SLEEPING IN THE SYNAGOGUE

I'd already been sleeping in the synagogue for a few weeks when I encountered Hubert Collins and his grandson hard at work on the carpeted staircase.

Hubert, 64 and still working six days a week, had made a success out of one of those businesses where an eighth grade education is no bar to earning a decent living. He'd been cleaning the carpets in our house for years when I hired him to do the same thing at Bet Shalom in Good Harbor. Twice a year he came to the synagogue hauling many pounds of bulky steam cleaners, along with plastic bottles of stain remover. I know cleaning—my company provides office services (decorating, fresh flowers, painting, cleaning) for Manhattan commercial tenants, and Hubert is good: prompt, thorough, careful. He likes to be paid about a minute after finishing a job, but who can blame him? After all, he's not the kind of guy to send you a bill generated by QuickBooks.

He was of that older generation of black men, born before the war, who wear their dignity like a uniform, always in order, never soiled or ill-fitting, men who have no need to be provocative or angry because they have already surmounted all the slights and condescension, the insults, curses and violence that white society can throw their way. They thumb their noses at that society every day by dint of their proud independence. Eight or nine years ago Hubert took in his grandson, Smitty, when his daughter abruptly moved to Atlanta to live with an old boyfriend. For Smitty, growing up with Hubert has been tough-love boot-camp; weekends and most days after school, the boy cleaned carpets with his grandfather.

As president of the synagogue I'm there a lot: Friday night and Saturday services, Tuesday night executive committee, a Wednesday sit-down with the rabbi. It was on one of those Wednesday afternoons that Hubert and Smitty showed up to perform our semi-annual cleaning. By then sleeping in the synagogue had become my routine─I don't mean sleeping just during the sermon, but all night, every night.

"Afternoon, Mr. Rivkin," Hubert said.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Collins. Afternoon, Smitty."

Smitty was a gangly 15-year old, tall enough to be a college forward, skinny as a

popsicle stick. He looked at my shoes and mumbled something I couldn't hear.

"I can't figure the kid out," Hubert had said to me months before. "Smart, quick with numbers, knows computers, but won't do a lick of homework. Here's a kid who could go to a good college, MIT even, but he won't take the trouble to get the grades.

"Maybe he needs to find something he's really interested in," I said. "Then he'll apply himself."

"The way I see it, he needs to apply himself first. If you've got a carpet to clean, no use standing around waiting to be interested in it. Get to it. Then you'll get interested alright. Interested in how to do it better and faster. Interested in getting paid."

"Another thing," he added. "He hangs around with some of the wrong kids, ones with nothing to do but to make trouble."

"That doesn't sound like Smitty. You work him pretty hard."

"Can't watch them all the time. Not at that age."

On this day, when their cleaning was done and Hubert and Smitty were packing up their gear, our rabbi, Danny Levinson, motioned to me from the library. "Andy, can you give me a hand with this?" he said, pointing to the Torah scroll on the table.

The Torah was open to a passage in Exodus and needed to be rewound almost to the end, to a chapter in Deuteronomy. Rewinding a scroll is a workout for arms and shoulders that can take 15 minutes−including stopping from time to time to scan the Hebrew text to see where you are, because a Torah scroll has no page or section numbers, no periods or commas.

Danny stationed me at the Deuteronomy end of the scroll, He stood at the Genesis end, quickly developing a rapid-fire rhythm as he skittered his roller toward me, tightened the scroll, pulled, then stretched his arms toward me again and again, pulling and rolling.

While the rabbi and I rolled the Torah, Smitty watched from the library entrance.

"What's that?" His words were high-pitched, squeaky, as if his vocal cords had some stretching to do in order to catch up with his height.

"The Torah," the rabbi said, "the Old Testament. Come have a look. Every letter is written by hand."

"By hand, wow. How long did it take you to write it?"

"Not me. It takes an expert, a scribe called a *sofer*, a year to do it."

"A whole year? How much does that cost?"

Danny smiled. "How much would you want to get paid, if you spent an entire year making just one thing?" Answer a question with a question: is that part of the training in rabbinical school, or does it just come naturally to them?

"A lot," Smitty said.

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It was early October, just after the holidays, when I moved into the synagogue. That first morning was disorienting. You know how it is to open your eyes at dawn and not remember where you are? Those fleeting minutes of gray when everything around you—the bedsheets, the door to your left and the night table by your side—has that insubstantial, dreamlike quality? You roll your eyes this way and that, trying to decipher the contours of the room. And then it comes to you: no, this is not my bedroom, I'm on vacation in Amsterdam or I'm in my son's apartment in West LA. In my case, I awoke not in a strange sofa bed with the springs poking aggressively at my spine, but in the little ante-chamber to the rabbi's study, on the second floor of Bet Shalom in our peaceful Westchester suburb.

We were already in a spell of crisp autumn nights. In underwear and socks I'd paddle to the second floor window in time to see the sun just breaking free of the lid of the horizon. The play of golden light and dark green pine needles brought a gasp to my lips. There was a row of white pines at the edge of the synagogue grounds, their long graceful limbs swooping low to the grounds, like the outstretched legs of a ballerina. With my forehead half an inch from the window pane, I could feel the mass of cool air pressing from the outside, knowing it was only a matter of time before the sun would heat the air under the roof and warm the glass. It was coming, the warmth of this fall morning; soon the blue of the sky would be enough to take your breath away.

Perhaps it was destiny that I wound up here. I put the house up for sale, as agreed, once Antonia and I had each signed the final divorce papers. I didn't expect a quick sale; the housing market was glum and getting glummer. Yet within a week my broker, Mary Alice Riley, brought over a buyer, an executive relocating to New York who saw the house

at 2 p.m. and made a full-price, cash offer at six. The only condition, non-negotiable, was that we close in three days.

“Impossible,” I said to Mary Alice. How could I disassemble a 3300-square foot house full of furniture, knickknacks, house plants, photos and memories in three days?

“Andy, he’s paying Asking Price,” Mary Alice thundered, implying that to turn it down would be a desecration, like using the Shroud of Turin to scrub the kitchen floor. “You have to take it. Don't worry, I'll help you get the house ready."

I took it.

That night I called Becky, my oldest daughter, to tell her the news.

“Oh daddy, that’s wonderful.” It always amazed me how little attachment my three children have to the house where they grew up. Becky was living in Raleigh with a boyfriend. When she heard I had to move out in three days, she invited me to come and stay with them.

"For a week or so," she quickly added. "You know, to relax and get your bearings."

“Thanks, but I have a business to run, remember?”

More than ever it was important to make that business pay. The agreement with Antonia gave her the lion’s share of the proceeds from the house sale, once the mortgage had been paid off. In return I got to keep the business free and clear, but that only made sense if I could wring some profit out of it.

When I got into the office services business 20 years ago, I didn’t make a ton of money, but I did fine. A guy like me who is presentable and knows how to talk to building managers and owners could get new clients and watch the business grow.

Now the field is crowded with newcomers, many of them immigrants who hire other immigrants. I have to hustle just to keep the existing customers, and when a company threatens to leave because someone underbids me by six percent, what choice is there but to match the price?

To clear out the house, Mary Alice found me one of those organize-your-life ladies, expert in managing what to keep, sell, donate. She helped me hire movers with gentle hands to wrap and pack the remaining furniture, dishes, lamps, throw pillows. paintings and papers, much of it headed for storage. On closing day the house was empty, spotless. I turned over the keys, collected a check and wired Antonia her share.

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I could have moved into the nearby national chain motel with its blond furniture assembled from some composite non-quite-wood material, its Gideon Bible in the night table, its mass-produced still-life print (a pear, an apple, a cluster of purple grapes) over the bed. Besides being depressed by the décor, I would have had to fork over $139 per night. As if to reinforce my money worries, the day of the closing a client in the financial district, Broad & Wall Realty, said they were considering a lower price from a competitor. They'd been with me for 14 years.

A cousin on the Upper West Side offered me his guest room, but then I thought of Bet Shalom. There was something so appealing about its anonymity—not to mention the deliciously illicit feeling of being there in secret and invisible.

When I first moved in I was afraid to sleep too soundly. The Torah scrolls are insured, as are the furnishings, the kitchen appliances and dishes and cutlery, the books in the library, the office equipment. The building has fire and smoke detectors, sprinklers. Still, I felt I was the flesh and blood defense against accidents, fire and assaults. Every noise shot me awake—the refrigerator compressor, the dull ring of acorns skittering down the roof, wind gusts that shook the window panes and set curtains quivering.

But after a few nights a soothing calm set in. I'm not a spiritual person, whatever that means. To be synagogue president you don't need a deep knowledge of Torah. You need to motivate congregants to volunteer for dozens of humdrum but essential tasks—babysitting on the High Holidays, arranging food for after services, seeing that enough people show up during the seven-day shiva period to comfort mourners, getting the leaks fixed, the bills paid, the dues collected. And you need to coddle, encourage−and occasionally overrule−the rabbi as he goes about his multi-faceted and demanding job.

Spiritual, no, yet once I got over my initial anxieties, those nights upstairs in a house of worship were restorative. Before lights out I read, or else lay there quietly, humming the refrain from a Shabbat melody, planning a new life. Night after night I slept without waking. When I had dreams, they were sunny—picnics by a meandering stream, a July outing to the old Yankee Stadium, a glorious coming graduation day for my youngest daughter, Sylvie, who'd just settled in for her last year at Penn. It wasn't closeness to God

that I experienced—neither synagogue attendance nor my presidential duties have worn away my inbred agnosticism—so much as a feeling of being sheltered. Unencumbered and at peace, that was my secret nocturnal life at Bet Shalom.

Peace was what I craved. I didn't find out about Antonia's affair with Harmon, a partner in her law firm, until after it ended. For weeks I couldn't look at her without the pain in my chest erupting into incoherent rage. The recriminations, fighting, tears, apologies and frigid silences went on and on until divorce was the only way out.

It was also a relief to be rid of the house. I liked the idea of living with no possessions except the gym bag that held my changes of clothing and toiletries, the briefcase with the laptop and office papers. In the morning I folded up my sheet and blanket, deflated my pillow and stored them at the bottom of a supply closet, in one of those plastic containers with a lock-down cover, Then I paddled down the hall to the upstairs bathroom and its spacious tiled shower, a thoughtful, if costly extra, installed when we did a synagogue renovation several years ago. Who knew that I'd be the beneficiary?

A few people figured out what I was doing. Early mornings I'd sometimes run into our custodian Evgeny, a tall fellow with coarse yellow hair and a high forehead. He'd be noisily scrubbing pots, stacking dishes and cutlery for the dishwasher.

"Hello Mr. Rivkin," Evgeny said in his formal way.

"Morning, Evgeny."

He never asked why I was there, but Evgeny misses nothing; my red and gray gym bag told him all he needed to know.

A few days later I spotted Howard Gold getting out of his car in the parking lot. Even before I saw his face I knew it was him from the way he swung his left foot, the artificial one, up over the lip of the car door frame before setting it down on the blacktop, manipulating it with the painstaking precision of a crane operator.

His face opened in that dazzling smile that served him well during a dozen years as president. I never thought he'd give up that job but he's got health problems, serious ones.

"Andy, how are you?" he said. "What a morning, isn't it?"

He'd come to Bet Shalom to drop off a check and wound up driving me to the station, saving me the walk. Howard knew about the divorce and as he waited in the car

with me for the New York-bound train. he asked how I was doing. Then he mentioned how crazy it was for him, a widower, to be all alone in a sprawling house.

"Why not stay at my place for a while? You'll have your own bathroom, you can come and go on your own schedule. Of course, if you want company"—and here he gave me a sly look that was nothing like his usual thousand-watt smile—"we can go out at night and chase women together."

I burst out laughing at the sheer incongruity of 72-year old Howard, gimping around on that artificial foot and tossing off pickup lines at some singles bar.

"Howard, you're a riot," I said, as the train rumbled to a stop. "And thanks for the lift."

As we rolled toward the city I considered his offer. He'd be an easy host, but honestly I preferred my upstairs couch, the way the threads of my life fit snugly into that gym bag, the peaceful oblivion that came over me every night when I shut off the light. At work I was finding a new focus. That morning I went out hustling for business, a new 41-story skyscraper in midtown where I knew the managing agent. Then I visited the Broad & Wall people and offered them a five percent reduction

"It's the best I can do," I said. "I can't work for nothing." Said it with the broadest smile I could muster, a la Howard Gold.

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The sound of breaking class was the last thing I expected to hear. Good Harbor was a friendly place, with neighbors who greeted you cordially and shopkeepers who knew your name.

There'd been plenty of anti-Semitism here in the old days. In the 40s and 50s it had taken the form of realtors not showing houses to Jews, just saying blatantly and without shame, "I don't think that's the right neighborhood for you people." But times had changed. Anti-discrimination laws had been passed. The people who didn't want Jews living next door watched their law firms take in Jewish associates and then Jewish partners; saw their kids come home from Amherst or Wellesley with Jewish friends.

Anti-Semitism was still there but it had become muted, had gone underground.

When I heard the synagogue window shattering, I first imagined that this was the

sound track of a dream featuring a car crash or an angry husband throwing dishes. The immediacy of the noise, like a thunderclap that disturbs the drowsy late summer afternoon, told me this was no dream. My next thought was, Here they come, neo-Nazi skinheads out to break things, spray swastikas. I groped in the darkness for the nylon sweat pants and the tea-stained sweatshirt, making the sleep-fogged mistake of inserting both sets of toes and knees into the same right pants leg, and then, when I got untangled, the further mistake of putting the sweat shirt on backwards so that the clothing tag that said "Machine Wash Warm Tumble Dry Low Do Not Iron" (who irons a sweat shirt, anyway?) brushed the tip of my nose as the sweat shirt settled, wrong side facing out, on my neck and shoulders.

There was no time to take it off and put it on right; young male voices were spiraling up the staircase.

"'Fuck you doin', man, you sure you know where we goin'?" This was a deep but young voice, belonging to a 16 or 17-year old.

"Relax, man. I know the way." This voice was younger, high-pitched, almost squeaky.

"Way to what?"

"To where they're at." And then the voice continued, "Those Torahs, man."

Though the younger voice sounded familiar, I couldn't quite place it. Not that I was still groggy; I'd never been more awake than in the panic of this moment, poised on the top step, as the blackness of the interior dissolved into recognizable, if oddly positioned shapes, the broad curving banister, the wide stairs with the carpeting worn a bit at the intersection of the treads and risers.

Now a third male voice, gruffly menacing, said "Fuck you think it's for? Motherfucker try to mess with our shit, I'm a take care of that motherfucker."

This pronouncement elicited a soothing, almost deferential plea from the oldest of the boys for gruff to cool it. The younger one, whose high-pitched voice was familiar, gave out a yelp and told gruff, put it away, don't be a fool.

What was it? A blackjack? A gun? The dialog froze me. I tiptoed to the rabbi's study. Here, in the cool darkness, surrounded by shelves of Hebrew dictionaries, a book entitled "Can Judaism Survive America" and some 45 over-sized volumes of Talmud in

their red binders, I dialed 911.

As I replaced the receiver it came to me, the owner of the squeaky voice. Now I charged downstairs shouting "Who's there, who's there?" a silly question better directed to a stranger ringing the doorbell than to this trio of intruders.

Just inside the door to the sanctuary I paused. Near the pulpit I could make out the wavering orbit of a tiny flashlight and three teenagers in an awkward dance with a pair of Torah scrolls; they looked like would-be running backs practicing a handoff. They'd broken the wide picture window on the east side of the sanctuary, leaving a scattering of jagged hunks of glass along the carpet to the right of the pews. I recognized Smitty's silhouette; he was the tallest of the three and the way he was cradling one of the scrolls in his arms suggested solicitude for his cargo that belied the affront of the break-in.

"Smitty, what are you doing? Put it down now before you get into trouble."

He looked at me, dumfounded to hear me address him by name.

"Motherfucker, what the fuck?" That was the gruff-voiced one, a stocky fellow in a black T shirt; there was a flash of gold from a chain around his neck. He seemed startled by the lights as I switched them on. He turned toward me, clutching a knife, but he had the unfocused look of someone without his distance glasses. I thought of bolting to the kitchen, to take shelter behind the pantry door, when I heard the whine of a police siren as two squad cars pulled up outside the front door of Bet Shalom.

"Sheeet. Motherfucker called the fucking cops." And then the gruff one took a step in my direction.

His were the last words I heard clearly. I tried to run, got tangled up in a folding chair that was askew along the aisle and pitched head-first into the door jamb. There was no slash of a knife, no sudden fountain of blood; instead I lost consciousness. I don't know how many minutes passed before two policemen, one in his fifties, the other looking barely 30, were standing over me, wondering what I was doing there. There was a stinging in my nose as agonizing as if someone had rammed a fistful of ice crystals up my nostrils.

"Is he some kind of night watchman?" one of them theorized.

I explained who I was, each word causing the cartilage in my nostrils to quiver in pain. The younger cop, perplexed, said, "You're the president and you have to sleep here

to guard the place?"

"It's just temporary. It's a long story."

The two Torah scrolls were unharmed; Smitty had laid them down gently on the pulpit when the cops arrived. The teens had been cuffed and bundled into the back seat of a squad car. I ran outside and asked to talk to them.

"I know one of these kids, he's a good kid, a hard worker," I said. "Let me get his grandpa down here. He'll be a hell of a lot tougher than any judge. Look, they're all teens, you know what juvenile court is like."

"It's not procedure," the sergeant in charge said. "Besides, what about the damage to the building, broken windows, whatever else they did?"

"Please, officer, can we just make the call," I pleaded.

I found the number and the sergeant called Hubert.

It barely took eight minutes before he was getting out of his van. "What'd they do?" he wanted to know. I showed him the broken glass, explained about the Torah scrolls.

He asked the officer for a minute with his grandson. One of the cops brought him out of the squad car, hands cuffed behind him. Hubert seized him by the shoulder; I could see how strong he was from the yelp that escaped Smitty's lips. The boy's shoulder blades clicked like an old-fashioned car door button being locked, a heavy, definitive sound.

When he was done talking to Smitty, Hubert gave an update to the sergeant.

"First thing, we're going to clean up this mess, get this window fixed. It'll be done by this afternoon, guaranteed. Smitty's going to pay for it, every last cent. After that, these three boys going to do community service. The garage outside the temple needs painting, they going to do that. Then, every Saturday for the next three months they going to show up at the police station and you can put them to work, any job in town, the schools, the hospital, whatever. I'm going to deliver them myself."

When I said the synagogue would not press charges, the sergeant sighed, and took the boys' names and addresses. He said he'd still need an okay from the police chief in the morning; otherwise they'd have to be booked.

Hubert looked at me. "Mr. Rivkin, that nose is swelled up pretty bad. Broken, I'd say."

"I guess." By now my voice was so muffled I couldn't hear my own words. We

locked up the synagogue as best we could, and Hubert said he'd be back in a little while with plywood as a temporary fix. Then he installed me in the front of the van with Smitty and his comrades in back, all three of them silent and shaken, and drove me to the hospital.

On the way, Smitty apologized to me. "I looked up what a Torah goes for, and thought we'd make a lot of money," he said, sniffling, overcome with remorse.

True, a used scroll could bring as much as $10,000 to $15,000, but I doubted he'd ever figured out how he was going to find a buyer.

"Dumbest thing I've ever done," Smitty added.

Then he asked, "What were you doing in the synagogue? You live there now?"

"No more, I'm moving out."

Time to look for an apartment; for now I'd go to Howard's or my cousin's—anywhere but the motel with the Gideon's Bible and the still-life of the apple, the pear and the grapes.

"Lucky for you he was there," Hubert said to the boys. "Damn lucky."

I got my nose looked at—"broken, it'll heal," the doctor said—took a pain killer and came back to my second-floor berth outside the rabbi's study for the last time. It was far from a tranquil night. I kept bolting up, recalling the glass shattering, imagining intruders −and then hearing the echo of Hubert Collins. For weeks this house of worship had been as soothing to me as a warm bath. But tonight it was as if Jeremiah had stepped out of the pages of the Old Testament, because Hubert's was the voice of a prophet, a deep rumble tinged with sadness and anger, laying down the law to those boys. He'd told his grandson he was lucky that I'd been sleeping in the synagogue. The way I saw it, Smitty was even luckier to have Hubert Collins for a grandpa.