

## FATHER OF THE BRIDE

Zelig jiggled the coins in his pocket and prepared to go to work.

The *chupah* was over. The *chassan* and *kallah* had been abducted by the photographers, and the waiters were scrambling to set up the dinner tables for the wedding guests. Zelig could see several beggars already circulating among the guests. Zelig smiled. Long experience had taught him that it wasn't necessary to be first. Technique was more important.

Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a heavyset man in a shabby suit and a misshapen hat. A smile spread across his face. "Leizer! Leizer Bernstein! How are you doing? Where have you been the last few months?"

"Oh, I've been around," replied Leizer. "I've been to L.A., and to Brazil, believe it or not. Here, I want you to meet Moshe Levy."

Zelig looked quizzically at Leizer, then he noticed a slight dark man hanging back behind Leizer. The man nodded almost imperceptibly at Zelig.

"Moshe, I'd like you to meet Zelig," Leizer continued with the protocols of the introduction. "Zelig is the best. The king. Always glad to help the other guy, you know, pass on a few hints and stuff like that. Zelig, Moshe here is from out of town, and I kinda took him under my wing."

Zelig thrust out his hand in greeting. "Glad to meet you, Moshe. Any friend of Leizer's is a friend of mine. Welcome to Brooklyn."

Moshe took Zelig's hand solemnly. "It's an honor to meet you," he said quietly. "I'm very indebted to you. And to Leizer."

“Aw, forget it, Moshe,” said Leizer. “One hand washes the other, and whatever goes around comes around.”

Zelig and Moshe both nodded sagely.

“Hey, guys,” Leizer declared. “Why are we standing around here talking? Let’s get something to eat.”

“Now’s not a time to eat,” said Zelig. “Now we gotta find the father of the *kallah*. Later, he’ll be tired. Now, he’s flying high, and his pockets are stuffed with money. I’m gonna look for him now. You wanna come with me?”

Leizer looked doubtfully at Moshe. “What do you say, Moshe? You wanna grab a bite to eat first? I don’t know about you, but my stomach’s grumbling. The father of the *kallah* pop is probably still up with the photographers. A few more minutes won’t make a difference.”

“I’m not hungry, but thanks anyway,” said Moshe. “You go get some food. I’ll just tag along with Zelig for a while.”

Leizer shrugged. “Count me in, too. I guess I’ll survive. I’ll just grab a couple of cookies from one of these tables. That’ll tide me over.”

“Okay, guys,” said Zelig. “Let’s go. But listen to me. I know the guy from way back. You guys hang back and let me do the talking.”

The three beggars moved to a strategic vantage point near the doorway to the grand ballroom. Five minutes later, the father of the *kallah* appeared.

Gamlie Greenzweig carried himself with an air of self-assurance that led others to treat him with deference. And now, as he walked down the curved marble staircase, his red hair and blue eyes glistening, his girth encased in a well-tailored suit that excused his corpulence rather than try to conceal it, his sleek, perfectly-shaven jowls creased into a benevolent smile, he was every inch a prince among men.

As soon as the father of the *kallah* was spotted, friends and relatives rushed forward to congratulate him. But Zelig, strategically positioned at the foot of the stairs, was the first to gain his attention.

“Mr. Greenzweig!” Zelig called out. “Let me be the first to wish you a hearty *mazel tov*. May you have lots of *nachas* from the young couple for many, many years to come. And may Heaven bless them with happiness and joy and many clever and healthy children so that you and your wonderful wife may be surrounded by devoted grandchildren and great-grandchildren until one hundred and twenty years.”

“Zelig, Zelig,” Mr. Greenzweig responded with a delighted chuckle. “You give such wonderful blessings. You should have been a *chassidic rebbe*. So tell me how much this blessing is going to cost me, eh, Zelig?”

Zelig drew himself up to his full height and straightened his grease-stained tie. “Mr. Greenzweig, I’m a little disappointed, if I may allow myself to say something like that on such a special night. Are we strangers to each other, you and I, that you should talk to me like this? Do you really think I want money from you in exchange for my good wishes? If anyone in this room is happier to be present at the wedding of your one and only precious child, show him to me. Except for you, of course, Mr. Greenzweig. I know what this means to you and to your wife after all these years. And my heart goes out to you.”

“I know you’re a good friend, Zelig,” Mr. Greenzweig replied. “I was just joking about the money, and you know it. But would you like me to make a small contribution anyway?”

“Well, what do you think? A shoemaker, I’m not. And a doctor or a lawyer, I’m also not. So if you want to give me something, good. And if not, also good. I’m leaving it up to you.”

“Of course you are, Zelig.” Mr. Greenzweig grinned and reached into his pocket. He pulled out his wallet, extracted a hundred-dollar bill and handed it to Zelig with a flourish. “Here, enjoy. And when you thank the Almighty for this little gift, throw in a good word for me and my family.”

Zelig slipped the hundred-dollar bill into his pocket. “Mr. Greenzweig, you are a real gentleman. I thank you, and I will say a prayer for you. And

for sure, I'm gonna put in a good word for you. I know how to put in a good word, believe me."

"I'm sure you do."

Zelig cleared his throat. "Speaking of putting in a good word, Mr. Greenzweig, I've got two friends with me tonight, and I was wondering if you could maybe show them a little kindness, like you showed me. Sort of."

"Sure, Zelig, why not?" said Mr. Greenzweig. He inclined his head towards the doorway. "Are those the two fellows?"

"You're a genius, Mr. Greenzweig! Hundreds of people running around and you pick my two friends out of the crowd. Just like that. Wow!"

Mr. Greenzweig laughed. "You're a regular clown, Zelig. Genius, my foot. Come by the house tomorrow, and I'll give you some old suits for your friends. Then they'll be a little harder to pick out. Anyway, I can't stand around here any more. I've got things to do. If you want me to give them something, bring them over right away."

"Sure thing." Zelig snapped his fingers in the direction of his two friends and waved them over.

Leizer Bernstein came eagerly forward. Moshe Levy trailed behind him, his slight figure almost entirely obscured by Leizer's broad one.

"Mr. Greenzweig," said Zelig. "I'd like you to meet my old friend Leizer Bernstein,"

Leizer grabbed Mr. Greenzweig's hand and shook it vigorously. "*Mazel tov! Mazel tov! Mazel tov!*" Then he paused, thinking hard of something else to say. "*Mazel tov! Mazel tov!*" he finally blurted.

"Thank you kindly," Mr. Greenzweig replied with a smile.

"And this is my new friend Moshe Levy," said Zelig.

Moshe Levy extended his hand from behind Leizer's back and mumbled an unintelligible greeting without meeting Mr. Greenzweig's amused eyes.

“Pleased to meet you, too,” said Mr. Greenzweig. He squinted at the bedraggled beggar with the swarthy complexion. “Don’t I know you from somewhere, Mr. Levy?”

Moshe Levy shook his head. “Nah,” he murmured, keeping his eyes averted. “I just got in from out of town.”

“I guess not,” said Mr. Greenzweig. He pulled two twenties from his shirt pocket and gave one to Leizer and one to Moshe. “Here you are, gentlemen. Remember me in your prayers. And by the way, the three of you are invited to join us for the dinner. I’ll tell the headwaiter will seat you at a good table.”

Without another word, he was gone, engulfed by a sea of well-wishers.

“Twenty bucks!” exclaimed Leizer. “And an invitation to the dinner! Great work, Zelig. I bet you didn’t think you’d get twenty bucks, did you?”

“No, actually I didn’t,” Zelig replied. “And what’s with you, Moshe? You couldn’t be civil to the man? You almost soured it for all of us. Can’t you get two simple little words like *mazel tov* out of your mouth? Leizer here did it five times, and you couldn’t even do it once?”

“I’m sorry, Zelig,” Moshe muttered. “I’m not used to talking to rich people. It gets me all nervous and tongue-tied.”

Zelig was incredulous. “Can’t talk to rich people? I think you’re in the wrong business, Moshe. What kind of *schnorrer* are you anyway?”

“I’m just a plain nickel-and-dime *schnorrer*, Zelig. This is the first time a rich man ever invited me to join his table as a guest. And he didn’t do it for me. He did it for you. Me he would have ignored. I’m just a failure.”

“Aw, forget it, Moshe,” Leizer chimed in. “Zelig, lay off the guy. He just froze. Not everybody can handle the rich big shots like you do. Come on, let’s find the headwaiter and get our seats. I want a proper place card with Leizer Bernstein written on it in a nice fancy handwriting and a table number right next to it. C’mon, let’s go.”

Zelig grinned and slapped Moshe Levy on the back. "Stick with Zelig, little guy," he said. "You'll learn fast. Let's go find that headwaiter."

The headwaiter seated them at Table 23 together with a few business associates and cousins of the *chassan*. By the time the soup was served, everyone at the table was laughing uproariously at Zelig's stories. Leizer was eating and drinking as if there were no tomorrow. Moshe Levy just listened in silence. He did not touch his food.

"Tell me, Zelig," said one of the businessmen. "You seem to know Mr. Greenzweig pretty well. Is that right?"

Zelig's eyes narrowed. "I guess you could say that. Why do you ask?"

"What's the matter, Zelig? Did I touch some kind of a raw nerve? Does the father of the *kallah* have something to hide?"

"Nothin' I know about. I know the man about sixteen years. He used to live in the old neighborhood before he moved out to that fancy mansion on the Island. I used to see him in *shul* on Sunday mornings from time to time. When other guys were giving me quarters, he would give me a buck. Sometimes even five. Great guy."

"Yeah, that's what we hear," said the businessman.

"Don't you know the man?" asked Zelig.

"Only by reputation. We're connected to the Roths, not the Greenzweigs. But I heard there are some dark skeletons in the Greenzweig closet. You ever hear anything about it, Zelig?"

"Nah. Nothin'."

The businessman turned to Leizer and Moshe. "How about you guys? You know what I'm talking about?"

Leizer stared at him blankly, his mouth full, apparently not having heard a word of the conversation. Moshe Levy simply shook his head.

The businessman leaned forward. "I heard there's some kind of mystery about Ruthie Greenzweig. You know, first the Greenzweigs don't have kids

for fifteen years, then they have this one child that doesn't even look like them. You think maybe she's adopted?"

Zelig snorted with disgust. "People always gotta talk. Especially about stuff they don't know nothin' about. They're just can't swallow the thought that Mr. Greenzweig has so much money and a spectacular girl like that, too. So what if it took them a long time to have a baby? Lots of people have babies after years and years. Maybe they got a blessing from some holy man or maybe it just happened that way. Who knows?"

The businessman reached over and patted Zelig patronizingly on the hand. "I think you know something, and you're covering it up."

Zelig poured some ginger ale over the ice cubes that filled his glass.

"C'mon, Zelig," the businessman persisted. "We're all friends here, and it's not gonna go any further. You can tell us."

"There's nothin' to tell," Zelig muttered, no longer garrulous and ebullient. He ripped off a chunk of bread and stuffed it into his mouth.

All further conversation was interrupted by the deafening music that greeted the triumphant entrance of the *chassan* and *kallah*. The tables emptied as all the guests went to join the rapidly forming dancing circles or the crowds that watched from up close. Zelig and Moshe squeezed into the first row of spectators. Only Leizer remained at Table 23, deeply engrossed in the dwindling pile of sour pickles and celery sticks that sat on his plate.

Fifteen sweaty minutes later, the band fell silent, and the bandleader invited the guests to return to their seats. The main course was being served.

While the waiters circulated among the tables with trays of hot food, the businessman steered the conversation back to the *kallah*.

"Aren't you a cousin of the *chassan*?" he said to a young man with prematurely white hair.

"Yes, I am," said the young man. "I'm Avi, Chaim Roth's first cousin."

"Is it true that she's adopted?"

Avi shook his head. “Chaim’s parents heard the silly rumor and checked it out. There’s nothing to it.”

“Really?” drawled the businessman. “How does such a story get started?”

The cousin shrugged. “How should I know? It seems like a lot of nonsense to me. Tell me, do you know any Jewish parents who’d sell their child? Nah, the whole thing is a made-up story, and my family doesn’t believe a word of it. If Greenzweig wasn’t so rich, nobody would be telling such stories.”

An elderly waiter appeared with a tray on his arm. “Prime rib or chicken,” he announced.

The next few minutes were occupied with making choices for the main course. Moshe Levy was the only one who wasn’t hungry, but Leizer persuaded him to take a portion anyway. Leizer thus managed to get both prime rib and chicken, which pleased him immensely.

“Tell me,” said the businessman. “This story that never happened, where did it supposedly take place?”

“You sure are persistent,” said Avi. “So let me set you straight before you go spreading rumors. The story we heard was that Greenzweig bought the child for a lot of money from one of his factory workers and that the parents changed their minds but Greenzweig wouldn’t give the child back unless they paid back every penny with interest. My uncle looked into it very carefully and couldn’t find any basis for such a story. There’s a birth certificate for Ruthie Greenzweig and hospital records. There’s nothing to back up this crazy story. Tell me, if it’s true, why hasn’t anyone heard from the parents in all these years? You know why? Because it isn’t true. That’s why.”

Zelig banged on the table with his glass. “Enough already! Here we are sitting at the girl’s wedding, and we’re taking her apart based on some silly

old gossip. Is that right? I say, let's take a vote right here, and that'll be the end of it. Okay?"

The businessman laughed. "Now that's a great way of establishing the facts, but I'm game. How about everybody else?"

The suggestion was greeted with smiles and nods.

"Great," said Zelig. "Let the balloting begin. Whoever thinks Ruthie Greenzweig is adopted, raise your hand."

Not a single hand went up.

"Whoever thinks she's Greenzweig's natural daughter, raise your hand."

Seven hands went up. Only the businessman, Leizer and Moshe didn't raise their hands.

"Leizer, what's with you?" asked Zelig. "Why didn't you vote?"

"Because I don't want to," said Leizer. "This whole conversation is sick. I couldn't care less if they got her from Mars. What's it to me?"

"Okay, Leizer. Don't bust a gut. How about you, Moshe?"

"I don't think I should vote on such a personal question about people who don't even know me. Who am I to have an opinion? So I don't have an opinion."

"Fair enough," said Zelig. He turned to the businessman. "And how about you?"

"I'm not convinced," he replied. "I can't vote either way."

"Okay," said Zelig. "The question was, Is Ruthie really Greenzweig's natural daughter? I count seven yeses, no noes and three abstentions. The question is settled. End of discussion."

The last dance began. The wedding celebration was drawing to a close, and a sense of poignant urgency filled the vast ballroom. The music blared, and the drum rolls echoed through the hall like a collective heartbeat.

Women trickled through the partition, jostling the photographer's ladder and craning their necks to catch a glimpse of the dancers who spun in flying circles around the *chassan*. Some dancers discarded their hats and jackets

and did *kazatzkas* on the floor in their sweat-soaked shirtsleeves. Others staged mock confrontations between matadors and bulls.

Chaim Roth, the *chassan*, red-faced and perspiring, stamped his feet and clapped his hands in rhythmic accompaniment to the dancers. Suddenly, he plunged into the outer circle of dancers and pulled his father into the center. Father and son danced in close embrace, their time-suspended movements expressing love, joy and a torrent of emotions that strained the confines of their hearts and brought tears to the eyes of the spectators.

Presently, the close family joined them in a small slow-moving circle at the very center of the celebration. Gamliel Greenzweig found himself squeezed in between two brothers of the *chassan*, and he smiled with pleasure at the thought that his precious only child, raised in luxury but also relative solitude, had now become part of the boisterous Roth family.

Suddenly, Gamliel Greenzweig staggered, clutched his chest and fell to the ground. The band music came to a faltering stop, usurped by screams and confused shouting.

“Everybody, stand back,” shouted a burly man holding a small radio transmitter. “I’m a paramedic. I’ve called for help. Stand back! Give him some air. And if there’s a doctor in the house, please come forward.”

The paramedic knelt by the stricken man and administered emergency care. Moments later, a doctor who had been among the guests joined him. The men worked feverishly to revive the father of the *kallah*, while his wife Sarah hovered anxiously nearby, her teeth clenched on the corner of a scented handkerchief that she held in an iron grip. By the time the ambulance arrived, a little color had returned to Gamliel Greenzweig’s face.

“Doctor, will he live?” wailed his wife. “Please tell me he will live. Please! Please tell me the truth. Will he live? Please tell me he’ll live.”

“He’ll live, Mrs. Greenzweig,” replied the doctor. “He’s suffered a mild heart attack, but he’ll be all right. Don’t worry.”

“Does he need to go to the hospital?”

“Yes, I’m afraid he does,” replied the doctor. “But he doesn’t have to go to the emergency room in the ambulance right now. Just take him into a private room here in the hall and let him rest. I’ve given him some medicine. You don’t need to disrupt the wedding totally, but as soon as the wedding is over, take him to Mount Sinai Hospital. I’ll call ahead to Admitting to reserve a place for him. All right?”

Mrs. Greenzweig nodded dumbly.

“Are you sure you can handle it?” asked the doctor. “Do you need help?”

“No,” she replied with artificial resolve. “I’ll handle it. Don’t worry.”

“Excellent,” said the doctor. “I’ll be here for a little while longer, in case you need me. I’ll look in on your husband before I leave, and I’ll check on him later in the hospital. He’s a lucky man. The attack was mild and probably didn’t cause much damage. He’s going to have to spend the rest of his life under the care of a cardiologist, but there’s no reason why he can’t lead a normal, active life for many years to come. You’ll both have plenty of time to enjoy your grandchildren.”

“Thank you, doctor,” she said. “Thank you so much.”

“You don’t need to thank me for that,” the doctor said. “Thank our good Father in Heaven who was watching over him. Good night.”

“Good night,” she replied.

The doctor turned to go but paused at the last moment. “And Mrs. Greenzweig.”

“Yes?”

“*Mazel tov.*”

Ten minutes later, Gamlieil Greenzweig was comfortably installed on a couch in the bridal suite under a light blanket. Sarah Greenzweig sat by his side in an armchair, her back ramrod-straight, her gaze glued to her husband, who lay with eyes closed in peaceful repose. The faint strains of music filtered into the room, signaling the resumption of the celebration.

“Gamliel, can you hear me?” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. There was no response, and she repeated the question at a slightly higher decibel level.

Finally, her husband’s eyes fluttered open. He looked around at his unfamiliar surroundings, and disorientation and panic appeared on his face, “Shh, relax, Gamliel,” she said in a soothing voice. “Everything is all right.”

“What’s … going … on?”

“You’ve had a slight attack, Gamliel.”

“Attack? What kind of attack?”

“A heart attack.”

Fear distorted his features. He tried to speak, but no words came out.

“Don’t worry, Gamliel,” she hastened to reassure him. “The doctor said it was a mild attack and that there was very little damage. He said you’ll be just fine. He said we’ll have many years to enjoy our grandchildren. You’ll just have to watch yourself, that’s all. And I’ll take care of you. It’s going to be fine, Gamliel. If you want it to be fine, it’s going to be fine. I know it.”

He looked at her intently for a few long moments, then he nodded and closed his eyes.

Sarah bit her lower lip as watched him, but she didn’t speak. She had to give him the time to come to terms with it in his own mind.

“Sarah,” he said without opening his eyes.

“Yes.”

He didn’t speak, and his eyes remained closed.

“What’s the matter, Gamliel? Should I get you something? Should I call the doctor? He’s still here.”

He shook his head. He opened his eyes and quickly closed them again. But she had seen the haunted look in them, and it frightened her.

“What is it, Gamliel? Tell me!”

“The last thing I remember before I passed out ... you know what it was?”

“What?”

“I saw those eyes, those dark, burning, hate-filled eyes.”

“What eyes are you talking about?”

“Come on, Sarah. Let’s not play dumb. It was twenty years ago, but it’s like yesterday. We’ve talked about it often enough. Don’t play dumb.”

Sarah fidgeted in her chair, playing with the rings on her fingers. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she said.

“All right.”

“I want to forget the whole thing.”

“All right.”

“It’s your fault, Gamliel. Why did you have to think about it tonight? Why did you have to remember those eyes during the wedding? Couldn’t you leave well enough alone?”

“I don’t know why I thought about him.” He paused. “He was a wild man, always in trouble with the police and everyone else. We were doing him a big favor, and he admitted it that first time we met with him, didn’t he, Sarah?”

“Yes, Gamliel. He did.”

“He knew what he was getting into, and he knew it was for the best. But he wasn’t a rational person, was he?”

“No, he wasn’t,” she agreed in a breaking voice. “He really wasn’t. He was a terrible man, and she was completely under his thumb. He was really abusive. He admitted it. We did what we had to do.”

“Isn’t that right?” he coughed slightly, and his face turned a faint pink.  
“Can I have some water?”

Sarah jumped to her feet. “Shall I call the doctor?”

“No, just give me some water. I’m okay. I want to talk.”

Sarah poured him a glass of water and held it to his lips. He sucked in a few drops and then shook his head.

“I thought about him a lot these last few weeks,” he said.

“You shouldn’t have.”

“You think what you think, not what you want to think. I thought about the second and last time we met him, and I saw those eyes in my mind. Those terrible eyes.”

“You shouldn’t have let yourself think about it. Look what happened.”

“I thought about those eyes, and I pictured them in my mind,” he continued, not bothering to respond to her comment. “But tonight, during the last dance, I wasn’t even thinking about him. And suddenly, the image of those eyes flashed in my mind, so … sharp … so … angry … so … so … malignant. It was like the last twenty years were just wiped away and we were back in that room. I wasn’t ready for it. I wasn’t prepared … and I blacked out.”

“You shouldn’t think about it, Gamliel. It’s all over. It’s behind us. I’m sure that the twenty years have changed him, too. Who knows? Maybe he thanks us now. Maybe he realizes there was no other way.”

“Yeah. Maybe.”

“We haven’t heard from him in all this time. How come?”

He shrugged. “How should I know? Maybe he’s dead.”

“Maybe. Yes, maybe he is. Anyway, you can’t eat yourself up about it. You have heart trouble now, and you have to take care of yourself.”

He closed his eyes and breathed a long sigh. “I guess you’re right. The past is past, and there’s nothing you can do about it, right?”

“Right. And there’s no reason to wallow in guilt. We didn’t do anything wrong. We did the right thing. Okay?”

“Okay,” he said. “I think I’ll just take a little nap now before I go back to our guests.”

“You do that.” She leaned over and pulled the blanket up to his chin. “It’s a little cold in here because of the air conditioning. Do you want another blanket?”

“No, I’m just fine. Why don’t you go downstairs? People must be wondering.”

She smiled. “Don’t worry. Everyone knows you’re just fine. You know, it’s not uncommon for the father of the *kallah* to get a heart attack at the wedding. But it’s usually because he’s worried about the money, not because he has visions of malignant eyes he hasn’t seen in twenty years. Anyway, the wedding’s practically over. It’s no big deal if the people go home without saying good-bye to me. I’ll sit here in case you need anything.”

He nodded gratefully and closed his eyes. Moments later, he was asleep. Sarah watched him with concern for a little while, then reassured by his improving color and the regular rhythm of his breathing, she allowed herself a little sigh and leaned back in the chair. Thank Heaven, she thought, everything was going to be all right.

An hour later, Gamliel and Sarah Greenzweig climbed into a limousine and were driven to the hospital.

After all the guests and family members, only the *chassan* and *kallah* remained, now Mr. and Mrs. Chaim and Ruthie Roth. They joked with the cleaning crew and the office staff as they packed up their presents before going on to the hotel suite they had reserved for the night.

Chaim Roth carried out luggage and packages, while Ruthie changed into street clothes. He had parked his car at the corner under the elevated tracks, and as he walked towards his car, his footsteps echoed in the lamp-lit darkness. On his last trip, a late train clattered and rumbled through the stillness and came to a screeching, ear-grinding halt at the station on the next street. Chaim stopped to watch it pass. From below, he could see the tiny faces of people staring ahead, intent on the unseen destinies of their

lives, unaware of the blossoming new world of the young Roths just a hundred yards away.

Standing alone in the street, a garment bag in one hand and a large gift-wrapped box in the other, and observing the oblivious late-night travelers on the subway system, Chaim was struck by the absurdity and immense grandeur of the world. Each person was an entire universe, his life so full of drama and joy and pain and complexity, yet totally meaningless to virtually all the myriad people, the myriad other universes, that bumped against him every day. Chaim shook his head, unable to absorb such paradoxical thoughts on his wedding night, and he went back to fetch his wife.

Ruthie was waiting in the lobby. She was holding a prosaic overnight bag, but her face still bore traces of the transcendent bridal glow.

Chaim took the overnight bag from her hand, and together they stepped into the chilly night. The streets were empty, and they chatted and laughed with carefree abandon, conducting silly races with their shifting shadows as they moved from street lamp to street lamp.

Suddenly, a figure detached itself from one of the doorways under the tracks and moved towards them.

Ruthie gasped, and her hand flew to her mouth. Chaim jumped in front of her to protect her from harm.

“Please, please,” a hoarse masculine voice spoke from the dark. “Don’t be frightened. I mean you no harm.”

Chaim looked at the man suspiciously. “Come out here under the light where we can see you,” he said.

The man moved into the light. He was a dark man of slight build, and he was looking at the young couple with strange intensity.

“I didn’t mean to frighten you,” he said. “I just wanted to speak to you, to wish a personal *mazel tov* and give you my blessings for a happy life together. I wanted to see the joy in your faces and carry it with me in my memory.”

“Oh, how sweet!” exclaimed Ruthie. “You waited here outside all this time just to tell us *mazel tov*. How absolutely wonderful! Do we know you? Are you a friend of my father’s? What’s your name?”

While his young wife spoke, Chaim stared at the man, taking in the shabby suit, the unpolished shoes and the poorly shaven face. Suddenly, he snapped his fingers.

“I got it!” he cried out. “I saw you tonight. You were with Zelig, weren’t you? With Zelig and that other guy . . . Leizer Bernstein. Right?”

The man’s eyes flashed grotesquely bright with sudden anger, illuminating his face with an almost malignant brilliance, but he quickly brought himself under control.

“Zelig?” asked Ruthie, puzzled. “You’re one of Zelig’s people? I don’t understand. Why should you take such a personal interest in us? Why should you stay here after everyone else is long gone?”

The man did not answer immediately, clearly upset by the unexpected direction the conversation had taken.

“I was touched by you young people,” he finally said. “You brought back memories. Old memories.”

“What sort of memories?” Ruthie breathed, excited by this wonderfully romantic finale to the most important day of her life.

“Memories of my wife,” the man replied. “You have a certain resemblance to her.”

“What happened to your wife?” Ruthie wanted to know.

“Ruthie!” Chaim admonished her.

The man shook his head. “No, it’s all right. I don’t mind her asking. I don’t mind her asking anything. If I don’t want to, I won’t answer. My wife died nearly twenty years ago. I’m a widower.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” she said in a soft voice. “Do you have any children?”

“We had a child, but we lost her before my wife died. I never remarried.”

“How sad!”

The man nodded and lowered his head. He reached into his pocket and withdrew a small object. He thrust it toward Ruthie.

“Here, I want you to have this,” he said. “It is my wedding gift to you.”

Ruthie took the small object and examined it in the light of the street lamp.

“Why, it’s a beautiful locket!” she exclaimed.

She looked from the locket to the man and back to the locket again.

Then she held out the locket to him.

“I can’t take this from you,” she said. “It must be very old and valuable. I can’t take this. I don’t even know your name.”

The man seemed at a loss for a moment. “No, no, you must take it. You simply must. My name is not important. The gift is important.”

“But why? Why are you giving it to me?”

“Open the locket,” he said. “Look inside.”

Ruthie opened the cover of the locket. Inside was a cameo of a young woman with a gentle smile. On the back of the cover was an engraved inscription: To M.F. from your devoted husband D.F. on the occasion of our first anniversary. Ruthie studied the cameo and the inscription for a long time.

“Why?” she breathed. “Why?”

“Because I’m alone in the world. Because I’m growing old and I have no one and when I die this little precious token of whatever life I had will die with me. When I saw you and you reminded me of my wife, I decided to give it to you. All I ask is that you treasure it and remember us from time to time. Nothing else. You young people are like the springtime. Like the birth of new life. But I’m old man winter, tired and cramped and beaten down. If you accept this locket from me, it will give me a little bit of hope for

whatever remains of my life. Please take it. It's beautiful and precious, and it belongs in a home with a future, not with me."

Ruthie looked at the man. Tears glistened in her eyes. "I'll keep it," she said. "Don't worry, I'll treasure it. Even if you don't tell me what the initials stand for. I'll remember you."

"Thank you so much," he said, choking on the words. He turned to Chaim and spoke with amiable and exaggerated gruffness to cover his embarrassment. "And you, young fellow," he said, "make sure you take good care of her. You are very lucky to have gotten such a wonderful girl. Cherish her. If you treat her like the queen she is, then you will be a king. Do you hear?"

Chaim nodded, wondering at his own submission to the instructions of Zelig's companion, a simple beggar, a man whose name they didn't even know.

"Good," said the man. He took a deep breath and continued with obvious reluctance. "I know you have to go, and I won't keep you any longer. I just want to wish you a long and happy life together, a life of health, honor and joy, with many healthy children and grandchildren. May you never know sorrow and heartbreak. May the Almighty watch over you every moment for the rest of your blessed lives."

"Oh, thank you," said Ruthie. "That's just beautiful. I'll always remember your words, even if you don't tell me your name."

The man seemed overcome by emotion. He shook Chaim's hand solemnly and bowed his head deferentially to Ruthie. Then he turned and walked away.

"Wait a minute!" Ruthie called out. "Come back here."

The man turned and looked at her quizzically, then he slowly retraced his steps.

"Chaim!" Ruthie cried out. "Give him something. You know, give him what he needs."

Chaim looked puzzled for a moment, then comprehension dawned in his eyes. He reached into his coat and pulled out a wad of crumpled bills. He peeled off three dollar bills and offered them to the man.

The man shrank away in horror.

“Chaim!” Ruthie scolded him. “Come on, don’t be a cheapskate. Give him something respectable. Here, let me see your wallet.”

Reluctantly, Chaim handed her his wallet. She rummaged inside and emerged with a fifty-dollar bill, which she waved triumphantly in the air.

“Here,” she said to the man. “Please take this. Buy yourself something special. From us.”

“I don’t want it,” he said miserably.

“Of course you do,” she insisted. “Tomorrow, you can tell Zelig you got fifty dollars from one person. Please, do me a favor and take it. I want you to have it. Didn’t you give me the locket?”

“That was different.”

“Still, I want you to take the money. I want to feel that I did something good on the night of my wedding.”

The man opened his mouth as if to speak but then thought better of it and simply nodded. He took the fifty-dollar bill and clenched his hand around it. Then he nodded to them again and walked away.

The young couple watched the man’s receding back as he walked towards the stairway leading to the train station. He was hunched over, as if he were carrying a heavy weight on his shoulders. He climbed the concrete steps and went into the station without looking back even once.

Chaim and Ruthie remained standing before the empty stairway until the distant sound of an approaching train shook them out of their reverie. They turned to go to their car when Ruthie noticed a flash of green among scraps of paper fluttering along the sidewalk in the gentle breeze. Something piqued her curiosity, and she stooped to pick it up. She froze, and the color drained from her face.

“Chaim, it’s the fifty dollars!” she cried out. “He must have dropped it. There’s a train coming. Quick, run, before it’s too late. Give it to him.”

Chaim grabbed the money from her hands and ran toward the station. He bounded up the stairs two steps at a time as the rumble of the incoming train vibrated the station platform. Having no tokens, he ran to the booth and tossed a five-dollar bill onto the counter, shouting “One token” to the attendant above the screeching of the train’s brakes. The attendant handed him the token, and he ran for the turnstiles without waiting for the change.

But as he burst through the doors onto the windswept outdoor platform, the train was already pulling out of the station. Dejected, he watched it gather speed and shrink into the distance, growing smaller and smaller with every passing moment, until all he could see were the two tiny red tail lights of the last car. Then these too vanished, and all that was left was the night.