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# Many Seconds Into the Future—A Story

*John J. Clayton*

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ALMOST EVERY day now, Daniel Hirsch looks up from his desk in the Boston office where he practices law or stands on clear fall days on the back deck of his house in Newton, a cup of coffee in his hand, and sends his spirit 200 years into the future. Two-hundred years, lifting above himself, seeing himself tiny down below—from that vantage point, he’s on a cliff of time looking down into a valley in which, to those below, everything seems to matter intensely, while from this cliff all that turmoil in the heart is simply . . . interesting, part of a dance, a little sad, a little funny. From this cliff it’s not such an important concern whether he lives until he’s eighty—or only till sixty, as will in fact be the case, for this, his 60th year, is almost sure to be the year of his death.

Considering things this way, though alive, he’s as good as dead. A hundred years from now, the difference of these few months, even a difference of a few lost years, will seem an eyeblink. After all, he’s not Mozart, he’s not Schubert. What’s a few years more or less?

At some point, he wants to believe, God will roll up the scenery and redeem us all. We’ll all be our original selves at Mount Sinai hearing the thunder. As others—who knows?—will be at Mecca or Bethlehem. And God will spread a *tallit* of light over all

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of us and say, “I know how strange your lives seemed. Now that I can explain it to you, I don’t need to, do I? The meaning is in your bones.”

In the meantime, while this flicker of life—its meaning—is not known to him, the image of a cliff of time is deeply consoling. The air is clear up here. His head lifts. No one would know he’s been dead for centuries, or that he won’t be alive next year at this time.

It’s just after the High Holy Days. He has not, it seems, been inscribed in the Book of Life.

His wife doesn’t know. His teenage son and daughter don’t know. His clients—mostly he handles estates—don’t know. He’s left extensive notes in each file. He’s provided as much clarity and tax savings as he can. He’s burned separate CD’s for everyone in the family: his brother in Ohio, his sister-in-law in Denver, two old friends, his ex-wife Jennifer, their grown son Jonah, his teenagers Alyssa and Jeremy, his wife Molly.

Mostly dry, practical stuff. No profound word-from-beyond-the-grave. “Molly, please make sure that Alyssa, when she has a home of her own, gets my grandmother’s samovar.” And to Jeremy, “In case I leave you before the summer, the materials concerning your trip to Israel are in the bottom drawer of my desk upstairs. It’s paid for. You take that trip, mister. You can say kaddish for me over there just as well as here.”

In each of the audio letters, he makes sure to say he loves wife or child or friend—or Jennifer, who

was once wife. “Jennifer, you’ve been a wonderful, funny, generous ex-wife to me. Isn’t it a great joke that we made such terrible mates and then such good friends?” No solemn philosophizing, and nothing about God, though each member of his family knows that in a secret cave inside his chest he stokes a sense of the holy.

Is he sad? Of course he’s sad. He won’t be a support to Jeremy and Alyssa through college. He won’t be there for their marriages, the births, please God, of their children and Jonah’s children. He’d planned to travel with Molly when they were empty nesters. It’s not going to happen.

Is he afraid? Of course. He’s been told to expect seizures and memory loss, possibly nausea, headaches, neurological incapacities. He sees his flesh rotting in the ground. He goes through bouts of panic. He’s been told he’s lucky—there won’t be much pain. An operation might give him an additional couple of months. He’s opted out.

For as long as possible, he wants just to live an ordinary life. Soon he won’t be able to hide symptoms; then the slope down is steep, maybe a two-month tumble. It disturbs him that at the end he won’t have a lucid relationship to his family. And how will he come to God with a clear soul? If he ever needed to do *teshuvah*, to return, to change his life, now is the time.

A MONTH AGO he had a severe headache; he lay down for hours. “You never have headaches,” Molly said. “If this lasts, I want you to see Dr. Schwab.” The headache went away. A week later, just before Rosh Hashanah, as he walked across the Boston Common toward the subway at Park Street, a brilliant, sunny day, the look of things altered. It didn’t happen all at once, but his visual field was breaking up: trees, faces, paths were either intensely bright, too bright to look at without squinting, or dim, deeply shadowed. Spots of non-seeing, and over everything a glow.

It didn’t scare him; it made what he saw strangely beautiful. A few times at Swarthmore, he’d tried mescaline. Mescaline enriches your visual field, can turn it into a post-impressionist canvas. The colors! Crossing the Common was a little like that. It made him stop, stare, breathe deeply.

“Classic migraine symptoms,” his doctor told him over the phone. “You don’t have a history of migraines? Well, come in, we’ll take a look. But there’s nothing to worry about.”

He wasn’t worried. In fact, he rather hoped it would happen again. Schwab said, “Well, you know, given the headache—and the left side of

your face: you do know it’s drooping?—an MRI wouldn’t be overkill. Could be a tiny stroke.” Daniel was sucked into the howling, cramped coffin of the MRI. In a few hours a radiologist and an oncologist diagnosed glioblastoma multiformes, deadliest of the brain cancers.

They stared at the MRI, clamped to Dr. Schwab’s light box. “So. I need to send you on to a surgeon,” he said, sighing. “They’ll do a biopsy. At the same time, we’ll see if they can debulk some of the tumor.”

“Some of.”

“Right. Some. I’m afraid so, Dan. Look. Fact is, your odds are less than poor. Time is short. A few months. At best a few months. But I’m not an oncologist, I’m not a surgeon. You go for a biopsy. I’ll set up the appointment. You’ve got insurance.”

“Let me think about it.”

“Dan, no—a biopsy. Not something to think about. That’s your next logical step. Please, look at this.” He pointed at the MRI. “You see that spidery-looking shadow?”

“A spider? More like a tarantula,” Daniel laughed. “Or some science-fiction alien. Will you look at that son of a bitch! That’s in me?” Its fuzzy tentacles, as they reached out, seemed to be growing new tentacles. It wasn’t in his brain or on his brain, it was etched into the pattern of his brain tissue. “I’ll get back to you, doctor. For now, let’s keep this between us.”

He shook hands and strode down the hallway to the main reception area. He knew that if he turned around he’d see Schwab staring after him.

After his talk with the doctor, after a little research on the web, he knew he couldn’t stop the creature from taking over. Not by surgery, not by chemo or radiation. He might win a few weeks’ reprieve, but at what cost?

“It’s nothing. Stress,” he told Molly. “Just what you thought. I’m working too hard. I need to take time to live a normal life. An ordinary life.”

“What I’ve been telling you.”

“Absolutely. I intend to spend more time with you and Jeremy and Alyssa.”

Only Harry Barnett, his firm’s senior partner, and Tim Asher, his friend since law school, know the whole story. “I’m staying on. When I can’t do a good job,” he says, “I’ll tell you. And if you see things I can’t see, ways I’m screwing up, just let me know.”

Harry Barnett, the old man in the firm, rests his elbows on the walnut conference table, chin on folded hands. “This is really rotten, boy. You sure you want to stay on? Don’t you want to bail out? Travel somewhere? Visit friends?”

“Travel? No. What I’ve left unlived,” Daniel says, “is ordinary life. I’ve lived it but scarcely knew it. That’s what I want to concentrate on, and that’s why I can’t tell Molly or the kids. Not till I start to slide. Because as soon as I tell them, the time won’t be ordinary.”

Tim adds: “Doctors can be wrong, too. You look great, Dan. Maybe it’s a misdiagnosis.”

Daniel, a tiny headache starting up: “From your lips to God’s ear.”

But he can’t count on this message being received. He sits cross-legged on a meditation mat in his study, and rather than focusing on his breath as he usually does, he imagines light perforating the top of his head and pouring in, shriveling the monster. After a half-hour he’s mellow but not optimistic.

“**M**ORE TIME with you and the kids.” These children came to him late. Jonah, his son with Jennifer, is thirty-three, married, living in Seattle. They talk on the phone, talk eagerly of Jonah’s successes—he’s the youngest dean at the University of Washington—but they don’t see a lot of each other. Strange. When Daniel was a very young father, living and fighting with Jennifer, he focused all his love on Jonah. Even when he was busy clerking after law school, when he’d been taken into a large Boston practice and needed to work impossibly hard, he took Jonah to Fenway, took him backpacking. Though he and Jennifer were dead to one another, he had to show that he had love to give.

It’s been different, easier, with Jeremy and Alyssa—he’s loved them more naturally. As his career flourished, he’s watched them grow up, if too often just going through the motions. It’s not that sometimes he misses Alyssa’s violin recitals, or doesn’t always see Jeremy pitch. It’s that when he does go, often only his body is there, while he’s scribbling points in a notebook.

Well, except for the time of his breakup with Jennifer, he was never very expressive. She used to call him “Mr. Cool” when they were on good terms, “Mr. Chilly” when not. “I can’t stand how secretive you are,” she would say. Which is funny, because now as friends they share secrets, gossip together easily.

Still, keeping this secret feels in tune with the rest of his life. He believes it comes from his father, a man who narrowed his eyes a lot and locked his secrets behind them. They quarreled when Daniel was in high school, and then he simply cut off until he was in law school and his father near death. The big man, maybe 220 pounds, once a semi-pro boxer, then a middle manager for General Mills—what se-

crets, after all?—had shrunk sadly, flesh sagging on the big bones. He still couldn’t talk to Daniel. He’d always bragged about Daniel’s smarts, but was embarrassed that his son was a lousy athlete. Daniel remembers sitting by his father’s bed in the hospital. One of the last things the old man said to him was, “I never *could* teach you to hit a ball, could I?”

Just look at Jeremy, he thinks. There’s the athlete he wanted me to be. Lean but powerful, Jeremy is a terrific pitcher, a fast wing in soccer. It must have skipped a generation. The way my grandfather’s *tefillin*, which my dad gave me for my bar mitzvah but never used himself, skipped a generation. Daniel puts on *tefillin* and prays almost every day.

So why does he feel his father inhabiting his body, breathing out his heavy breath through Daniel? Maybe the connection is part of the reparations he needs to make. His *teshuvah*.

And maybe another part is driving Jeremy and Alyssa to school in the morning instead of letting them take the bus. Actually he lets Alyssa drive, not only to give her practice but as a precaution. Suppose he has another episode like the one on the Common?

“You sure, Dad?” Alyssa asks.

“What *is* this? You’re always so busy in the morning,” Jeremy says.

“How much longer,” he says, “will we be together like this? I mean, soon you guys will be out of the house. Am I right? I’m right.”

“All day long you get paid to be right,” Jeremy says. “Not with us. Am I right?”

Jeremy, with his wild curly hair, has what Alyssa calls “attitude.” One minute he’s tender, climbing up on the bed between his father and mother to watch TV, the next he’s uncommunicative or hostile, like Daniel himself as a teen, and scrappy with his sister. Now she wrecks his good mood. “You have to be right, don’t you? Brother dear, why don’t you save it for debate club?”

“Blow it out thy bottom, dear sister,” he says in a thick stage-British accent, and lifting his bottom adds a Bronx cheer.

“Dad!” Alyssa groans. “Uch! He’s so vulgar! You’re really disgusting, Jeremy.”

He asked for ordinary, didn’t he?

**E**VENINGS NOW, Daniel’s home in time for dinner. If Molly works late at the lab, and he makes dinner—he’s always been a weekend cook—they wait for her. After all, he’s less pressured at work, he’s not taking on new clients.

Molly comes home ragged, sullen from battle with a colleague who seems to feel that her job is

to make Molly miserable. In the past, he'd steer clear when she came home like this. Now he puts an arm around her, soothing. Each night, not just on Shabbat, he asks Alyssa to light candles, pours a full glass of wine for himself and Molly, a little for Jeremy and Alyssa. He says a blessing. They hold hands at the table. Alyssa is wearing her hair in a new way—three perfect rolls behind—and her long gold earrings catch the light of the candles. Jeremy is caught up in the ceremony, but he rolls his eyes and grins. The kids look at one another—what is all this? He pretends not to notice. “You’re our blessing,” Daniel says, reaching across the table to squeeze Molly’s hand. And to Molly, “you’re my blessing.” If not now, when?

Molly shakes her head and grins. “I don’t get it. Daniel?”

He opens his hands wide. “Why not? You’re all precious to me.”

“You amaze me. But hey,” she laughs, lifting forefinger and eyebrows, “don’t stop!”

Daniel has a strong baritone. He sings in a community chorus. But now he has decided to drop out—“for business reasons” he tells the director. This may be the last time I listen to the Brahms piano quartets, he thinks, closing his eyes while Rubinstein and the Guaneri play for him. And making love, slowly, as he and Molly have learned to do, he thinks, this may be the very last time. It’s not. They do it again a few days later, and again he thinks, this may be the very last time. Click, he says to himself, click, taking mind-photos.

There are dark times. He thinks about this house without him, his body without him. Suddenly, the room seems like an expressionist theater set, with faulty perspective and odd angles. He gets up from a chair and feels gnarling in his belly—as if the room were an airplane, tilting, dropping a sudden 200 feet. At such moments, if someone were to ask him who he is, he’d have to look at his wallet. Then it’s over. He remembers; the plane levels out.

Molly’s busy in her study, Jeremy’s off doing homework upstairs, Alyssa pokes through a college guide. He finds himself, temples throbbing but not with pain, tumbled out of his chair onto the carpet, curled up, headphones askew. Light has washed through him.

The Schubert is playing, still the same movement. Whatever “it” was, it’s taken maybe a minute.

*It’s starting*, he thinks. Soon he’ll have to tell Molly. Rousing himself, shaking his head clear, he giggles that he’s so calm.

All of a sudden he yanks off the headphones and stumbles for the phone. He stands there, waiting,

waiting. *Now* it rings. “Molly,” he calls, “I think it’s for you. It’s good news.”

She calls back, “Can you get that, Danny?”

He picks it up, says, “Just a minute, please.” Then, “Molly?”

She takes the call, he hangs up. She shuts the door to her office. When she comes out, she’s glowing. “Danny? Listen! They’re offering me the directorship at the lab. Oh my God!”

He yells, “Alyssa? Jeremy? Come down here.”

“It’s not absolutely firm. We’re talking tomorrow. I never thought—”

“Well, you deserve it.”

“Danny?” She narrows her eyes at him. You *said* it was good news. How did you know? Did they call before?”

“Just a guess.”

“A guess? A *guess*?”

THAT WAS the first time. You could call it *déjà vu*. Experiencing *déjà vu*, you not only know you’ve been here before, you have a presentiment, usually vague, as to what will happen next. Daniel Hirsch’s presentiments become, in the next few days, anything but vague. He knows with exactitude. Sometimes what happens turns out not to be what he expects, but often it is. Most unnerving, he’s propelled not a split second but many seconds into the future.

There’s a certain look to things. A vividness. Knowing in advance, he catches a sheen of light on the drapes, calls “Jeremy!” but too late—waits for the dropped cup, Jeremy’s “damn!,” the click of the pantry door, slush of the mop. It’s more than presentiment. He feels the turmoil in Jeremy’s stomach, the clenched jaw, the big breath. He goes into the kitchen to assuage—hey, no big deal—but he can feel the wall that surrounds the boy, can almost see it, makeshift and jagged. He waits, goes to the fridge for juice. After a minute the wall dissolves, turns into ordinary pride. Now it’s safe for Daniel to say, “Bummer. I know how that feels. Thanks for cleaning it up.”

“Sure.”

And he *does* know—because for a moment he was within Jeremy’s being. Maybe this damage is a gift from God. If so, it’s a curious gift, suddenly to be thrust inside another person. He passes Molly on the stairs and feels a thick blur of love for her or from her, puts out a hand to graze her shoulder and feels her before he touches her. What does he feel? Not just love—he feels the anxiety she feels, too, though its content isn’t clear. He guesses it’s about being asked to be director of the lab. Or is it about

him? Has she seen something? He feels family voices all around him, too blurred together for him to catch the words.

One night he lies in bed in turmoil and finally realizes that it's not his turmoil. It's from somewhere else. First he thinks it's Molly, but she's peacefully asleep. He sits in his study for a while, eyes shut, and it comes to him: his son in Seattle, it's what Jonah's feeling, something's very wrong. He makes a call.

"Dad? What are you doing up at this hour? It's one o'clock there."

"I couldn't sleep. So? What's wrong?" he asks, as if Jonah had left a voicemail message.

"What do you mean?"

"In your life."

"Oh. Nothing."

"Yes. There is. Something."

"Dad? What are you talking about? Everybody has something."

"Something particular, Jonah. Something's upsetting you."

"Dad? Well, yes." Now Jonah speaks in a guttural whisper, as if his hand is on the mouthpiece. "How do you know? There's a young woman . . ." He tells him a little about her. A graduate student—he's directing her research. He thinks about her all the time.

And Elaine? Daniel asks. "How's Elaine?" He listens, he listens.

Mr. Cool or Mr. Chill, Daniel is a good listener. At work, mostly doing estate planning, he has to be. He listens underneath what clients say in order to know what really matters to them. In private life he never talks about feelings, hates it when conversations turn in that direction. But these days, feeling pulses through. He'd better get used to it, he thinks. It's likely to last as long as I do.

Everything is so saturated, it's as if he can walk around inside Jonah's life. He feels the mess. He can't see the young woman, but he can enter into Jonah's relationship with Elaine. He's known Elaine for six years; he's very fond of her. What he can do is pray for them, enter their life and try to breathe peace into it.

Every day now, there are moments when he loses clarity and then his own peace dissolves. He's prided himself on his clear mind. What will he be without it? He avoids talking, afraid words will spill out as babble. He's becoming thick-mouthed. The words get chewed at and can't get out. Worse, at moments he searches for himself, scanning a room the way you search for something forgotten, something lost. Yet as he walks through his daily life, nobody seems to notice.

He finds himself getting sleepy, needs to close his eyes a few minutes. Sleepy.

Eyes closed, he imagines back, back, back, generation to generation, to a fiery mountain, an Israelite, his ancestor, in terror. Blare of the horn, the mountain smoking.

ONE EVENING, as he's washing up at the bathroom sink, talking to Molly about a PBS program they've watched on stem cells, he feels faint, and a high-pitched buzzing fills him. Fills . . . whom? Who is this person filled with sound? He's on a tile floor feeling warm breath on him, she's bending over him. "Daniel?" she says. "What's going on?" She? It's Molly. So he's Daniel. A moment later, he floods back into full memory. His head hurts; the light in the bathroom is horribly bright. "Please, would you turn that down?"

"Turn what down?"

"The music. No—the light, I mean." Only a little dizzy, he picks himself up, makes his way to the bed. "Sit down. This is going to be hard, Molly. Hold my hand. Hold my hand."

"You'll be all right—you must have slipped and banged your head. Breathe."

"*You* breathe. I've got to tell you something, Molly?" She sits beside him and he takes her hand. He can't find words, then says flat out, "The thing is, I've got brain cancer. I've got a bad kind. Shh, shh, shh, please. It's called glioblastoma multiformes. It's basically . . . not operable."

"*Danny?*"

"I'm sorry, Molly."

"Please, no, Danny. Danny?"

"I'm so sorry. To have to leave you all. I'm sorry."

"No, no, Danny. Why didn't you tell me? What do you mean basically not operable? Did they biopsy it? How do you know it's malignant if they didn't operate and biopsy it?"

"You can see it on the MRI. I'm trying to bracket off my death. To live an ordinary life."

"Ordinary! So that's what's going on. . . . Danny, the thing is you've been anything but ordinary. I've been feeling so close to you, and it's weird, here you are, I'm feeling close and you, you're keeping secrets. Honey, did you know one side of your face is drooping a little? It's getting worse. I thought it might be Bell's palsy. That's why I asked you to see Dr. Schwab. Oh my God. How long do we have?"

"A few weeks, maybe a few months." He knows he shouldn't say this, but it needs to come out. "Molly, I know you don't want to think about this, but you're so young, you're beautiful . . ." Twelve

years younger, her curly hair uncolored, just touched with gray. A lovely, soft, placid face, not the face of an administrator. She fools them at the lab every day, dressing in masculine clothes. She'll marry. She must. He reminds himself to tell her so in a letter.

"Oh, shit. Shit."

"See? That's what I don't want to do. Bitterness just wastes our little bit of time. I want to live day to day. I won't be like this, so clear, very long. But we can have good days. I've been too busy to have days at all. I haven't been there. Know what I mean? I haven't been in my days."

"Oh, Danny, oh, Danny. Why can't they operate? Or do chemo?"

"Maybe we could scrounge a few more weeks—but what kind of life? Look, you can call Schwab. He'll try to get you to pressure me. It'll be awful, but I know you'll want to call."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she asks again but doesn't expect an answer.

All night in bed he holds her. They doze. She has spurts of weeping. At two or three they wake and fumble toward one another, comforting, stroking, until it mutates into making love. Daniel feels her weeping. They waken while Alyssa and Jeremy are getting ready for school.

"We've got to tell the kids," Molly says when they're alone. She's getting ready to drive out to the lab. "We can't pretend everything's normal and then you just . . . start failing."

"In a sense, it *is* normal. Right? Don't get mad, honey. It is. Every time we walk out the door we may never come back. People get hit by cars. They get heart attacks, they die. That's what people do."

"Horseshit. It's true and it's horseshit . . ."

"Okay." He laughs. "It's horseshit. We'll tell the kids after dinner," he says. "Okay?"

But Alyssa isn't home for dinner—she's at a study session. At nine she's back, standing in the hall, bookbag over her shoulder, a tall girl with almond eyes. He's amazed at the connection between them, feels what it will be like to be her when she hears.

Jeremy calls through his door—he's in the middle of something.

"Come anyway!" Molly, who's never loud, calls very loud. Jeremy comes.

They gather on cushions around the low teak coffee table. Daniel sees the administrator in his wife cranked and running. She'll handle things—handle everything. It's how she'll cope. It's good she has a way. "Your father and I have something to tell you—"

"Oh, no." Jeremy says. "No! You're *not* getting a divorce."

"Of course not," Daniel says. "Have you seen any signs of that?"

"Because it's like half my friends, their parents are getting a divorce and, well, they have this big family meeting first. Then, *what?* It better be a big deal, you're scaring me."

So he tells them. At once, Alyssa's in tears and Molly holds her. Jeremy just shakes his head; Daniel leans over to give him a hug, and Jeremy stiffens, punches him delicately in the chest.

And now there's a long battle, circling back on itself, because no matter how often Daniel says an operation won't change things, chemo won't change things, the children refuse to accept it. It's as if he were choosing to die. "You've got to try," Jeremy says. "You've got to fight."

"You've been seeing too many TV movies. This is nothing you can fight. What I want is that we don't kill the time we've got left together by griping. Okay?"

They sit around the table grieving. "How will we know," Jeremy asks, "when it starts?"

Daniel says, "I'm afraid it will be pretty obvious."

"So that's why you've been driving us to school," Alyssa says. "Oh, Dad."

HE CAN no longer drive with them to school because he's afraid he might have what Molly calls "an episode" and not find his way back. Besides, his vision is more and more blurred, and it plays tricks on him. An ordinary life? Everything feels full of his dying. The new "normal" includes everyone checking in with him from lab or school by cellphone. "Dad? You okay?" Molly takes work home so she can monitor him, though that's not the way she puts it. "I want to spend time with you." But the time is so washed in his dying that before his mind is gone, joy is gone. They're already mourning.

One morning Molly stays home to take Daniel to his office. He's been working from out of the house, but Harry Barnett called last night, and the flatness of his voice told Daniel he needed to go in. After rush hour they drive to Copley Square, park in Daniel's assigned spot in the garage, and take the elevator to the lobby. He's been feeling pretty normal this morning, but the elevator, stuffed with souls, gets to him right away. He's bombarded. He can't fend anyone off. He gives Molly a look: you hear what I hear? A chorus of pain and desire. Or just blood in his ears. He has an image of one of those

Spanish St. Sebastians, pierced like a porcupine. He feels punctured, and, trickling out, begins to lose coherence. He tries to explain to Molly, who's got his hand now, but he knows he's babbling.

Upstairs, the anteroom is a visual metaphor of restrained elegance. Molly squeezes his hand and sits down to read a research paper she's brought along. "You'll be okay?" Daniel says, covering up his shame for needing her. "I'll be right back."

He walks down the central corridor, legal staff to the right, lawyers to the left. First by chance, then as they hear his name, his colleagues emerge. "Daniel!" "Mr. Hirsch!" "Daniel, m'man, how you doing?" "Hey, Daniel." "Great seeing you." By the pats and handshaking he's not accustomed to, it's clear that in spite of his request to Harry and Tim, everyone knows. This annoys him. He nods and waves like a retired ballplayer, weary of the sentimental accolades that prove he's through.

At the end, the corridor turns. On the left, the window side, are the bright, paneled conference rooms, and, in the far corner, Harry's office. Harry stands outside, reaches out his hand and wraps his other arm around Daniel. "Come on in, come on in." Outside the window is downtown Boston, the curving river. Tim stands up, Nancy Schumer stands up, Charles Harris half-lifts himself from his chair for a moment.

"Well, the sooner you go into goddamn remission," Harry says, "the happier we'll all be around here."

"Thanks."

"You *believe* me," Harry says, slowly, tapping his heart—an imperative, not a question. "But," he sighs, "in the meantime . . ." The rest of his words are rushed. "Thing is, I think we need you to go squirrel-in with Charlie here—hand over your files, let him take some notes, okay?"

"Fine, if that's what you want."

"Don't get like that. We don't *want* it. You think we want it?"

"You know what I mean, Harry. If you want to get it over with now, sure. I have everything prepared. We both know I'm not going into remission."

Harry has tears in his eyes. "I don't want to get it over. Last thing I want, Danny."

Daniel puts a hand around Harry's neck. "It's okay, it's really okay. You're a sweet guy." His fingertips on Harry's thick neck seem charged. Out of the corner of his eye he notices that Tim and Charles and Nancy are looking anywhere else. "Charlie?" he says. "Let's you and me go back to my office." He's grateful that his speech is almost clear.

But a visual incident seems to be starting up.

The room grows too bright. The sky, the glass of other office buildings, silver sheen of the river far below, so bright, kind of beautiful, faces dim, breaking up. That's the scary part. He sits, closes his eyes. "You guys give me a minute, okay?"

When he opens his eyes, only Harry's there.

"Charlie's down at your office, Danny. I hope that's okay. I let you rest a few minutes."

"Sure. Sure." He stands and stretches. "It's been good working with you, Harry." He gives him a brief hug, then holds on, and Harry pats, pats, pats.

ALL THESE years, it *has* been good—the work with these people its own reward. Unlikely ever to see Harry again. Tim will come over, a few other friends. He needs to say goodbye to the Edelsteins, who attended so many concerts and ate so many dinners with them. His old friend Paul Del Monte, who lives in Albuquerque now. And Jonah. Of course, Jonah. He can't bring himself to call Jonah.

Already, with this visit downtown, he's shed much of his life. Now the files are gone, his profession gone, he has become free. But twice on the drive that afternoon, as he tries to talk to Molly, he's aware the words aren't coming out right. Coherent rise and fall of his voice as if . . . dissolve . . . his sentences have rhythms of English, but he knows that only some of the words are English. He hears but can't speak right. Pain in head, head thickening. As they drive, Molly gets in touch with Dr. Schwab by cell; it's to his office in Brookline she takes him.

Daniel hears her talking to the doctor. "He knows I'm not an oncologist." Daniel can't hear Molly's answer. They leave him in the waiting room. When Schwab calls him in, it's to give him a shot of cortisone, a prescription for pain killers. "But you've got to promise me you'll see Fitzgerald. We're talking about plain comfort, Daniel, not cure. Comfort. I'll give him a heads-up. Okay? You promise?"

He doesn't want to see anyone new, but for Molly's sake he will. He makes an appointment with Fitzgerald. This afternoon, after a nap, he prints out information for Molly—his trust instruments, his file of investments, instructions to Joe Berg, their financial planner. Molly has always left these matters to Daniel. It comforts him that money is there for Jeremy's and Alyssa's tuition. He writes a covering note. He's impressed by its clarity. Easier than speech. "I suspect you won't need this house, honey. It'll be way too big once the kids are in college. Until then, you're probably better

off not introducing any more changes into their lives. But it's up to you." He means to add, "I want you to marry again." It's too hard to write that.

Of course it's up to her; it's all up to her—unless he intends to stick around as a ghost. He half-feels like one already. There's awareness, then gap, then awareness: in, out. The phone rings in his head, he goes toward it, now it actually rings. Increasingly he feels so oppressively connected that it's too difficult for him to go shopping now, painful even to walk down a crowded street. Others suffuse him.

He doesn't want to talk to most friends. It's hard for him, hard for them. It's better, easier with those he loves. He writes—on laptop, hand too unsteady for a handwritten note. As he writes, he seems to enter them. Where are his boundaries? At moments, scanning, can't find himself. All defining separate self dull pain thickening the base of the occiput and pulsing behind forehead.

A clear note to Alyssa:

I suspect you'll want to stay with your mother next summer and not go to Interlochen. It's loving of you, but ask her. I believe she'd rather you went. I'd rather, too. Your music is such a gift to us. When I walk in and hear you playing, it's all been worth it!

Keeps a smile on his face, even for the young rabbi, only a year with the congregation, who pays a sick call. Visits to comfort the sick are prescribed in the Talmud; but it's this young man who needs comforting. He keeps taking off his glasses, closing his eyes and rubbing them, putting his glasses on again. Daniel wants to let him know, it's all right, it's all right. He could offer the rabbi a guess or two on immortality. Different from what we imagined. "I am not contained between my hat and boots." Once, Daniel thought this was Whitman's spiritual brag. What he's intuiting is that it's true, exactly true. He is becoming dispersed—especially into his family. He and the rabbi pray *minbah*, the brief afternoon service.

He has to use a hiking pole, tip covered in duct tape, to get around the house. It's necessary . . . move slow, don't stumble. The Friday after the trip downtown, after the rabbi leaves, Daniel has a peculiar feeling he himself is at the door. Taking up the pole, he goes to open.

Jonah! A suitcase beside him, having paid off the taxi, Jonah.

"You surprised, Dad? Molly called us. Which, let me add, is more than I can say for you."

"Going to call, really, really. Glad you're here, glad you're here, very." Daniel is embarrassed at his

slurring. He holds Jonah, smells him the way he did when Jonah a little guy. Hey. My baby.

His baby, the thirty-three-year-old dean of students, is showing Daniel a thin, pouting mouth—the injustice of not being confided in! He's not letting his father into his eyes. But anger, Daniel knows—he's seeing from inside his son—is a dam to protect Jonah from flood of grief. Still, Jonah's right—should have let him know. "How's Elaine?"

"We're okay. She's pregnant, Dad."

"Oh, Jonah, Jonah—totally wonderful. Elaine!"

"It is wonderful. I was a little crazy for a while."

"I know, I know." He lacks words, and the oh in "know" has become hard to shape, so he pats Jonah's back and shakes head up and down ferociously.

NOW, ALL his children there, he should have things to tell them. Profound, sticking things for after he goes. Even Jennifer here—taken train up from New York to say goodbye, Jonah met her at Back Bay station. Jennifer wants to see Daniel now, while he, husband seven years, friend for life, still pretty coherent. But as they sit in the dining room, he has no words. He makes language, rehearses sentences. Is silent.

His consciousness opposite of profound. Ach, he's embarrassed . . . wears diapers.

He goes a little in, he goes a little out. He points to butter for his bread: hard-words-find.

Jeremy has become a little too sober, not bad thing . . . for him. As if to test bond between brothers, Daniel plucks invisible string joining Jonah and Jeremy, and listens to resulting music.

*Teshuvah*. Repentance, turning to God—what's it mean for him? Any dark evil in his life? Thinks no-no. Lot of inattention. A little bad anger. Impatience—people on one speed, he another. Well! Used to be a sports car, now not so many cylinders. Nothing like withering brain to slow you down, better than a two-by-four to get your attention. Attention hard now. He prays, *Hold Your hands me*. Words bollix up. He slips out of himself, himself scattered into being of others at table. He can be Molly-Daniel or Alyssa-Daniel, but if he doesn't try hard-hard, he becomes them all together.

In dull pain and constant blurred seeing, held by his little *mishpokbeh*, his family. At the same time, he begins to feel if he lets go, another reality will hold him. "Inscribed in the Book of Life." Maybe different from what we think. He has his ugly-ugly dying to get through. Organs stop receiving messages from dying brain, then organs die. Another reality? Isn't he half-held there already? God waiting? Crooking a finger?

The family at the table looks peaceful, everyone smiling, passing food, ordinary family, like family at Sinai. He knows better. Tension between Molly and Jennifer—friends, but not tonight. Jeremy wants to be anywhere else. “Hey, you looking good, ol’ Dad,” Jeremy says. Alyssa fingers a long gold earring to soothe herself, irritated by the obvious con. Daniel waves his hand, orchestra conductor, tries to make music from noise.

Alyssa resists. Begrudges his dying, his not fighting. At the table she says again, should think once more—operation, chemo. He sees: in ten years when she tells her husband the story, she’ll say, “My dad just gave up.” But now she shrugs it away. Most of the night, she’s forced-smiling. Jeremy’s performing for Jonah, acting grown-up. Everyone performing.

Daniel, too. His performance: everyone peaceful. Pretends not to know all upset and conflict they feel; pretends to believe surface. Let them feel they’re fooling him—help them get through his dying. Like a midwife. Birth, birthing him. Molly, organization lady, she’ll be okay sitting *shivva*. Tell stories, turn their life into show-and-tell as she lugs out books of photos for friends who make up a *minyan*. She’ll hold Alyssa and Jeremy, hug Jonah, too, and they’ll cry. Now his job is smile, smile.

All at once he spots Jeremy. Knows how thick with tension Jeremy, about to break this peace with a snotty, sibling dig at Alyssa—Daniel even knows the comment, something to do with her weight. Alyssa’s fantasy (silly, she’s so beautiful) is that she has an extra five pounds. Her plate is piled high with salad.

Jeremy makes the dig: “Got enough lettuce leaves, Aly? Let’s keep those pounds off.”

She gives him a look. Not sufficient. He really wants to get her. He’s about to reach over to her plate and swat the lettuce leaves. Daniel knows: she’ll take her plate and dump it all on his head, and then a big fight will suck up into itself unexpressed sorrow and fear at the table. End of peace. In the same instant, no plan, Daniel mimes a seizure—rolling up eyes, shaking, tumbling off chair onto floor. He lies there twitching.

Everything, thank God, stops. Jeremy’s action is blocked, conflict dissolves, and Daniel realizes—frustrating!—it was all exactly meant to be. Fake seizure, everybody helping, part of the *déjà vu*. God fooling him!

He speaks, but knows he is saying nothing. Not intelligible. *Intelligible*: intellect, intelligent, tell. He tries to send out telling sentences but exactly like speaking college French has to rehearse a correct

construction, remember words, and all too much effort from start of sentence to end . . . Remembers “ordinary.” Some joke. You think you die, first you go dim, say goodbye. But no. Another place takes you, another frame of reference, and everyone seems so far away, words far away. Silence. Silence. Somebody asking, somebody asking. Conscientious, like a good father, husband, friend, tries hard to push words out. Silence.

He stands up and with walking stick in hand like a pilgrim, trudges to bed. Already Daniel Hirsch is half-somewhere else.

**MOLLY:** Molly tugs hard at the drawer where the albums are kept. Uncollected photos spill out on the carpet of her bedroom. She catches sight of Jeremy lifted, by her and Daniel, over a whitecap that’s run its course. *Click*. Jeremy looks two, Alyssa would have been four. Who took it? A friend? Jiggling, she pulls the drawer off its tracks; it almost lands on her feet. A glossy 5 x 7 of Daniel at the helm of Paul Del Monte’s boat. She picks up the load of albums, a whole life in her arms. The rabbi has just arrived to lead an evening service. She feels looked at by a smiling Daniel. She remembers the day they went out with Paul and Sylvia—so windy, the boat, heeling way over, scared her. Hard gusts rolled the bay black; she held on to Alyssa and stayed low.

She lifts up the albums to pass around. It’s all supposed to be beautiful; a beautiful narrative. Already she’s printed the most recent pictures and found a trove of Daniel’s childhood photos to lay out on the coffee table. She hears coughing, straightening of chairs. Daniel’s voice comes back. Not the words, just his voice over Alyssa’s voice—Alyssa greeting latecomers.

Cheating a little, pulling aside the scarf covering the mirror of her vanity, she straightens her hair, tucks in her blouse with the scrap of black fabric pinned to the collar, and hurries in as the rabbi chants the *barekhu*, everyone standing, to begin the evening service in a house of mourning.

Jonah:

It’s a bumpy flight. Jonah staggers to the rear of the plane, holding onto the seats, and, closing himself up in the bathroom, looks out at a layer of clouds just below. He’s on his way home to Seattle after sitting *shivva* with Molly, Jeremy, Alyssa for two days. An odd thing. He feels his father enter his body—not a ghost, but folded-in, skin to skin. And his breath—his breath is his father’s breath. He leans his hands on the washbasin and starts to heave hot breath and tears. If there’s content to

this grief, it's regret that they'd seen each other so little the past few years. Well, but that's what it's like, he thinks, his career, his father's career, one side of the country, the other. Still, it grieves him. *We used to be so close*, he thinks. He washes his face in cold water.

He remembers a line of poetry, "distance avails not, and place avails not," from Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry." Paul Del Monte recited parts of the poem at the funeral; it was one his father loved. He takes the poem from his inside jacket pocket and unfolds it. At this moment Jonah feels his father's presence so intensely that he glances in the bathroom mirror, half expecting to see his father's face. "Hey, Dad?" he whispers.

As the plane rocks, over the loudspeaker the steward calls for passengers to return to their seats because of turbulence.

Jeremy:

Many years later, when Jeremy is working for the World Bank in Paris, his mother and stepfather come to pay a fall visit. It's become a tradition, these visits. Louise loves Jeremy's mother, and they have the opportunity of showing off Paris as if it were their own city. They also love it that Molly and Nathan take the children so he and Louise can spend a weekend in the country.

He's worried about his mother, her shortness of breath. She walks a block and has to stop. Arms akimbo, she sucks in air. He sees that Nathan is protective, making sure they walk slowly, taking cabs in the rain. He's a decent man, Nathan. Their romance they kept secret for a couple of years, and finally, when Molly retired, they married. Dad wouldn't mind, Jeremy thinks. He hopes his mom knows that. His dad was explicit about it that night after he collapsed at the table and Jonah and Jeremy helped him upstairs. Daniel felt better fast. Jeremy sat on the bed; they talked. "I want you . . . go to Israel, tickets, next summer. You go, you hear me?"

"Yes, Dad."

"You bring back some dirt . . . Holy Land, okay? A little. Spread on my grave, okay? Hey! I can talk like this . . . you . . . now . . . a big boy." He gestured for Jeremy to come close to him. "One more thing. Your mother. She'll marry, I think. I *want* that. You let her know."

During the week of sitting *shiva*, he mentioned it to Mom, but she waved it away and shut her eyes. Well, now she has somebody. Somebody nice, Dad. You'd really like him.

It brings him back to that night. Strange, Dad's

collapse at the table, so out-of-the-blue and brief, and he recovered so fast. It comes back to Jeremy, closing his eyes, where they were sitting, what they were saying, and *snap*, just like that, he gets it. Why, the trickster! He knows what his father was doing. I was about to get on Alyssa's case, goof around with lettuce leaves. Dad knew I was going to act up. He faked it, faked a collapse to keep me from starting a fight and wrecking the dinner!

He thinks about his sister, living in San Francisco now. They have a phone date planned for the weekend. He can't wait to tell her.

Alyssa:

Alyssa is feeding her two-year-old, slapping the table and babbling *blb blb blb*, and Danny babbles back, mimicking but wilder. Then he starts and she copies. They echo each other while her husband Stan bolts down hot coffee and stuffs his bookbag before going off to teach.

"I wish you could have met him, my dad," she says. She fingers her earring, remembers she's wearing no earring—too dangerous with a toddler who might suddenly yank—and Stan nods. "We had such a nice time talking about him over the phone yesterday, Jeremy and I." Stan is trying to make sure he's got everything, but he nods so she'll know he hears her. She tells him, forgetting she's told him before, "At the end, you know, so sad, he just gave up." She's given that version to each of several boyfriends before she was married, to her best girlfriend in college.

"You've told me that, honey. Why? Why did he give up? Was he depressed?" Stan asks, hefting the heavy bookbag to his shoulder.

"Well, no, I wouldn't say so." She looks into a corner of the room, the ledge where she's put the shining samovar, as if he were standing there, her father, and she rethinks her story. "Stan? You know . . . maybe it wasn't giving up," she says. "Maybe Dad knew what was best for him."

Stan looks at the wall clock, puts down his bag, comes over to the table to kiss Danny and Alyssa.

"And maybe best for all of us. At the end he couldn't talk, but he could shake his head, and you knew he was there. Often he was smiling. God, I never thought of it that way. The final month was terribly sad, of course, but maybe it would have been worse."

When Stan goes off, she returns to echoing her son and being echoed by him, dancing the same dance, two in one, feeling the boy by enacting the life that's in him.