little men
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novellas and stories

GERALD SHAPIRO
To Judith Slater and Michael Pearce
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I'd like to thank the English Department of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln for giving me a sabbatical leave during which I finished most of this book. A number of friends offered me encouragement as I wrote *Little Men*: Hal Dresner, Erin Flanagan, Tim Schaffert, Grace Bauer, Joel Deutsch, and, above all, Judith Slater, who patiently read this book through its many drafts and gave me the benefit of her wise counsel and her love.

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Making love to his ex-wife Pauline on Friday nights was probably the most sophisticated thing Ira Mittelman had ever done in his life. It made him feel like he’d taken up permanent residence in an insouciant, world-weary French sex comedy. “Oh, yes, but of course I’d love to get together, only I’m busy tonight. I’m meeting my ex-wife for dinner—we have a standing date. We’re still screwing, you know—one week. Don’t tell our lawyers! The ‘marriage’ may be over, but that’s just a bunch of legal nonsense. Two healthy, middle-aged consenting adults—eh?”

To tell the truth, the sex itself wasn’t earth-shaking, but it wasn’t any worse than it had been during the five years of their courtship or the ten years of their marriage, and given the fact that he and Pauline were nearly fifty now and had been having sex more or less forever, it wasn’t at all bad. Anyway, the sex was secondary. It was the kissing—warm, breathy, tender kisses before, during, and after—that mattered to him, he’d come to realize with some surprise, more than the familiar routine of foreplay and penetration, more than the moaning, the coming, the soft, sleepy bliss of afterglow. In truth, Ira had found that it wasn’t all that hard to get laid in San Francisco—even Manhattanized, its features smeared over by a thick, noxious mask of Silicon Valley money-culture, the city was still incurably romantic, one big Lovers’ Lane—but getting kissed by somebody who knew how to do it . . . well, that was something else again.

For the past two years Ira and Pauline had gotten together for dinner almost every Friday evening around six-thirty, at Cacciatore di Spello, a
trattoria at the fringe of North Beach. Every week they sat at an out-of-the-way table near the kitchen and had a couple of drinks, then ordered ravioli, veal, a salad, and a bottle of Chianti. After dinner, they saw a film if there was something good at one of their favorite theaters, or took in a play, a concert at Symphony Hall or the Opera House if one of them had happened onto some tickets. Afterward, even if it was midnight, they went to her small apartment in Presidio Heights, shared a snifter of cognac, and made love. One week they turned the lights off (her preference), the next week they left them on (his).

When he and Pauline kissed at the end of a Friday evening, cupped in the soft embrace of her sofa and warmed by cognac, Ira felt a flushed, poignant tightness in his chest, a wave of emotion stronger than anything else he felt all week. She felt something, too, he assumed, though they hadn’t spoken about it, perhaps afraid that if they put any of this into words, it would evaporate into thin air, just as their marriage had.

Every Friday evening Pauline arrived at Cacciatore di Spello full of office gossip, her eyes brimming with benign mischief. She wrote advertising copy at Reinhold and Rosen, a small direct-mail agency in the Financial District, and there was always something amusing going on at the office. Soandso, she reported, formerly on Lithium, was now on Paxil. This one was sleeping with that one; those two, very cuddly last week, were this week on the outs. She always included an update on her boss, a crazy little guy in his fifties named Kenny, who was going through a protracted case of confused sexual identity—flamboyantly gay one month, sashaying back and forth through the office in a flaming kimono, one hand on his hip, the other flapping the air, and the next month straight again, chewing a cigar and screaming “Give me a woman with bullet tits! I want bullet tits!” at the top of his lungs. Then there was the business itself: rumors were constantly circulating—accounts were about to be lost, firings were imminent, other accounts might be coming their way. Pauline reported all of this merrily, imitating various office personalities, doing the voices, hammering it up while she and Ira stirred their cocktails.

Then it was his turn. But what was there to say? He worked alone in the quiet privacy of his apartment in Noe Valley, rarely seeing anyone except the occasional client, a museum curator, now and then a book collector or dealer stopping by to chat or get an estimate. Once a week he
took his laundry to a Chinese place in the neighborhood, and if he was
lucky, the proprietor, Mr. Wu, said something memorably witty, which
Ira could then pass on during dinner on Friday night. Now and then
there was something amusing on the bulletin board in the market on 24th
Street where he bought his groceries, and here again he noted it (some-
times even jotting down a reminder to himself) and let loose with the tid-
bit once Pauline had finished with her rendition of that week’s
shenanigans at Reinhold and Rosen. His car, an aging Volvo, had been
stolen right in front of his apartment building three times in the past six-
ten months (all it took, apparently, was a screwdriver and a sixth-grade
education to hot-wire the thing), and these episodes had provided Ira
with some nice comic material; he’d done decent impersonations of the
police officers assigned to his case, and had described the various indig-
nities his poor car had been put through with each succeeding theft—the
vomit, the stench of marijuana, the melted candy bars, the used condoms,
and so on.

But for the most part he was silent during these evenings with
Pauline. The fact was, he’d never been a great conversationalist, even
when he was young and hip and in the know; and now that he was gray-
ing and sensed his faculties beginning to slip (his hearing was fading in
one ear, and he couldn’t read a menu without moving the thing first into
and then away from his face), he’d noticed that he’d begun to turn in on
himself, like a fist. He had friends in town, but he didn’t kid himself—
they weren’t close friends.

Though he wouldn’t have wanted Pauline to know this, Ira prepared
for his dates with her all week long. He considered the possibilities every
morning, skimming the Chronicle’s arts section while he sipped his coffee,
taking note of promising films, concerts, and plays. Sometimes he called
Pauline on Friday afternoon to list their options and ask her preferences,
but more often he surprised her, which seemed more to her liking. Then
came Friday evening at Cacciatore di Spello, the romantic high point of
his week. It was a life. It was his life.

Which explained why, even though Ira knew he should drop every-
thing, do his duty and take his father’s ashes back to Missouri where the
old man had wanted to be scattered, and even though his sister Ruthie
had been needling him in weekly phone calls from Seattle to get on a
plane and fulfill his obligation to their dad, the ashes still sat in a brown
plastic cannister the size of a kleenex box, perched next to an old tennis racket on a shelf in the hallway closet of Ira’s apartment. “I can’t leave town right now,” he’d told Ruthie repeatedly. “I have this thing going with Pauline, I know it sounds crazy, but I can’t leave, not even for a few days. You don’t understand what’s at stake here. I skip a Friday, it could all come unraveled.”

“Oh, I understand what’s at stake,” Ruthie told him. “You’re porking your ex-wife and you think that’s more important than doing your duty to your father, your father who loved you so much it was like a sickness.”

Ira’s father had made his wishes known very clearly during the last few years of his life, while he was wasting away in the guest room at Ruthie’s house, driving her family crazy. On the back of his will, he’d scrawled, “Scatter my ashes at HaHaTonka—Ira knows the way.” He wrote the same message on post-it notes, more than a dozen of them, and left them stuck on every piece of furniture in his sickroom. Whenever Ira called his dad to say hello and check on his condition, it was the primary subject of their conversation. The old man was obsessed by this idea—being scattered to the winds at dear old Camp HaHaTonka, the Boy Scout camp in the Ozarks where Ira had spent five idyllic boyhood summers. “You’ll do it for me, this one last favor, Ira,” the old man croaked. “You’ll do it for me because you were a Boy Scout, you were an Eagle Scout, you know your duty. You of all people should know how to do a good deed.”

And yes, yes, if it weren’t for the standing date with Pauline every Friday night, of course Ira would have been happy to do it, too—happy to do his father’s bidding, and happier still to get the goddamn ashes out of his apartment. Having his father’s ashes stuck up there on the closet shelf was no day at the beach. He couldn’t get over the strangeness of it. He asked himself the same question morning after morning: how could they fit a person’s remains into something so small and nondescript? Over the past ten months he’d grown accustomed to looking at the cannister for a few minutes as he went through his regular morning routine: get up, stumble through some stretching exercises, shower, brew a pot of coffee, pay a visit to Dad, then sigh and shut the closet door. Ira had become an expert at this particular sigh, a plaintive one which began somewhere up in his nose and ended deep in his belly. This was what he
got for being such a bad son, he told himself. There was no use in denying it: he hadn’t been sufficiently attentive to his father those last years, as the old man, moldering in Ruthie’s guest room, slowly tilted forward into death—he hadn’t called often enough, hadn’t written, hadn’t flown up to sit at the old man’s bedside, feeding him chipped ice and sips of orange juice. Well, everything was different now: here he was, dutifully saying hello every morning. Hi, Dad, good morning, nice to see you. Sorry you’re still in that goddamn box.

It shouldn’t have been possible to squeeze eighty-five years of somebody’s life into such a forgettable little cannister. Wasn’t something a bit bigger, perhaps even grander called for? Ira wasn’t asking for anything elaborate—an epigraph from Keats etched on a marble urn would have been too much, obviously. But something. He remembered the array of containers on display in the family bereavement room at the crematorium back in Kansas City—a wall full of marble, onyx, pewter and brass, everything dignified, understated, substantial. Surely something from that wall would have done the trick. Anything. But this? This brown cube of industrial plastic? How could it all come down to this?

He’d come to imagine his father not reduced to ashes, but whole—somehow miniaturized like the guy in “The Incredible Shrinking Man,” and very irate about it—stuffed into the plastic cannister in the closet, wearing his brown Shabbos suit, beating on the lid with his tiny fists. “He wants out,” he told Ruthie whenever she called to berate him. “I swear to god, I think I can hear him in there. He’s pissed off.”

“Why do you tell me this stuff? You want to go crazy, Ira, so go crazy—but I can’t get involved.”

“I’m just telling you what’s going on.”

“I’ll tell you what’s going on. You’re shtupping your ex-wife, which for your information is a crime in about fourteen states, though of course not in California, no—the only thing against the law in California is jaywalking. Listen, Ira, I don’t know what to tell you. You say Dad wants out of that box? So take him back to Missouri, dump the ashes at Camp Whatchamacallit, get back on the plane—you could do it in two days, shazam, you’re done—you haven’t missed a single chance to hop in the sack.”

“Ruthie, that’s unfair.”

“I’m sorry, Ira. You know perfectly well what Dad wanted you to do.
You’ve known about it all along, you haven’t lifted a finger, so don’t come crying to me. I don’t have time for it.” It was true—Ruthie barely had time to breathe. Two nights a week she drove meals to AIDS patients in Seattle’s iffiest neighborhoods; her Mondays and Fridays were given over to volunteer work at the Home for the Jewish Aged; she had a husband, children, even a recent grandchild—a life so full of good works, so laden with duty and obligation that when she called Ira to discuss their father’s remains, her voice at times took on a desperate, strangled tone, like someone caught in a trash compactor.

“I paid for the whole shebang,” she’d told him repeatedly, “the cremation, the memorial service—I bought the flowers, the buffet. I didn’t ask you for a nickel. The least you can do is deal with the ashes. You’re the son!”

“I know I’m the son,” Ira told her.

“Why didn’t he want to be buried, like Mom? They could have been buried side by side back in Kansas City. What’s wrong with that? It would have been nice that way. Anyway, Jews aren’t supposed to be cremated, are they? It’s against the law.”

“Dad wasn’t much of a Jew, Ruthie. You know that. He ate bacon on Yom Kippur.”

“He was your father, you were his son, that’s a special bond—and don’t bring up the Yom Kippur bacon, I don’t want to hear about it. This is Biblical, Ira—there’s something in the Bible about it, I can’t remember where. It’s in the Torah. The son says Kaddish for the father. That’s your job.”

“I can’t say Kaddish. I can’t remember the words. I don’t even own a tallis.”

“So don’t say Kaddish! Who’s asking you to do anything? But tell me, what’s the point of sticking the ashes in a closet and worshiping them? What kind of craziness is that? He wasn’t that great a father, you know. He loved you ’til the day he died—but let’s not pretend. We’re not talking about Father Knows Best here. The man had many failings.”

No one was disputing that point, Ira told himself—though this morning, a Friday in mid-June, waking up with a stiff neck, the issue of his dead father’s many failings seemed utterly irrelevant. He stood at the closet, coffee cup in hand, sighed his sigh, and listened to the phone ringing in the living room. Reluctantly he shut the door. *See you tomorrow, Dad.*
On the phone was Henry Cruikshank, a regular customer, a dealer in rare books. “Listen up, Ira: I’ve got a live one,” Cruikshank told him in a breathless voice. “First edition of *Paradise Regained*—1671, the Starkey edition, the one with *Samson Agonistes* added on. I’m talking big bucks here, Ira. I snagged it at an auction last week—the big players weren’t paying attention, they were all off at another table, drooling over a first edition of *The Song of Hiawatha*, if you can believe that,” he cackled, “and so I picked it up for pennies. And now I’ve hooked a buyer, some geeky kid down in Los Gatos—one of those dot-com gazillionaires. Unbelievable luck. The bottom hasn’t dropped out yet for this kid—he’s still raking it in. We can really make some money on this one—but we have to move fast. Next week he’ll probably be worth nothing.”

“Congratulations, Henry. I’m impressed.”

“Ira, wait a second, I’m not finished. The problem is, when I had this kid on the phone, I-I sort of misrepresented the condition of the book. A little. I just exaggerated it a little bit. I couldn’t help myself.”

Ira tsksed into the phone.

“Get past the binding, open it up, it’s gorgeous! Milton himself probably held this book! Think about it! He would have been blind by now, you know, so he’s running his fingers over the pages, feeling the print! Oh, man. Now listen: my buyer, he’s scheduled to come up to the city to take a look next Friday. That gives us a week.”

“A week? I’ve got a couple of jobs ahead of you, Henry. I don’t know if I can get to it.”

“Aw, don’t tell me that,” said Cruikshank. “The book just needs a little refurbishing, that’s all. It’s a—listen, Ira, do me a favor, at least take a look at this thing. As a favor to a friend.”

“So what’s the problem?”

A long groan whistled through the receiver like wind. “The binding’s a mess. It looks like some know-nothing butcher tried to rework it, maybe mid-nineteenth century. The bands are ruined. There’s glue all over the place. The boards are probably ruined, too. I’m telling you, whoever did this was a criminal.”

“And how much did you pay for it?” asked Ira.

“Two thousand,” Cruikshank croaked, and in a rush of breath, added, “You don’t have to tell me—I paid too much. I know, I know, I know.”

“You always pay too much.”
“Don’t, Ira.”

“No, listen to me. That’s why you’re in the fix you’re in. You see something, you fall in love with it, you forget you’re in business—and bam, you’re writing a check. You’re hopeless.”

“I know, I know, I know. It’s my failing. I love books. That’s my problem. I should have gone into antique furniture. Tables and chairs don’t push any of my buttons. Books drive me crazy, it’s like an addiction. But enough about my problems, doctor. Listen, can you take a look at this thing right away, tell me what it needs? I’m desperate, Ira. You know as well as I do, in ‘fine’ condition, this thing’s worth eight thousand.”

“Eight thousand?”

“Okay, seventy-five hundred. A new binding, some gold leaf, a little decorative tooling here and there—I love the craftsmanship you bring to your work. And that’s the truth. I’m not just buttering you up.” Cruikshank paused. “Look, okay, seven thousand, maybe. But still—that’s enough to keep my head above water another couple of months. That’s all I’m asking. And I’ll split it with you, by the way. No kidding.”

“You don’t have to do that, Henry. I don’t want that. Just my usual fee, plus materials.”

“No, I mean it, Ira. We go fifty-fifty on this one. Listen: this buyer I’ve got on the line—he’s a kid. He’s got money coming out his navel. If he doesn’t give it to us, he’ll be spending it all on penny candy. He’ll be down at the mall, playing video games, trying to sneak into R-rated movies. Look at it that way.”

Ira cradled the receiver against his jowl and wound the phone cord around his wrist. “Okay, okay—I’m not making any promises. A week isn’t much time. But I’ll take a look. Bring it by around eleven this morning.”

“You’re a prince.”

Ira hung up and poured himself another cup of coffee. He had two hours before Cruikshank would be there. His neck was throbbing: too many hours at the workbench yesterday, carefully re-pasting the red and black morocco spine labels on a fine three-volume first edition of Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, then cleaning the spines with a light wash of hydrogen peroxide to get them ready for a new layer of gold leaf. The volumes showed their age—some mold spots here and there, a bit of marginal dampstaining—but obviously these books had been loved for a hundred
and eighty years, nestled securely in their slipcases, nurtured and caressed. This morning if he concentrated he could get the gold leaf applied to the bindings before Cruikshank knocked on the door.

But this was Friday, and every Friday morning Ira found himself lost in anticipation of the upcoming evening with Pauline. He could call her now—she’d be at her desk already—just to see what she had to say. She already knew the ongoing saga of his father’s ashes, of course—he’d told her and told her—but even if this was the fifteenth time he brought it up, Pauline wouldn’t yell. She wouldn’t tell him he had to drop everything and go back to Camp HaHaTonka. She’d listen to him patiently, sigh with him, tantalize him with a brief preview of the latest dope on crazy Kenny and all the other mayhem at Reinhold and Rosen. Maybe he’d ask her for advice about what to do that night after dinner—but then again, maybe not. He had his eye on a month-long Buñuel retrospective, in progress at the Vogue, the neighborhood cinema near Pauline’s apartment; tonight they were showing That Obscure Object of Desire, which Ira imagined would provide a nice segue into the rest of the evening.

But calling Pauline would mean that he’d have nothing more to look forward to until that evening—so Ira reluctantly put off the phone call, and went back to his workshop. At least there was the three-volume edition of Ivanhoe to occupy the time. It had been rebound in the 1850s, a good piece of work, though the headbands had deteriorated and mold had crept into the second volume, penetrating deep into the pages and leaving behind a mottled pattern of foxing that obscured some lines of the text. Last night, after a day spent at the work table, he’d left the volumes to dry in the press; the paste he’d used to re-attach the Morocco spine labels needed a good twelve hours to cure as it penetrated the fibers of the old leather. Carefully now, he opened the press and lifted the first volume’s cover, noting the way the red and black Moroccan leather over the spine joint wrinkled. Everything was in order. Now all that was left was the gilding of the top and bottom quadrants of the spines, and Ivanhoe would be finished: not just good as new, but better—solid and strong enough to last another hundred and eighty years, maybe longer.

The gold leaf itself, which he kept in a small box in a cabinet, was so delicate that it weighed almost nothing. Ira lifted out the box, opened it, and set it aside. In a small saucepan he mixed a glaire—a compound of
egg white, vinegar and milk—then he plugged in an ancient, grime-encrusted hotplate and heated the mixture in a saucepan. Using a boar’s hair brush, he painted the warm *glaire* in a thin layer onto the top quadrant of the first volume’s spine. Then with tweezers he lifted one small tissue of gold leaf from the box. This was the tricky part; the gold leaf was so thin that a shaky hand, a momentary tremor in his wrist could tear it so badly he’d have to start over again with another piece. Slowly, carefully, he transferred the gold leaf onto the spine’s newly *glaired* surface, where it lay slightly bunched in the center of the quadrant.

He leaned down over the book, held his breath, steadied himself, pursed his lips, and then popped them gently, a soft “ppp.” A soft current of air fanned out over the tissue of gold leaf, smoothing it out perfectly over the surface of the *glaire*. Ira gazed at it a moment, saw that it was going to be fine, then he turned his head away and let out a slow breath. He repeated the delicate process with the spine’s bottom quadrant, first painting on a thin sheen of *glaire*, then lifting a tiny sheet of gold leaf onto the surface, then popping his lips—“ppp”—to fan the golden tissue out smoothly. He used one of his burnishing tools to finish the job, first rubbing the tool against the smooth prow of his forehead to pick up a bit of oil, then embossing both sections of gold leaf firmly into the leather, taking special care with the corners, and then finally he was done. Then he turned his attention the second volume, and then the third—and as he entered what he thought of as his “work-zone,” his concentration drifted, and though he wanted desperately to avoid the subject, soon he was thinking of nothing but Camp HaHaTonka, and the miserable brown cannister containing his father’s ashes.

Each summer for five years, from eleven to fifteen, Ira had spent three weeks at Camp HaHaTonka, sweltering in the miasmic Ozark humidity, fending off clouds of tiny stinging insects while he made a succession of lanyards, wallets, and other handy craft items, and learned invaluable bits of Scout Lore, like “A chain is only as strong as its weakest link,” and “Avoid persons who are coughing or sneezing.” It had been nearly thirty-five years since he’d worn the olive-green uniform of the Boy Scout of America—thirty-five years since he’d seen Camp HaHaTonka—but what did any of that matter? He couldn’t help himself—just the thought of the place, and the Scout Law came into his head: “A scout is trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly, courteous, kind, obedient, cheerful, thrifty,
brave, clean, and reverent.” The words were still etched on his brain in boldface. This is ridiculous, he told himself. He could remember virtually nothing of his childhood—so why did he remember this load of gibberish?

Probably because when he was eleven, he’d still believed in the incantatory power of mottos and oaths, secret handshakes, the kind of wisdom that could be collected in handbooks. Ira believed in God and Country back then—in Honor and Duty, too, though he didn’t know what either word actually meant. All he knew was that saying them, or just thinking about them, brought a rim of tears to his eyes.

Eventually he’d climbed all the way to Eagle, the highest rank you could attain. When he mentioned this now to acquaintances in the book business, they looked at him as if he must be pulling their leg. At first glance, Ira knew, he didn’t seem to be made of Eagle Scout material, and it was true that he lacked the hardiness, the ingenuity, the seriousness of purpose and firmness of character generally associated with Eagle Scouts. He’d read somewhere that only four per cent of boys who entered the Boy Scouts stuck it out all the way up the ladder to the rank of Eagle. And no wonder. Each rank carried with it an increasingly difficult series of tasks to be completed, merit badges to be earned, good deeds to be done: digging a field latrine, swimming half a mile in full uniform, reading a Hardy Boys mystery to a blind boy, repainting a neighborhood playground, paying hospital visits to people you hardly knew, learning to cook breakfast for six over an open fire, demonstrating the ability to clean and dress a serious wound, following animal tracks for a mile through heavy underbrush. Being a Boy Scout at any rank was work, but becoming an Eagle Scout was more like a full-blown career. Naturally enough, only the geeks were willing to stick with it all the way—the slavish knot-tying bird-identifiers, the scab-kneed pyromaniacs able to start a fire in the pouring rain with two pieces of flint and an abandoned robin’s nest, the plucky few who begged to be allowed to sleep outdoors in the snow, and then were up at dawn, singing “God Bless America” while they fried bacon and eggs for the rest of the troop—these freaks of nature, these idiot savants. And then there was Ira Mittelman, the Good Son, who did it all for his father.

Ira’s dad, Bernard, who taught Driver’s Ed at a local high school, was the tenement-born child of poverty-stricken immigrants, and had
never had a chance to join the Scouts as a youth. “Who had time for Scouting?” he demanded in a frantic voice—the voice of someone about to crash head-on into a concrete abutment—whenever the subject came up. “Who had time for fun, period, when I was a kid? Who had the money for it? Camping trips? Forget about it. We slept in tents, all right—whenever the rent came due. Mealtime was cold cereal, hold the milk. The Boy Scouts? That was for kids one heckuva lot luckier than me.” He usually launched into these speeches as he and Ira preened in the mirror, adjusting their Scout uniforms before a troop meeting. “Look at us, will you?” Bernard Mittelman demanded, and Ira obediently peered into the mirror, unsure of what he should be noticing. His father tugged at his official Boy Scout neckerchief, then sat down and began to pump his right foot spasmodically into the floor, a nervous brake-slamming tic left over from his grueling daily routine of riding around town in the company of student drivers. Ira’s friends had asked him occasionally about his father’s nervous foot, and Ira, at a loss for what to say, hinted at war-related injuries, then tried to change the subject.

Ira’s sister Ruthie, seven years older, hadn’t been forced to do anything but play the piano. Nobody made her put on a Girl Scout uniform and sell cookies door to door. Ira pointed out this disparity to his father on more than one occasion—usually when they were on a camping trip, trying to figure out how to read a compass in pitch darkness, or pouring calamine lotion on each other to stop the itching from mosquito bites and poison ivy. “It isn’t fair, Dad,” he’d mutter. “Ruthie gets to stay home. She’s at the movies right now, I bet. It’s air-conditioned. She’s eating buttered popcorn with her friends.”

“Plenty of boys would give their eye-teeth to have the chance to be a Scout,” his father would tell him, puffing furiously on a cigarette. “They’d line up for a chance to be here in the great outdoors with their dad. Plenty of kids would.” Then he’d sit down on a nearby log and pump the dirt with his nervous foot while Ira hung his head, contemplating the depth of his ingratitude.

The thought of his father—just a fleeting mental glance at him—left Ira exhausted, filling him with remorse so leaden it threatened to plunge him right through the floor. He had not sufficiently loved his father. This simple fact outweighed everything else he’d done in his life; his accumulated good deeds, the years of kindness to strangers, the slowly accruing
interest on all his accounts, season after season of dutiful motions, all of his best intentions put together were nothing compared to it.

And now this. Ruthie had been right all along—this business with the closet shrine was nonsense. What was the point of all that sighing? The fact was, it was too late to do anything for his father. The time to have been dutiful was while the old man was alive and kvetching at Ruthie’s house in Seattle. Ira could have flown up there for a long weekend—he could have taken the old man to a Mariners’ game, bought him a hot dog and a bag of peanuts. They could have gone up in the Space Needle and made jokes about the tourists. They might have become friends, at last, he and his dad—just a couple of guys out on the town together. Well, he’d blown his chance on that one. Now all he could do for the old man was open the closet door and say hi every morning.

If Ruthie’d been there to read his thoughts, she’d have had a fit. “So take the ashes back to HaHaTonka, then! What is it, Ira—do you enjoy making yourself feel like a jerk?”

No, he didn’t enjoy it. And it wasn’t just the standing date with Pauline that was holding him back, either. In fact, Pauline was just an excuse, and he knew it. The truth was, Ira was fundamentally opposed to such sentimental journeys—reunions, homecomings and the like—no matter what the nature of the errand. Revisiting the sacred sites of one’s childhood—the very thought of it all brought phlegm to his throat. Everywhere he looked he saw American culture shamelessly chasing after its past. In a society afflicted with profound amnesia, cut off from any true understanding of its history, Top-40 radio stations excitedly announced “a nonstop hour of music from the ’70’s!” as if Tony Orlando and Dawn constituted something ancient and mysterious, like Etruscan ruins. On the J-Church streetcar a month ago he’d overheard a couple mourning in all sincerity the demise of an undistinguished chophouse, a tourist dump at the corner of Van Ness and Lombard: “I can’t get over it. The place was there for ten years! Ten years! Now it’s gone, overnight!”

It was his work, Ira reasoned, that had dimmed his view of what passed for the past these days. How could it not? Last week he’d slipped a damaged first edition of Dickens’ David Copperfield out of its delicate tissue paper wrapping and held the fragile tome tenderly, inhaling the mysterious scent of must and mildew that arose from its mottled pages like incense. Not a reproduction, not a reprint—the first edition, with
thirty-eight plates by Phiz, plus an errata leaf, Maclise’s portrait of Dickens, his wife and his sister following the plate listing—even the blue printed wrappers were original! Right there, heavy in his own hands! Dickens himself might have held this edition, this very book. That was the past—no, THE PAST, the real article—not just a time, but a place, a world, worth spelling out in capital letters, worth yearning for, worth rescuing, worth restoring with all the care and expertise a craftsman could muster. Nowadays the past had been packaged, transformed into a hash of five-and-dime sentimentality, just another industry busily turning heartfelt human emotions into a bunch of interchangeable tchotchkes. The past—and in America that meant anything older than the fruit in your refrigerator—was just one more commodity to be bought and sold.

Ira had already missed his tenth, twentieth, twenty-fifth and thirtieth De Lesseps High School class reunions, and had no intention of attending the fortieth when that one rolled around. Despite a personal phone call pleading with him to attend, he’d also passed two years ago on a chance to get together with graduates of his Hebrew school at a testimonial dinner for dear old Mrs. Leibowitz, one of their beloved teachers who now lay at death’s door. (“Aw, c’mon, Mitts,” his old classmate Barry Sherman had cried over the phone, “it won’t be the same without you!”) No one had called him “Mitts” in years. He adored the name; it made him sound like a scrappy, devil-may-care kid you’d want to have on your side in a fight—which was just the kind of guy he’d never been.) No, none of these events had tempted him in the least. So why should a chance to revisit Camp HaHaTonka be any different? To hell with it. Trustworthy, loyal, helpful, friendly—no, he told himself, it was time at last to forget that stupid mantra. His father’s ashes could stay in the hall closet, where they belonged.

Oh, but such a petulant, ungrateful train of thought was unworthy of an Eagle Scout, Ira knew. It was un-American, cowardly, self-indulgent—it violated any number of rules laid out in the Scout Handbook in large, boldfaced type. He should be ashamed of himself. But then again, who was he kidding? Despite his father’s fond and fervent hopes—the pushing, the nudging, the pleading—the fact was that Ira had never been Eagle Scout material, not for a minute.

He’d tried to be a good Boy Scout—really, he had. Boys’ Life, the
official magazine of the Boy Scouts, came to his house every month, full of patriotic fervor, earnest how-to articles (“Make a holder for old copies of Boys’ Life out of a cut-off box of Cheerios!”), and true-life adventure stories involving Boy Scout heroes, kids just like Ira, who rescued perfect strangers, preferably old folks or wheelchair-bound kids, from burning buildings or sinking rafts, then got big medals pinned on them by high-ranking officials. The back pages were strewn with ads that hawked useful weapons like BB guns, slingshots, and bullwhips (“Hand Made by Cherokee Indians!”). Every issue included a couple of full-page ads promoting sales schemes: you could join the Junior Sales Club of America, agreeing to sell boxes of occasional cards to friends, neighbors, and family members in exchange for great gifts. All you had to sell was sixty boxes of cards, and you could get a three-speed bike for free. “Most boys know sixty people—it’s a cinch! Want a bugle? Sure you do! Just sell twelve boxes. How about a Marlin shotgun? It’s a snap! Thirty-six boxes and she’s yours!”

Boys’ Life drove Ira crazy with desire. He felt like he was being ripped in half, from the inside out. On the one hand, he couldn’t help himself: he begged his parents shamelessly for a bullwhip (“Aw, c’mon, just the ‘Muleskinner,’ model—it’s only two dollars and fifty cents!”). He’d seen Lash LaRue on Saturday afternoon TV disarm a gunman at twenty feet using nothing but his bullwhip, and it seemed like a perfectly sensible weapon to have around the house. He longed to join the Junior Sales Club of America, because he really, truly wanted a three-speed bike, a set of Voit water skis, a Kodak movie camera, a bull horn, and a walkie-talkie set, and he knew he could have them all, too—just for selling two hundred boxes of cards. Sure he could.

But at the same time a dark, ironic voice in his head told him that he couldn’t sell any occasional cards—that if he went around the neighborhood ringing doorbells, nobody would answer, and if anyone did, they’d slam the door in his face. He couldn’t give them away, in fact. The voice in his head was chattering like a monkey by this time. If he ordered any occasional cards from the Junior Sales Club of America, he’d be stuck with them for the rest of his life. He’d still be sending them to people when he was ninety-five. The voice also told him that there was next to no chance that he could actually save anybody from a burning building or a sinking raft, not just because burning buildings and sinking rafts
were hard to come by in everyday life, but because he was, to put it plainly, a coward.

Oh, sure, when the big day finally came, just after his fifteenth birthday, he walked across the stage and accepted his Eagle badge, executed the Scout handshake right and left, saluted everybody in sight, kissed his mother on the cheek like all the other boys—but Ira knew as he was doing it that he didn’t deserve to be up there. He’d memorized everything, gone through all the motions, practiced his sheepshank, his sheet bend, his half hitch and his clove hitch until his little fingers were numb, but the whole shebang amounted to *bubkes*. He’d been a shitty Boy Scout. In fact, he hadn’t even liked being a Boy Scout very much. Oh, sure, there’d been an occasional enjoyable moment here and there, usually when he was by himself in his tent at Camp HaHaTonka, weaving a lanyard or humming into his kazoo, just thinking about things. Most of the time, though, he’d found the Boy Scouts boring—and the parts that weren’t boring were often sort of scary. Admittedly, it was pretty fascinating to read about emergency remedies for snake bites in the Boy Scout Handbook, but did everybody in Troop 144 really have to practice putting tourniquets on each other every week? He’d had practice tourniquets applied to every part of his body except his penis—and even the possibility of *that* had come up in casual Troop 144 banter. Over the course of five years in the Boy Scouts he’d suffered through poison oak, poison ivy, poison sumac, spider bites, and diarrhea. He’d gone camping in the rain and the snow; he’d sneezed his way through hay fever-ridden ten-mile hikes that left his feet a mass of blisters; he’d watched his thumbnail turn black and fall off after he’d accidentally smashed it with a rock; he tried not to complain, but that stuff hurt, dammit. Of all the gifts his father gave him that Ira didn’t really want (Little League baseball, swimming lessons, boxing gloves, a chemistry set, a dyed-pink baby chicken) the Boy Scouts lasted longest, and loomed largest—and the guilt he felt about it all still rested in his heart like an anvil. *I’m sorry, Dad,* he said to himself almost every day. *You gave me what you wanted for yourself, and it was the wrong gift.*

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Henry Cruikshank arrived twenty minutes early, catching him off guard, still lost in thought. Ira was so submerged in melancholy memories that
when the knock came at the door, he looked around him uncertainly in a
daze, half convinced for just a moment that his father had somehow gotten
out of the container in the closet. Then the knock sounded again, and
he scrambled to usher Cruikshank into his crowded workshop at the
back of the apartment. Cruikshank was disheveled, as usual, with a two-
day growth of beard flecked with bits of his breakfast. He was a tall,
shambling man with haunted eyes, a collection of tics. Ira felt a deep kin-
ship toward him, though he disapproved of nearly everything Cruik-
shank did.

“Hey, what happened?” Cruikshank asked him, casting a nervous
glance around the workshop. The room was a mess.

“You’re early,” said Ira. “That’s what happened.” He propped the
rolls of leather back into an oaken barrel in the far corner of the shop,
then turned to the tangle of tools still littering the worktable: the small
tub of wheat starch paste was open, as well as the can of rabbit-skin glue;
he’d left the litho stone smack in the middle of everything after working
on Ivanhoe, with the surface covered by the scraps of pared leather he’d
scraped against it; around the stone lay a variety of calipers, the ballpeen
hammer, several rollers, the narrow and wide scrapers, a chisel, the paste
brush. The paste brush! Twenty-five dollars worth of boar bristle, and
now he’d have to soak it in solvent overnight to get the paste out. There
were a dozen curved embroidery needles scattered about, as well—the
ones he used for sewing new bindings. If he’d been his own apprentice,
he’d have fired himself for the sheer mess of it all.

With the clutter finally cleared away, Ira slipped Cruikshank’s copy
of Paradise Regained out of its casing and surveyed the damage. “Be care-
ful, would you?” Cruikshank moaned. He leaned over Ira, sighing and
clucking. The damage to the binding was extensive: the leather had dete-
riorated completely, taking all of the gold leaf lettering and the cords—
the hemp supports girdling the spine—along with it. The spine had
collapsed, and the joints, the seams where the front and back covers
attached to it, were ripped from top to bottom. But still, it wasn’t a total
disaster. Cruikshank was right, for once: the book was potentially a mag-
nificent find. The license leaf and title-page were a little stained, and the
head-lines on pages 22, 26 and 27 were shaved—and naturally, given the
age of the thing, the pages were brown and mottled with mold—but
none of those problems posed a serious threat to the book’s value. He
might even be able to save the endpapers if he worked slowly and carefully.

Cruikshank paced back and forth in front of the work table, biting his lip, wringing his hands. “Can you do anything with it?” he asked at last. “I know it’s in bad shape, but Jesus, I fell in love with it. I shouldn’t have bought it. I know, I know. Not at that price, anyway.”

“Yeah,” Ira said softly, still staring at the binding.

“You know, just once you could tell me something just to comfort me. Would that be so terrible? Would it kill you? Listen to me, Ira. We could clean up on this thing. Five grand profit to split, and what would it take you? A couple of days? This buyer—the kid in Los Gatos—he doesn’t even know anything about books. He’s just buying up anything he can grab. He’s into stuff. He tells me last month he went ga-ga over Fabergé eggs at Neiman Marcus. He bought three of them. Now it’s books—he says he can hardly wait for next Friday, he’s salivating for this Milton—he can’t wait to see it.”

Ira sighed and gently closed the book.

“Oh, no,” Cruikshank said. “Don’t do it, Ira.”

“What. Don’t do what.”

“I can see it in your eyes. I know what you’re thinking.”

“No you don’t.”

“You’re thinking it’s too much profit. You’re such a goddamn Boy Scout.”

“Oh, don’t say that. Please. I don’t want to hear that kind of thing right now.”

“I know the way you think. We’ve had this conversation fifteen times.”

“Henry, look. I don’t care what you charge the guy. Charge your client whatever you want, as far as I’m concerned. It’s none of my business. Just don’t tell me about it.” Ira put an arm gently around Cruikshank’s shoulder and led him toward the door. “I’ll do the work. I’ll get it done. I promise you I’ll do the best I can with the restoration. You’ll be happy.”

“You always do your best, Ira. I knew I could count on you.”

“But if you don’t take off now, I won’t be able to finish the job I’ve got scheduled before yours,” Ira said, and opened the door.

“Right! Okay, then. Get back to work!” Cruikshank said. He
stepped out into the hall, then turned around. “Look at it this way,” he said. “To this kid, five grand is what he gives the cleaning lady at Christmas. It’s nothing. We deserve this, Ira, both of us. We’ve earned it.”

“You deserve it, Henry,” Ira said as he was shutting the door. “It’s all yours. I haven’t earned anything at all.”

That night at Cacciatore di Spello, Pauline seemed shy and girlish; she patted her hair when she sat down at the table, which was something she’d never done before, and she smiled coyly when Ira kissed her on the cheek. Something was up, Ira knew. He’d told his story about Henry Cruikshank and the Los Gatos gazillionaire with the three Fabergé eggs, but Pauline didn’t laugh—in fact she downed her martini in two gulps as she listened, and then she became fixated on her thumbnail, which she buffed with her napkin as Ira spun out the anecdote.

As usual, their table was at the back wall, away from the worst of the Friday evening crush. The red checkered tablecloth looked like it could have used a good scrubbing, and the candle stuck in the straw-bottomed, wax-encrusted Chianti bottle was little more than a stub—but that was part of the battered charm of the place. Bruno, their waiter, took away their empty glasses and brought the pasta course—a steaming platter of ravioli stuffed with chard and ricotta, topped with a light marinara sauce—and as the steam rose from the platter and Ira dipped his spoon to taste the marinara, Pauline finally came out with her news.

“You’re what?” he asked, and turned his good ear toward her. He’d heard her, all right; this was a reflexive move, desperate, hopeful for the split second it took to turn his head. Then he caught a glimpse of her face, and he knew.

“I said . . . I’m getting married, Ira. He’s a fellow from work. You don’t know him.”

“Oh, my god.” He didn’t want to do it, but he was unable to stop himself; he dropped the spoon into his ravioli and cupped his head in his hands.

“Look, we both knew this couldn’t go on indefinitely.”

He lifted his head from his hands. “We did?”

“Well, I did. It’s been nice. But—”
“Nice?” The question came out louder than he’d intended it. “Okay, look,” he said, now whispering, his head thrust toward her across the ravioli. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. This is just taking me by surprise, is all.” He paused, trying to catch his breath. “How long has this been going on? You and the guy, I mean.”

“For a while. He’s been pushing me to make a decision.”

“Who is it? What’s his name?”

“It’s Kenny, Ira. Kenny, my boss. He’s really a very nice guy.”

“Kenny? Confused Kenny? One month he’s—”

“He’s really very sweet.”

“You’re kidding. He’s crazy. He’s a maniac. You tell me about him every Friday.”

“Listen, Ira, I know how you must feel. I should have told you things were going along a certain way with Kenny and me. I should have done that. I know. Honestly, I wanted to tell you about this as it was developing—but if I had, what would you have said?”

“I would have said—I don’t know.” He threw up his hands. “How would I know that? I have no idea.”

“Kenny’s gone through some phases over the past couple of years, but he’s settled down a lot lately,” said Pauline. She broke off a piece of bread and shredded it into crumbs on her plate. “He’s got grown children, by the way—a son and a daughter. Very nice. They both went to Stanford. I’ve met his ex-wife, too, for that matter. It turns out we go to the same place to have our hair done. She’s a lovely person.”

“Well, that’s just great,” Ira said bitterly, and blew out a sigh. “What about us? We had something going here, didn’t we?”

“I don’t know. I don’t think so.” Pauline sighed, shook her head, looked away briefly, then back at him.

“I’m not just talking about the sex, by the way. I’m talking about the companionship.” He paused, reconsidering. “But okay, let’s just—let’s just talk about the sex, for starters.”

“Oh, Ira, let’s not. Please.”

Ira shut his eyes, but instead of blackness, he saw what seemed to be blood red curtains floating thickly in the air. He opened his eyes. “You’re just going to end this?” he said. “I can’t believe it. We’ve been having such a good time together.”

“We’re divorced. We were married for ten years, it didn’t work out,