The Assembly

Yellow is hard. And Mina knows colors. A good eye — the customers always said so. Twice she had her husband Marvin paint their old living room yellow. The first time, too gold; the second too lemony — she lived with it. But here, in these two rooms, well, they've gotten it perfect, her son and daughter-in-law. Even her old furniture seems relaxed. The mahogany sideboy under one dormer window. Her bookcase under another — all she needs. She's begun to crochet again. And she has her dog. Her radio. But no television. That she goes down stairs for. Sits with them — her son, his wife, her grandson.

And, of course, she's with them for meals — her daughter-in-law Rose takes such pains. It's getting better. Mina can't deny it. Not quite as awkward. She's learning. If she looks down into the garden and sees Rose picking the last of the mums, she goes downstairs, watches her filling a vase, talks about the colors. Says how good the flowers look on the mantle. It isn't much, but something: it's only been three months. The only one who took to it naturally is her grandson. "Grandma's coming to live with us? Cool!" That's what her son Gary told her the boy had said.

Jason, God bless his dark brows, like those she and her sisters had, and, of course, their brother … she's never told anyone that's what she sees in the boy. He stands, now, in the dormer window, luminous with youth-on-the-cusp. His eyes innocent that he's committed the worst sort of betrayal: that done with purity of heart.

"Will you do it, Grandma?"

"What?"

"Come to the assembly?"

"You told them I would?"

"I told them I'd ask."

"What did your teacher say?"

"Mr. Fitzhugh is in charge of Family Heritage Month. He's not really my teacher. He teaches physics. I'm not into physics."

Looking up at him, she knows he's little more than a bundle of adolescent urges, but, still, he retains enough sweetness to break Mina's heart. Her son and daughter-in-law have pinned such hopes on him — as if Mina, herself, weren't reminder enough that the future has less substance than smoke.

Every six weeks a report comes from the private school with a Latin motto and serpentine walks. A gloom settles over the house, floats up to Mina's yellow rooms. Gary will make that clicking noise with his tongue, and her daughter-in-law's face, cheerful at the dinner table, will collapse at the counter. The grades aren't bad, but not good enough for the college the boy's sister attends. The boy himself will shoot baskets off the garage until his father calls, saying the neighbors will complain.

"Well, what did this Mr. Fitzhugh say?"

"He said he understands."

Mina thinks no one named Fitzhugh could ever understand. When does he have to know?"

"I forgot to ask."

She pushes herself up from her chair. All about are framed photos of the life she lived as wife and mother: herself and Marvin on a cruise; the weddings of their daughters; Gary's medical school graduation: Marvin, on one side; Rose, not Mina, on the other.

"Do you think the boys will want to hear?"

"Well, yeah … I mean it's like they have to be there any way. It's an assembly, you know."

"An assembly for the Holocaust?"

"Well, . . yeah. They have one every year. It's Family Heritage Month."

"Every year, this Family Heritage Month includes something about the Holocaust?"

"Just about."

"And someone comes to talk?"

"Well, sometimes. Sometimes they just show a movie or something." She knows he doesn't mean the flippancy of that "something." But, still, these assaults at unguarded moments, none passes without exacting its toll.

"I better walk Romeo before it gets dark." Her dyspeptic fluff of a dog lies on a princely pillow. Such a seductive lassitude has taken hold of her in these high yellow rooms she fears she'll surrender her remaining time to watching clouds.

"Is it cold outside?' From the folded stack in the right-hand corner of her top dresser drawer, she takes an olive and gold scarf. Before she steps out, she will need to reassure herself in the foyer mirror that its stripes complement the persimmon of her jacket.

"A little … maybe … I don't know." The boy is massaging the sweet spot behind the dog's ears. Each of her children had Marvin's reddish hair and blue eyes, but in this boy, so caught in the long and painful birth of his manhood, she sees in his dark, sweeping brows the youthful beauty by which she survived.

F F F

In the basement where they lived beneath their father's little dry goods shop Mina watched her little sister trying to wake him.

"Leave him, Sara."

"What?"

"Just leave him. We have to go." Their father sprawled across a sagging bed. The bed and a washstand were the only furniture on one side of miserable little space where they all slept. The room backed out of a hillside and had one window overlooking a narrow yard where noontime light washed a high plank fence. A blanket strung from a rope sliced the room lengthwise. Behind the blanket was the mattress where she, her sisters and brother slept.

"Mama's gone to the station?"

"One of them came," her younger sister said. "I think he had a dog. I don't know. I was under the mattress." Months earlier their mother had pulled up the floor under the mattress, burned the boards and hollowed out four body-length impressions in the dirt. At night Mina, Sara and Asher, their brother, and even little Leah, took the dirt and carefully spread it around the yard, one handful at a time. Mina always spread hers along the fence, pushing against the planks in the dark to see if they moved.

"When I came out, Mama and Leah were gone."

"Was Mama wearing her red kerchief?"

"I just told you, I didn't see them."

"What about Asher?"

"He's gone."

"To the station?"

"I don't know."

"How can you not know, Sara? I told you to watch him."

"I did watch him. I watched him leave. He just bolted. Mama couldn't stop him. I don't know if he was going to the station or what. Where are they taking us?"

All morning Mina had been trying for news, but no one had time. Even before they were at the station, details were snuffing out their lives: Levi Jacob wondering if he should take his violin or a sweater… Lili Sherer sewing family pictures into the lining of her coat. No one looking anyone in the eye. Things. They wanted things … the smaller, the better. Soldiers were on every side street. She sneaked into the old bakery, climbed out the back, and over fences to get back to the basement room.

Mina pulled the blanket aside. On the mattress was a sock doll — Leah, their baby sister, had named it Bunny. Its head had been ripped open and stuffing spilled out. "Look at this. Look at what Papa did to Bunny. This is how he got the drink." Two days before, they had watched their mother sew her wedding ring into Bunny's head, but their father had been watching too.

"Come on, Sara, leave him. He'll be all right. He'll find a way. He always has." She watched her sister's eyes taking in the little room's details. The pathetic little washstand. The sorry blanket. How could poor Sara think they were worth remembering?

"Come on," she said again. "We have to go."

Echoes of abandonment fluttered over the cobblestones. An old man with a prayer shawl and a bleeding hand hobbled by. A buxom woman in a maroon beret struggled with a suitcase that wouldn't stay shut. Every half block, she'd have to stop, carefully fold its contents and struggle on. A young mother pushed a baby carriage with a little girl tagging along beside. The mother would halt, beat her to stop crying, then push faster — they had to be at the station by twelve. In Sara's eyes, Mina recognized that uncomprehending stare of their neighbors.

"Sara, you go. Find Mama."

"What?"

"Go to the station. Find Mama and Leah."

"Alone?"

"Just go."

"But what about you?"

"I can't leave him. I've got to try to get Papa." And almost believing it herself.

"How?"

"Who knows? Maybe Asher's come back. I'll do it. Go."

"I'll come."

"No. No. You go. Find Mama." She was already stepping back, willing Sara forward, and hearing that other voice, the one from a man who came into the shop almost every day even when there was nothing left on the shelves: "The last two boards of the fence, I'll loosen them. Get through. There's a space in the back of the coop. You can crawl in. Just you. Understand? Just you."

"Find Mama, Sara. Look for her red kerchief. Tell her I'm coming." And all the time, Mina was stepping back… stepping back … studying Sara's face. And then turning, running. And hearing Sara calling, "Mina!"

"What?"

"Bring Bunny."

"What?"

"Bring Bunny. Leah will want her."

"Just go, Sara."

F F F

St. Bart's Way is narrow, and along its granite curbs the sycamores and maples have pried up the sidewalk. The trees hold a sort of primacy and for their sake, young parents, who themselves once tripped on the cantilevered walks, stoop to kiss the bloody knees of their own crying children.

The houses pass from one generation to the next as subtly as silver acquires patina. Mina's seen them at wide doors, sometimes with gray hair, sometimes with privileged-streaked blond, their eyes drinking in that part of themselves coming up a flagstone path — some sibling whose shoulders slant as theirs do, or whose head tilts to volleyed helloes. Even their clothes drape alike over mirrored bones — those at the door — those on the flagstones. This, Mina thinks, she will never know.

Women who would consider resetting their gems a firstorder violation, think nothing of throwing their husbands' old golfing jackets, frayed as November leaves, over their shoulders to walk their dogs. Sometimes Mina wonders if any of them were customers of hers and Marvin's, if she was the one fitting skirts over their tummies, showing them the transformative powers of a neckline. What would she do then? Extend her hand? And say, "Why, Mrs. Crane, how good to see you. Mina Nagy. You remember from Nagy's Apparel. I never forgot that navy suit with the white piping. Yes, I'm living here now, with my son, Dr. Nagy." And all the time she'd be eyeing the old golfing jacket, remembering the sort of man who sold it, a man she and Marvin knew from the trade. A man smiling the smile only a man on commission can.

At the apex of the street's curve, is a white house with four dormers punctuating its slate roof. Mina admires the symmetry of its Revolutionary icons — its weathervane, the garage cupola, the eagle knocker on its heavy door. Between the door's panels hangs a sheaf of red and gold corn. There are pumpkins on either end of the wide steps: the face of one scowls — that of the other grins. Such a strange American stew, she thinks, an all-but-forgotten Colonial past brewed with something more primal, unbridled.

An SUV turns the corner, passes her, then backs up. Rose lowers the window, "Do you want a ride home?"

"Romeo's not finished." The dog is questing for the perfect tree.

Rose says, "I bought some flounder for dinner." Every night she announces what they were having for dinner as if she needs Mina's permission. She should be beyond that, Mina thinks. "Sounds wonderful." Her daughter-in-law will have a cookbook on its clear plastic stand before she gets Romeo home.

When she opens the door, Rose doesn't smile at her, or coo to Romeo as she usually does. She's sloshing parsley in a small porcelain rinsing sink. Jason has told her about the assembly, Rose thinks. And when the boy goes to the refrigerator with his chastened walk, she's certain.

Rose waits until he leaves. "You don't have to go, Mina," she says. "Jason can explain. Let them get someone else. Or I can get Gary to tell them. It's just too much." She thrusts the parsley into a copper basket hanging from the sink's edge. The front of her slacks is splattered with water.

On the green marbled counter a TV is playing, and a man with close cropped hair and a flawless silk tie talks about public trust.

"It's all right," Mina says.

"You're going to do it?"

"Jason didn't know what he was asking. He didn't mean anything. I'm thinking about it." Under a swan-necked faucet Rose rinses translucent filets. They drape from her hands like swags of white damask. The question of whether Mina will go to the assembly hangs too; the two women cannot look each other in the eye. Where is justice, Mina wonders, if history intrudes on this earnest woman, her daughter-in-law, who lifts a colander as gracefully as Eve reaching for the apple.

She's afraid to look away from the man with his exquisite tie talking about "right-thinking citizens." Afraid she'll see a curl of smoke snaking under the door, spilling over the harlequin tiled floor, and wrapping around her ankles.

F F F

The sun was high, and having no shadow, she felt invisible. She had the sense of running in a bubble. As though a benign gelatinous seal separated her from the cat lolling on a green bench, an old woman running with an empty basket.

When she turned the corner an arm grabbed her — he must have had a face — everyone has a face — but what she always will remember is that grip. "Where are you going?" She will never know how she thought of it, how she had the presence of mind to say, "Please, I'm unclean." Something in his eyes recoiled — he hadn't been prepared for that. "Please, I'm unclean — it came when I was at the station. I have to get a rag. Please, I need a rag. I'm unclean."

Even as he threw her down, she could see she had touched a nerve, had invoked something fearsome, something demanding acknowledgement. And when there were shots, he left off kicking her almost as if relieved. She stayed on the cobblestones until she couldn't hear his boots any more.

Their drygoods shop had been emptied long ago; no need to bother going there. Instead she went down the outside steps to the basement rooms where they lived, all the time, hearing in her head: "The last two boards of the fence, I'll loosen them. There's a space in the back of the coop. Just you. Understand?" In the room with the window to the yard, their father's arm was flung over his eyes against the sunlight. When he groaned she knew he would waken soon. That's how it always went: first the roaring and the drunken beatings, then the sleep a step from death, and, finally, the painful wakening. "Papa," she said. But, if he awoke, what then? Staggering to the station? … already late. Would he even go with her?

And then she noticed his feet: how could that be? He had had his shoes on, she was almost certain, when she left with Sara. He did have them, didn't he? But where were they? What had he done with them? And, then she realized… Asher! It had to be. Asher would do it — take their father's shoes. In a wink he would. Never think twice — his had always been the worst beatings.

And then she heard something … or thought she heard … what? A murmur? Something overhead? In the shop? "Papa?" … he groaned. "Hush Papa." And there it was again … now she was sure. A footstep, and another, now, upstairs. Whoever they were, they would have to go outside and down the steps: there were no inside stairs. Was there time to lift the mattress? Time to crawl under? Time to press her face into the dirt? And all the while hoping Bunny stayed where she was, in the middle of the brown stain on the mattress. So everything would look perfectly natural.

She never heard them come into the room. Just a shout and then the screaming; she thought it would never stop — she knew that sort of screaming — they all did — their father had taught it to them.

And then the shots. One. Then four into the mattress. She never forgot waiting to be dead. Never forgot thinking, *So, just your body goes. I am here. I am still here. Still me.* Never forgot waiting to float… out the window … never imagining through the wall … always out the window. Floating. Yes. She always thought of it as floating, not flying, but floating, high, so high, she would see the empty streets, the deserted houses, and, at the station, a red kerchief.

But, then, realizing she was alive and thinking suffocation was possible, she started to count to mark the hours. But she got confused and would have to start over, "One thousand one … one thousand two … one thousand three." She felt an urge to sleep, but would force herself: "One thousand one … one thousand two … one thousand three." How many seconds in an hour? Three hundred sixty? Three thousand, six hundred? How many times should she count? Darkness would be safest, she knew, but she had heard they always came back at night to catch the ones who had hid. "One thousand one… one thousand two … one thousand three … " She was on the fifth cycle when she felt she had to get out: if she didn't, her limbs would never move.

Her father was against the far wall, his legs splayed wide and the front of his pants bloodied. What they had cut off, was shoved in his mouth.

Even as she took the blanket from the rope she meant to cover him with it. But it was still with her when she climbed out the window, pushed aside the boards and crawled into the space behind the coop.

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The salesgirl is a study in mahogany and gray, her only ornamentation, the pearly beads tipping her braids. Mina appreciates her gabardine suit and black slides and the commiserative way their eyes meet in the dressing room mirror. When she holds a geometric scarf against Mina's suit, the salesgirl's brows arch in question. When Mina smiles, she whisks it off, saying, "I thought it was a keeper, too. Now, how about a half an inch off those sleeves?"

When the salesgirl asks, "What sort of a do are you ladies going to?" Mina's eyes cloud.

"We're just shopping. We might not be going anywhere," says Rose from the aisle between the cubicles. The jacket of her suit bunches over her backside. And the skirt is too short.

"You know," says the salesgirl, "we have pants that go with that jacket." Rose looks to Mina. "You'll probably get more wear out of pants," Mina says. When the saleslady brings them, they need shortening.

Mina studies the precise shade of cordovan in the thinnest line of her suit's plaid — there is just time to get a handbag. The one she wants must hold something larger than a handkerchief but smaller than her new scarf. If she goes to the assembly, it must open easily. She tries one, then another; Rose looks at none. Mina finally picks one with an envelope flap and sees the tightness around Rose's mouth relax.

n the kitchen store Mina's feet have begun to hurt, but Rose's eyes alight from a white pitcher to a garlic press. "I want one of those things that separates pan drippings for Thanksgiving." When the clerk says they haven't come in yet, Rose selects a cheese grater. She tells Mina, "Gary thinks I'm crazy for grating my own cheese. But I tell him, it's the details that make a difference. 'After all,' I say, 'when you operate, you're just as proud of the closing stitches as you are of the valve job, aren't you?'"

This woman my son married, Mina thinks, she is so solid. In the food court she and Rose eat their yogurts near a fountain under a skylight. A half dozen youngsters mill at the fountain's edge. All their clothes, Mina thinks, look uncomfortable. The girls' navels show. And the crotch of the boys' shorts drip past their knees. All wear totemic jewelry. Mina thinks they have created themselves from plastic stones and metallic dyes. The girls have silver-toned mouths; the boys' heads have been tipped in gold.

"I hate that weepy bitch, Alison," says a girl with amethyst hair. "I gave her five hundred hits."

"She's just a filthy skank," says another, "but I only gave her two hundred. I gave the rest to Patrick. He makes me sick. I'm sick of looking at him." She wears a cross at her throat.

"They're talking about that TV show, *Popular,* says Rose. "The one that follows six teenagers from around the country. Each week the audience gets to vote someone off the show. The one who's left gets a new car and a trust fund worth two million dollars."

"Patrick's a real suckass. I want him so gone," says a boy. "Christ, did you see him when he got his SAT scores. I thought he was going to bust a fuckin gut."

"I used to tease Jason that he should sign up for the show. If he got chosen and was the last one, he'd have two million dollars."

Mina doesn't tell Rose that the children at the fountain have mothers too, mothers, who must love these offspring so bereft of promise. One with a tuft of hair under his lower lip lights a cigarette and the smoke drifts over Mina. When she looks at him, his apology is profuse. "I didn't mean to offend you," he says, flicking the cigarette into the fountain.

"Brandon!" the girl with the cross shrieks. "You asshole. You'll clog up everything." She starts to paw at the water, almost falling in. The boy starts to splash too. "Fuckin butt," he shouts, "Get up here. You get up here, you fuckin butt. You'll clog everything up." The others join in. Mina's getting wet. When she stands, the girl who started it, gushes, "Oooh, I'm so sorry." She starts to dab at Mina with a napkin. "Look, Brandon, the lady got all wet."

"All wet? Oh, my, that's so awful," he says. The others are closing in, dabbing too — "And it's such a pretty jacket. Where did you get it, Lady? J.C. Penney's? Sears? They've got such pretty stuff at Sears. Do you want us to send your pretty Sears jacket to the dry cleaners? My mother knows a real good dry cleaners." She

hears their laughter, as if it came through cotton batting and when she looks up, the Jack o' lanterns on the banners lofting from the skylights grin down on her.

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She should have known he'd come, even though she had told him to stay away if it had snowed — they'd see his tracks.

"Mina," she heard him whisper.

Between the cracks in the coop, he was silhouetted against a ribbon of violet rising in the sky over the fence.

"Mina!" again.

"Asher, go away!" How he had known she was in the coop, he had never said. The first time he came she had asked him where he was hiding and he had only answered, "Not far." His visits were becoming more frequent, more reckless. The last time, he had begged for a chicken, but she hadn't dared. She knew he wouldn't leave. She rolled on her other side to the true back of the coop and with her fingertips counted the boards. When she pressed the fourth one, it sprang out — the man had made it so — she reached in and felt, first something moist and sticky, then, a peck and another. Then, something warm and ovoid. Two of them.

"Mina!"

"Wait! I have to put the board back."

She could scarcely see him, but could make out that his hand, when he took the first egg, was shaking. He tried to crack it against his teeth, and then against the edge of their father's shoe. When it spilled into the snow, he scooped both snow and egg into his mouth. Mina tried to pick up all the shell fragments before giving him the other — now a streak of pale yellow pushed against the violet. This time he managed to crack the egg against his teeth and arched his head back to swallow. When he dropped the shell, Mina saw it was smeared with the blood from his gums.

"Let me stay here with you."

"You can't, Asher." The light was growing; the rooster would crow soon.

"Come on. He only comes to you at night. I'll get out. He won't know."

"He'll know."

"Maybe I could give him something."

"What?"

"What you do. Maybe that's what he really wants."

"He's not like that."

"Oh no? What's he like, then?"

"You have to go, Asher." The rooster would start soon … at any minute the man would come for the eggs.

"Get me a chicken."

"I can't. His wife counts them." The rooster started. Her brother was backing away, still saying, "Get me a chicken, for God's sake, Mina. A chicken."

And she was saying, "Asher, wait," and getting, not a chicken, or even an egg, but the blanket. And now the crowing was continuous and he was going through the boards, and she was crawling into the space behind the coop just as the door to the house screeched on its hasp.

Through the cracks she saw the man stoop to examine the
bits of shell and watched him grind them into the snow. He studied the tracks to the fence, then made a business of fetching a hammer, then some nails, his boots obliterating the footprints. What she will remember is that the rhythms of rooster and hammer were only prelude to the beat of his belt against her back that night when he dragged her out, tied and gagged her, so that her screams were heard by her ears only. She will remember that for months she counted the chickens to keep from going mad, and the morning the rooster stepped on a chick before its second wing was free of the shell, and that the sun was so bright the morning the door to her space

behind the coop opened, she couldn't see the faces of their former neighbors staring at her with every expression but sympathy.

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In the mirror on the back of her closet door, she tries the scarf one way, then another. Too much flair, she'll appear frivolous; too little, tentative. She takes the scarf off, folds it in the half, then slips the ends through the loop — give them flair.

She needs everything she can summon, plus all she's been given — her new handbag, the sunlight through the dormer windows, the yellow walls — she needs them to sustain her. She goes to her dresser, opens the bottom drawer, and takes out a tissue-swaddled shape. She places it beside her new bag and folds the paper away, first one raggedy leg, then another. Next a raggedy arm, then a second. Of course, there is no head. She touches the doll's wound softly, as if her finger could cauterize the gash. She, who's sewn countless hems, changed whole shoulders, this she never sewed. She taps the spilling stuffing back into the cavity — she will not mend it, but she will lose not one fiber more.

The yellow walls shimmer around her, and out the dormer window the autumn morning sky and leaves are all dazzle and fire. Whatever purchase she has, is rooted in Bunny. She wonders if a headless doll is testimony enough, if it will teach privileged young men that their least evil act has consequence? That there's no such thing as a little evil? Can anything teach that?

She folds the tissue over the doll as tenderly as she once covered her sleeping babies with flannel blankets. Then slips it into her handbag and adjusts the handles over her shoulder — the bag hangs only as low as her breast, and she feels the soft lump of Bunny against her as she starts down the stairs. Gary and Jason are in the foyer.

"You look great, Grandma," the boy says. He's wearing a blazer with the school's crest on its pocket. She almost cannot bear the sweep of his brows.

Rose comes in from the kitchen. Her pants flap about her ankles; she's worn the wrong shoes for the new length. Still, it's she who hugs Mina. "You don't have to do this, Mina." Even now, she's saying, "We'll come up with something. A flu or something. Right, Gary?"

Mina looks at her family, backlit by October light through the fantail transom. What, she wonders, would command their energy at this moment if their history had been different? What would lay claim to their thoughts? Romeo's latest fit of dyspepsia? A new kitchen range? Tutors for Jason? Isn't the more worthy purpose to tell what she knows: that the eddies of evil are endless.

She checks herself in the mirror and looks back at her family. She wants to free them of the pain in their eyes, but knows that it's not herself who's caused it, but the convergence of memory and duty summoning them to this moment. "I have," she says, "done much harder things in my life."