

They not only taxed the lands and the cattle of the Cossacks but also their churches and religious customs. And who collected these taxes? The Jews. Who had possession of the keys to the Cossack churches? The Jews. Who did the Cossacks need to go to if they wanted to open their churches for a christening service or for a marriage or a funeral? The Jews. All of whom were acting in behalf of the Polish lords.

'Nothing happened for a long time, because the Cossacks, like the Polish peasants, were afraid of the Polish nobles. But in the year 1648, a man named Bogdan Chmielnicki became the leader of the Cossacks, and he led an uprising against Poland. The Jews became the victims of the Polish peasants, who hated them, and of the Cossacks, who also hated them. The revolution lasted ten years, and in that time something like seven hundred Jewish communities were destroyed and about one hundred thousand Jews were slain. When the horror was over, the great Jewish community of Poland had been almost completely destroyed.'

My father paused for a long moment. The window curtains moved softly in the cool night breeze. When he spoke again, his voice was low, tense, subdued.

Reuven, what could our people say to God during the Chmielnicki uprising? They could not thank Him for the slaughter going on before their eyes, and they would not deny his existence. So many of them began to believe the Messiah was coming. Remember, Reuven, that those Jews who believe in the Messiah believe also that just before the Messiah comes there will be an era of great disaster. At the moment when there seems to be no meaning in life, at that moment a person must try to find new meaning. And so thousands upon thousands of Jews in both eastern and western Europe began to look upon the Chmielnicki disaster as the prelude to the coming of the Messiah. They prayed and fasted and did penance - all in an effort to hasten his coming. And he came. His name was Shabbtai Zvi. He revealed himself about the same time as the massacres began. More than half the Jewish world became his followers. Years later, when it turned out that he was a fraud, you can imagine what the effect was. The Chmielnicki uprising was a physical disaster; the false Messiah was a spiritual disaster.

'We are like other people. Reuven. We do not survive disaster merely by appealing to invisible powers. We are as easily degraded as any other people. That is what happened to Polish Jewry. By the eighteenth century, it had become a degraded people. Jewish scholarship was dead. In its place came empty discussions about matters that had no practical connexion with the desperate needs of the masses of Jews. Pilpul, these discussions are called - empty, nonsensical arguments over minute points of the Talmud that have no relation at all to the world. Jewish scholars became interested in showing other Jewish scholars how much they knew, how many texts they could manipulate. They were not in the least bit interested in teaching the masses of Jews, in communicating their knowledge and uplifting the people. And so there grew up a great wall between the scholars and the people. It was also a time of terrible superstition. Our people believed that there were demons and ghosts everywhere that tortured the Jew, wracked his body, and terrorized his soul. These fears affected all Jews. But they affected the unlearned masses worst of all. At least the scholar had his pilpul to keep him alive.'

'Now, Reuven, if everywhere around you there are forces that wish to harm you, what is it that you can do to help yourself? Of course, you try to destroy those forces. But the masses of Jews did not believe they had the power to do this. Only very skillful people possessed such power, they felt. And so there came upon the scene Jews who claimed to be experts in the chasing away of demons and spirits. Such men were looked upon as saints, and they became very popular in Poland. They claimed that their power came from their ability to manipulate the various letters that spelled out the mystical names of God. That is why they were called Ba'ale Shem - Masters of the Name. To drive away evil spirits they wrote magical amulets, prescribed medicines, performed wild dances, wearing the tallit and tefillin, over white robes; they used black candles, sounded the shofar, recited psalms, screamed, pleaded, threatened - anything to drive the evil spirits out of a person who, for example, might be ill, or away from a mother who was about to have a child. To such a level had our people sunk in Poland by the eighteenth century. And here,

Reuven, is where my answer to your questions about Reb Saundens' son really begins.'

My father paused for a moment and finished his tea. Then he looked at me and smiled. 'Are you tired yet, Reuven?'

'No, abba.'

'I am not sounding too much like a schoolteacher?'

'I don't mind it when you sound like a schoolteacher,' I said.

'It is not a lecture,' he said. 'I will not ask you questions afterward.'

'I want you to go on,' I said.

He nodded and smiled again. 'I want some more tea,' he said. 'But a little later. Now let me tell you about a man who was born in that century, and I think you will begin to have your answer.'

'There are many legends about his birth, but I am not interested in telling you legends. He was born about the year 1700 in Poland. His name was Israel. His parents were very poor and not learned, and they both died while he was still a child. The people of his village cared for him and sent him to school. But he did not like school, and whenever he could he would sneak away and escape to the woods where he would walk under the trees, look at the flowers, sit by a brook, listen to the songs of the birds and to the noise of the wind in the leaves. As often as his teachers brought him back, so often did he run away to these woods, and after a while they gave up and left him alone. When he was thirteen, he became an assistant to a schoolmaster, but instead of helping the master teach the little children, he often took them also to the woods where they would sing or stand in silence, listening to the birds in the trees. When he grew older he became the headle of the village synagogue. All day long he would sit around, listening to the learned discussions that went on inside the synagogue walls, and at night, when everyone else slept, he would take the holy books in his hands and study them carefully. But it was not the Talmud that he studied, it was the Kabbalah, the books of Jewish mysticism. The rabbis had forbidden the study of the Kabbalah, and so Israel had to study in secret. He married, finally, but almost nothing is known about his wife. She died soon afterward, and Israel, a full-grown man now, became a schoolteacher. He had a wonderful way with children, and he

achieved a great reputation as a teacher. He was a kind and gentle person, honest and unaffected, and often people would come to him and ask him to settle their quarrels. He came to be regarded as a wise and holy man, and one day the father of Rabbi Abraham Gershon of the city of Brody came to him and asked him to settle a business dispute he had with another man. He was so impressed with Israel that he offered to give him his daughter Hannah in marriage. Israel agreed, but asked that the betrothal document be kept a secret for the time being. And now, an interesting event occurred. The father of Hannah died, and Israel traveled to Brody, to the house of the great Rabbi Abraham Gershon, Hannah's brother, in order to claim his bride. He was dressed in the clothes of a peasant, torn boots and coarse garments, and you can imagine how shocked the rabbi was when he saw the betrothal agreement in Israel's hands. His sister should marry a peasant? What shame and dishonor that would bring upon the family name! He tried to persuade his sister to reject her father's choice, but somehow Hannah saw something in Israel which the good rabbi of Brody did not, and she refused. After their marriage, Rabbi Abraham Gershon tried to improve his brother-in-law's education. He began by teaching him Talmud, but Israel was a failure at that, too. Finally, the rabbi gave up and ordered his sister and brother-in-law to leave Brody so as not to dishonor his good name, and they left.

'And now, Reuven, you will begin to have the answer to your question. I am sorry I am taking so long.'

'Please go on, abba.'

'All right. Israel and his wife left Brody and settled in the Carpathian Mountains in a village near Brody. They were very poor, but very happy. Israel earned a living by selling the lime which they dug in the mountains. The Carpathian Mountains are beautiful, and Israel built a little house and spent many days there alone, praying, dreaming, and singing to the great hills. Very often he would remain alone throughout the entire week, and return to his wife Hannah only for Shabbat. She must have suffered terribly because of their poverty, but she believed in him and was very devoted.'

'Reuven, it was in these mountains that Israel gave birth to

Hasidism. He was there many years, thinking, learning from peasant women how to heal sickness with grasses and herbs, to write amulets, to drive out evil spirits. The people of the village loved him, and soon his reputation as a holy man began to spread throughout all of Poland. Legends began to grow about him. He was not yet forty, and already there were legends about him. You can imagine what kind of person he must have been.

'His brother-in-law, Rabbi Abraham Geshon, finally regretted his cruelty and asked Israel and Hannah to return to Brody. He acquired a tavern for them to operate, but it was Hannah who really managed it while Israel wandered about in the woods and meadows outside of Brody, meditating. Finally, he began to travel, and he became a Ba'al Shem. He was kind and saintly and godly, and he seemed to want to help people not for the money they paid him but for the love he had for them. And so they came to call him the Ba'al Shem Tov - the Kind or Good Master of the Name. He mingled with the people and talked to them about God and His Torah in plain, simple language that they could easily understand. He taught them that the purpose of man is to make his life holy - every aspect of his life: eating, drinking, praying, sleeping. God is everywhere, he told them, and if it seems at times that He is hidden from us, it is only because we have not yet learned to seek Him correctly. Evil is like a hard shell. Within this shell is the spark of God, is goodness. How do we penetrate the shell? By sincere and honest prayer, by being happy, and by loving all people. The Ba'al Shem Tov - his followers later shortened his name and called him the Besht - believed that no man is so sinful that he cannot be purified by love and understanding. He also believed - and here is where he brought down upon himself the rage of the learned rabbis - that the study of Talmud was not very important, that there need not be fixed times for prayers, that God could be worshipped through a sincere heart, through joy and singing and dancing. In other words, Reuven, he opposed any form of mechanical religion. There was nothing new in what he taught. You will find it all in the Bible, Talmud, and Kabbalah. But he gave it a special emphasis and taught it at a key time to people who were hungry for this kind of teaching. And these people listened and loved him.

Many great rabbis came to mock him and went away converted to his way of thinking. When he died, his followers opened their own synagogues. Before the end of that century, about half of eastern European Jewry consisted of Hasidim, as his followers were called, pious ones. So great was the need of the masses for a new way to approach God.

'There was another man born in that century, Rabbi Elijah of Vilna, a great Talmudist, a genius, and a strong opponent of Hasidism. But even his opposition could not stop Hasidism from growing. It flourished and became a great movement in Jewish life. For a long time there was terrible bitterness between the Mitnagdim, the opponents of Hasidism, and the followers of the Besht. For example, if the son of a Hasid married the daughter of a Mitnaged, both fathers would say Kaddish after their children, considering them to be dead and buried. So great was the bitterness.

'The Hasidim had great leaders - tzaddikim, they were called, righteous ones. Each Hasidic community had its own tzaddik, and his people would go to him with all their problems, and he would give them advice. They followed these leaders blindly. The Hasidim believed that the tzaddik was a superhuman link between themselves and God. Every act of his and every word he spoke was holy. Even the food he touched became holy. For example, they would grab the food scraps he left on his plate and eat them, because the food had become holy through his touch, and they wanted some of this holiness inside themselves. For a while, the tzaddikim were kind and gentle souls, like the Besht himself. But in the next century the movement began to degenerate. Many of the positions of tzaddik became inherited posts, going automatically from father to son, even if the son was not a great leader. Many tzaddikim lived like Oriental monarchs. Some of them were out-and-out frauds, and they exploited their people terribly. Others were very sincere, and a few were even great scholars of the Talmud. In some Hasidic sects, the study of the Talmud became as important as it had been before the time of the Besht. Secular literature was forbidden, and the Hasidim lived shut off from the rest of the world. Anything that was not Jewish and Hasidic was forbidden. Their lives became frozen.

The clothes they wear today, for example, are the same Polish-style clothes they wore hundreds of years ago. Their customs and beliefs are also the same as they were hundreds of years ago. But not all of the Hasidic communities are identical, Reuven. The Hasidim of Russia, Germany, Poland, and Hungary are different one from the other. Not very different, but they are different. There are even Hasidic groups that believe their leaders should take upon themselves the sufferings of the Jewish people. You are surprised? But it is true. They believe that their sufferings would be unendurable if their leaders did not somehow absorb these sufferings into themselves. A strange belief, but a very important one, as far as they are concerned.

'Reuven, Reb Saunders is a great Talmudist and a great tzaddik. He has a reputation for brilliance and compassion. It is said that he believes the soul is as important as the mind, if not more so. He inherited his position from his father. When he dies, the position will go automatically to Danny.'

My father stopped, looked at me with a smile, and said, 'You are not asleep yet, Reuven?'

'No, abba.'

'You are a very patient student. I think I am going to have another glass of tea. My throat is a little dry.'

I took his glass, poured into it some strong-brewed tea from the teapot, filled it with water from the kettle, then brought it back to him. He put a cube of sugar between his teeth and sipped slowly from the glass, letting the tea soak through the sugar. Then he put the glass down.

'Tea is a blessing,' he said, smiling. 'Especially to a school-teacher who must always give long answers to short questions.'

I smiled back at him and waited patiently.

'All right,' my father said. 'I see you want me to continue. Now I am going to tell you another story, also a true story, about a Jewish boy who lived in Poland in the second half of the eighteenth century. As I tell you the story, think of Reb Saunders' son, and you will have your answer.'

'This boy, Reuven, was brilliant, literally a genius. His name was Solomon, and later in life he changed his long Polish name to Maimon. When he was young, he found that the Talmud

could not satisfy his hunger for knowledge. His mind would not let him rest. He wanted to know what was happening in the outside world. German was by then a great scientific and cultural language, and he decided to teach himself to read German. But even after he learned German he was not satisfied, because the reading of secular books was forbidden. Finally, at the age of twenty-five, he abandoned his wife and child and after many hardships came to Berlin where he joined a group of philosophers, read Aristotle, Maimonides, Spinoza, Leibniz, Hume, and Kant, and began to write philosophical books. It is astonishing how he was able to gobble up complicated philosophical treatises with such ease. He had a great mind, but it never left him in peace. He wandered from city to city, never finding roots anywhere, never satisfied, and finally died at forty-seven on the estate of a kind-hearted Christian who had befriended him.

'Reuven, Reb Saunders' son has a mind like Solomon Maimon's, perhaps even a greater mind. And Reb Saunders' son does not live in Poland. America is free. There are no walls here to hold back the Jews. Is it so strange, then, that he is breaking his father's rules and reading forbidden books? He cannot help himself. It is unbelievable what he has read these past few months. You are a brilliant student. I tell you that now very proudly. But he is a phenomenon. Once in a generation is a mind like that born.'

'Now, Reuven, listen very carefully to what I am going to tell you. Reb Saunders' son is a terribly torn and lonely boy. There is literally no one in the world he can talk to. He needs a friend. The accident with the baseball has bound him to you, and he has already sensed in you someone he can talk to without fear. I am very proud of you for that. He would never have told you about his library visits if he believed for a moment you would not keep his words a secret trust. And I want you to let him be your friend and to let yourself be his friend. I am certain you and Reb Saunders' son can help each other in such a friendship. I know you, and I know him. And I know what I am saying. And now, Reuven, the lecture is over, I am going to finish my tea, and we will go to bed. What a lecture it has been! Do you want some tea?'

'No, abba.'

We sat in silence, while my father sipped from his glass.

'You are very quiet,' he said finally.

'It all started with a silly baseball game,' I said. 'I can't believe it.'

'Reuven, as you grow older you will discover that the most important things that will happen to you will often come as a result of silly things, as you call them – "ordinary things" is a better expression. That is the way the world is.'

I shook my head. 'I just can't believe it,' I said again. 'This whole week has been like something from another world. The hospital, the people I met there, Mr Savo, little Mickey, Billy – all because of a ball game.'

My father sipped his tea and looked at me over the rim of the glass. He said nothing, but he was watching me intently.

'I don't understand it,' I said. 'Weeks and weeks go by, one Shabbat follows another, and I'm the same, nothing has changed, and suddenly one day something happens, and everything looks different.'

'Different? What do you mean, different?'

I told him how I had felt that afternoon when I had come home from the hospital. He listened quietly, all the while sipping his tea. When I finished, I saw him smile. He put down the glass, sighed, and stopped, his voice breaking. He was quiet for a moment. Then he looked at the clock on the shelf over the refrigerator. 'It is very late,' he said. 'We will talk some more tomorrow.'

'Yes, abba.'

'Reuven –'

'Yes?'

'Never mind. Go to sleep. I am going to sit here for a while and have another glass of tea.'

I left him sitting at the kitchen table, staring down at the white cloth.

Chapter 7

The next day I met Danny's father.

My father and I woke early so as to be in our synagogue by eight-thirty. Manya came in a little before eight and served us a light breakfast. Then my father and I started out on the three-block walk to the synagogue. It was a beautiful day, and I felt happy to be out on the street again. It was wonderful to be outside that hospital, looking at the people and watching the traffic. When it didn't rain and wasn't too cold, my father and I always enjoyed our Shabbat walks to and from the synagogue.

There were many synagogues in Williamsburg. Each Hasidic sect had its own house of worship – *shtiblach*, they were called – most of them badly lighted, musty rooms, with benches or chairs crowded together and with windows that seemed always to be closed. There were also those synagogues in which Jews who were not Hasidim worshiped. The synagogue where my father and I prayed had once been a large grocery store. It stood on Lee Avenue, and though the bottom half of its window was curtained off, the sun shone in through the uncurtained portion of the glass, and I loved to sit there on a Shabbat morning, with the gold of the sun on the leaves of my prayer book and pray.

The synagogue was attended mostly by men like my father – teachers from my *yeshiva*, and others who had come under the influence of the Jewish Enlightenment in Europe and whose distaste for Hasidism was intense and outspoken. Many of the students in the *yeshiva* I attended prayed there, too, and it was good to be able to be with them on a Shabbat morning.

When my father and I came into the synagogue that morning, the service had just begun. We took our usual seats a few rows up from the window and joined in the prayers. I saw Davey Cantor come in. He nodded to me, looking gloomy behind his

glasses, and took his seat. The prayers went slowly; the man at the podium had a fine voice and waited until each portion of the service had been completed by everyone before he began to chant. I glanced at my father during the Silent Devotion. He stood in his long prayer shawl, its silver trim bathed in sunlight, its fringes dangling almost to the floor. His eyes were closed – he always prayed from memory, except during a Festival or a High Holiday Service – and he was swaying slightly back and forth, his lips murmuring the words. I did not wear a prayer shawl; they were worn only by adults who were or had once been married.

During the Torah Service, which followed the Silent Devotion, I was one of the eight men called up to the podium to recite the blessing over the Torah. Standing at the podium, I listened carefully to the reader as he chanted the words from the scroll. When he was done, I recited the second blessing and the prayer that thanks God when a serious accident has been avoided. As I left the podium and walked back to my seat, I wondered what blessing, if any, I would have recited had my eye been blinded. What blessing would Mr Savo make if he were a Jew? I asked myself. For the rest of the service, I thought constantly of Mr Savo and Billy.

Lunch was ready for us when we got home, and Manya kept adding food to my plate and urging me to eat; food was necessary for someone who had just come back from the hospital, she told me in her broken English. My father talked about my work at school. I must be careful not to read until Dr Snyderman gave me his permission, he said, but there was nothing wrong if I attended classes and listened. Perhaps he could help me study. Perhaps he could read to me. We would try it and see. After the Grace, my father lay down on his bed to rest for a while, and I sat on the porch and stared at the sunlight on the flowers and the aianthus. I sat like that for about an hour, and then my father came out to tell me he was going over to see one of his colleagues.

I lay back on the lounge chair and stared up at the sky. It was a deep blue, with no clouds, and I felt I could almost touch it. It's the color of Danny's eyes, I thought. It's as blue as Danny's eyes. What color are Billy's eyes? I asked myself. I think they're also blue. Both Danny's and Billy's eyes are blue. But one set of eyes

is blind. Maybe they're not blind anymore, I thought. Maybe both sets of eyes are okay now. I fell asleep, thinking about Danny's and Billy's eyes.

It was a light, dreamless sleep, a kind of half-sleep that refreshes but does not shut off the world completely. I felt the warm wind and smelled newly cut grass, and a bird perched on a branch of the aianthus and sang for a long time before it flew away. Somehow I knew where that bird was, though I did not open my eyes. There were children playing on the street, and once a dog barked and a car's brakes screeched. Someone was playing a piano nearby, and the music drifted slowly in and out of my mind like the ebb and flow of ocean surf. I almost recognized the melody, but I could not be sure; it slipped like a cool and silken wind from my grasp. I heard a door open and close and there were footsteps against wood, and then silence, and I knew someone had come onto the porch, but I would not open my eyes. I did not want to lose that twilight sleep, with its odors and sounds and whispered flow of music. Someone was on the porch, looking at me. I felt him looking at me. I felt him slowly push away the sleep, and, finally, I opened my eyes, and there was Danny, standing at the foot of the lounge chair, with his arms folded across his chest, clicking his tongue and shaking his head.

'You sleep like a baby,' he said. 'I feel guilty waking you.' I yawned, stretched, and sat up on the edge of the lounge chair. 'That was delicious,' I added, yawning again. 'What time is it?'

'It's after five, sleepyhead. I've been waiting here ten minutes for you to wake up.'

'I slept almost three hours,' I said. 'That was some sleep.' He clicked his tongue again and shook his head. 'What kind of infield is that?' He was imitating Mr Galanter. 'How can we keep that infield solid if you're asleep there, Malter?'

I laughed and got to my feet.

'Where do you want to go?' he asked.

'I don't care.'

'I thought we'd go over to my father's shul. He wants to meet you.'

'Where is it?' I asked him.

'It's five blocks from here.'

'Is my father inside?'

'I didn't see him. Your maid let me in. Don't you want to go?'

'Sure,' I said. 'Let me wash up and put a tie and jacket on. I don't have a catfan, you know.'

He grinned at me. 'The uniform is a requirement for members of the fold only,' he said.

'Okay, member of the fold. Come on inside with me.'

I washed, dressed, told Manya that when my father came in she should let him know where I had gone, and we went out.

'What does your father want to see me about?' I asked Danny as we went down the stone stairway of the house.

'He wants to meet you. I told him we were friends.'

We turned up the street, heading toward Lee Avenue.

'He always has to approve of my friends,' Danny said. 'Especially if they're outside the fold. Do you mind my telling him that we're friends?'

'No.'

'Because I really think we are,' Danny said.

I didn't say anything. We walked to the corner, then turned right on Lee Avenue. The street was busy with traffic and crowded with people. I wondered what any of my classmates would think if they saw me walking with Danny. It would become quite a topic of conversation in the neighborhood. Well, they would see me with him sooner or later.

Danny was looking at me, his sculptured face wearing a serious expression. 'Don't you have any brothers or sisters?' he asked.

'No. My mother died soon after I was born.'

'I'm sorry to hear that.'

'How about you?'

'I have a brother and a sister. My sister's fourteen and my brother is eight. I'm going on sixteen.'

'So am I,' I said.

We discovered that we had been born in the same year, two days apart.

'You've been living five blocks away from me all these years, and I never knew who you were,' I said.

'We stick pretty close together. My father doesn't like us to mix with outsiders.'

'I hope you don't mind my saying this, but your father sounds like a tyrant.'

Danny didn't disagree. 'He's a very strong-willed person.

When he makes up his mind about something, that's it, finished.'

'Doesn't he object to your going around with an *apkoros* like me?'

'That's why he wants to meet you.'

'I thought you said your father never talks to you.'

'He doesn't. Except when we study Talmud. But he did this time. I got up enough courage to tell him about you, and he said to bring you over today. That's the longest sentence he's said to me in years. Except for the time I had to convince him to let us have a ball team.'

'I'd hate to have my father not talk to me.'

'It isn't pleasant,' Danny said very quietly. 'But he's a great man. You'll see when you meet him.'

'Is your brother going to be a rabbi, too?'

Danny gave me a queer look. 'Why do you ask that?'

'No special reason. Is he?'

'I don't know. Probably he will.' His voice had a strange, almost wistful quality to it. I decided not to press the point. He went back to talking about his father.

'He's really a great man, my father. He saved his community. He brought them all over to America after the First World War.'

'I never heard about that,' I told him.

'That's right,' he said, and told me about his father's early years in Russia. I listened in growing astonishment.

Danny's grandfather had been a well-known Hasidic rabbi in a small town in southern Russia, and his father had been the second of two sons. The firstborn son had been in line to inherit his father's rabbinic position, but during a period of study in Odessa he suddenly vanished. Some said he had been murdered by Cossacks; for a time there was even a rumor that he had been converted to Christianity and had gone to live in France. The second son was ordained at the age of seventeen, and by the time he was twenty had achieved an awesome reputation as a Talmudist.

When his father died, he automatically inherited the position of rabbinic leadership. He was twenty-one years old at the time.

He remained the rabbi of his community throughout the years of Russia's participation in the First World War. One week before the Bolshevik Revolution, in the autumn of 1917, his young wife bore him a second child, a son. Two months later, his wife, his son, and his eighteen-month-old daughter were shot to death by a band of marauding Cossacks, one of the many bandit gangs that roamed through Russia during the period of chaos that followed the revolution. He himself was left for dead, with a pistol bullet in his chest and a saber wound in his pelvis. He lay unconscious for half a day near the bodies of his wife and children, and then the Russian peasant who tended the stove in the synagogue and swept its floor found him and carried him to his hut, where he extracted the bullet, bathed the wounds, and tied him to the bed so he would not fall out during the days and nights he shivered and screamed with the fever and delirium that followed.

The synagogue had been burned to the ground. Its Ark was a gutted mass of charred wood, its four Torah scrolls were seared black, its holy books were piles of gray ash blown about by the wind. Of the one hundred eighteen Jewish families in the community only forty-three survived.

When it was discovered that the rabbi was not dead but was being cared for by the Russian peasant, he was brought into the still-intract home of a Jewish family and nursed back to health. He spent the winter recovering from his wounds. During that winter the Bolsheviks signed the treaty of Brest-Litovsk with Germany, and Russia withdrew from the war. The chaos inside the country intensified, and the village was raided four times by Cossacks. But each of those times the Jews were warned by friendly peasants and were concealed in the woods or in huts. In the spring, the rabbi announced to his people that they were done with Russia, Russia was Esav and Edom, the land of Satan and the Angel of Death. They would travel together to America and rebuild their community.

Eight days later, they left. They bribed and bargained their way through Russia, Austria, France, Belgium, and England.

Five months later, they arrived in New York City. At Ellis Island the rabbi was asked his name, and he gave it as Senders. On the official forms, Senders became Saunders. After the customary period of quarantine, they were permitted to leave the island, and Jewish welfare workers helped them settle in the Williamsburg section of Brooklyn. Three years later the rabbi married once again, and in 1929, two days before the stock market crash, Danny was born in the Brooklyn Memorial Hospital. Eighteen months later his sister was born, and five and a half years after the birth of his sister, his brother was born by Caesarean section, both in that same hospital.

'They all followed him?' I asked. 'Just like that?'

'Of course. They would have followed him anywhere.'

'I don't understand that. I didn't know a rabbi had that kind of power.'

'He's more than a rabbi,' Danny said. 'He's a tzaddik.'

'My father told me about Hasidism last night. He said it was a fine idea until some of the tzaddikim began to take advantage of their followers. He wasn't very complimentary.'

'It depends upon your point of view,' Danny said quietly.

'I can't understand how Jews can follow another human being so blindly.'

'He's not just another human being.'

'Is he like God?'

'Something like that. He's a kind of messenger of God, a bridge between his followers and God.'

'I don't understand it. It almost sounds like Catholicism.'

'That's the way it is,' Danny said, 'whether you understand it or not.'

'I'm not offending you or anything. I just want to be honest.'

'I want you to be honest,' Danny said.

We walked on in silence.

A block beyond the synagogue where my father and I prayed, we made a right turn into a narrow street crowded with brownstones and sycamores. It was a duplicate of the street on which I lived, but a good deal older and less neatly kept. Many of the houses were unkempt, and there were very few hydrangea bushes or morning glories on the front lawns. The sycamores formed a

solid, tangled bower that kept out the sunlight. The stone banisters on the outside stairways were chipped, their surfaces blotched with dirt, and the edges of the stone steps were round and smooth from years of use. Cats scrambled through the garbage cans that stood in front of some of the houses, and the sidewalks were strewn with old newspapers, ice cream and candy wrappers, worn cardboard cartons, and torn paper bags. Women in long-sleeved dresses, with kerchiefs covering their heads, many with infants in their arms, others heavily pregnant, sat on the stone steps of the stairways, talking loudly in Yiddish. The street thrived with the noise of playing children who seemed in constant motion, dodging around cars, racing up and down steps, chasing after cats, climbing trees, balancing themselves as they tried walking on top of the banisters, pursuing one another in furious games of tag – all with their fringes and earlocks dancing wildly in the air and trailing out behind them. We were walking quickly now under the dark ceiling of sycamores, and a tall, heavily built man in a black beard and black catfan came alongside me, bumped me roughly to avoid running into a woman, and passed me without a word. The liquid streams of racing children, the noisy chatter of long-sleeved women, the worn buildings and blotched banisters, the garbage cans and the scrambling cars all gave me the feeling of having slid silently across a strange threshold, and for a long moment I regretted having let Danny take me into his world.

We were approaching a group of about thirty black-caftaned men who were standing in front of the three-story brownstone at the end of the street. They formed a solid wall, and I did not want to push through them so I slowed my steps, but Danny took my arm with one hand and tapped his other hand upon the shoulder of a man on the outer rim of the crowd. The man turned, pivoting the upper portion of his body – a middle-aged man, his dark beard streaked with gray, his thick brows edging into a frown of annoyance – and I saw his eyes go wide. He bowed slightly and pushed back, and a whisper went through the crowd, like a wind, and it parted, and Danny and I walked through, Danny holding me by the arm and nodding his head at the greetings in Yiddish that came in quiet murmurs from the people he

passed. It was as if a black-waved, frozen sea had been sliced by a scythe, forming black, solid walls along a jelled path. I saw black and graybearded heads bow toward Danny and dark brows arch sharply over eyes that stared questions at me and at the way Danny was holding me by the arm. We were almost halfway through the crowd now, walking slowly together, Danny's fingers on the part of my arm just over the elbow. I felt myself naked and fragile, an intruder, and my eyes, searching for anything but the bearded faces to look at, settled, finally, upon the sidewalk at my feet. Then, because I wanted something other than the murmured greetings in Yiddish to listen to, I began to hear, distinctly, the tapping sounds of Danny's metal-capped shoes against the cement pavement. It seemed a sharp, unnaturally loud sound, and my ears fixed on it, and I could hear it clearly as we went along. I listened to it intently – the soft scrape of the shoe and the sharp tap-tap of the metal caps – as we went up the stone steps of the stairway that led into the brownstone in front of which the crowd stood. The caps tapped against the stone of the steps, then against the stone of the top landing in front of the double door – and I remembered the old man I often saw walking along Lee Avenue, moving carefully through the busy street and tapping, tapping, his metal-capped cane, which served him for the eyes he had lost in a First World War trench during a German gas attack.

The hallway of the brownstone was crowded with black-caftaned men, and there was suddenly a path there, too, and more murmured greetings and questioning eyes, and then Danny and I went through a door that stood open to our right, and we were in the synagogue.

It was a large room and looked to be the exact size of the apartment in which my father and I lived. What was my father's bedroom was here the section of the synagogue that contained the Ark, the Eternal Light, an eight-branched candelabrum, a small podium to the right of the Ark, and a large podium about ten feet in front of the Ark. The two podiums and the Ark were covered with red velvet. What was our kitchen, hallway, bathroom, my bedroom, my father's study and our front room, was here the portion of the synagogue where the worshippers sat.

Each seat consisted of a chair set before a stand with a sloping top, the bottom edge of which was braced with a jutting strip of wood to prevent what was on the stand from sliding to the floor. The seats extended back to about twenty feet from the rear wall of the synagogue, the wall opposite the Ark. A small portion of the synagogue near the upper door of the hallway had been curtained off with white cheesecloth. This was the women's section. It contained a few rows of wooden chairs. The remaining section of the synagogue, the section without chairs, was crowded with long tables and benches. Through the middle of the synagogue ran a narrow aisle that ended at the large podium. The walls were painted white. The wooden floor was a dark brown. The three rear windows were curtained in black velvet. The ceiling was white, and naked bulbs hung from it on dark wires, flooding the room with harsh light.

We stood for a moment just inside of the door near one of the tables. Men passed constantly in and out of the room. Some remained in the hallway to chat, others took seats. Some of the seats were occupied by men studying Talmud, reading from the Book of Psalms, or talking among themselves in Yiddish. The benches at the tables stood empty, and on the white cloths that covered the tables were paper cups, wooden forks and spoons, and paper plates filled with pickled herring and onion, lettuce, tomatoes, gefilte fish, Shabbat loaves – the braided bread called chalah – tuna fish, salmon, and hard-boiled eggs. At the edge of the table near the window was a brown leather chair. On the table in front of the chair was a pitcher, a towel, a saucer, and a large plate covered with a Shabbat cloth – a white satin cloth, with the Hebrew word for the Shabbat embroidered upon it in gold. A long serrated silver knife lay alongside the plate.

A tall, heavyset boy came in the door, nodded at Danny, then noticed me, and stared. I recognized him immediately as Dov Shlomowitz, the player on Danny's team who had run into me at second base and knocked me down. He seemed about to say something to Danny, then changed his mind, turned stiffly, went up the narrow aisle, and found a seat. Sitting in the seat, he glanced at us once over his shoulder, then opened a book on his stand, and began to sway back and forth. I looked at Danny and

managed what must have been a sick smile. 'I feel like a cowboy surrounded by Indians,' I told him in a whisper.

Danny grinned at me reassuringly and let go of my arm. 'You're in the holy halls,' he said. 'It takes getting used to.'

'That was like the parting of the Red Sea out there,' I said. 'How did you do it?'

'I'm my father's son, remember? I'm the inheritor of the dynasty. Number one on our catechism: Treat the son as you would the father, because one day the son will be the father.'

'You sound like a Mitnaged,' I told him, managing another weak smile.

'No, I don't,' he said. 'I sound like someone who reads too much. Come on. We sit up front. My father will be down soon.'

'You live in this house?'

'We have the upper two floors. It's a fine arrangement. Come on. They're beginning to come in.'

The crowd in the hallway and in front of the building had begun coming through the door. Danny and I went up the aisle. He led me to the front row of seats that stood at the right of the large podium and just behind the small podium. Danny sat down in the second seat and I sat in the third. I assumed that the first seat was for his father.

The crowd came in quickly, and the synagogue was soon filled with the sounds of shuffling shoes, scraping chairs, and loud voices talking Yiddish. I heard no English, only Yiddish. Sitting in the chair, I glanced over at Dov Shlomowitz, and found him staring at me, his heavy face wearing an expression of surprise and hostility, and I suddenly realized that Danny was probably going to have as much trouble with his friends over our friendship as I would have with mine. Maybe less, I thought. I'm not the son of a tzaddik. No one steps aside for me in a crowd. Dov Shlomowitz looked away but I saw others in the crowded synagogue staring at me too, and I looked down at the worn prayer book on my stand, feeling exposed and naked again, and very alone.

Two gray-bearded old men came over to Danny, and he got respectfully to his feet. They had had an argument over a passage of Talmud, they told him, each of them interpreting it in a