

The Four Questions

By Allegra Goodman

Commentary, April 1996

Ed is sitting in his mother-in-law Estelle's gleaming kitchen. "Is it coming in on time?" Estelle asks him. He is on the phone checking on Yehudit's flight from San Francisco.

"It's still ringing," Ed says. He sits on one of the kitchen swivel chairs and twists the telephone cord through his fingers. One wall of the kitchen is papered in a yellow and brown daisy pattern, the daisies as big as Ed's hand. The window-shade has the same pattern on it. Ed's inlaws live in a 1954 ranch house with all the original period details. Every year, practically, since their wedding, he and Sarah have come out to Long Island for Passover, and the house has stayed the same. The front bedroom, Sarah's old room, has a blue carpet, organdy curtains, and white furniture, including a kidney-shaped vanity table. There is a creaky trundle bed to wheel out from under Sarah's bed, and Ed always sleeps there on the trundle, a step below Sarah.

In the old days, Sarah and Ed would fly up from Washington with the children, but now the kids come in on their own. Miriam and Ben take the shuttle down from Boston; Avi is driving in from Wesleyan, and Yehudit, the youngest, is flying in from Stanford because the holiday coincides with her spring break. Ed is going to pick her up at Kennedy tonight. "It's coming in on time," Ed tells Estelle.

"Good," she says, and she takes away his empty glass. Automatically, instinctively, Estelle puts things away. She folds up the newspaper before Ed gets to the business section. She'll clear the table while the slower eaters are contemplating seconds. And, when Ed and Sarah visit, Ed will find that his things have inexorably been straightened. His tangle of coins, keys, watch, and comb has been untangled. The shirt and socks on the bed have been washed and folded. It's the kind of service you might expect in a fine hotel. In West Hempstead it makes Ed uneasy. His mother-in-law is in constant motion, sponging, sweeping, snapping the refrigerator door open and shut. Flicking off lights after him as he leaves the room. Now she is checking the oven. "This is a beautiful bird. Sarah," she calls into the den. "I want you to tell Miriam when she gets here that this turkey is kosher. Is she going to eat it?"

"I don't know," Sarah says. Her daughter the medical student (Harvard medical school) has been getting religiously more observant every year. In college she started bringing paper plates and plastic utensils to her grandparents' house because Estelle and Sol don't keep kosher. Then she began eating off paper plates even at home in Washington. Although Ed and Sarah have a kosher kitchen, they wash their milk and meat dishes together in the dishwasher.

"I never would have thought it," Estelle says. "Yehudit was always finicky. I could have predicted she would become a vegetarian. But Miriam used to come and have more of everything. She used to love my turkey."

"It's not that, Mommy," Sarah says.

"I know. It's this Orthodoxy of hers. I have no idea where she gets it from. From Jonathan, I guess." Jonathan is Miriam's fiancé.

“No,” Ed says, “she started before she even met Jon.”

“It wasn’t from anyone in this family. Are they still talking about having that Orthodox rabbi marry them?”

“We met with him,” Ed says.

“What was his name, Lowenthal?”

“Lewitsky,” Ed says.

“Black coat and hat?”

“No, no, he’s a young guy—”

“That doesn’t mean anything,” Estelle says.

“He was very nice, actually,” Sarah says. “The problem is that he won’t perform a ceremony at Shaarei Tzedek.”

“It’s not Orthodox enough for him?”

“Well, it’s a Conservative synagogue. Of course, our rabbi wouldn’t let him use S.T anyway. Rabbi Landis performs all the ceremonies at S.T. Miriam is talking about getting married outside.”

“Outside!” Estelle says. “In June! In Washington D.C.? When I think of your poor mother, Ed, in that heat!” Estelle is eleven years younger than Ed’s mother Rose, and always solicitous about her health. “What are they thinking of? Where could they possibly get married outside?”

“I don’t know,” Ed says, “Dumbarton Oaks. The Rose Garden. They’re a couple of silly kids.”

“This is not a barbecue,” Estelle says.

“What can we do,” Sarah asks, “if they insist on this rabbi?”

“And it’s March, already,” Estelle says grimly. “Here—” she takes a pink bakery box from the refrigerator. “Ed, you’d better finish these eclairs before she gets here.”

“I’d better not.”

“It’s a long time till dinner,” Estelle warns as she puts the box back.

“That’s OK, I’ll live off the fat of the land,” says Ed, patting his stomach.

“I got her sealed matzahs, sealed macaroons, vacuum-packed gefilte fish.” Estelle displays the packages on the scalloped wood shelves of her pantry.

“Don’t worry. The boys are going to eat,” Sarah assures her mother. They bring the tablecloth out to the dining room. “Remember Avi’s friend, Noam?”

“The gum chewer. He sat at this table and ate four pieces of cake!”

“And now Noam is an actuary,” says Sarah.

“And Avi is bringing a girl to dinner.”

“She’s a lovely girl,” Sarah says.

“Beautiful,” Estelle agrees with a worried look.

In the kitchen Ed is thinking he might have an éclair after all. Estelle always has superb pastry in the house. Sol had started out as a baker, and still has a few friends in the business. “Are these from Leonard’s?” Ed asks when Sol comes in.

“Leonard’s was bought out,” Sol says, easing himself into a chair. “These are from Magic Oven. How is the teaching?”

“Well, I have a heavy load. Two of my colleagues went on sabbatical this year—”

“Left you short-handed?”

“Yeah,” Ed says, “I’ve been teaching seven hours a week.”

“That’s all?” Sol is surprised.

“I mean, on top of my research.”

“It doesn’t sound that bad.”

Ed starts to answer. Instead, he goes to the refrigerator and gets out the eclairs.

“Leonard’s were better,” Sol muses. “He used a better custard.”

“But these are pretty good. What was that? Was that the kids?”

Ed runs out to meet the cab in the driveway, pastry in hand. He pays the driver as his two eldest tumble out of the cab with their luggage—Ben’s back pack and duffel, Miriam’s canvas tote and the suitcase she has inherited, bright pink, patched with silver metallic tape, dating from Ed and Sarah’s honeymoon in Paris.

“Daddy!” Miriam says. “What are you eating?”

Ed looks at his éclair. Technically all this sort of thing should be out of the house by now—all bread, cake, pastry, candy, soda, ice cream—anything even sweetened with corn syrup. And, of course, Miriam takes the technicalities seriously. He knows she must have stayed up late last night in her tiny apartment in Cambridge, vacuuming the crevices in the couch, packing away her toaster-oven. He finishes off the éclair under her disapproving eyes. He doesn’t need the calories, either, she is thinking. She has become very Puritanical, his daughter, and it baffles him, her strict views on religion. They had raised the children in a liberal, rational, joyous way—raised them to enjoy the Jewish tradition, and Ed can’t understand why Miriam should choose austerity and obscure ritualism. She is only twenty-three—even if she is getting married in June. How can a young girl be attracted to this kind of legalism? It disturbs him. On the other hand, he knows she is right about his weight and blood pressure. He’ll take it easy on dinner.

Meanwhile, Ben carries in the bags and dumps them in the den. “Hi Grandma! Hi Grandpa! Hi Mom!” He grabs the TV remote and starts flipping channels. No one is worried about Ben becoming too intense. He is a senior at Brandeis, six feet tall with overgrown ash-brown hair. He has no thoughts about the future. No ideas about life after graduation. No plan. He is studying psychology in a distracted sort of way. When he flops down on the couch he looks like a big, amiable golden retriever.

“Get me the extra chairs from the basement, dear,” Estelle tells him. “We’ve been waiting for you to get here. Then, Sarah, you can get the wine glasses. You can reach up there.” Estelle is in her element. Her charm bracelet jingles as she talks. She directs Ben to go down under the Ping-Pong table without knocking over the boxes stacked there; she points Sarah to the cabinet above the refrigerator.

Estelle is smaller than Sarah—five-feet-two-and-a-quarter—and her features are sharper. She had been a brunette when she was younger, but now her hair is auburn. Her eyes are lighter brown as well, and her skin dotted with sun spots from the winters in Florida. “Oh—” she sighs suddenly as her granddaughter Miriam brings a box of paper plates from the kitchen. “Why do you have to—?”

“Because these dishes aren’t *Pesah* dishes.”

Estelle looks at the table, set with her white and gold Noritake china. “This is the good china,” she says. “These are the *Pesah* dishes.”

“But you use them for the other holidays, too,” Miriam tells her. “They’ve had bread on them and cake and pumpkin pie and all kinds of stuff.”

“Oooh, you are sooo stubborn!” Estelle puts her hands on her tall granddaughter’s shoulders and gives her a shake. The height difference makes it look as though she is pleading as she looks up into Miriam’s face. Then the oven timer goes off and she rushes into the kitchen. Sarah is washing lettuce at the sink. “I’ll do the salads last,” Estelle tells her. “After Ed goes to the airport.” Miriam is still on her mind. What kind of seder will Miriam have next year after she is married? Estelle has met Miriam’s fiancé, who is just as observant as she is. “Did you see?” she asks Sarah. “I left you my list, for Miriam’s wedding.”

“What list?”

“On the table. Here,” Estelle gives Sarah the typed list. “These are the names and addresses you asked for—the people I need to invite.”

Sarah looks at the list. She turns the page and scans the names, doing some calculations in her head.

“Mommy!” she says, “There are 42 people on this list!”

“Not all of them will be able to come, of course,” Estelle reassures her.

“We’re having 100 people at this wedding, remember? Including Ed’s family, and the kids’ friends—”

“Well, this is our family. These are your cousins, Sarah.”

Sarah looks again at the list. “When was the last time I saw these people?” she asks. “Miriam wouldn’t even recognize some of them. And what’s this? The Seligs? The Magids? Robert and Trudy Rothman? These aren’t cousins.”

“Sarah! Robert and Trudy are my dearest friends. We’ve known the Seligs and the Magids for 30 years.”

“This is a small family wedding,” Sarah tells her mother. “I’m sure they’ll understand—”

Estelle knows that they wouldn’t understand.

“We have to cut down this list,” Sarah says.

Estelle doesn’t get a chance to reply. Avi has arrived from Connecticut, and he’s standing in the living room with Ed, Sarah, and Ben. *She* stands next to him: Amy, his friend from Wesleyan. Estelle still holds back from calling her his girlfriend. Nevertheless, there she is. She has gorgeous strawberry-blond hair and she has brought Estelle flowers—mauve and rose tulips with fancy curling petals. No one else brought flowers. “They’re beautiful. Look, Sol, aren’t they beautiful?” Estelle says. “Avi, you can take your bag to the den. The boys are sleeping in the den; the girls are sleeping in the sun room.”

“I don’t want to sleep in the den,” Avi says.

“Why not?” asks Estelle.

“Because he snores.” Avi points at his brother. “He’s so loud. I’d rather sleep in the basement.”

Everyone looks at him. It’s a finished basement and it’s got carpeting, but it is cold down there.

“You’ve shared a room with Ben for years,” Sarah says.

“You’ll freeze down there,” Estelle tells him.

“I have a down sleeping bag.”

“You never complained at home,” Sarah says.

“Oh, give me a break,” Ben mutters under his breath. “They aren’t going to have wild sex in a sleeping bag in the basement.”

“What?” Ed asks. “Did you say something, Ben?”

“No,” Ben says, and ambles back into the den.

“I don’t want you in the basement,” Estelle tells her grandson.

“Can I help you in the kitchen, Mrs. Kirshenbaum?” asks Amy.

Estelle and Amy make the chopped liver. The boys are watching TV in the den, and Ed and Sarah are lying down. Miriam is on the phone with Jon.

“Did you want me to chop the onions, too?” Amy asks Estelle.

“Oh, no. Just put them there and I’ll take out the livers, and then we attach the grinder—” She snaps the grinder onto the Kitchen Aid and starts feeding in the broiled livers. “You add the onions and the eggs.”

She pushes in the hard-boiled eggs. “And the *schmaltz*.” She is explaining to Amy all about chopped liver, but her mind is full of questions. How serious is it with Avi? What do Amy’s parents think? They are Methodist, Estelle knows that. And Amy’s uncle is a Methodist minister. They can’t approve of all this. But then, of course, how much do they know about it? Avi barely talks about Amy. They’ve only met her once before when they came up for Avi’s jazz-band concert. And then suddenly Avi said he wanted to bring her with him to the seder. But he’s never really dated anyone before, and kids shy away from anything serious at this age.

Amy’s family goes to church every Sunday. They’re quite religious. Amy had explained that to Estelle on the phone when she called up about the book. She wanted Estelle to recommend a book for her to read about Passover. Estelle didn’t know what to say. If only Amy weren’t Methodist. She is an absolute doll. The tulips stand on the counter in the big barrel-cut crystal vase. The most beautiful colors.

By the time Ed goes off to the airport, everything is ready except the salad. They dress for dinner while he is gone. “Do you have a decent shirt?” Sarah asks Ben, who is still watching television, “Or is that as good as it gets?”

“I didn’t have a chance to do my laundry before I got here, so I have hardly any clothes,” Ben explains to his mother.

“Ben!” Estelle looks at him in his red and green plaid hunting shirt. Avi is wearing a nice starched Oxford.

“Maybe he could borrow one of Grandpa’s,” Miriam suggests.

“Come on, Ben,” says Sol, “let’s see if we can strap you into something.”

They wait for Ed and Yehudit in the living room, almost as if they were expecting guests. Ben sits stiffly on the couch in his too small, stiff shirt. He stares at the silver coffee service carefully wrapped in clear plastic. He cracks his knuckles, and then he twists his neck to crack his neck joints. Everyone screams at him. Then, finally, they hear the car in the driveway.

“You’re sick as a dog!” Sarah exclaims when Yehudit gets inside.

Yehudit blows her nose and looks at them with feverish, jet-lagged eyes. “Yeah, I think I have mono,” she says.

“Oh my God,” says Estelle. “She has to get into bed. That cot in the sun room isn’t very comfortable.”

“How about a hot drink?” suggests Sarah.

“I’ll get her some soup,” Estelle says.

“Does it have a vegetable base?” Yehudit asks.

“What she needs is a decongestant,” says Ed.

They bundle her up in the Lazy-Boy chair in the den and tuck her in with an afghan and a mug of hot chocolate.

“That’s not kosher for *Pesah*,” worries Miriam.

“Cool it,” Ed says. Then they sit down at the seder table.

Ed always leads the seder. Sol and Estelle love the way he does it because he is so knowledgeable. Ed’s area of expertise is the Middle East, and so he ties Passover to the present day. And he is eloquent. They are very proud of their son-in-law.

“This is our festival of freedom,” Ed says, “commemorating our liberation from slavery.” He picks up a piece of matzah and reads from his New Revised Haggadah: “This is the bread which our fathers and mothers ate in *Mitzraim* when they were slaves.” He adds from the translator’s note: “We use the Hebrew word *Mitzraim* to denote the ancient land of Egypt—”

“As opposed to modern-day *Mitzraim*,” Miriam says dryly.

“To differentiate it from modern Egypt,” Ed reads. Then he puts down the matzah and extemporizes. “We eat this matzah so we will never forget what slavery is, and so that we continue to empathize with afflicted peoples throughout the world: those torn apart by civil wars; those starving or homeless; those crippled by poverty and disease. We think of the people oppressed for their religious or political beliefs. In particular, we meditate on the people in our own country who have not yet achieved full freedom; those discriminated against because of their race, gender, or sexual preference. We think of the subtle forms of slavery as well as the obvious ones—the gray areas that are now coming to light: sexual harassment, verbal abuse—”

Miriam is ignoring him. She is sitting there chanting to herself out of her Orthodox Haggadah.

“Finally, we turn to the world’s hot spot—the Middle East,” Ed says, “we think of war-torn Israel and pray for compromises. We consider the Palestinians who have no land to call their own, and we call for moderation and perspective. As we sit around the seder table we look to the past to give us insight into the present.”

“Beautiful,” murmurs Estelle. But Ed looks down unhappily to where the kids are sitting. Ben has his feet up on Yehudit’s empty chair and Avi is playing with Amy’s hair. Miriam is still poring over her Haggadah.

“It’s time for the Four Questions,” he says sharply. “The youngest child will chant the Four Questions,” he adds for Amy’s benefit.

Sarah checks on Yehudit in the den. “She’s asleep. Avi will have to do it.”

“Amy is two months younger than I am,” Avi says.

“Why don’t we all say it together?” Estelle suggests. “She shouldn’t have to read it all alone.”

“I don’t mind,” Amy says. She reads: “Why is this night different from all other nights? On other nights we eat leavened bread; why on this night do we eat matzah? On other nights we eat all kinds of herbs; why on this night do we eat bitter herbs? On other nights we do not dip even once; why on this night do we dip twice? On other nights we eat either sitting up or reclining; why on this night do we all recline?”

“Now, Avi, read it in Hebrew,” Ed says, determined that Avi should take part—feeling, as well, that the questions sound strange in English. Anthropological.

“What was that part about dipping twice?” Amy asks when Avi is done.

“That’s when you dip the parsley into the salt water,” Ben tells her.

“It doesn’t have to be parsley,” Sarah says. “Just greens.”

“We’re not up to that yet,” Ed tells them. “Now I’m going to answer the questions.” He reads: “We do these things to commemorate our slavery in *Mitzraim*. For if God had not brought us out of slavery, we and all future generations would still be enslaved. We eat matzah because our ancestors did not have time to let their bread rise when they left E—*Mitzraim*. We eat bitter herbs to remind us of the bitterness of slavery. We dip greens in salt water to remind us of our tears, and we recline at the table because we are free men and women.

“OK,” Ed flips a few pages. “The second theme of Passover is about transmitting tradition to future generations. And we have here in the Haggadah examples of four kinds of children—each with his or her own needs and problems. What we have here are instructions on how to tailor the message of Passover to each one. So we read about four hypothetical cases. Traditionally, they were described as four sons: the wise son, the wicked son, the simple son, and the one who does not know how to ask. We refer to these children in modern terms as: committed, uncommitted, unaffiliated, and assimilated. Let’s go around the table now. Estelle, would you like to read about the committed child?”

“What does the committed child say?” Estelle reads. “What are the practices of Passover which God has commanded us? Tell him or her precisely what the practices are.”

“What does the uncommitted child say?” Sol continues. “What use to you are the practices of Passover? To you, and not to himself. The child excludes him or herself from the community. Answer him/her: this is on account of what God did for me when I went out of *Mitzraim*. For me, and not for us. This child can only appreciate personal gain.”

“What does the unaffiliated child say?” asks Sarah. “What is all this about? Answer him or her simply: we were slaves and now we are free.”

“But for the assimilated child,” Ben reads, “it is up to us to open the discussion.”

“We can meditate for a minute,” Ed says, “on a fifth child who died in the Holocaust.” They sit silently and look at their plates.

“It’s interesting,” says Miriam, “that so many things come in fours on Passover. There are four questions, four sons; you drink four cups of wine—”

“It’s probably just coincidence,” Ben says.

“Thanks,” Miriam tells him. “I feel much better. So much for discussion at the seder.” She glares at her brother. Couldn’t he even shave before he came to the table? She pushes his feet off the chair.

“Don’t be such a pain in the butt,” Ben mutters.

Ed speeds on through the Haggadah. “The ten plagues that befell the Egyptians for refusing to let the Israelites go: “Blood; frogs; vermin; wild beasts; murrain; boils; hail; locusts; darkness; death of the first-born.” He looks up from his book and says, “We think of the suffering of the Egyptians as they faced these calamities. We are grateful for our deliverance, but we remember that the oppressor was also oppressed—” He pauses there, struck by his own phrase. It’s very good. “We cannot celebrate at the expense of others, nor can we say that we are truly free until the other oppressed peoples of the world are also free. We make common cause with all peoples and all minorities. Our struggle is their struggle, and their struggle is our struggle. We turn now to the blessing over the wine and the matzah. Then,” he nods to Estelle, “we’ll be ready to eat.”

“Daddy,” Miriam says. “This is ridiculous. This seder is getting shorter every year.”

“We’re doing it the same way we always do it,” Ed tells her.

“You always skip the most important parts.”

“Miriam!” Sarah hushes her.

“Why do we have to spend the whole time talking about civil rights?”

“Because that’s what Passover is about,” Sol tells her.

“Oh, OK, fine,” Miriam says.

“Time for the gefilte fish,” Estelle announces. Amy gets up to help her and the two of them bring in the salad plates. Each person has a piece of fish on a bed of lettuce with two cherry tomatoes and a dab of magenta horseradish sauce.

Sarah stands up, debating whether to wake Yehudit for dinner. Instead she walks over to Miriam and sits next to her for a minute. “Miriam,” she whispers. “I think you could try a little harder—”

“There’s no reason for that. There’s no reason for you to talk that way to Daddy.”

Miriam looks down at her book and continues reading to herself in Hebrew.

“Miriam?”

“What? I’m reading all the stuff Daddy skipped.”

“Did you hear what I said? You’re upsetting your father.”

“It doesn’t say a single word about minorities in here,” Miriam says stubbornly.

“He’s talking about the modern context—”

Miriam looks up at Sarah. “What about the original context?” she asks. “As in the Jewish people? As in God?”

Yehudit toddles in from the den with the afghan trailing behind her. “Can I have some plain salad?” she asks.

“This fish is wonderful,” Sol says.

“Outstanding,” Ed agrees.

“More,” says Ben with his mouth full.

“Ben! Gross! Can’t you eat like a human being?” Avi asks him.

“It’s Manishewitz Gold Label,” Estelle says. “Yehudit, how did you catch this? Did they say it was definitely mono?”

“No—I don’t know what it is,” Yehudit says. “I started getting sick on the weekend when we went to sing at the Jewish Community Center for the seniors.”

“It’s nice that you do that,” Estelle says. “Very nice. They’re always so appreciative.”

“Yeah, I guess so. There was this old guy there and he asked me, ‘Do you know *Oyfn pripichik*?’ I said, ‘Yes, we did,’ and he said, ‘Then please, can I ask you, don’t sing *Oyfn pripichik*. They always come here and sing it for us and it’s so depressing.’ Then when we left, this little old lady beckoned to me and she said, ‘What’s your name?’ I told her, and she said, ‘You’re very plain, dear, but you’re very nice.’”

“That’s terrible!” Estelle says. “Did she really say that?”

“Yup.”

“It’s not true,” Estelle says. “You should hear what everyone says about my granddaughters when they see your pictures. Wait till they see you—maid of honor at the wedding. What color did you pick for the wedding?” she asks Miriam.

“What?” Miriam says, looking up from her Haggadah.

Ed is gazing at Miriam and feeling that she is trying to undermine his whole seder. Who is she to criticize the way he leads the service? What does she think she is doing? He can remember seders when she couldn’t stay awake until dinner. He remembers when she couldn’t even sit up. When he could hold her head in the palm of his hand.

“I think peach is a hard color,” Estelle is saying. “It’s a hard color to find. You know, a pink is one thing. A pink looks lovely on just about everyone. Peach is a hard color to wear. When your Mommy and Daddy got married we had a terrible time with the color because the temple was maroon. There was a terrible maroon carpet in the sanctuary, and the social hall was maroon as well. There was maroon flocked wallpaper. Remember, honey?” she asks Sol. He nods. “Now it’s a rust color. Why it’s rust, I don’t know. But we ended up having the bridesmaids in pink because that was about all we could do. And in the pictures it looked beautiful.”

“It photographed very well,” Sol says.

“I’ll have to show you the pictures,” Estelle tells Miriam. “The whole family was there and such dear, dear friends. God willing, they’ll be at your wedding, too.”

“No, I don’t think so,” says Ed. “We’re just having the immediate family. We’re only having 100 people.”

Estelle smiles, “I don’t think you can keep a wedding to 100 people.”

“Why not?” Ed asks.

Sarah clears the fish plates nervously. She hates it when Ed takes this tone of voice with her parents.

“Well, I mean not without excluding,” Estelle says. “And at a wedding you don’t want to exclude—”

“I don’t think it’s incumbent on us to invite everyone we know to Miriam’s wedding,” Ed says crisply. Sarah puts her hand on his shoulder. “It’s not even necessary to invite everyone *you* know.”

Estelle raises her eyebrows and Sarah hopes silently that her mother will not whip out the invitation list she’s written up. The list with 42 names that mercifully Ed has not yet seen.

“I’m not inviting everyone I know,” Estelle says.

“Grandma,” Miriam says, looking up. “Are you inviting people to my wedding?”

“Of course not,” says Estelle, “But I’ve told my cousins about it and my dear friends. You know, some of them were at your parents’ wedding. The Magids. The Rothmans.”

“Woah, woah, wait a second,” says Ed. “We aren’t going to revive that guest list. I think we need to define what we mean by immediate family.”

“I’ll define for you,” Estelle says, “what I mean by the family. These are the people who knew us when we lived above the bakery. It wasn’t just at your wedding. They were at *our* wedding before the war. We lived within blocks of each other; and when we moved out to the Island and left the bakery they moved, too. I still talk to Trudy Rothman every day. Who has friends like that? Years ago in the basement we hired a dancing teacher and we used to take dancing lessons together. Fox trot, Cha-cha, tango. We went to temple with them. We celebrated such times! I think you don’t see the bonds because you kids are scattered. We left Bensonhurst together and we came out to the Island together. We’ve lived here since ’56 in this house. We saw this house go up, and their houses were going up too. We went through it together, coming into the wide open spaces, having a garden, trees, and lawns. We see them all the time. In the winters we meet them down in Florida; we go to their grandchildren’s weddings—”

“But I’m paying for this wedding,” Ed says.

Estelle leaves the table and goes into the kitchen.

“Dad,” Avi groans. He whispers to Amy, “I warned you my family is weird.”

“I’m really hungry,” Ben says. “Can we have the turkey, Grandma? Seriously, all I’ve had to eat today was a Snickers bar.”

In silence Estelle returns from the kitchen carrying the turkey. In silence she hands it to Sol to carve it up. She passes the platter around the table. Only slowly does the conversation sputter to life. Estelle talks along with the rest but she doesn’t speak to Ed. She won’t even look at him.

Ed lies on his back on the trundle bed next to Sarah. She is lying on the other bed staring at the ceiling. Every time either of them moves an inch the bed creaks. Ed has never heard such loud creaking; the beds seem to moan and cry out in the night. “The point? The point is this,” Sarah tells him. “It was neither the time nor the place to go over the guest list.”

“Your mother was the one who brought it up!” Ed exclaims.

“And you were the one who started in on her.”

“Sarah, what was I supposed to say—thank you for disregarding what we explicitly told her? Yes, you can invite everyone you know to your granddaughter’s wedding? I’m not going to get steam-rolled into this—that’s what she was trying to do, manipulate this seder into an opportunity to get exactly who she wants, how many she wants—with no discussion whatsoever.”

“The discussion does not have to dominate this holiday,” Sarah says.

“You let these things go and she’ll get out of control. She’ll go from giving us a few addresses to inviting 20, 30 people, 50 people.”

“She’s not going to do that.”

“She knows hundreds of people. How many people were at our wedding—200? 300?”

“Oh, stop. We’re mailing all the invitations ourselves from D.C.”

“Fine.”

“So don’t be pig-headed about it,” Sarah says.

“Pig-headed? Is that what you said?”

“Yes.”

“That’s not fair. You don’t want these people at the wedding any more than I do—”

“Ed, there are ways to explain that, there are tactful ways. You have absolutely no concept—”

“I am tactful. I am a very tactful person. But there are times when I’m provoked.”

“What you said about paying for the wedding was completely uncalled for.”

“But it was true!” Ed cries out, and his bed moans under him as if it feels the weight of his exasperation.

“Shh,” Sarah hisses.

“I don’t know what you want from me.”

“I want you to apologize to my mother and try to salvage this holiday for the rest of us.”

“I’m not going to apologize to that woman,” Ed mutters. Sarah doesn’t answer him. “What?” he asks into the night. His voice sounds to his ears not just defensive but wronged, deserving of sympathy. “Sarah?”

“I have nothing more to say to you,” she says.

“Sarah, she is being completely unreasonable.”

“Oh, stop it.”

“I’m not going to grovel in front of someone intent on sabotaging this wedding.”

Sarah doesn’t answer.

The next day Ed wakes up with a sharp pain in his left shoulder. It is 5:19 in the morning, and everyone else is sleeping—except for Estelle. He can hear her moving around the house adjusting things, flipping light switches, twitching lamp shades, tweaking pillows. He doesn’t know which is worse, his shoulder or those fussy little noises. They grate on him like the rattling of cellophane paper. When at last he struggles out of the sagging bed, he runs to the shower and blasts hot water on his head. He takes an inordinately long shower. He is probably using up all the hot water. He imagines Estelle pacing around outside, wondering how in the world anyone can stand in the shower an hour, an hour and fifteen minutes. She is worried about wasting water, frustrated that the door is locked and she cannot get in to straighten the toothbrushes. The fantasy warms him.

By the time the children are up it has become a muggy, sodden spring day. Yehudit sleeps off her cold medicine, Ben watches television in the den with Sol, and Miriam shuts herself up in her room in disgust because watching TV violates the holiday. Avi goes out with Amy for a walk. They leave right after lunch and are gone for hours. Where could they go for three hours in West Hempstead? Are they stopping at every duck pond? Browsing in every strip mall? It’s a long, empty day. The one good thing is that Sarah isn’t angry at him any more. She massages his stiff shoulder. “These beds have to go,” she says, “they’re 30 years old.”

“It would probably be more comfortable to lie on the floor,” Ed says. He watches Estelle as she sets the table for the second night’s seder. “You notice she still isn’t speaking to me.”

“Well,” Sarah says, “what do you expect?” But she says it sympathetically. “We have to call your mother,” she reminds him.

“Yeah, I suppose so.” Ed heaves a sigh. “Get the kids. Make them talk to her.”

“Hey, Grandma,” says Ben when they put him on the phone. “What’s up? Oh yeah? It’s dull here, too. No, we aren’t doing anything. Just sitting around. No, Avi’s got his girlfriend here so they went out. Amy. I don’t know. Don’t ask me. Miriam’s here, too. Yup. What? Everybody’s like dealing with who’s going to come to her wedding. Grandma E? Oh, she’s fine. I think she’s kind of pissed at Dad, though.”

Ed takes the phone out of Ben’s hands.

“Kind of what?” his mother Rose is asking.

“Hello, Ma?” Ed carries the cordless phone into the bedroom and sits at the vanity table. As he talks he can see himself from three angles in the triptych mirror. He sees the dome of his forehead with just a few

strands of hair; his eyes, tired, a little bloodshot, even; the pink of his ears, soft and fleshy. He looks terrible.

“Ed,” his mother says. “Sarah told me you are excluding Estelle’s family from the wedding.”

“*Family?*” What family? These are Estelle’s friends.”

“And what about Esther and Pauline? Should I disinvite them, too?”

“Ma! You invited your neighbors?”

“Of course! To my own granddaughter’s wedding? Of course I did.”

“Ma,” Ed snaps. “As far as I’m concerned, the only invitations to this wedding are going to be the ones printed up and issued by me, from my house. This is Miriam’s wedding. For her. Not for you, not for Estelle.”

“You are wrong,” Rose says simply. Throughout the day these words ring in Ed’s ears. It is he who feels wronged. It’s not as if his mother or Sarah’s mother were contributing to the wedding in any way. They just make their demands. They aren’t doing anything.

Miriam is sitting in the kitchen spreading whipped butter on a piece of matzah. Ed sits down next to her. “Where’s Grandma?” he asks.

“She went out to get milk,” says Miriam, and then she bursts out, “Daddy, I don’t want all those people at the wedding.”

“I know, sweetie.” It’s wonderful to hear Miriam appeal to him, to be able to sympathize with her as if she weren’t almost a doctor with severe theological opinions.

“I don’t even know them,” Miriam says.

“We don’t have to invite anyone you don’t want to invite,” Ed says firmly.

“But I don’t want Grandma all mad at me at the wedding,” her voice wavers. “I don’t know what to do.”

“You don’t have to do anything,” Ed says. “You just relax.”

“I think maybe we should just invite them,” Miriam says in a small voice.

“*Oy,*” says Ed.

“Or some of them,” she says.

Someone rattles the back door and they both jump. It’s just Sarah. “Let me give you some advice,” she says. “Invite these people, invite your mother’s people, and let that be an end to it. We don’t need this kind of *tsuris*.”

“No!” Ed says.

“I think she’s right,” says Miriam.

He looks at her. “Would that make you feel better?” She nods and he gets to give her a hug. “I don’t get to hug my Miriam any more,” he tells Sarah.

“I know,” she says. “That’s Grandma’s car. I’m going to tell her she can have the Magids.”

“But you make it clear to her,” Ed starts.

“Ed,” she says. “I’m not making anything clear to her.”

At the second seder, Estelle looks at everyone benignly from where she stands between the kitchen and the dining room. Sol makes jokes about weddings, and Avi gets carried away by the good feeling, puts his arm around Methodist Amy and says, “Mom and Dad, I promise when I get married I’ll elope.” No one laughs at this.

When it’s time for the Four Questions Ed reads them himself. “Why is this night different from all other nights? On other nights we eat leavened bread. Why on this night do we eat matzah? Ben, could you put your feet on the floor?” When Ed is done he says, “So essentially each generation has an obligation to explain our Exodus to the next generation—whether they like it or not.”

That night in the moaning trundle bed Ed thinks about the question Miriam raised at the first seder. Why are there four of everything on Passover? Four children. Four questions. Four cups of wine. Lying there with his eyes closed, Ed sees these foursomes dancing in the air. He sees them as in the naive illustrations of his 1960’s Haggadah. Four gold cups, the words of the Four Questions outlined in teal blue; four children’s faces. The faces of his own children, not as they are now but as they were nine, ten years ago. And then, as he falls asleep, a vivid dream flashes before him. Not the children, but Sarah’s parents, along with the Rothmans, the Seligs, the Magids, and all their friends, perhaps 1,000 of them walking *en masse* like marathoners over the Verazzano Bridge. They are carrying suitcases and ironing boards, bridge tables, tennis rackets, and lawn chairs. They are driving their poodles before them as they march together. It is a procession both majestic and frightening. At Estelle’s feet, at the feet of her 1,000 friends, the steel bridge trembles. Its long cables sway above the water. And as Ed watches he feels the trembling, the pounding footsteps. It’s like an earthquake rattling, pounding, vibrating through his whole body. He wants to turn away; he wants to dismiss it, but still he feels it, unmistakable, not to be denied. The thundering of history.