SLEEPING IN THE SYNAGOGUE

Hubert Collins, 69 and still working 60 hours a week, had made a success out of one of those vanishing businesses where an eighth grade education is no bar to earning a decent living. He'd been cleaning the carpets in our house for a dozen years when I became house chairman and 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 proprietary 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 working 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 announced she was moving to Atlanta to live with an old boyfriend. Smitty's father? All I know is, his last name was Smith and he's been long gone. 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.

Now that I'm president of the synagogue I'm there a lot: Friday night and Saturday services, Tuesday night executive committee, an every-other-Wednesday sit-down with the rabbi. Late on one of those Wednesday afternoons, I ran into Hubert and Smitty. It was September, about a month before I started sleeping in the synagogue—I don't mean sleeping just during the sermon, but all night, every night.

"Afternoon, Mr. Rivkin," Hubert said when he saw me.

"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 a few 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."

There's another thing, he said. "I don't like some of the kids he hangs out with. Kids 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," Hubert said. "Not at that age."

On this particular day, as Hubert and Smitty packed up their gear, our new 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 that we'd be chanting for that Saturday's service. To rewind a scroll is a workout for arms and shoulders that can take 15 minutes. That includes stopping from time to time to check where you are, because the Torah has no page or section numbers, no periods or commas. You have to recognize the text and know its position in the entire scroll.

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

While the rabbi and I rolled the Torah, Smitty stood at the entrance to the library.

"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 and 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, called a *sofer*, a year to do it."

"A year? A whole year? How much does it 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 on a mattress in my son's bachelor apartment in West LA.

In my case, I awoke not in a friend's sofa bed with the springs poking aggressively at my spine, but in the little conference room, an 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 my underwear and socks I paddled 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 felt 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 preordained that I would wind 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 an executive from Unilever who was relocating to New York; he saw the house at 2 p.m. and made a full-price offer at 6 p.m. No inspection, no mortgage; 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, papers and memories in three days?

"Andy, he's paying Asking Price," Mary Alice thundered, implying that to turn it down would be a desecration, something akin to using the Shroud of Turin to scrub the kitchen floor. "You have to take it."

I took it.

The night I accepted the offer, I opened a beer, heated up a slice of pizza and called Becky, my oldest daughter, to tell her the news.

"Oh daddy, that's wonderful." It always amazed me how little attachment my three daughters have to the house where they grew up. Becky was living in Seattle, managing an organic herb farm. At this point in her life Good Harbor was little more than a dot on the map.

"Would you like me to come and help you clear out the house?" she offered

"There's no time. I have to be out in three days."

"Three days?" Surprise raised her voice an octave. "You'll need a place to stay," she said, and then paused. "You want to come out here and stay with us?"

Us meant Becky and boyfriend Jeff, whom she was in no hurry to marry.

"Thanks, but I have a business to run, remember?" One of my main problems these days—aside from finding and keeping customers—was to avoid getting busted by Immigration and Naturalization for employing illegals. No matter how many Social Security cards and drivers' licenses I examined, no way could I detect the frauds: stolen or counterfeit cards, false names, addresses that didn't exist.

More than ever it was important to make the business pay. The agreement with Antonia required me to turn over the lion's share of the proceeds from the house sale, once the mortgage had been paid off. 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 first got into the office services business 20 years ago, things were a lot

easier. Maybe you didn't make a ton of money, but you made a good living. 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 know how to hire other immigrants. I have to hustle harder just to keep what business I have, and when a customer threatens to leave because someone underbid me by six percent, what choice do I have but to match the price?

Mary Alice had assuaged my panic about the closing by explaining that the judicious application of money solves all problems, She found me Carlotta, one of those organize-your-life ladies to help manage what to keep, sell, donate. Movers with the strong yet gentle hands of massage therapists arrived to wrap and pack every dish, table, lamp and throw pillow; it all went into storage. On closing day the house was empty, spotless. I turned over the keys to the man from Unilever, 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) on the wall 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 one of my long-time clients, Broad & Wall Realty—half a dozen classy older buildings in the financial district—said they were considering a lower proposal from another outfit. They'd been with me for 14 years.

A cousin on the Upper West Side offered me his guest room, but once I thought of Bet Shalom I couldn't resist. There was something so appealing about its anonymity—not to mention the deliciously illicit feeling of breaking the rules.

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 an alarm system, 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 and into the gutters, 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, making fundraising calls, seeing that enough people show up during the seven-day shiva period to comfort mourners, keeping the lawn mowed and getting the leaks fixed. You need a savvy treasurer to balance the budget while holding dues in line. And you need to coddle and encourage the rabbi−while remembering that he is the synagogue's employee and not its master.

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 dearly 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. Her tears only fed my anger; often I refused to be in the same room with her. On and on it went—fighting, tears, recriminations, apologies and frigid silences—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 backpack briefcase with the laptop and office papers. In the morning I folded up my sheet and blanket, deflated my pillow and stored them in one of those plastic containers with the lock-down covers, placing it at the bottom of a supply closet Then I paddled down the hall to the spacious tiled shower in the upstairs bathroom. When we did a synagogue renovation several years ago we had the plumbers install that shower, thinking it would be useful if we ever had to put up a

weekend guest. Little did I know I'd be the beneficiary.

A few people figured out what I was doing. One morning I came down to find our custodian Evgeny, a tall fellow with coarse yellow hair and a high forehead. He'd arrived early and was noisily scrubbing pots, stacking dishes and cutlery for the dishwasher.

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

"Morning, Evgeny." I mumbled something about being there to pick up the mail but Evgeny misses nothing; my red and gray gym bag told him all he needed to know.

A few days later I ran into 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 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 more than a dozen years as president. I never thought he'd give it up but apparently he's got heart problems. That, and a new granddaughter he's always flying out to Chicago to see.

"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. Howard had heard about the divorce and as he waited 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 Buddha-like smile—"we can go out at night and chase women together."

I burst out laughing at the sheer incongruity of it, 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 three percent reduction

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

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It was the last thing I expected to hear, and then to see. Good Harbor was a friendly place, with neighbors who greeted you cordially and shopkeepers who didn't take advantage, that is other than charging you the 25 percent surcharge that's common in zip codes in the top rung of per capita income.

There'd been plenty of anti-Semitism in Good Harbor 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. Little by little, attitudes altered. Social change is a river that wears away at the rock face of custom day by day and year by year. 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 or Yale with Jewish friends.

Jewish families had moved in, joined the country club and supported the local organizations, the United Way, the Art Center, the clothing drive, the Thanksgiving appeal, with a level of generosity that astounded well-to-do gentiles. Anti-Semitism was still there but it had become muted, had gone underground.

When I heard the noise of breaking glass I first imagined that this was the sound track of a dream featuring a car crash or a wife throwing dishes at her husband. 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 carpeted stairs with tiny dust balls clustered in the elbows 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 turned and tiptoed to the rabbi's study. Here, in the cool darkness, surrounded by shelves of Hebrew dictionaries, a concordance to the Bible, prayer books, 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 UPS man ringing the doorbell than to this trio of intruders.

Just inside the door to the sanctuary I paused. On the bima I could make out the wavering orbit of a tiny flashlight and three black teenagers in an awkward dance with a pair of Torah scrolls; they looked like would-be halfbacks practicing a backfield 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 on us." 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 who I was. 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, muscular but slow-witted, said, "You're the president and they make you 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 bundled into the back seat of a squad car. I ran outside and asked to talk to them.

The sergeant in charge didn't like the idea.

"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 said. "Besides, what about the damage to the building, broken windows, whatever else they did?"

I laid it on thick, telling him what a great job the cops were doing.

"Please, officer, let's just make the call."

I found the number in the office and the sergeant called Hubert.

"What'd they do?" he wanted to know, when he got out of his van eight minutes later. I showed him the broken glass, explained about the Torahs.

He asked the officer for a minute with his grandson. One of the cops brought him out of the squad car, hands cuffed. 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 a précis 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 arrested and booked.

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

"I guess so." 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 to finish the job. Then he installed me in the front seat of the van with Smitty and his two comrades in back, 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, 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 exactly 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."

I'd have to look for an apartment; in the meantime I could 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 someone downstairs, and every time I did so I could hear the echo of Hubert Collins. In all the weeks I'd been here, this house of worship had been as soothing and unobjectionable 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 in a way that allowed no detours, no excuses. 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.