

Rebecca, Rebecca, where the hell is Rebecca?

Norman Blum, monogrammed duffel bag in hand, surveys the crowd in the lobby of the university conference center: broad, gray-haired grandmothers in socks and Birkenstocks; wrinkled former flower children surrounded by their clamoring kids; a few dewy college students who will eventually age into exact replicas of those in the other two categories. All of them chattering, throwing back their heads in laughter, greeting old acquaintances. Norman recognizes no one, sees no one here that he can imagine greeting. Not even Rebecca.

Rebecca, who has dragged him here—well, okay, *invited* him here. But it felt less like an invitation than a lure, or a test: do you love me enough to meet me in a place where you yourself would never voluntarily venture? Of course, those weren't her exact words. She'd talked about how they hadn't seen each other in so long (true, but whose fault was that?), how this would be the perfect opportunity to meet "halfway," as she put it—she coming from Boston, he from New York, to rendezvous here in Connecticut. (Although,

after all the shlepping he's done to get here, it feels like he's come a lot more than halfway.) And then there were the words that no father, especially no father of a thirty-five-year-old unmarried daughter, could resist: "There's someone I'd like you to meet . . ."

"Dad!" comes a voice from behind him. He turns with an expectant smile that freezes to puzzlement as soon as he sees her. Gone is the wavy auburn hair that used to frame her face. In its place is a layer of mud-colored fuzz that allows a clear view of her ears, which he now sees are punctured with many tiny silver ornaments: little rings, stars, moons. Her nose, prominent as his own, seems to protrude like a beak, with no hair to distract the eye from it. And her tiny frame is engulfed in a pair of grotesquely voluminous overalls, from which her stick-like arms are waving an enthusiastic greeting.

"Rebecca!" he says, remembering to speak. The skinny arms enfold him, and he squeezes back. "What happened to your hair?"

She rubs a fist across the top of her head and beams. "You'll get used to it. So, *nu—vos macht a yid?*"

"*Vos . . .* Huh?"

"Oh come on, don't tell me you don't know what that means."

Norman sighs, remembering the purpose of this gathering. "Rebecca, I've told you, I don't *know* any Yiddish."

She crosses her arms in front of her chest and shakes her head at him, as though she's the parent and he's the recalcitrant child. "Dad, it's in there somewhere. You've just repressed it all. *Zeyde* used to tell me that when you were a kid he spoke to you in Yiddish all the time."

"*Zeyde*? What happened to 'Grandpa'?"

Her lower lip juts out, just the way it did when she was little, bracing for a fight. "*Sometimes* I called him '*Zeyde*.' Anyway, it means 'how are you?'—literally, 'how is a Jew?'"

"'How is a Jew?' Oh, *that's* nice. *That's* real nice."

Now it's her turn to sigh. "No, you don't get it. In the *shtetl*, everyone was a Jew. So it was

just like saying, 'how's a guy doing?'"

"Okay, but here's what *you* don't get: this isn't the *shtetl*. We're in America now."

She bites her lip and puts a hand to her forehead, her gaze directed intently at a spot on the floor. "All right, all right, listen. Why don't we find out where your room is and then you can take a little nap or something before dinner. Because there's . . . because I have some friends I'd like you to meet."

"YIDDISHLAND!" says the brochure that arrived in the mail six weeks ago, courtesy of Rebecca—the brochure that Norman is fingering now, as he lies on the narrow bed in the barren dorm room that's been assigned to him. "A Three-Day Celebration of Yiddish Language, Culture, and Music."

Why Yiddish, Norman wonders? Where is this coming from? They've never been particularly Jewish, never paid much attention to all that stuff. Oh, Marion would light *Shabbes* candles, when she remembered, if they weren't going out on a Friday night. They'd go to temple on the High Holidays, they would have a Seder. The minimum. And Rebecca never showed much interest in religion. She went to Hebrew school for a couple of years and then dropped out. They didn't put up much of an argument about it; there were enough other battles to fight.

So why Yiddish? Norman could understand, perhaps, an interest in Zionism, in Hebrew. But Yiddish? It was so . . . backward-looking, so futile. A language of brutal pogroms, of dank tenements, of pasty-faced Yeshiva *bokhers* with *payes* dangling in front of their ears. Rebecca grew up in a world of split-levels and picture windows, of verdant backyards and swing sets, of unlimited opportunities—a world, frankly, that Norman provided for her. And now she wants back to the *shtetl*?

It started about a year and a half ago, shortly after Marion died. Norman began to notice, during his infrequent phone conversations with Rebecca, that she was slipping in little Yiddish phrases—phrases she'd certainly never used before, some of them phrases he wasn't even aware

she'd ever heard: *Abi gezunt*, she'd say. *Mazel tov*. *Meshugine*. *Genug shoyrn*. She sounded like his grandmother, for Christ's sake. Then she mentioned she'd been taking a Yiddish class, which eventually escalated into a Yiddish reading group. She started talking about "klezmer music," even sent him a CD. As soon as he played it, he'd recognized it, that weepy-wailing-laughing music that his mother used to listen to on the radio. Jewish music.

It's not that Norman is ashamed of being Jewish; he just doesn't see the point in making a big deal about it. He hadn't even really wanted to name his daughter—his only child—Rebecca. If you want an "R" name after your mother, he'd said to Marion, how about Robin? But she'd stuck to her guns. She could be stubborn, at times. Just like her daughter.

God knows he's had his run-ins with Rebecca. Used to be, when she was little, he could do no wrong. She'd sprint to him when he got home from work, leap up and cling to him like a baby monkey. Couldn't wait to tell him about the new kid at school, or the "A" she'd gotten on her math test. "Guess what, Daddy, guess what!" But that all began to change, starting, he thought, in junior high. He'd walk in the door and she'd be nowhere in sight. She'd slink reluctantly to the dinner table, spend the bare minimum of time there, roll her eyes when he tried to engage her in conversation.

Since college things have gotten even worse, if that was possible. She's always been a smart girl, Rebecca, always done well in school. But after graduation she didn't seem to know what to do with herself. Ended up waitressing for God knows how many years. Law school? he'd suggest tentatively when she came home for a visit. Business school? he'd venture, knowing that he'd only get the eye-rolling, the scowl. When at last she decided on a master's in social work, he tried not to show his disappointment. "It's a *profession*," she flung at him. "Isn't that what you wanted? What's the matter, it's not lucrative enough for you?" He's only concerned for her welfare, her future. She isn't exactly going to be an heiress. But he doesn't say anything any more, most of the time, because he knows if he does, it will only lead to a fight.

Lately, though, when she's talked to him about this Yiddish stuff, there's been a

difference—an excitement in her voice, an echo of that "Daddy, Daddy, guess what!" of long ago. So he's listened, he's tried to respond with interest, even though what he really wants to say is, "What the hell is this all about?"

Walking to the dining hall across the campus—if you can call it that, all modern construction and anemic saplings, nothing like the venerable brick and towering trees he used to savor when he visited Rebecca at Princeton, long ago—Norman begins to wonder about this someone that Rebecca wants him to meet. One of those scraggly-bearded, round-shouldered guys he saw in the lobby, perhaps, wearing jeans and a faded t-shirt? Not exactly what he's hoped for, but he's willing to be open-minded, at this point. Rebecca hasn't even mentioned that she's dating anyone in quite some time. Anyway, given the setting, at least the guy will be Jewish. Maybe too Jewish, Norman chuckles to himself.

Taped to the entrance to the dining hall there's a hand-lettered sign that brings Norman up short. At first it looks like nothing more than a random collection of squiggles, but there's something familiar about them, and then Norman realizes that it must be Yiddish, written in Hebrew script. Suddenly he has a little vision: air mail letters that his parents and grandparents used to get, written on onionskin by relatives in Europe. He would stare at these same squiggles, turning the fragile, translucent paper around and around trying to get it right side up, until some laughing grown-up snatched it from him. But what the hell is this sign trying to tell him? Is everyone in attendance here assumed to know Yiddish? The chutzpah!

As Norman opens the double doors, his senses are assaulted: bright fluorescent lights, a clatter of trays, an unidentifiable aroma of hot food, echoing voices in English and Yiddish. He manages to procure a plateful of vegetable lasagne and at last spots Rebecca at a large table, surrounded by a bunch of other women. She's pointing to the empty chair beside her, which she's apparently saved for him.

"*A gutn ovnt!*" she cries as he sets down his tray. "Dad, that's Amy and Danielle over there,

and on your other side there, that's Shira and Jennifer. And this—this is my friend Robin.”

"Robin!" Norman says, extending his hand past Rebecca to the plump, smiling woman on her right. "Do you know we almost named Rebecca that?"

"Now *that* would have been confusing," Rebecca says, and the two of them burst out laughing. Norman chuckles along with them, although he doesn't really see why it's so funny. He's wondering where the guy is, the one Rebecca wants him to meet, but he doesn't want to come out and ask her.

There's an awkward silence as Norman stirs sugar into his iced tea, spoon clinking against glass. Then Norman begins to hear a sort of babbling, like a bunch of nonsense syllables strung together. At first he assumes it must be Yiddish, but no, it's more like the random sounds made by a baby—and it *is* a baby, a pudgy blond baby wedged onto the lap of one of the women sitting across from him.

"Cute kid you've got there," Norman says to the mother, grateful for an opening.

"Thanks," she replies. "He's kind of a handful in a situation like this."

"I can imagine. Is your husband here too?"

"I don't have a husband."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Norman says automatically, assuming death, divorce. But as the awkward silence re-descends, it occurs to him that perhaps that wasn't the right thing to say. Maybe she's one of these single-moms-by-choice, which is fine with him really—he's even thought, in his darkest moments of longing for a grandchild, that Rebecca might consider doing that. Norman is trying to figure out a tactful way of conveying all this when Rebecca emits a sigh, the kind of sigh that indicates she's about to say something important.

"Dad, Amy and Danielle are *partners*. Benjamin is their *son*."

"Oh. Oh sure, fine." And it is, it *is* fine. Norman has always prided himself on his open-mindedness, his lack of bigotry, his membership in the ACLU. What people do in the privacy of their own bedrooms, and all that. But as he darts a few glances around the table, something else

begins to dawn on him. There's a reason there are no other men at this table. There's something, some common bond, that has brought these women—including Rebecca—together. And it is the woman named Robin—not the scraggly T-shirted future son-in-law of Norman's imagination—who is the special someone that Rebecca wants him to meet.

As Norman mechanically chews his lasagne, tasting nothing, as he half-listens to the women discuss which workshops to attend at the conference, another part of him is aware of something distant but interior that is breaking, shattering: a whole series of images of the future he must have been harboring somewhere in his mind. Rebecca in a white dress, walking down an aisle on his arm; him clapping a son-in-law on the back, the two of them chuckling over Rebecca's little quirks; Rebecca with a baby in her arms, a toddler at her heels, transformed by motherhood into a softer, gentler version of herself. Someone more like Marion.

Rebecca isn't speaking to him directly, but she's monitoring him, he can tell. Giving him quick little looks to see if he's okay. Is he? He's not sure. Careful now, he thinks. To show disappointment or disapproval—or worse, horror or disgust—would just set off the old cycle of bickering and recrimination, the "you just don't understand" stuff. Well, maybe he *doesn't* understand, but he can act like he does. Maybe in time he can conceivably get used to this, the way Rebecca said he would get used to her hair. And the fact is, if he's really honest with himself, this possibility has occurred to him before—fleetingly, half-consciously. He always beat it back down before it could blossom into a suspicion. But now the realization is beginning to click into place. It's as though Rebecca has just handed him the missing piece of a puzzle—the piece he knew was wedged between the sofa cushions, the piece he never really wanted to fish out. So this must be why she invited him here, to this Yiddish thing, Norman thinks, to let him in on this part of her life. She must have wanted some neutral turf, someplace where either one of them could escape if the going got too rough. But damn it, he's going to show her that it's not going to be rough, that she can trust him, confide in him.

"Come on, Dad," Rebecca says to him quietly, her plate still half full. "I'll walk you back to

your room."

Outside, the early summer sun is beginning to set, casting a pinkish glow over the square brick buildings and the scrawny trees, which now look to Norman not so much anemic as courageous: struggling skywards, filled with potential.

"Hey, Beck," he says after a pause. "I'm really glad you invited me here."

"You are?"

"Yeah, sure. I mean, I got a chance to meet your friends, and . . . Robin. I think I understand . . . what the situation is."

Rebecca stops, turns to him. "And you're not—you know . . . disappointed, or angry, or anything?"

"Well, Beck, I'll be honest with you. Sure I would have preferred it if you'd taken . . . the more traditional route. But the important thing is that you're my daughter, and I love you, and what I want more than anything is that you should be happy. And I know that's how your mother would have felt, too."

"Oh, Dad." She throws her arms around his neck. "I'm *so* relieved. I didn't have it planned quite this way—I had a little speech I was going to say—but I guess it worked out."

She steps back, her face illuminated by the widest smile Norman has ever seen on it. Norman beams back, glowing with the knowledge that, for once, he has said the right thing.

"And I know you're really going to like Robin, once you get to know her," Rebecca continues. "She's so— but hey, you'll find out for yourself. What we really need to talk about now is what we're going to do tomorrow." She fishes a crumpled booklet out of the pocket of her overalls and starts to study it. "I thought first we could do Yoga in Yiddish together—don't worry, I'll translate. And then I was going to go to this workshop on Yiddish Women Poets—there are some really great ones, like Rukhl Korn and Kadya Molodowsky. But there's a beginning Yiddish class at the same time, and I thought if you went to that, it would really start to come back to you—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute. I don't really need to do all that. I'll just have breakfast with you and your friends, take a walk, maybe stay through lunch, and then head back to the city."

"What?" Her mouth is open in surprise.

"Well, I've met your friends, I've met Robin. I know—you know—what the story is there. So why do I need to hang around? I mean, that *was* why you asked me here, wasn't it?"

"No. No, not really." She snorts and shakes her head, presses her lips together as though she's trying to control herself. Norman can see her looking for the right words, trying to strike the right tone, the way he himself had been just minutes before. But it annoys him, coming from her. As though he needs to be handled carefully! "I mean, that was part of it," she says at last. "But the main thing was to give you the opportunity to reconnect with where you came from—you know, your roots, your heritage."

"You mean this Yiddish stuff? But what if I don't want to 'reconnect,' as you put it, with all that?"

"Dad. It's *there*, it's part of you. You're just repressing it, denying it. Give it a chance!" Rebecca's eyes have that wide-open look people get when they're afraid to blink because it might push out the tears. "It's sad, it's really sad, when you keep a part of yourself so well hidden that you don't even realize it's there. You know?" Her voice is trembling. "You live a twisted, incomplete, joyless life when you deny a part of yourself. Believe me, I've *been* there."

"Rebecca, honey." Norman tries to put an arm around her, but she goes stiff and crosses her arms in front of her chest. "Why are you making such a big deal out of this? My life isn't . . . joyless. It's not incomplete."

As soon as he says this, Norman starts to think about all the nights he's eaten dinner alone in front of the TV, all the days he's spent puttering aimlessly around the apartment since Marion died. Okay, so maybe his life is lacking something. But why is Rebecca so convinced that it's Yiddish?

"Oh, forget it." Suddenly she seems deflated, all the passion shot out of her like air from a

balloon. "You just don't understand. Maybe you're right. Maybe you should go ahead and pack your bag and go home first thing tomorrow morning."

"No, no, I want to stay. Honest." It's true, he realizes.

Rebecca shakes her head. "It's okay Dad, you don't have to say that. I just thought you would—oh, I don't know what I was thinking. Look, I'll come down to New York soon. Maybe next month. We'll see each other then. Okay?"

Norman is in the kitchen tidying up after dinner. A *Seinfeld* rerun is on the TV in the combination living-and-dining room, but it's hard to make out the words with the water running. One plate, one glass, one set of silverware. What's the point of running a dishwasher? He uses it for storage.

It's been three weeks since the Yiddishland thing, and still Rebecca hasn't called. Typical. No phone call, but he's spent plenty of time worrying about the visit: Will she bring that friend of hers, that Robin? Will they want to stay with him? Should he put them in the living room on the fold-out, or would they want more privacy? Maybe he should let them have his bedroom, with the queen-size bed? Or maybe he should just suggest, as politely as possible, that they'd be more comfortable in a hotel. His treat.

The weird thing, though, is the way Yiddish words have been popping into his head these last few weeks, words he doesn't even know the meaning of. Words, tunes, phrases. What is this, the early stages of Alzheimer's? Is he going to be condemned to relive his entire childhood, or just the parts that transpired in Yiddish? He's been telling himself not to worry, but the truth is it's driving him nuts, not knowing the meaning of these words. Words he heard God knows how many times when he was a kid, and it never bothered him then that he didn't understand. He had his mind on other things. But now, all these incomprehensible words floating around in his head—it's like an itch he can't scratch.

Today he broke down and got himself a Yiddish-English dictionary—in transliteration, of

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course—so he could look up words like *holtz* and *petrishke*, which turned out to mean "wood" and "parsley." While he was standing there in the bookstore, his eye happened to fall on a book of Yiddish proverbs, so he took that one too. And next to that was *The Penguin Book of Modern Yiddish Verse*, which had a long introduction and English translations of the poems printed opposite the Yiddish originals. He'd never heard of any of the poets, except the two women Rebecca had mentioned.

He's drying his knife and fork with the dishtowel, half-listening over the *Seinfeld* laugh track for the phone to ring, when it occurs to him: if Rebecca ever does show up for this promised visit, maybe he'll go back to that bookstore and get the book of poems. Not for himself, for Rebecca. It could be a present, a kind of peace offering.

Although, to be honest, why a peace offering should be necessary, Norman isn't entirely sure.

THE END