



Ellen Davis Sullivan

# Yiddish Land

For 67 years Ruben Gedalia Petrofsky went by the name of Rudolf G. Peters because he thought it would make his life easier. And it did. He changed his name when he graduated college and left the Bronx. He moved to the Midwest, where no one knew his old name. His Orthodox upbringing was gently ignored when he married the least observant woman he could find.

Rudy and Iris joined a Reform temple, went to the occasional Friday night service with other Jews who could only chant the most basic Hebrew prayers and didn't exactly fast on Yom Kippur as much as refrain from eating before services. They sent their two kids to religious school and their son Jerome had his bar mitzvah. Girls didn't become men in 1965.

Having survived all those years with his heritage disappearing like the wake of a ship that had sailed, it was a shock to everyone, Rudy included, when he suddenly began speaking Yiddish. It happened one day when his daughter Sandra brought him to the table for lunch in the assisted living building she had moved him into after Iris died. Rudy liked the term "assisted living" because for most of his life he'd felt the pressure of providing for his family. Oh, Iris helped of course, raising the children while he moved from selling life insurance to shoes to Pontiacs to new homes. Most of his bosses were Jews and might have hired Ruben Petrofsky, but they felt more confident about Rudy Peters, a burly, beak-nosed man, quick to smile and ready with a salesman's *spiel*. In his best years, he drove an El Dorado and Iris redecorated. In the years when builders withheld commissions Rudy had earned, they ate at home on Saturday nights. Through it all, they saved enough to send both kids to college and Jerome on to law school. Rudy felt good about that. Now he had enough to live in a place where people's only job was to help the residents keep going.

Not that Rudy needed all that much help with the day-to-day, though he'd been nervous about venturing outdoors since the day a few weeks before when he stumbled on an uneven bit of pavement getting into Sandra's car. That was when he'd asked her to stop by each day to make sure he didn't have an accident. "How can I prevent an accident?" she'd asked, but he'd easily overcome her reluctance as he had many a buyer in his selling days. "You'll stop in," he said, unsure where he was going with this until he heard his own words. "Help me get my lunch on the table, you know, see that I haven't cut my throat shaving or tied my belt too tight." He made a face as if he were choking, and, though his words made no sense, Sandra smiled. The next day she showed up at noon.

Now Rudy relaxed into his daughter's reassuringly solid grip on his elbow as they walked from his easy chair to the table. He had to slow his pace to keep Sandra beside him. Rudy was a great walker, striding fast and sure, just like his mother out for her morning constitutional, though lately he'd kept up his exercise routine by walking the carpeted hallways of the building.

Sandra disappeared into the kitchen. Alone, Rudy stared at the old sepia photo of Iris's parents, when suddenly his eyes went out of focus. As he tried to fix his gaze on their faces, he wondered what had happened. He could see fine by the time Sandra returned to set his plate in front of him and flick open the tab top on his Dr. Brown's cream soda. The sound of the fizz lulled Rudy into forgetting about the instant when the world blurred.

He looked down at his plate. "*Ich vays nicht?*" he asked. Though she'd been born into a home in which she'd rarely heard a word of Yiddish, somehow Sandra recognized the question.

"It's your lunch, Pop," she said.

He hated her calling him that, part of the false heartiness she'd adopted along with her daily visits. However, his attention was gripped by a bigger puzzle: where had his question come from? He hadn't been thinking of the Yiddish words. They just popped out. He decided to ignore it. Age had taught him one thing. His body would change in surprising ways: hair springing out on his toes, his ears growing larger, not to mention where his hairline had gone.

He ought to tell Sandra that "Pop" sounded disrespectful. The indignities of other humans should be addressed. "*Dreck,*" Rudy said. Though he'd meant to express how he missed the way she used to call him "Dad," what came out was a curse.

"It's not," Sandra said, defensively. "It's a perfectly good brisket sandwich, made from the same brisket you ate

happily at dinner Sunday night."

Rudy couldn't listen. This sudden takeover of his tongue scared him. "*Ich...*" he heard himself say, though he'd meant to say "I." What was happening to him? He, who had always relied on words to get his way. In his confusion, he made a face, his nose pinched, his lips tight, his gray mustache twitching as if he could regain control of his speech by realigning his mouth.

"What?" Sandra said. Rudy could see worry in her eyes, though he was sure she didn't yet know what to worry about.

"*Gay aveck,*" he said, though he didn't mean for her to leave exactly, but for her to go and find someone to help. His command of Yiddish was limited. Maybe he should have paid more attention when Aunt Molly, *aveb sholom*, came to the apartment on Aqueduct Avenue and whispered to his mother.

"Where do you want me to go, Pop?"

"*Ich farshtai nit,*" he said, marveling at what came from his lips, a phrase he hadn't known he knew. At the same time he felt a spurt of panic. He was huffing, as if too much air had been pumped into his lungs.

"Why don't you speak English?" Sandra said. "So I can understand you."

Rudy looked into his daughter's black, questioning eyes. After Iris died, he'd wished Sandra looked more like her mother. He'd tried to see his wife in her dark curls, but even as a child Sandra had Rudy's plump cheeks and thick-boned build. Everything about Iris had been slender, her wrists, her ankles, her pointy chin, only her lips had left a full imprint on his.

Sandra was staring as if she could look through him if she tried hard enough. "Say something in English," she said. "Anything."

Now that she had a hint of his problem, Rudy's breathing slowed a bit, but he could only shrug.

Sandra pulled out a chair and sat beside him, her face near his. "Just say my name," she said. "Say 'Sandra.'"

"*Sheyne maydl,*" he said.

Tears welled in his daughter's eyes, though if he'd called her a "beautiful girl" she probably would have corrected him with "woman" and not just because she was 53. She'd been born into the generation that was going to change the world, the boom of babies, which had been such a relief after the deaths of so many young men in the war.

Before he knew what was happening Sandra was on the phone and the nurse from downstairs appeared at the door.

"I'm so glad you're here," Sandra said to the woman, a wizened blonde with a smoker's raucous cough and a satchel in hand. She explained that Rudy wasn't able to speak.

Despite Sandra's words, the first thing the nurse did was ask him a question. "What's the matter, Mr. Peters?" she said, taking hold of his wrist. Rudy could tell her expert fingers were feeling for his pulse.

"*Ich bin nit krank.*"

The nurse continued to stare at her wrist watch for several seconds. "Does anything hurt?" Without waiting for an answer, the nurse put her cool palm against Rudy's forehead, her nails tousling his eyebrows. "Let's just take your temperature," she said.

Sitting with the thermometer between his lips, the meaty scent of brisket made Rudy regret he hadn't eaten before the nurse arrived. He'd been distracted by Sandra's quick spurt into action. Her efficiency reassured him, reminding him of her mother.

"Your temperature's normal." The nurse extended the blood pressure cuff Rudy recognized from his annual physicals. Snapping the Velcro into place, she pumped the rubber grenade until the sleeve pinched his arm. As the air hissed out, she stared at the indicator. "Your pressure's good." She looked in his eyes

for the first time. "You don't seem to have anything wrong with you."

"He can't say anything," Sandra said. "At least not in English."

"That's odd," the nurse said. "Perhaps you should call his doctor and see when he can see him."

Sandra had the phone from her purse at her ear before Rudy could even remember where he kept his doctor's number. Apparently she had a direct line because she only pressed a single button. He couldn't use the little phone Sandra had bought him with the buttons small as a gnat's *kishkes*.

"He offered to meet us at the Emergency Room."

"I don't think that's necessary," the nurse said. "His vital signs are excellent."

Sandra repeated the woman's words into the phone. "He can see him tomorrow morning in his office," she said closing the metal device. "If he begins acting strangely before then we should take him to the nearest ER."

The nurse gave Rudy a piercing look as if she wasn't completely sure that he hadn't already fallen into the strange category, then she began to talk to Sandra, telling her what to look for. Rudy was momentarily reassured. At least the medical professionals didn't think he was fodder for the Emergency Room yet. As Sandra wrote notes on a pad of paper, isolation crept over Rudy like a chill. He rubbed his bony fingers together, but couldn't generate any heat. Being alone like this would be a lousy way for his life to end, his words disappearing before he vanished entirely. The thought saddened him. Not that he'd planned a big speech for his last days, but he began to realize what a pleasure talking had been.

The women were looking at him again. "When did this start?" the nurse asked. "*In mitn drinen.*" Rudy didn't know where his brain had found this, but the words were right. It had certainly started suddenly.

This sudden takeover of his tongue scared him. "*Ich...*" he heard himself say, though he'd meant to say "I." What was happening to him? He, who had always relied on words to get his way.

The nurse glanced at Sandra. "I have no idea what that means," Sandra said. "He never spoke Yiddish when I was growing up. I recognized a few things he said at first, but now I'm lost."

"Is there someone else in the building who might understand? How about that lady with the accent?" the nurse said.

"Do I know her?" Sandra looked at her father for an instant, then said "Never mind, Dad, we'll figure it out." She and the nurse consulted the building's telephone directory, flipping pages.

"Mrs. Horowitz," the nurse said. "She's the one I meant."

"It can't hurt to give her a call."

"*Gornisht vil helfen,*" Rudy said, not so much from negativity, but because he didn't like being ignored in his own home.

"That," Sandra said, "means 'nothing will help.'"

"Now don't be so sure, Mr. Peters." The nurse returned to his side. "You have to keep a positive outlook. Nothing too terrible's happened to you. I've seen a lot worse. You're not in any pain, right?" The woman pinched his arm, which Rudy found totally unnecessary. "You can follow what I'm saying. So for right now, we don't know that there's anything that much to worry about. Though of course you'll know more after your doctor gives you a thorough examination."

"*Hak nit kayn tshaynik,*" Rudy said.

"That means 'thank you,'" Sandra said with a wry smile that told Rudy she knew what it really meant. Rudy was grateful for her understanding that the nurse had gotten under his skin. It made him feel less alone, trapped as he was in fragments of a foreign tongue.

The nurse headed toward the door, ready for the next resident, who might have a real emergency. Sandra was letting her out when Rudy remembered that Mrs. Horowitz might understand him. That made him feel a little better, though he wasn't sure he wanted his words to be channeled through her. When he first moved into the building, he'd only been widowed for a few months. His longing for Iris was like the desire he'd first felt for girls when he was a teenager, as if his nerve endings had been exposed and were rubbed raw by each passing skirt. He'd chat up the women who joined him at a table in the dining room, but these women left each meal unsatisfied. Little Mrs. Horowitz, who made sure everyone in the building knew she'd been an English teacher, quite an accomplishment, she'd say, for someone who didn't know a word of the tongue when she arrived at Ellis Island, had been one of the few who didn't bother him. In the months since, her indifference began to irk him. What could be more annoying than a woman who only nodded when he smiled? Now she was going to come and help. Most likely she'd make corrections in what Rudy said. His agitation at this possibility rumbled in his chest like heartburn.

With the nurse gone, Rudy drank some cream soda and let out an audible burp. Relieved of that, he decided to eat. The brisket hadn't lost a thing in the time it had been sitting in front of him.

"At least you still have an appetite," Sandra said as she watched him eat. "That's a good sign."

"*Gotsa dankn,*" Rudy said, thanking his maker when he should have been thanking his daughter.

"I'm going to have to leave you for a couple hours, Dad," Sandra said. "But I'll be back to stay with you tonight."

*"Vu geyst shlofen du?"*

"I can sleep on the couch," she said.

Rudy didn't know which was more disturbing, that he couldn't really talk or that Sandra mostly seemed to understand what he was saying. Was Yiddish

in her genes? He considered where she might have picked it up. His mother might have sung her songs from the Old Country or told her stories, but she'd only put Sandra to bed a handful of times over the years.

Sandra bent and gave him a dry kiss. He was beginning to wonder how he could let her know that Mrs. Horowitz

might not be such a great idea, but he couldn't form a sentence to warn her.

At the door Sandra said, "I'll see you in a little while."

*"Zay gezunt,"* Rudy said, wishing her well, though what he really wished was that she'd come up with a plan other than Mrs. Horowitz. He had no words for that. He'd have to hope for the best.

During the night Rudy's sleep was disturbed by a dream. A woman—his mother?—held him close as if he were a child, her frizz of red hair against his cheek, her blue eyes avid to take him in, her whispering breath smelling sweet. Her words jangled with a familiar rhythm, though he couldn't make out their meaning. He woke feeling strangely unsettled.

He couldn't imagine how his mother, or anyone else for that matter, could talk to him in Yiddish words he didn't know in his own dream, unless she was speaking from the other side. This didn't make sense to Rudy. As far as he knew, Jews didn't believe in that kind of afterlife. And why for the first time in years would she appear to him in his sleep? Maybe it hadn't been his mother but some female angel of death warning him this was it. Suddenly, Rudy's heart valves began to stampede. He pressed his palm against his chest as if that could slow the pounding.

*"Sheyne maydl,"* he called out, having grown used in a day to thinking of "beautiful girl" as his daughter's name.

At first there was silence, then a rustling, no doubt his daughter shifting herself on the narrow sofa. He called again, this time trying to put more air behind his words. The stirring continued, then he heard the creak of a floorboard. "What is it?" Sandra asked rounding the corner from the living room.

*"Ikh vays nit,"* Rudy said, regretting he could only say he didn't know. Though that was the truth, he was accustomed to having a glib answer at the ready.

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"*Mein harts...*" Rudy couldn't tell his daughter that in his dream his mother had spoken to him in Yiddish. How could he make her understand? "*Bubbe,*" he said, then put both hands under his face to mime sleep.

"Grandma?" Sandra said.

He said the word again, this time squeezing his eyes shut.

"You dreamt of her?"

"*Yob.*"

Sandra sat on the bed beside him. "I don't know why that upset you. I always hope to dream about Mom."

Rudy patted her hand, feeling close to tears. "*A gute neshome.*" His daughter truly was a good soul, if only he could tell her how much he appreciated that.

Sandra bent and rested her cheek on his shoulder. Rudy patted her hair. They hadn't held each other close like this in years. Now it seemed natural that his child should want to be near him. And all because he could no longer speak to her in words she could understand. For the first time since his tongue stopped responding to his commands, Rudy thought perhaps what had happened to him wasn't the worst thing in the world.

Sandra must have stayed with him until he fell asleep. When he woke in the morning he didn't try to talk to her. Only a few smiles passed between them, though Rudy did say "*Gut morgen*" when she came to help him shave.

"Good morning, Dad," Sandra said.

She was clearing the breakfast dishes when Mrs. Horowitz arrived. The old lady must have rushed up as soon as she was forced to leave her table, where no doubt she'd been telling everyone who'd listen about Rudy's affliction. There were so few changes in the lives of the building's residents, except for the arrival of sickness and death, that maybe they found a certain satisfaction at not being catastrophe's current victim. Or else they knew that nothing at all happening is its own kind of death.

When Sandra opened the door, Mrs.

Horowitz approached him as she might a curiosity at a carnival freak show, smiling with the skepticism of one not easily fooled. She was a sturdy woman, for all she lacked in height, thin and strong looking, with her taut calves and trim waist. Her gray eyes, peering at him from behind small ovals of glass, were magnified giving her the look of a forest

animal, a deer maybe.

Rudy had prepared for her, forcing Sandra to bring out his good maroon cardigan and the tan slacks still in the cleaner bag. He wouldn't have this woman go back and report to her friends that he looked like a *schlepper* in his own home. She also seemed to have dressed for the occasion, wearing a plum colored

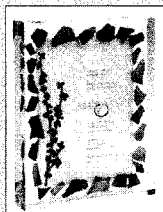


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Rudy was instructed to get undressed. “*Es pas nit*,” he said, pointing to Mrs. Horowitz. The little woman gave a mighty sigh. “He thinks I’m interested in seeing him naked? After 53 years of marriage, he thinks he has something I haven’t seen before?”

sweater and skirt. Rudy had never noticed it before, but with her wavy brown hair and large eyes, she must have been a looker in her day, before the glasses of course.

“*Vos makbstu?*” she asked.

“*Nishkosbe.*”

The slip of an interpreter turned to Sandra. “He says he’s not so bad.”

With two women staring at him, Rudy felt the need to say more, but the truth was he had nothing to report.

“Is there something you want me to ask him?” Mrs. Horowitz asked Sandra.

“He seems to understand English,” Sandra said. “We just need you to tell us what he’s saying.”

“So ask him something.”

“Did this just happen out of the blue?” Sandra asked.

“*Vu den?*”

She turned to Mrs. Horowitz. “He says ‘what else?’” Then as if she still wasn’t sure Sandra understood, she said: “You know, ‘of course.’”

“Got it,” Sandra said. “Maybe we should head down to the car. The doctor’s going to work him in so the sooner

we get there, the better.”

“Fine by me,” Mrs. Horowitz said.

“*Ich bin fertig*,” Rudy said as he braced himself on the arm of the sofa so he could stand.

“What?” Sandra said, looking slightly alarmed.

“He’s ready,” Mrs. Horowitz replied.

Already Rudy felt as if he were listening to a radio station with a bad reception. Mrs. Horowitz was like static. Not that she’d misinterpreted what he’d said, but having her there made Sandra seem farther away.

In the car, Rudy sat in the back seat listening as the women chatted. He couldn’t tell if she was just being polite, or if Sandra actually found Mrs. Horowitz’s life story interesting. She’d been in a concentration camp as a child and seemed only to remember the day they were liberated by the American soldiers. Rudy was surprised at how ordinary this

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all felt, riding along, letting the women do the talking, though it wasn't how he would have behaved normally.

At the doctor's office, the three of them were shown into an examining room and Rudy was instructed to get undressed.

"*Es pas nit*," he said, pointing to Mrs. Horowitz.

The little woman gave a mighty sigh. "He thinks I'm interested in seeing him naked? After 53 years of marriage, he thinks he has something I haven't seen before?"

"Is that what he said?" Sandra asked.

"He said, 'It isn't proper.'"

"She's not his wife?" The nurse said.

Sandra explained why Mrs. Horowitz was with them.

"Here," the nurse said, pulling a curtain along a rod to shield Rudy from the women. As she left, she rolled her eyes.

Rudy removed his clothes as quickly as his bloodless fingers would permit. He'd grown slow with age, partly because he wasn't in a rush any more, where did he have to hurry to? And partly because nothing was as easy as it used to be. As if it weren't bad enough that he was cold all the time with his clothes on, here he had to sit in a paper johnny, icy air chilling his spine down to his *tuches* with his daughter and Mrs. Horowitz visible in outline on the other side of a thin white sheet. It was enough to give him *shpilkes*.

At that, Rudy felt a shiver more powerful than cold air could produce. He'd almost begun to think in Yiddish. Speaking it was bad enough, but if it infiltrated his brain, would he still be himself? And who was that self, Rudy Peters? Or had Ruben Gedalya Petrofsky come to reassert his ownership of this decaying body?

Until yesterday, Rudy had always been sure he could talk his way into or out of anything. Thinking back, as he hadn't for years, he realized this wasn't who he'd been as a kid. He'd been a quiet, bookish

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sort who'd developed his *shtick* to deal with the big boys in the neighborhood, the ball players and street toughs. Rudy deflected their taunts with jokes and mimicry, teaching himself a patter along with a stance that appeared confident, but not cocky. He'd practiced in front of the mirror.

Now that quiet boy seemed to be climbing back out of whatever deep place Rudy had banished him. This was more than a little unsettling. Rudy wanted to talk to Sandra, but he felt funny about the sheet

and Mrs. Horowitz next to her. Suddenly a picture flashed through his brain of the *shul* they'd gone to when he was a boy, the women shut off behind a curtain so they wouldn't distract the men during prayers. He could see his mother with the scarf she'd worn to cover her hair.

Rudy was relieved when the door opened and Dr. Krauss appeared, though by now he'd come to believe he had a problem beyond that which could be solved by a doctor. As he said, "*Gut morgen*" the two women peered around the screen.

"What's this?" the doctor said.

"*Epes iz kalyeh gevoren mit mir,*" Rudy said.

"He says 'something's wrong with him,'" Mrs. Horowitz said as she and Sandra emerged from behind their curtain. As Sandra described the sudden onrush of Yiddish and the reasons for Mrs. Horowitz's presence, Dr. Krauss looked at Rudy. When she'd finished there was silence while the doctor wrote in his folder. "Have you ever heard of someone waking up one day speaking a language he never knew before?" Mrs. Horowitz asked.

The doctor looked up, tapped his pen against his lips then said: "He must have known it at some level. Was Yiddish spoken when you were a boy?"

"*A bissel.*"

"That means 'a little,'" Mrs. Horowitz translated.

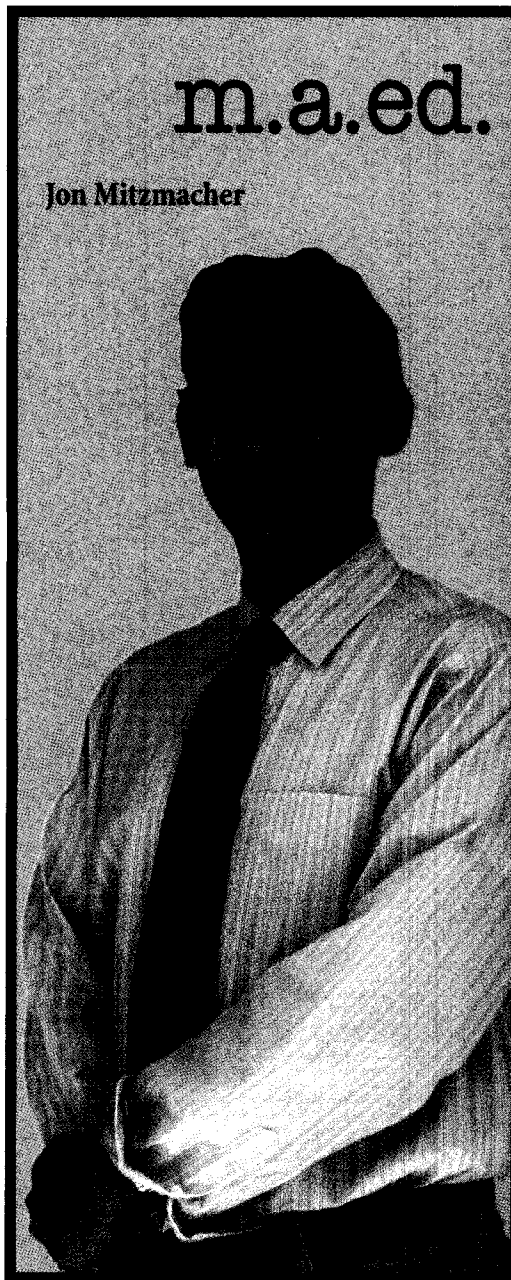
"Yes," Dr. Krauss said. "I know." He held his finger in front of Rudy's face and indicated for him to follow its motion with his eyes. "Somehow you must have absorbed more than you realized," he said as the finger went left, then right, then up, then down. "But the question is why it's taken over your speech. After I've examined you, we'll have to have some tests done to figure that out."

Rudy was grateful to the doctor for talking to him as if he were still in his right mind.

"At the hospital?" Mrs. Horowitz asked. She seemed eager for the excursion.

"Of course," Dr. Krauss said.

"Today?" Sandra asked.



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"As soon as we can get him scheduled." The doctor began to gently press his fingers against Rudy's neck, then moved to his chest. "If my examination doesn't show any need for immediate treatment, and you don't appear to be in any distress, then we'll do the best we can to get the tests done promptly."

"*Gay aveck*," Rudy said to the women as the doctor loosened the johnny.

They retreated behind their curtain.

The doctor pressed the stethoscope against Rudy's heart. "A little fast," Doctor Krauss said. "But that isn't surprising when you've had an unusual time the past 24 hours. Does anything hurt?"

Rudy shook his head.

"I didn't hear that," Mrs. Horowitz called loudly from the other side of the sheet.

"He didn't say anything," the doctor said.

"*Yente*," Rudy whispered.

"That I heard," Mrs. Horowitz called.

The doctor smiled, then compressed his forehead into lines of wrinkles. "You really do have command of everything except English. This is extremely unusual."

"What do you mean, doctor?" Sandra said at her normal volume.

"His senses are all intact. He knows what we're saying. He responds appropriately. It's puzzling."

The doctor completed the exam, explaining that he could only perform the basic neurological tests, which all seemed normal, but that Rudy should be seen by a specialist. Then the doctor seated himself at the small desk by the sink. He required Mrs. Horowitz's as-

sistance only when he asked Rudy when he'd noticed this coming on.

"*Nekhten. Der lontsb.*" Rudy said.

"That's yesterday at lunch," Mrs. Horowitz said.

"That's when it started, doctor," Sandra added.

"So you didn't notice anything until you started speaking?"

Rudy thought for a moment. He couldn't remember any warning. Preferring not to include Mrs. Horowitz in the discussion, he shook his head.

"Another head shake," Doctor Krauss spoke in the direction of the curtain, then hunched over the folder writing as Rudy dressed. He'd nearly finished tucking in his shirt when Mrs. Horowitz called, "Can we come out now?"

The doctor glanced at Rudy, then gave the OK.

"Mr. Peters," the doctor began.

"Ruby," Rudy said.

"It's Rudy," Sandra said.

"Ruby," he repeated.

"Is it possible he's developed dyslex-

m.b.a.

Sarala Waller



Sarala Waller's sister was not like other students in her school—but she deserved no less. Watching her sister struggle, Sarala vowed to one day help other children with special needs.

Today, Sarala is the Corporate Development Manager for Autism Speaks, and is responsible for partnering with corporations to help provide services, research and advocacy for people with Autism.

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ia?" Sandra asked.

"That's one thing we can rule out," the doctor said.

"Ruben Gedalya Petrofsky," Rudy said proudly, wondering why at this moment his old name was asserting itself. No one else seemed too perturbed about it, so they headed out to the receptionist's desk to schedule some tests.

She was on the line with the hospital when Mrs. Horowitz announced she had yoga on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons. "Not that I couldn't miss it if you need me."

"I really think we do," Sandra said.

"I didn't do much here."

"I felt better having you along and I'm sure Dad did, too."

Sandra put her hand on Rudy's arm. Feeling like Charlie McCarthy, he smiled and gave a slight nod, then realized he was resisting a real feeling of comfort emanating from the little woman who was the only one who could understand him. Though Mrs. Horowitz spoke up in ways that Iris, with her lady-like manner, would have found coarse, her assertiveness allowed Rudy to relax. Clearly he needed a strong person's help. He couldn't even speak English for crying out loud.

The next day Mrs. Horowitz stopped by and suggested they talk to the rabbi.

"About what?" Sandra asked, putting down the bag with her father's lunch.

"Maybe he's heard of something like this happening before."

"*Az me fregt a sheilab, vert traif,*" Rudy said.

Sandra looked at Mrs. Horowitz.

"It's an old saying. It means something like 'Ask the rabbi a question and he'll find something wrong.'"

"Does that mean you don't want to see the rabbi?" Sandra asked.

Rudy shrugged.

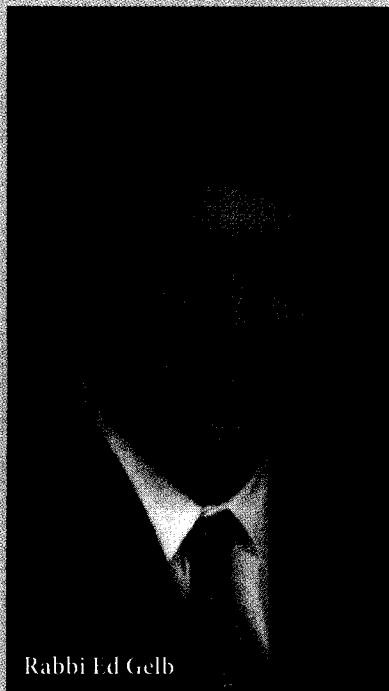
"I already called," Mrs. Horowitz said. "Rabbi Nadler said he doesn't know much Yiddish, but his father, the retired rabbi, is fluent and would be happy to have visitors. He's expecting us."

Rudy marveled at how Mrs. Horowitz took charge of things. Though he couldn't believe the old rabbi would know anything about his problem, it felt good to be doing something.

Sandra drove them to the rabbi's house, where the younger Rabbi Nadler's wife showed them downstairs to the rec room. An old man with a white beard and a black kippah dozed in a large easy chair. A delicate-boned man, he was dressed in a black suit, his knobby hands holding an open book in his lap. Rudy had been mistaken to think he was sleeping. Just before he looked up, the rabbi placed one finger on a line of text.

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Rabbi Ed Gelb

Growing up in Wyoming, becoming a rabbi was the furthest thing from Ed Gelb's mind. When the director of Camp Ramah, where Ed worked summers, suggested he consider it, Ed was taken aback.

Today, Ed is a rabbi and Director of Camp Ramah in New England, helping instill in young people a strong Jewish consciousness and life-long friendships.

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"These are the people who have come to consult you, Papa," the rabbi's wife said to her father-in-law. "Mr. Peters-" "Petrofsky," Rudy said.

The rabbi's wife looked as if she were sure she'd said the right thing, a tilt of annoyance to her head.

"Either is OK," Sandra said.

"Petrofsky's a fine name," the rabbi said. He slid the book onto the table beside him as if the pages were sheets of crystal. Then he held out his hand. His daughter-in-law disappeared.

Rudy rested his palm against the old man's dry, cool skin.

"*Ich bais Reb Nadler,*" the old man said.

"*Ich bin tsufriden eich tsu kenen,*" Rudy replied.

"He's saying 'it's nice to meet you,'" Mrs. Horowitz whispered to Sandra.

Rudy turned toward his daughter. "*Mayn tochter—*" He hesitated, not wanting to call her "*shayne maydl*" in front of the Rabbi.

"Sandra," she said. "And this is Mrs. Horowitz, my father's neighbor."

"Pleased to meet you," the rabbi said, nodding his head slightly at the women. He offered them seats. They sat on the sofa with Rudy closest to the rabbi.

"*Vos iz mit dir?*" the rabbi said.

"He's asking what's wrong," Mrs. Horowitz said softly.

Rudy explained that all of a sudden he could only speak Yiddish and "*Ich red nor a bissel.*"

"And that only a little," Mrs. Horowitz said.

A smile tweaked the rabbi's lips. He looked at Sandra. "*Ret ir Yiddish?*" he asked.

"He wants to know if you speak Yiddish," Mrs. Horowitz said.

"Hardly any, rabbi. That's why we brought this lady along."

Mrs. Horowitz raised her chin and wriggled her back against the sofa. Rudy was pleased at her serious expression. She wasn't just here to get out of her apart-

ment. She was taking her role to heart.

The rabbi gave a single stroke to his white chin hair. "This is a problem with a solution," he said.

Rudy felt wary. The rabbi hadn't taken even a minute to think.

"You know the bookstore down by the university," the rabbi said looking beyond Rudy to Sandra. "Go there and

you will find a book so that together you and your father can learn his language."

Rudy thought this was the most ridiculous advice he'd ever heard. His problem was he could only speak Yiddish and the rabbi's solution was he should learn more Yiddish? He wanted to say "thanks for nothing" and he even knew the words for it, but this man was after all a rabbi,

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His problem was he could only speak Yiddish, and the rabbi's solution was that he should learn more Yiddish? He wanted to say, "Thanks for nothing." And he even knew the Yiddish words for it, but this man was, after all, a rabbi, so Rudy kept quiet.

so Rudy kept quiet.

"But how will my father get along without speaking English?" Sandra said.

"This lady will make herself available to help him for now," the rabbi said, extending his arm toward Mrs. Horowitz. "And soon you'll be able to understand him yourself."

The three visitors sat in silence as the rabbi returned his attention to his book, lifting it slowly, resting it against his bony knees then opening it.

"*Doz is alts?*" Rudy asked.

"He's asking if that's all," Mrs.

Horowitz said.

"I guess so," Sandra said as she stood. "Thank you very much, rabbi."

Rudy got up and then helped Mrs. Horowitz who tucked her arm into the crook of his. As they went upstairs they passed the *rebbitsen* who accepted their thanks as she let them out.

In the car, Sandra spoke first. "Shall we stop by the bookstore?"

"*Sara alter kocker,*" Rudy said.

Sandra looked at Mrs. Horowitz who said "He's not thrilled with the rabbi's advice."

"Me either," Sandra said. "I don't know what I expected from him, but it sure wasn't this."

As they drove toward home, Sandra spoke to her father. "Don't be too discouraged, Dad. The doctor may come up with a way to cure you once they have the test results."

"*Fun dein moil in Got's oi'eren,*" Rudy said.

"That's 'from your mouth to God's ears,'" Mrs. Horowitz translated.

Rudy felt his gloom lighten just a shade. The doctor might find a small, not very potent tumor he could remove and maybe Rudy would go back to normal. Or even better, a pill he could swallow, he'd be willing to take it every day to get back to being himself.

"What do you say to giving the bookstore a try?" Sandra asked. "It couldn't hurt."

"Now you're starting to sound like

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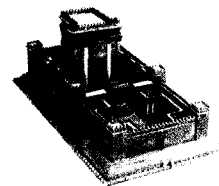
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you know Yiddish," Mrs. Horowitz said.

Rudy just grunted.

"He doesn't mind," Mrs. Horowitz said, as if even his sounds required her services.

At the bookstore, young people lounged in overstuffed chairs bending the spines of books they hadn't paid for. Rudy hadn't been to a place like this in years. He wondered why there was a coffee shop in the middle of the store. And racks of greeting cards, gift wrap and row upon row of movies and music. Some bookstore. Sandra found the information desk where a boy with hair like a porcupine's and a silver hoop earring pointed them in the direction of the foreign language books. Rudy had to admit the kid was polite and helpful, despite his wrinkled tee shirt. Did no one get dressed to go to work these days?

He began to wonder how much time he'd spent in his apartment since Iris died. He'd still gone to Sandra's for dinner every Sunday and during the week she'd taken him to doctors' appointments, grocery shopping, to the park for a walk, but he felt as if he'd been in a closed off world. Now that he couldn't talk their language, young people looked like an alien species.

His daughter ducked into a narrow aisle. Rudy and Mrs. Horowitz followed, carefully dodging books strewn on the floor. Sandra took a volume from a shelf, flipping the pages. Then she began to giggle. "Look," she said.

Rudy and his companion peered over Sandra's shoulder at a conversation that looked like it had come from a tourist guide. He read the first line aloud: "*Vu iz a guter hotel?*"

"Where is a good hotel?" Sandra asked.

This time Rudy put a little American self-importance into his tone. "*Ich vil a tsimmer biz montik.*"

Sandra did the same when she read: "I want a room until Monday."

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For the next line, Rudy puffed out his chest like a high roller with a fat cigar, who treated everything as an opening bid. “*Veist mir an ander tsimmer,*” he said.

“I’ll show you another room,” Sandra said. “In the hotel next door.”

All three of them laughed.

“It’s like we’re on a trip back in time,” Sandra said. “Where else could we find a country with people who speak only Yiddish?”

Rudy was thinking about the Old Country when he realized Mrs. Horowitz had become *verklempt*. “That’s where I come from,” she said, wiping away a tear with a trembling hand. “The country where people spoke only Yiddish.” She snuffled loudly, then slipped her hand from Rudy’s arm as she pulled a handkerchief from her bag. Her nose-blowing was a rousing honk.

Rudy didn’t like to see her cry. She was a good person, kinder than he’d believed from her early nodding, and strong, too. He wanted to make her feel better. But what could he say? He looked down at the words on the page.

“*Ich hob eier land zaier lib,*” Rudy read.

With that the old lady brightened as if Rudy had spouted a bit of the salesman’s patter he used to live by. She stuffed the hankie in her purse.

“What did he say?” Sandra asked.

“He said, ‘He likes my country very much.’”

Sandra looked at her father with a tenderness that made Rudy feel a *bissel verklempt* himself, but being a man he swallowed his tears.

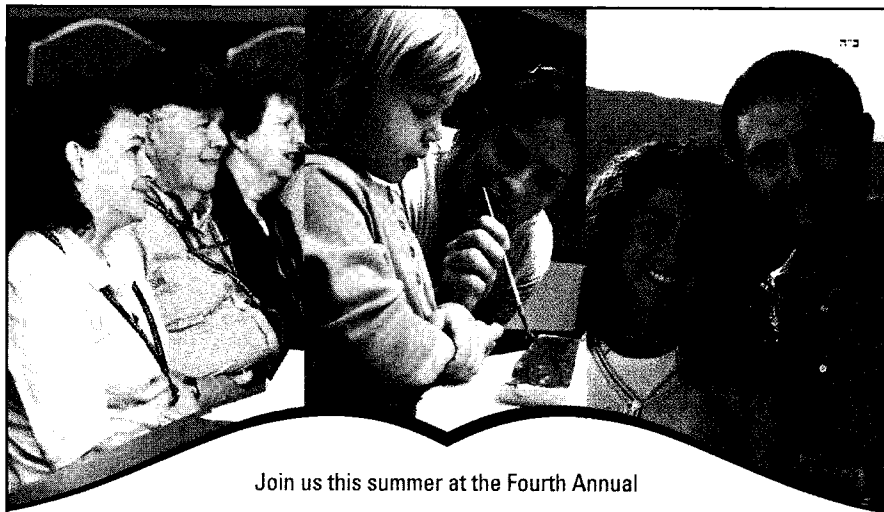
In the car on the way home, Rudy considered whether he could learn to live as this Ruby character at least until the doctors figured out how to fix his tongue. He’d have to adjust to sitting in the back seat and speaking a language in which he didn’t know how to say “I miss my wife.” That brought him up short. For all these months since Iris died, he’d suc-

ceeded in burying his grief deep in a place where it couldn’t hurt him. Now that he had the beginnings of a new life, studying the book with Sandra, taking meals with Mrs. H. and maybe, when he felt up to a real conversation, paying another visit to the old rabbi, he suddenly longed for Iris with a terrible ache in his belly. Rudy

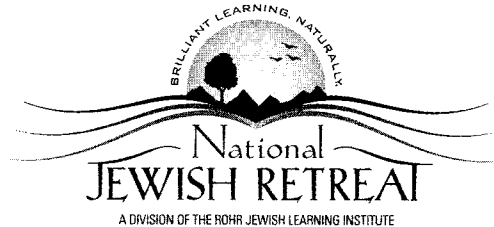
rubbed his hand across his midsection.

Glancing up he saw Sandra watching him, her eyes like a mask in the rearview mirror. “Are you hungry, Dad?”

The speed of Rudy’s nod surprised him, along with the realization that he wouldn’t mind a bite to *ess*.



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