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Word count: approx. 6,300 words

Operation: Yizkor!

By Gil Roth

Loesser was maybe three or four years old, standing in the threshold of his house, facing the front yard. He stretched his right arm straight up, far as it could go, and jumped, trying to reach the blue metal cylinder nailed to the doorframe. It was almost six feet from the floor, and Little Abe Loesser missed it by a few inches, then tried again, swinging his arm and stumbling out the door onto the concrete front step.

His father heard the thump and came out of his den to see what the commotion was about. Halfway up the stairs, he saw his son get up, gather himself, and jump, this time straining with his left arm to touch the tube in the doorframe. He missed, then noticed his father, who said, "It's not a fucking piñata, Abe."

"What is it?"

"It's called a mezuzah."

"What's it for?"

". . . Keeps vampires out. So don't touch it."

That was the first Abe had heard of vampires, although he'd already been exposed to both Count Chocula and The Count on Sesame Street. It took a him few years more to find out that he was Jewish, and some time after that he learned in Hebrew school that the mezuzah isn't the cylinder itself but the parchment contained within it, which bears the prayer known as the Sh'ma.

This was the extent of Loesser's Hebrew patrimony, such that when Abe's phone rang 35 years later, and his father said, "Where's your temple? The high holidays are coming. I have to pray for my parents," Loesser was taken aback.

The old man had survived a septuple bypass eight months earlier, but his response to that had mainly been a half-assed exercise regimen complimented by unending criticism of his son's diet, not finding religion.

Had he lost his mind? Loesser's temple? Abe had been to temple maybe half a dozen times in the quarter-century since his bar mitzvah. A seder here and there, sure. Oh, and he participated in the office menorah-lighting with a handful of Jewish coworkers, but that was mainly for the thrill of lighting a fire in the break room. Donning tallis and yarmulke? Blessing wine, bread and candles? Keeping kosher, or even just avoiding bread during Passover? Not a chance. But it's not like his old man was Maimonides, either.

Jew*y*, not Jew*ish*, is how Abe described his upbringing. In more polite circles he phrased it as, "Culturally Jewish, rather than religious." Less Torah, Talmud and Zohar, more Woody Allen, Mel Brooks and Philip Roth. If push came to Shoah, he knew he'd still wind up in the cattle cars, but he'd have the solace of having tasted pork, shellfish and shiksas.

Loesser couldn't recall much about Yom Kippur rites, except that you fast — no food or drink — from sundown to sundown plus an hour, and you pray a lot to take your mind off the fasting.

"Who is this? Sounds like Ike Loesser, but that can't be," Abe replied.

"No joking. I must pray for them," he said, in his Ukrainian-by-Israeli accent. Forty years in America couldn't make a dent in it.

"They've been gone been a long time. Doesn't kaddish have a statute of limitations or something?" Loesser remembered how his Israeli coworker Guy prayed kaddish three times a day for a year after his mom kicked. Loesser never knew his old man's parents. They'd been left in The Old Country, although it was never clear which one he meant. The old man didn't tell Abe many stories about Israel — getting there after the war, living there for 20 years, or leaving for America

— and by the time Loesser was grown up, there were plenty of things for them not to talk about.

"Not kaddish. Yizkor. During Yom Kippur next week. I have to pray. The days of awe are upon us. Where's your temple?" he pleaded.

Over the years Loesser had been conditioned to treat their relationship more like crime-lord and accomplice than father and son. Get a few drinks in him, and Loesser would regale you with stories of The Bomb Threat ("With my accent, they'll recognize, but you . . ."), Riding Shotgun ("You stay in the guest bedroom here with the gun while I talk with the fence, and if it sounds like trouble . . ."), or the more innocuous yet more disrespectful Case of the Purloined Flowers ("Nobody brought flowers for poor Johnny; go to that big grave a few rows back and . . .").

Loesser riffed through the old man's scams and hustles like a deck of marked cards, trying to discern the angle he was playing, but all he could say was, "I'll find us a shul, Pop."

Loesser spent the week casing synagogues. He started in his hometown, at the temple where he'd gone to Hebrew school, only to discover that it had closed down sometime in the past few years and been replaced by an Syrian Orthodox church.

The night Rosh Hashanah began, he visited the Reform temple near his office, but crossed it off the list the moment he saw the female rabbi. There was no chance; Loesser's old man once got off a plane when he learned the pilot was a woman. As Loesser liked to point out, he didn't insist his wife and son follow suit.

The Conservative shul in the tony town nearby strongly suggested that he make a donation in order to get good seating during Yom Kippur. Loesser wasn't concerned about sitting in the back of the temple — in fact, he was banking on it — but he feared the old man would take it upon himself to play the role of Rodney Dangerfield in *Caddyshack!*, in some misguided attempt to start a class war during the day of atonement.

Finally, he resorted to Guy, who was with his family in Israel, but texted him an address and the note, "tomorrow 1130 JMT".

The old man sat on the front step of the house as Loesser pulled into the driveway. He moved back into the place 10 years ago when Loesser's mother, tired of northeast winters, bugged out for the Land of Disenchantment. He had already put on a tallis, and was fidgeting with the fringe at the end of the shawl, like it was a rosary. He was lost in thought, and Loesser waited a few moments before honking his horn.

The hospital stay and rehabilitation had carved seventy pounds off the old man. Loesser tried to cheer him on about the weight loss, and even thought about getting him a "Biggest Loser - Cardiac Division" T-shirt, but the old man looked less healthy now than when he was pushing three hundred pounds with 100% blockage in three cardiac arteries. His skin had grown wan, and as his jowls drained away, the skeletal sharpness of his cheekbones left his face hollow. He moved slower, as if mistrusting his body and its seemingly full recovery from post-op infirmity.

He shuffled along in loose-fitting khaki pants, a white dress shirt, and a pair of Crocs. *Really?* Loesser thought. *You couldn't put on a decent pair of shoes?* Loesser wore a dark suit, light blue dress shirt, yellow tie, and the leather wingtips he bought while covering a conference in Milan.

The old man walked slowly down the driveway, maybe more slowly than his years, although that had become a matter of debate. Growing up, Loesser thought his old man had been born in 1938, but Abe accompanied him to the Social Security office in Hackensack and watched the old man claim it was '36.

When the clerk asked him to produce a birth certificate, the old man replied, "They didn't let us keep a lot of our paperwork . . . *IN THE CONCENTRATION CAMPS*." The clerk decided that the "1938" on his immigration papers was a typo and the old man soon began receiving his benefits.

The real mystery was how the old man managed to hold a steady job all these years and not lose the house, despite all of his scams.

Ike got in the car. He pulled the tallis in to keep it from getting caught in the door, and Abe noticed that it was old, stained, and threadbare. Before he could ask where the old man stole the shawl, his father asked, "Are you fasting for the holiday?"

"Yeah. I figured a little affliction couldn't hurt." The lack of caffeine was already crushing him.

"Good. You could lose a few pounds."

Not another word for the next 10 minutes, as Loesser drove out to the thruway. Every dig he came up with was either mangled beyond phrasing (he was already imagining the joy of a post-sunset coffee), or too pointlessly cruel to say to one's father during the High Holidays.

As they got on the entry ramp, the old man said, "I'm sorry. You shouldn't wind up on the table like me, is all."

Loesser puffed out his cheeks a moment. He remembered the old man unconscious in the ICU after bypass surgery, wired up and intubated, the nurses seeming a little more anxious than he thought was appropriate. They didn't want to alarm Loesser, but there were signs of internal bleeding. It reached a point where a doctor was called in, and visiting hours were abruptly ended.

They stabilized the old man overnight and Loesser returned to the ICU the next morning just as they were bringing Ike up from sedation. He saw his son as if through a fog, then more sharply. He tried to draw letters on his blanket for Loesser to read, but the nurse told him it was okay to speak, now that the breathing tube had been removed. He looked at Loesser and whispered something. Abe leaned in and asked him to repeat it. He did, and Abe sat back. The nurse asked what he said. The old man turned his head to look at her.

"He just . . . he wanted to know if he received a blood transfusion. You know, because of the operation," Abe said, slowly and exaggeratedly shaking his head outside of his father's view.

The nurse smiled, patted his arm, and said, "No, sir. No need for a transfusion." They'd given him at least four pints of blood by the time Abe left the night before.

He remained a while, until the old man drifted off. As he passed the nurse's station, she said to him, "Let me guess: he was afraid we'd give him blood from an African-American?"

Loesser stammered and said, "That's not exactly how he put it, but . . ."

"People his age, they're scared of some crazy things," the nurse said. "You wouldn't believe what I've heard from people whose life we just saved."

Loesser looked over at the withered man in the passenger seat. He couldn't imagine ending up in the same condition, even as he felt its inevitability. He asked, "How about you? Fasting?"

"I'm sick. I have a heart condition. I'm excused," the old man said.

They soon reached a neighborhood strikingly similar to the one they left: suburban-bordering-on-exurban, rolling hills, thick trees, twisting streets, nine-room bi-levels in a few repeating floor-plans, garages facing the street or the side of the house depending on the irregularities of the builder's acre, little quirks and mutant-extensions cropping up as the houses grew beyond their 1960s-era constraints.

"Here there's a temple?" the old man asked. Loesser craned his neck, looking for street signs and house numbers. They soon found the address Guy had given, but it was a residence, not a temple or Jewish center. A few cars were on the street in front the house, so they parked nearby.

Loesser's hand remained on the key as he shut the car off. He looked again at his father, whose placid face betrayed no anxiety. He yearned to ask the old man what this was really about. Why pray now? Why bring his son into it? Was it some late-in-life stab at reconnecting? A "one last caper and then we're out" scenario? Was Loesser even part of the equation, beyond his role as wheelman?

He couldn't ask. He was afraid that a direct question would just trigger some new stage in a decades-long confidence game. Or worse, it could bring him dangerously close to sympathy.

The old man said, "Are we going? We're Jews, right?"

"If you say so."

They left the car and walked down the driveway to the house. From the outside, it seemed to be a mirror image of the one where Abe grew up, like left and right hands. Loesser noticed the mezuzah was on the opposite side of the front door, and mentioned it to the old man. "What do you mean? It's on the same side as ours."

He touched the metal case and then kissed his fingers, a gesture Loesser had never before seen him make.

Loesser knocked on the door. Through the frosted vertical window, he saw a small figure bound up the stairs. A Hasidic boy, maybe eight or nine years old, opened the door and said, "L'shana tova!" He was in black pants and a white dress shirt. A black velvet yarmulke with silver trim sat atop his head. Loesser wondered how young he was when he started growing his forelocks, and whether they were a status symbol among the kids at school. "I'm the rabbi's son. Please come in," he recited, leading them down the stairs.

The staircase mirrored their house, the left side leading down, right side leading up. Loesser knew his old house like it was an extension of his nervous system, and he tried to impose that map onto this new space.

The boy led them to a converted rec room. A temporary partition separated the women and children from the men, although they could hear more children in the guest bedroom next door. Within each half of the room, a narrow aisle divided six or seven rows of chairs. At the lectern at the front of the room, a Hasidic rabbi decked out in a white robe just finished leading a prayer.

Because of the partition, Abe could only see the front of the men's portion of the room. There were six or seven bearded men there, their tallises pulled up to cover the tops of their heads.

"I said find us a temple," the old man whispered to Loesser, "not a settlement on the West Bank!"

The rabbi looked up and noticed the two newcomers. "Please! Come in!" he thundered. "Take a seat!", gesturing to a pair of empty folding chairs in the front row. Reluctantly, Loesser and the old man walked past the female congregation and sat in the front among the bearded Jews.

Within moments, there was a tap on his shoulder; a middle-aged man in a tan suit was proffering two prayer books, a pair of yarmulkes, and a loosely folded tallis. Abe thanked him, then nonchalantly looked back at the rest of the congregation. He breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that most of the male congregants were not Hasidic, but were in standard suits or khakis and blazers.

Loesser draped his prayer shawl over his shoulders, and both men centered their yarmulkes atop their heads. Abe looked into a neighbor's prayer book to see what page the services had reached.

There were around 30 men in their side of the room, most of them older than Loesser. The half-dozen Hasidic men were clustered near the front, in black suits. A few very old ones had white robes similar to the rabbi. At the front of the room, facing the wall and the window outside, was a beardless younger man in a standard black suit, white socks and black Crocs. He was holding a prayer book close to his face and bowing repeatedly. Loesser felt like he'd entered another world, made more disturbing by how familiar the house was.

The rabbi announced that the chazzan would lead the next section, and the young man took his place at the lectern. He began chanting and reading quickly, occasionally raising the volume of a single word or two. Behind him, Abe noticed, was a fireproof safe mounted into the wall, with a velvet curtain hanging before it. The rabbi, meanwhile, took a seat beside the old man. He shook both their hands, and said, "I'm Rabbi Dov!" The rabbi looked to be near Loesser's age, although his reddish beard may have added a few years. He wore horn-rimmed glasses that partially obscured the fierceness of his eyebrows.

They introduced themselves, and the rabbi asked for their Hebrew names. "Yitzhak," the old man replied.

"And what's your father's Hebrew name?"

The old man hesitated, then answered, ". . . Efraim."

"Yizhak ben Efraim! Good to meet you. So you must be Avraham ben Yitzhak," the rabbi said to Loesser.

"I must be."

"What brings you around today?" the rabbi asked, as the chazzan kept chanting.

Lack of caffeine had already wreaked havoc on much of Loesser's higher brain functions; he couldn't think of a response, and his puzzlement must have shown on his face. The rabbi reached over, patted him on the arm, smiled and said, "Kidding! Welcome to our shul! Good new year! Shana tova!"

"Thank you," said Loesser. "It's, um, quite a temple."

"The Temple is waiting to be rebuilt in Jerusalem," the rabbi corrected. "Until then, we have our shul! It's not much, but it's home." *Always stepping in it*, thought Loesser. *Just keep your mouth shut.* "The chazzan will be done soon, so we're going to need both of you to help out with today's services," the rabbi told them.

The old man turned to glare at Loesser, who was already shaking his head and putting up his hands as though he was being mugged.

"I need one of you to take the Torahs out of the ark --"

"I have a heart condition! He should do it! I'm excused!" the old man blurted, drawing the attention of the other congregants.

"-- and one of you to read a blessing over the Torah."

"*In your face*!" Loesser hissed, jabbing a finger at his father.

"It's meant. To be. An honor," the rabbi said, nodding slowly, eyes narrowing. ". . . I'm glad that's settled. Abe, you come up with me; Isaac, when I call 'Yitzhak ben Efraim,' that'll be your cue."

The rabbi directed Abe to push back the curtain and open the door of the safe, which was unlatched. Within were two Torahs, each in a velvet cover with decorative silver ornaments on their top handles. The ornaments had bells on them, and Loesser tried to bring the first Torah out without jangling the bells. He avoided bumping the Torah against the sides of the ark, as though he was playing a game of *Operation*.

As he opened the ark and removed the Torah, the congregation rose and chanted a prayer. It was the Sh'ma. It had been drilled into Loesser's mind in Hebrew school, and he chanted along with the first line, "*Sh'ma Yisrael, adonai elohaynu, adonai ehod*." *Hear, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One.*

He handed the first Torah off to the chazzan, and then drew the second one out. He was about to give it to Rabbi Dov, who said, "No, no! Follow him!", pointing to the chazzan. The rabbi then tapped Abe's shoulder and leaned in to whisper, "And whatever you do, don't drop the Torah."

The scroll and its cover must have weighed around 30 pounds. Loesser adjusted the unwieldy bulk and got behind the young man. They walked down the

center aisle of the men's congregation. As they passed, each man touched his prayer book or his tallis to each Torah, then brought that part to his lips. At the back of the room, they crossed over to the other side and brought the Torahs among the women and children. Women touched their prayer books to the Torahs as the men did.

By reflex, Loesser sized up the women. He could have guessed that a Hasidic shul on Yom Kippur ranked pretty low on pickup potential, but still found himself wondering what lay under some the dark wigs and long skirts.

When they finished their circuit, the chazzan placed his Torah on the broad lectern. Rabbi Dov directed Loesser to sit in the folding chair right in front of them, holding the other Torah. He tried not to let the little bells jingle while the rabbi spoke.

Loesser looked over to his old man, who pointed at him and made a baby-cradling gesture with his arms. The congregant sitting next to him, a non-orthodox man in his 50s, said, "Shana tova! I'm Josh."

"Abe," he said, trying to reach over to shake the man's hand, but nearly toppling the Torah.

Josh helped steady it. "Whoa! You don't want to drop that!"

"I know. The rabbi already warned me. I bet they'd never let me back in this place," Loesser said.

"You don't understand; if you drop a Torah, you have to fast for forty days," the man told him. Forty days. He was at the eighteen-hour mark and his thoughts grew more muddled by the minute.

He hugged the scroll closer, jingling the bells. "But don't worry," Josh said, speaking from the side of his mouth, "the other congregation members will each fast for a day to help you reach forty. Probably."

Loesser tried to keep the noise down while the rabbi called up congregants to perform the blessing over the Torah, known as aliyah. One would come up, touch his tallis to a portion of the Torah that the rabbi indicated with a silver pointer shaped like a finger, kiss that piece of his tallis, and then read a line in Hebrew from a laminated page that lay on the lectern. The congregation would respond, and the congregant would read the rest of the blessing. Then the rabbi would read/chant a

section of the Torah, and the congregant would recite another blessing, then shake hands with everyone up at the lectern. The next one would come up and the previous one wouldn't sit until the new congregant's reading was complete.

Loesser noticed that the congregation was hardly silent during all this. Each time the Torah portions were being read, he could hear murmurs of conversation throughout of the room. Nothing too loud, but not the respectful silence he was expecting.

"Yitzhak ben Efraim!" said the rabbi.

It took the old man a few moments to recognize his Hebrew name being called for aliyah. Loesser clutched the Torah tighter, afraid the old man would try to knock it out of his hands and escape from the shul during the confusion. He also crossed his fingers for good luck.

The rabbi said to him, "It's transliterated in English underneath."

"I can read," he replied, and read, "*Barchu et adonai hamvorach*."

The congregation replied, "*Baruch adonai hamvorach l'olam va'ed.*"

The old man breezed through the rest of his blessing. Loesser beamed from his chair, holding the Torah like a child.

Once his section was complete, the old man waited by the lectern for the next congregant. It turned out to be Abe's seat-mate, Josh. He went through his blessing and reading, and when it was complete, the old man took his seat next to Abe.

"Good job, Pop," Loesser said.

"Your old man's still got it. Some things you don't lose."

The rabbi and the chazzan bundled up the Torah on the lectern and told Abe to bring up the second one, which he laid down beside it. As they packed it up, Abe returned to his seat.

A few more prayers followed, then Rabbi Dov announced the program for the rest of the day. "I'm afraid we've fallen a little behind schedule, but I think we can make up the time by cutting the breaks short," he said, mining the Yom Kippur humor. Loesser wondered if it was easier to get laughs from a crowd that was growing delirious with hunger and thirst.

"We'll be getting to Yizkor soon, but before that, I want to remind you all why we're here today. We know Yom Kippur as the day of affliction. On this day, we afflict ourselves in five ways. Why five ways? Anyone?"

"Because of the five books of the Torah," said one of the non-Hasidic men.

"That's right. For the five books, we afflict ourselves five ways: we abstain from eating, drinking, washing, marital relations, and wearing leather shoes," the rabbi declared, counting each one off with his right hand. Loesser looked down at his feet and his Italian leather wingtips. He looked back at the rest of the congregation, and realized that every single man was in canvas sneakers, Crocs, or plastic sandals. He tried to find someone to blame, but came up empty and hated himself.

"We do this to become like angels," the rabbi said, "who neither drink nor eat. This fasting, this refrainment from earthly pleasures, it allows us to focus on the spirit, on our angelic aspects. I wear this white kittel like a burial shroud, to symbolize the dross of the earthly body.

"But this isn't only the day of affliction. It's also the day of atonement! This is the last of the ten Days of Awe that began with Rosh Hashanah. This is the period in which the Lord decides which names are inscribed in the Book of Life and which are sealed in the Book of Death.

"He writes the names of the righteous in the first book and the wicked in the other book, on the first night of Rosh Hashanah. For the rest of us, neither wicked nor righteous, we have these ten days to repent and atone for our sins before God determines our fate."

Ten days of repentance, forty days of fasting, five books of the Torah, seven bypasses of the old man's heart: the numbers piled up. Loesser found it difficult to concentrate while Rabbi Dov explained a mystic theory of the creation of the universe. As best he could understand it, there was a higher realm at the beginning, a pre-universe. Emanations of divine light were supposed to flow into vessels there, only the vessels weren't strong enough to contain the light, and they shattered. The resultant broken world is what we inherited. "Our job is to help restore order to the world," the rabbi told the congregation.

"The phrase *Tikkun Olam*, 'repair the world,' is overused in modern Judaism," he said. "It becomes a catch-all to describe any kind of social good that one pursues. While that can't hurt, it ain't enough.

"What *Tikkun Olam* describes is something higher: restoring our relationship with the universe of God's creation, through Torah, through goodness, through fulfilling our obligations as Jews. The divine light has been scattered throughout this lower world, and each mitzvah we perform — and there are 613 of them in the Torah — can help us collect it."

The old man perked up at that last phrase, nudged Loesser to get his attention, then rubbed his thumb against his index and middle fingertips. "Time for the donations," he whispered.

The rabbi gathered his beard in one hand and slowly let it out. "Now, I want to tell you a story," he said. "It's about a group of rabbis arguing. I know! Who could imagine such a thing?"

The congregation chuckled.

"It's not my story. It's one told by Maimonides in the 12th century. The rabbis were arguing about what it means to be human. Does it mean walking upright? The power of speech? Free will? They argued and argued and finally, one of them decides to test out an idea. He takes his house cat, and he trains it to be a waiter.

"That's right! It takes a while, but he teaches the cat to walk on its hind legs, to take orders, bring out plates, handle bills, and more. The cat does a wonderful job, doing everything a human waiter could do. You can't imagine the tips he got!

"The other rabbis come to the see the cat, and they're amazed. 'Well, Rabbi So-and-So, you've really made us think about what it means to be human! If this cat can do all these things, maybe we need to change our ideas.'

"But then one of the rabbis releases a mouse in the restaurant. (Don't ask why he had a mouse with him; it was the 12th century in Spain.) The cat sees the mouse, drops his plates, and takes off to eat the mouse."

The rabbi took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose where they rested.

"Some of us only come to shul once a year. We take this *one day* to atone to God for our sins. For one day, we fast and ask forgiveness. But what about those other 364 days? Who are we the rest of the year? Our sins and temptations are mice; the question is, are you a man or are you a cat?"

He ended the sermon, made announcements about upcoming events at the Jewish center, then asked for all congregants whose parents are still alive to leave the room. "God bless, my parents are both still with us," he said, "so the chazzan will lead the Yizkor prayer."

The old man worriedly looked to Loesser, who shrugged, got up, and walked out the back door of the house, in step with Rabbi Dov.

Twenty or so adults and scads of children stood outside on the concrete patio. The rabbi asked Loesser, "So, Avraham ben Yitzhak, tell me: what do you do when you're not praying and studying Torah?"

Loesser laughed. "That'd be a pretty long list. My job is editing a business magazine."

"A Jew working in the media? Who ever heard of such a thing?" He patted Loesser on the shoulder. "Kidding! You must be Guy's friend. He told me you might be coming. You know, we get a lot of Israeli transplants like him here at Chabad. Even if they're not orthodox, they seem to prefer this over some of the established local congregations. Glad you could make it for Yizkor. Are we going to see you here next week?"

"For . . . ?" Loesser asked.

"Shabbat. Plain old Shabbat. Blessings on Friday night, Torah on Saturday morning," the rabbi said. "We can always use help getting a *minyan* together."

"I . . . think I'm a cat, sir."

"I don't think you are, but I've been wrong about these things before."

"What makes you think that?" Loesser asked.

"Cats don't have shame."

The rabbi's wife came by with their children, and Loesser shook his hand and slinked away.

Shame? Loesser had Jewish coworkers who hadn't been bar mitzvah'd. He had Jewish cousins who kept Christmas trees. Why should he suffer shame for wearing leather shoes on Yom Kippur, while they lived at peace?

It was shame at not living up to some Jewish ideal that his father had barely acknowledged, but also shame of looking like a rookie in front of a congregation. There were so many prayers, songs and rituals in which he had no experience. He was amazed to find that he could transliterate prayer book Hebrew after so many years, but it was all out of context for him, just sounds from an alien alphabet. He hated standing out as The Worst Jew In The Shul, and the hot flush of embarrassment at each miscue this morning had left him alternately ready to storm out of the place and to vow to return every week for instruction.

The Yizkor prayers ended, and one of the men opened the door so that the other congregants could re-enter. The old man pushed his way outside and said to the rabbi, "Thank you, shana tova, we have to get home, my son, he's diabetic." He took Loesser's arm and hurriedly walked along the backyard to the driveway. Abe took off his tallis and handed it to one of the congregants, who was dying for a cigarette.

In the car, he said, "Y'know, Pop, I was actually doing okay there."

"You? You looked like you were in agony!"

"I haven't had anything to eat or drink for eighteen hours! And diabetic? Where did *that* come from?"

"I had to think fast."

"That was thinking?"

Loesser drove them back to his childhood home. He thought about the rabbi's sermon and it occurred to him that he may not have been the only once-a-year — or once-a-quarter-century — Jew at the shul. What about the other men, not the Hasidic ones? How did he know if each one was an observant Jew? Couldn't one or two have been as unpracticed as him, just following the lead of the others, mouthing along the prayers? So wrapped up in his shame, he didn't even think that someone else might be experiencing the same thing.

He kept recalling his promenade through the shul holding the Torah, and the reverence the congregants showed. They didn't care about his footwear; he was just the messenger.

They pulled into the driveway and Loesser walked the old man up to the front step. Loesser pointed to the mezuzah on the left side of the doorframe and exultantly said, "I *told* you it was on the wrong side!"

"It's on the right side if you're leaving," the old man argued.

"Get me a hammer or something I can pry this off with. If you want to be Jewish, let's start here."

The old man grumbled and waved dismissively, but entered the house and walked downstairs to his workroom. Moments later, he returned and said, "You shouldn't be working on Yom Kippur," handing an old wooden claw-hammer to his son.

"Yeah, well, we shouldn't be driving today, either. I shouldn't be wearing leather shoes —" wedging the claw under the bottom of the mezuzah's case "— and I shouldn't be slobbering over the bacon double-cheeseburger I'm going to break this fast with —" prying the bottom away from the doorframe "— and you shouldn't be lying to a rabbi about my health —" straining to loosen the nail that held the top of the case "— and . . ."

"And you shouldn't disrespect your father," the old man said. "It's one of the commandments. It's a mitzvah."

Abe went slack, his forehead resting on the doorframe. "Now you're concerned with mitzvahs?" he asked.

"Mitzvot," the old man muttered. "The plural's mitzvot."

"I'm almost 40 and he wants to start with the Hebrew lessons. Listen, Pop: let me just take care of this one thing, and we can call it a day of atonement, okay?" He wiggled the mezuzah case back and forth and felt the nail gradually lift from the doorframe.

He looked at it in his hand for a few moments, separated from the context it had always had in his memory. The porcelain case was blue, about three inches long, with the Hebrew letter Shin at the top, and a stylized torch beneath it. The flame

looked like the one on the sign down the street for the Lutheran church. A coat of paint applied to the door and frame years ago left half the prayer-case white, and sealed shut.

Loesser asked, "Is there something we're supposed to recite before putting it up, o great rabbi?"

The old man shrugged, "I should know? It's been wrong for 40 years."

Loesser lined up the case on the right side of the doorframe, a little below eye level, and tapped in the nail at the top. He decided to angle it a little, rather than a straight vertical, giving it a rakish tilt. Maybe the vampires would notice.

He held the second nail between his thumb and forefinger, then steadied the hammer on it and cocked it back. Maybe it was the fasting and caffeine-deprivation and their attendant vise-like grip on his skull, or maybe it was the lack of a handgrip on the slick wooden hammer, or maybe it was a plain old parapraxis so obvious that Freud would have been embarrassed to note it. Regardless of the cause, the hammer missed the nail and shattered the case. Abe flinched lest he get a sliver of porcelain in his eyes.

The old man laughed and slapped him on the back. "This is fixing things? Congratulations! *Tikkun Olam*!"

Loesser handed the hammer back to his father and bent down to scoop up the fragments of the case from the front step. He got the larger shards in one hand, then paused and began running his other hand along the concrete step and under the doorframe.

"There's no prayer," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, there was no parchment in the case, no Sh'ma. It's not on the ground and it couldn't have fallen *that* far. There's no prayer . . ."

The old man looked confused, said, "It must have . . . rotted away? It's been there 40 years . . ."

Or it was never there, Abe thought, standing up and presenting the splinters of the case to his father. Loesser felt himself sinking. Would it have mattered if he never found out it was empty? Had it disintegrated? Was it Schrödinger's

mezuzah? Was it another one of the old man's scams, begun so long ago that even he'd forgotten about it?

"If there was no prayer . . ." he began.

"There always is," the old man said, putting his hand on Abe's shoulder. "And tomorrow you can go out to the Hasidim and buy me another one."

Loesser walked back to his car. He reached for the top of his head to remove his yarmulke, but it must have fallen off. He still felt its impression on his head, and knew he would for the rest of his days.