helen that night when I went to her apartment to talk. It wasn't just Francisco, though it seemed as if some memory of his body had been keeping me alive while the others died. It was Larry and the way he died also, with PCP; and Henry, with KS lesions in his lungs; and Stanley, whose brain erupted with tumors; and Jaime, whose skin was so jaundiced it was almost the color of mahogany; and Paul, with dementia—Paul, whom I had known so long I could remember when he was still straight and married.

"Married," Helen murmured. "I was married. Twice."

Not even Helen could listen, it seemed.

That night I felt as if the whole world had died, or at least the world as I had known it, though I had no black armband to wear to show what I had lost or what that world had meant to me. But that was also the night Helen showed me the room that had been Josh's and said I could live there if I ever needed, that she'd help me if I got sick; there was no need for worry because I could stay with her if the time should come when…

I stood in the doorway, studying the small room, which looked stricken beneath the harsh brightness of the ceiling light—the unvarnished pine desk, the narrow bed covered with a thin blanket, the nightstand with its metal gooseneck lamp. *Well*, I thought, *it's a home, or a kind of home, at least*. And I felt happy to have it, as if I could breathe for the first time in years.

Afterward I went downtown to the Positive Immunity workshop I'd enrolled in to boost my immune system. I sat in a circle with the other men while the facilitator led us in chanting: *"Living. Dying. Living. Dying. Two different words for just one thing."*

I know what kind of ritual we'll get when we die, I thought each time I looked around the room at the bunch of us, the worried unwell, the last of our kind, *Homo urbanus*. It won't be Kaddish. It won't be a funeral pyre on the Ganges. It'll be a boom box playing "Je Ne Regrette Rien" in the rear of some Unitarian church hung with rainbow flags, like a gay Knights of Columbus hall.

One of the men in our circle started coughing. At first it was a small cough, but then it didn't stop. He just kept coughing and coughing, and we were all staring at him and thinking, Oh shit, TB, maybe, or pneumonia…

I don't need this, I was thinking, I don't need this. I just need to get out of here.

I walked out onto the street and started home. It was a cold night, and I could see all the way up Sixth Avenue. The sidewalk was crowded with people, some walking briskly and some pausing to

look at things for sale in lighted store windows. *I'm an ordinary person*, I kept thinking, *I'm among the others, I'm one of them, an ordinary person, that's who I am*. That's when it occurred to me that I'd never have to go back to that room where that man was coughing and coughing. I had a new fate now. I had Helen.

It's almost midafternoon when I spot Helen standing in the lobby, wearing her swimsuit covered with an old t-shirt that says Poconos. She's looking through a rack of postcards.

"Where have you been?" I ask.

"Looking at postcards," she says.

"Since last night?"

Helen doesn't answer. We have a rule that neither of us is allowed to inquire into things about which nothing has been prevolunteered. We also have a competing rule that we're not allowed to keep secrets.

She chooses a card from the rack and examines it. "What do you think of this one?" she asks.

She says she's been thinking she might send a card to Dr. Berlinski—Thank yahweh you're not here—but I can't tell if she's kidding. Berlinski was her first oncologist, the one with whom she had an affair after she lost her hair from chemo. When he told her to take off her wig one night during sex, assuring her she'd still be beautiful, she believed that God had given her Berlinski as her reward for having cancer. That was the week before Josh was killed.

"Let's go," I tell her. We're supposed to be spending the day at the dock, preparing for Josh's *yahrzeit*.

"Just a minute," she says, retrieving the Panasonic cassette player from where she's left it on a sofa. She wants to bring it so we can listen to some tapes she's made of Josh's favorite music, like Lynyrd Skynyrd and Nirvana and Def Leppard doing "Pour Some Sugar on Me." Though music's forbidden on Tisha B'Av, Helen has decided these songs are special exceptions since they no longer constitute what Rabbi Stollman would call "joyful noise." After all, they were Josh's songs and now Josh is dead.

Down at the dock we spread out our beach towels. Helen starts unpacking a tote bag of things she's brought for the *yahrzeit*, which we plan to observe by rowing onto the lake at dusk and lighting a candle. We can't observe it earlier than dusk, Helen tells me, since the rabbi says people should mourn and lament only after they've concluded the important daytime obligations of the living, such as tending to business and making money. But we have no business to tend to, I want to tell her, other than mourning and listening to Rabbi Stollman.

“Look what I brought,” she says, holding up a booklet Josh made for her one Mother’s Day, stapling together Xeroxes of his favorite poems—*real* poems, Helen points out, by Muriel Rukeyser and Sharon Olds and people like that, not just the junk that most kids would choose. She shows me his Yankees baseball cap and his small collection of key chains, chronicling the history of each one—how he got this key chain on a school trip to Valley Forge and this one from a Hebrew school classmate who’d visited Tel Aviv with her uncle’s family. She shows me a key chain from which dangles a mini Magic 8-Ball.

As for me, I have even less than Helen, at least of Francisco’s: a white cotton handkerchief, a Zippo lighter he once bought in a junk shop, engraved with a stranger’s monogram.

“Let me tell you what I was planning for the bar mitzvah,” Helen says. She’d hired a caterer, a real first-rate outfit, sort of a kosher Balducci’s: buffet dinner for 60, with salmon steaks and fish salads, five different kinds. Helen has told me all of this before. Josh didn’t live to see his bar mitzvah.

I shift on my towel. I look over the edge of the dock, down into the water. Small fish dart in the shallows. For a moment, I want to tell Helen something I remembered a few nights ago—something Francisco once said, I think, though now I can’t recall exactly what.

“You’re not listening,” she says.

“I’m listening,” I tell her. But in truth I am staring into the water, trying to remember what Francisco looked like—how his hands looked, for instance, when he touched me, and what his body looked like when he stood before the mirror taking off his shirt. His chest was smooth and lightly muscular. I remember that.

“You want to listen to ‘Pour Some Sugar on Me’?” Helen asks.

“No.”

“I do,” she says.

I watch her as she fiddles with the cassette player. The sun is harsh. In this light, she looks almost defeated, her arms covered with small patches of scaling skin, the residue of the psoriasis she got while undergoing chemo.

I don’t want to be here, not right now, not on this sunstruck dock, listening to Helen. For a moment, it had almost seemed as if I were in Paris again, as if I’d been traveling there simply by gazing into the reflection of my own face on Eagle Lake. I want to tell Helen how Francisco looked the last time I saw him, standing on a concrete quay in the Gare du Nord—his dark face, the radiance of his white shirt.

“I can tell you aren’t listening,” Helen says. She can’t get the cassette player to start working,

though she keeps pushing the play button. The tape is jammed.

I don't know what to say. I don't belong here, not with these widows, not even with Helen, though I can't imagine where I do belong, not any longer.

"What?" Helen asks.

"Nothing."

"You're acting like you're mad at me," she says.

"No," I tell her.

"I think you might be pissed about the guy I met in the bar last night," she says. "I think you're jealous."

I don't want to discuss this. "It's not like we're married," I tell her.

She puts down the cassette player. "That's right," she says. "That's exactly right. It's not like we're married."

She turns away, making a display of herself, arranging Josh's things into a circle around her. Stop it, I want to tell her. You're the one who gets to have a *yahrzeit*. You're the one who's in remission.

"Go ahead and be pissed if you want," she says, "But don't take it out on Josh."

"I waited all morning," I answer. "I waited because of Josh." But that's not really true. I waited for Helen.

"OK," she says. "OK, forget it."

"It's not like I'm dead," I tell her, although as soon as I say it I realize it sounds like a non sequitur.

"No," she says. "It's not like you're dead."

Then we sit in silence, neither of us knowing what to say next. It's a draw, as it always is: Dead son trumps dead ex-lover, but AIDS trumps cancer. No matter how much the ante gets raised, no one ever wins the pot.

I stand up and start folding my towel. "I need to go," I tell her. I tell her I'm getting a headache.

"You can't," she says.

"I have to," I tell her, putting my t-shirt back on so that no one will see my unclothed torso when I

get back to the lodge, now that I'm a member of the KS Club. *Helen, you'll live*, I'm thinking.

"It's Tisha B'Av," she says.

I look at her as she sits on her beach towel, holding the booklet that Josh made her, her shoulders streaked with sunburn. For a moment I want to tell her I'm sorry. I want to tell her it isn't important; it's just a feeling I had and I'll stay, but it seems too late to say these things.

"I need to go my room to lie down," I say. I tell her I'll meet her at dusk for the *yahrzeit*.

I start up the hill.

"Don't you want to listen to *The Torah Tapes*?" Helen shouts after me. "Or don't you give a shit what happens to Jews?"

I don't answer. I keep going, past the tennis courts and through the stand of pines. As soon as I'm alone, it occurs to me that what I want is to drive somewhere, to drive and drive with no destination, as in the old days, though it's not until I'm climbing the front steps of the lodge that I realize that what I'd like even more is a drink. And why not? I've got my own little *yahrzeit* coming up. "You've got to give up drinking," the doctor said the day I was diagnosed almost 15 months ago, though I'd told him I only drank wine now and again. Alcohol, he said, causes the virus to replicate at twice the speed.

Well, I thought, I knew booze was good for something.

I know I'm on dangerous ground. I know the AA commandments—they're my version of the Torah—and I know how to keep living after the world falls apart: Don't think. Don't drink. Go to meetings.

I'm just thinking of a drink because of Francisco, I tell myself—because Francisco died and then the friend who called to tell me the news died too, a few months later, and then I no longer knew anyone who could remember Francisco and me, at least not from that time, not from back then.

I step onto the porch. The Adirondack chairs are empty; the old ladies have gone in to take their naps before preparing for dinner.

Then I see Sunil standing in the corner.

"Hello," he says as if he's been watching me.

"What are you doing?" I ask.

"Looking at the water," he says. He steps toward me. He points at Eagle Lake. It's late afternoon, almost evening. In this light, the water is gray and still, almost as if it were something solid.

“Sometimes I row out there,” I tell him.

He says he likes the lake, that it reminds him of the time he once spent in the north of India, almost near the border with China. In that region, he says, the whole world is made of water. The dry earth we live upon actually consists of floating islands.

He is beautiful, I’m thinking, his stillness, *his calm, lean body, his serious, dark face*. We’re standing close to one another, our arms almost touching, though I don’t know if what I’m feeling—shortness of breath, a kind of anticipatory paralysis—feels like loss or desire.

“I could take you with me,” I tell him.

“I cannot put you to such a bother,” he says. I can’t tell if he’s embarrassed by the suddenness of my invitation.

“It’s no bother,” I say. I don’t how to tell him he’s saving me from something—from myself.

Soon we are walking the path to the boathouse. He’s a few steps ahead of me, and I’m watching him as he touches a hand lightly to the honeysuckle bushes as he ambles by them. I can remember what it’s like to be alive. It’s simple, like pushing a button.

I ask him to choose a boat, and he picks the new one, the one painted blue, not the old one that Helen and I use. I kneel beside the boat to steady it as he steps in, seating himself in the bow. Then I untie the line and step in also, taking the middle seat, my hands on the oars. We’re facing one another.

I row. I watch him. For a long time he is silent, studying the shoreline, where late light is darkening the blue pines. Then he murmurs, “This is good.”

When we reach the center of the lake, I lift the oars into the boat. I sit back. We drift in slow, loose circles.

I cannot stop watching him. He removes his shirt and holds it in his lap. He needs to keep it neat for dinner, he says.

I’m in no hurry to get back.

“There’s an island on the lower lake we could row to,” I tell him. I imagine us lying on its shore, side by side, naming the shapes we see in the dream-clouds above us. I imagine myself telling him what has happened that has brought me here: how my friends have died and how it sometimes feels as if I alone have somehow escaped to tell the tale, though there’s no one left to whom I might tell it except Helen, who has her own story to share.

He shifts on his seat. “I wish I’d brought water,” he says.

I close my eyes. *This is what the revealed world has given me*, I'm thinking, *in exchange for my losses—this moment, this easeful drifting.*

When I open my eyes, I see he is looking at me. "What?" I ask.

"Nothing," he says.

"No, go ahead."

"I want to ask a question," he says.

I believe I know what he's thinking. It wasn't a daydream, my intuition about his being gay.

"It's personal," he says.

I nod. I want to encourage him.

He looks away, trailing his hand through the water. Then he looks back at me. "I am wondering about your sickness," he says.

I'm startled. "What?" I ask, my voice suddenly rising. "I don't know what you mean."

He can't know, or so I'm thinking. It's not like he's seen me shirtless on the dock; it's not like I've got what one friend used to call "the look"—drawn face and darkened eyes, the first vague traces of wasting.

"I'm wondering if you have it," he says. "You know. The virus. My mother showed me the medicine you keep in the fridge."

So there it is, in plain sight. I'd thought it was concealed within my blood, visible only if titrated. What can I say? *Please, kind sir, which virus would that be?*

"Yes," I tell him. "HIV. The virus."

He shakes his head. "I am very sorry. That is very bad." He asks if I've told my mother.

"She's dead," I tell him.

He leans forward as if to indicate that he wants to speak in confidence, as if there were some chance that another person might overhear. "I prefer men," he says, almost whispering. "But I have only one boyfriend because I do not wish to get this virus."

He looks at me as if he wants me to tell him something—that he'll be safe forever, perhaps.

“Please understand my mother does not know about me,” he continues. “Please understand I am telling you a secret.”

But I’m not listening, not really, not any longer. I’m staring into the water. Francisco is dead, I keep telling myself. Francisco died, but not for love of me.

Then I realize: It’s dusk. It’s Tisha B’Av.

I tap on her door. “Helen, Helen.” I can hear that she’s listening to the *The Torah Tapes*, though I can’t make out what the rabbi is saying, only the strange but melodious singsong of his chanting.

“I want to come in,” I say, but she doesn’t answer.

When I open the door, I see that she’s sitting cross-legged on the bed, cradling the Panasonic, rocking rapidly back and forth in what seems a kind of furious davening. The rabbi’s chanting something, I’m not sure what, about seeing the chaluk, the robes of brilliant light in which God wrapped Himself so He’d be visible to Moses.

Helen looks up and switches off the cassette, severing the rabbi in midpassage.

“What?” she asks. “What do you want?”

I don’t know, I want to tell her.

“I’m busy,” she says, “listening to the rabbi, learning all about God’s faces.” She starts to talk more quickly. “I bet you didn’t know He’s got lots of faces, different faces. I bet you thought He had no face or that He was invisible or something like that, but no, that’s not what the rabbi says…”

“Helen,” I say.

“No,” she says.

She leans back against the wall and shuts her eyes. She looks tired, her face mottled with grief. “You were supposed to be here,” she says. “You were supposed to be here, but you weren’t.”

I sit down on the bed beside her. For a moment I feel as if I’m her husband come home late from work; I’ve missed something important that I’d promised I’d be back in time to see—a recital, perhaps, or a school play. We’re discussing our son, whom I have disappointed.

I see the *yahrzeit* candle still sitting on her bureau. “You didn’t light Josh’s candle,” I say.

“It got too late,” she says.

I know the candle's supposed to be lit at sundown, as the rabbi has explained, just as soon as the day's extinguished, but I tell her that this doesn't really matter.
"It matters," she says. "It's a ritual."

There's nothing more to say, or so I imagine. I can hear a car engine idling roughly outside in the parking lot. I can hear an occasional door opening and shutting in the hallway.

"I've got to take my medicine," I say.

Helen nods. "Go ahead."

I stand to go, though I don't want to leave like this. "We could meet in the boathouse," I tell her.

She doesn't answer.

I go down the back stairs to the refrigerator. It now seems public, the brown paper bag that holds the vials, though I carry it up to my room, where I give myself my injection and then take two Tylenol, as I always do, to stave off side effects. When I'm done, I go downstairs, relieved to find no one sitting in the lobby.

It's dark inside the boathouse. There are only the muffled soft sounds of the rowboats striking against the rubber tires tied to the sides of the docks. Then I see Helen, already seated in our boat, watching me.

"I didn't think you'd come," I say.

"I'm here," she says.

I step into the boat. Helen leans over to untie it, as she always does, and we push off.

There's almost no moon, though each time I row a long stroke, I can see the oars moving through the black water as if they were pushing through darkness itself, then rising as pale emanations. I want to say a prayer. But I can't recall one.

"Look," Helen says, almost whispering. She points to the opposite shore. Someone's walking there, among the high weeds along the embankment, shining a flashlight into the water.

"Who is it?" Helen asks.

"I don't know. Maybe someone camping in the woods."

Whoever it is walks back into the trees. For a few moments, we watch as the flashlight's beam darts through the lower branches, briefly revealing them. Then it disappears.

“I want to light the *yahrzeit* candle,” Helen says. She’s brought it along in her pocket. She sets it on the tip of the bow and strikes a wooden match. When she touches the match to the wick, a small flame sputters and then catches, though it makes too weak a light to guide us.

“I don’t want to say Kaddish,” Helen says.

“You don’t have to,” I tell her.

“I have to do something,” she says.

“You can talk about him,” I say. “You can tell me things you remember.”

“No,” she says. “I don’t want to do that.”

She says she thinks she’ll sing a song; then she says she can’t recall any songs to which she knows enough words. She hums “Greensleeves” instead.

I ask, “Did Josh like ‘Greensleeves’?”

“I don’t know,” she says.

She looks out toward the shore. I can tell she’s not sure what to do, that the *yahrzeit* isn’t working.

Then she whispers, “Joshua.”

She whispers it again, “Joshua, Joshua, Josh.” Then says it aloud and then louder still, until she’s calling it across the lake, one letter at a time: “J-o-s-h-u-a.”

But there’s no Joshua. The concealed world has not returned him. There’s only Helen and me sitting in a boat, a space between us.

Helen lifts the candle. It flickers but doesn’t blow out. Then she holds it out over the water as if she were trying to look down into darkness itself. Is it true what the rabbi says, that Heaven and Earth were made of water? I know what Helen says about Genesis—that God didn’t punish Adam by killing him but rather by letting him live.

I put down the oars. I lean over the side of the boat, but the water’s too black to see through. “Who goes there, in the dark?” I whisper.

“We do,” Helen answers.

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