

GEOFF KIRSCH

A Dish Best Served Cold

Instead of children, Dr. and Mrs. Ira A. Rosen, DDS had a tastefully well-appointed home on a full-acre spread in Dix Park, Long Island, with facilities enough for a whole dinner party to excuse itself at the same time. Theirs was a life of affluent complacency, prescription sunglasses and designer warm-up suits, defensive driving classes and synagogue social halls. The greatest obstacle they faced—either together or separately—was making alternate arrangements during the week the maid visited Ecuador each Christmas. That is, until Ira turned fifty.

First came the gadgets: the crepe-maker, the Juice Tiger, the double-basket deep-fat fryer. I wish you'd consulted me, was all Barbara Rosen said, silently resolving to keep those eyesores well-hidden in a closet. Next was the sports memorabilia. Whatever pleasure he found filling up the guest room with box after box of unopened baseball cards, she neither shared nor understood. But this battle, too, Barbara chose not to pick. Phase or no phase, she trusted the man—he wouldn't bring anything too ungodly into their house. Then he installed a home entertainment center, which vomited sound all over the ground floor. He bought a Jaguar. He drafted schematics for a hideous carport, proposing to pave over her proud little azalea garden. Here's where it stops, Barbara finally decided, but it was like barring the gates after the castle had been stormed—her husband the orthodontist was dropping her for a shikse.

It began as a tryst, Dr. Rosen explained. He sprang the subject one evening over egg rolls and Kung Pao chicken, brought-in from Asia Garden West on Jericho Turnpike. Usually, Barbara ordered from just plain Asia Garden, also on Jericho. But walking to the car earlier that afternoon, encumbered by Ira's dry cleaning, she caught the gaze of a pleasant little man in chef toques, out there hawking coupons. That's Dix Park for you: not a town, really, but a portion of Island-long commercial strip that offers eight different places to get lo mein. And deli. And bagels. Pizza? Forget about it, choose from ten, all of them good, and all of them locked in an endless war for customers, firing promotional giveaway after promotional giveaway at a class of people

who'd eat take-out six nights a week regardless. Still, it was rather charming how he'd helped her to the car, and what the hell? She could shake things up, too—albeit less bombastically.

He didn't intend it to get so serious, so fast, Dr. Rosen said, and then he said some other things, all the while picking out the shrimp from a mound of twelve-ingredient fried rice, which he then placed, neat-rowed, onto a napkin. It just happened, he said. I love you, but, he said. Et cetera, et cetera, he said, though not in so many words. When he was done, he rolled up the napkin and buried it in the trash.

"So what are you telling me?" Barbara said.

"I'm not sure how to phrase it," he answered.

A protective instinct grabbed hold of Barbara. She began to look at her kitchen, really look at it, the vaulted ceiling, the deep-stained cabinetry, the fully-stocked Sub Zero in matching cherry finish. Attempts at family grounded years ago, she'd redirected her love into the house. Sure, Ira's wherewithal was in there somewhere, but the place was mostly a reflection of Barbara's mannered sensibility and tireless devotion. Down to the Chagall lithographs. Down to the custom-tailored draperies. Down to the wooden curtain rods she'd contracted special from Vermont, each one naturally hollow, the artisan said and she'd never forget, using a painstaking process developed by Aborigines. To complete it took half a decade and countless runs to Brattleboro, but *kine-ahora*, Barbara thought, the set was magnificent. Ira hadn't even told her the shikse's name—probably Chrissie, or Christie, or Kristy with a K and a Y. There's no worse feeling than to be threatened in your home by an unseen force.

"I just think," Ira continued. "I just think—is there any duck sauce left?"

The center island was strewn with greasy-bottomed paper bags and half-empty cartons. A complimentary quart of Happy Family sat congealing on its sleek Formica surface, the whole damn mess of it mirrored back at her in a night-blackened bay window. Shock had given way to anger; tears later, yes, but for now, anger.

"No, Ira, you used it all."

She had see-through braces, the shikse. That's how they met: Dr. Rosen wired her up on the house. Well, okay, she had compensated him, in her own way and on multiple occasions. But money never changed hands. He'd mentioned that, too. That, and how the shikse

ooh'd and ah'd every time she set foot in Dix Park Cosmetic Dental, impressed by all the photos of his new cabin-cruiser *Tsurrus*, which Barbara openly hated, which he also mentioned. For contrast.

"We've been through a lot together," Dr. Rosen said. He was snapping up snow peas, one at a time in rapid succession.

Barbara felt dinner catch in her throat—halfway down or halfway back up, she couldn't say—and took a swallow of Caffeine-Free Diet Coke.

"But I think it might be time," he said, and paused to dab his mustache-less beard.

"What, Ira?" Barbara said. "You think it's time for what?"

She'd shed a pound that week, not that it mattered now. A shikse, Ira. A *shikse*? What do you do with her, spread her open on that sticky hydraulic chair, with the ceiling-mounted track light shining right on her crotch? Or do you bend her over it instead, ramming her *goyishe* face up against the cuspidor, there, that's wasn't so bad, now spit.

"I like this new place," he said.

"Ira."

He swiped the menu off the table, tilted his trifocals to inspect it.

"Look, fifteen-dollar Wednesday special. Oh, wait, that's for sushi."

"Too bad you don't eat seafood," Barbara said, toxically.

"I can't help if it turns my stomach," Ira said. "Even the smell. Especially the smell. Maybe I'm allergic. Maybe it could kill me."

"Okay, Ira, enough."

"All dishes supervised by Master Chef Suzuki, it says."

"Ira, please!" Barbara said. "If you've got something to say, say it. Otherwise, dump the shikse, and I'll try my best to forgive you."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, Barb," Dr. Rosen said. Suddenly, he was all business. "I want a divorce."

Well, he got one. And that's not the half of it.

Whereas Dr. Rosen's finances allowed him a whole team of crack-erjack lawyers, during Barbara's marital tenure, she hardly worked a day, not after they hired Maria. The job of kept wife is less about salary than benefits, and since bankable attorneys don't accept payment in the form of spa Tuesdays or brunch with the Temple Beth Shalom sisterhood, she abandoned all hopes of equitable property distribution. Lucky for her, then—the only thing she wanted was the

only thing she expected.

But when they met in the offices of Ira's representation, they split their assets painlessly. Eerily painlessly. The Volvo, hers. The Mt. Snow time-share, hers. The season tickets to Westbury Music Fair, the two burial plots his mother gave as wedding gifts, hers, hers, and hers. Ira ceded their telephone stock, and Barbara's counsel nudged her under the table; by the time she nabbed the Roth IRA, that eager young man was practically vibrating with joy. Dr. Rosen even let go the highlights of their record collection, happily accepting the bargain-bin selections for himself: her *Yellow Submarine* to his *Magical Mystery Tour*; her *Surrealistic Pillow* (Jefferson Airplane) to his *Nuclear Furniture* (Jefferson Starship); her Simon & Garfunkel to his plain old Paul Simon (neither fought for custody of Garfunkel's solo projects). At lunch, her lawyer reassured her—clean sweep, he said, I stake my career on it—but the parties reconvened to a very rude awakening. Ira was gunning for the house.

It got worse from there. Worse than the weeks of legal maneuvering. Worse than witnessing her outclassed junior associate get crushed by a firm whose clients included several New York Islanders, and, for a brief time, Joey Buttafuoco. Worse than the final resolution: she'd been more than evenly compensated, the house and all within it was his. Yes, even worse than winding up with the long end of the wishbone, when all she'd really wished for had just broken off in her ex-husband's hand. Because not only was Barbara out, the shikse was in. And the timeline was head-spinning.

Three days, they'd given Barbara, three days to remove every last trace of herself from the house she once assumed she'd die in, unless they retired to Boca, and even then.

While Dr. Rosen pattered around without a care in the world—no Dix Park Motor Court for him—Barbara boxed up her effects: clothes and handbags mostly, shoes, refrigerator magnets, her Brandeis diploma, several laminated newspaper clippings—"Hurricane Barbara Hits East Coast;" "Get Ready for Barbara;" "Barbara on the Rampage!" She went about her task with heavy-hearted methodology, drifting in and out of hallways, whispering: "What's to become of me, now that I've lost everything?"

At least at first. Three days, they'd given Barbara, each room a literal inventory of what she stood to surrender forever, until

gradually, her thinking turned outward. On the third morning, after the moving van rumbled down the drive, it dawned on her that no, she hadn't lost everything. Three days, they'd given Barbara, and it was all the time she needed to arrive at the real question: what's to become of *them*—that gold-digging shikse and her stinking ex-husband-now that they've stolen it?

Dimpled body notwithstanding, the woman's mind was fairly lean. Back in the day, she made Gold Key Society and her senior thesis, "Salmon and a Safe Deposit Box: Retribution in Steinbeck's *Cannery Row*," earned university honors. Time to work the old magic, she told herself, as she plunked into the paunch of their living room sofa. Wheels spun. Hair twirled. A breeze blew in through the slightly-parted sliding glass doors. Back and forth, back and forth, the drapes rocked on their massive curtain rod. Barbara watched transfixed as the silk brocade shimmered like fish scales in the midday light. And then, like that, a solution.

About an hour after she placed the call to Asia Garden West, Ira glided into the kitchen wearing nylon tennis pants and a Fila T-shirt. He'd been drawn, no doubt, by the unmistakable sound of someone opening disposable food containers.

"What's all this?" he asked.

"Call it a last supper."

Barbara Rosen sat primly at the table, contemplating the opulent Asian smorgasbord before her: hamachi, chuutoro, and ebi, hamaguri, kaibashira, and unagi, hundreds of them, arranged like post-modern lawn ornaments on platters lined with plastic grass. There were various futomakis-bonito, crab, octopus-and sashimis of mackerel, salmon, tuna. Four sides of caviar. And the crowning touch, two quarts of Happy Family, which, though she hadn't asked for it specifically, Chef Suzuki threw in compliments of himself, you know, anything for the lovely Mrs. Rosen. It wasn't sushi per se, but it more than met her specifications. Jam-pack it with fish, Barbara told him. That's the whole idea.

"I took the liberty of using the joint credit card," Barbara said. She produced the Visa Platinum and flicked it at her ex.

"You think you're pretty clever," he said. "But I see through your little game."

"Game?" she said, coyly.

"What were the damages here, \$300, \$400? I get more than that fitting a ten-year-old's bite plate."

"I know you do, Ira," Barbara said, as she dissected a flower of ginger.

"All you've done is made some restaurateur's day."

"Is that right?"

For several moments they said nothing, each measuring the other while Barbara drenched a hunk of wasabi in soy sauce. Ira kept his distance. He was breathing through his mouth, but for him, there would be no olfactory escape.

"You're angry," he said, eventually.

"Damn right I am, Ira, but don't worry," she said, and laid a pale pink petal atop a piece of yellow tail. "Once I finish this meal, you'll never see me again."

"Yeah," Ira said.

Barbara slurped the hamachi into her mouth and chomped down hard.

"Dig in, babe, I couldn't possibly eat all this myself."

Ira shook his head. He was looking a little green around the gills.

"Come on," she said. "For old times' sake?"

"I'll pass."

"Not even a teeny-tiny piece?" she said, and thrust some futomaki in his direction. "You'll like this one. It has cucumber."

Ira recoiled from her outstretched chopsticks as if they were red-hot poker gripping a glowing coal. His non-tennis-playing gut shifted beneath the T-shirt, and he busied his hands stuffing it back into his pants.

"You'd really do yourself a service adding fish to your diet," Barbara said. "But I guess that's not my job anymore—let the shikse worry about your health."

"Why so keen on this fish thing?" he asked, and then broke into a smile. He figured he had her number; boy, was he wrong. "You poisoned it, didn't you?"

"Don't be stupid."

"What'd you fill it with Barb, drain cleaner?"

"No."

"Some kind of laxatives, then?"

"Sweet, misguided, Dr. Rosen," Barbara began. Slowly, deliberately, she heaped the futomaki with roe, opened wide, and bit, allowing just enough juice to dribble down her chin. "Don't you realize that I've got bigger fish to fry?"

Ira excused himself, as Barbara knew he would, something about his boat or his mistress or some other nonsense meant to hurt her. It didn't, though, not at all. Here in the final moments of her soon-to-be-previous existence, she felt strangely alive, alive and able, and in a way she hadn't for decades, when a rose-lipped Barbara Green left Waltham, Mass. betrothed to a promising young dental student from the Bronx. It's like a grand re-opening, she thought, as she twisted the cap off a bottle of rice wine. A grand re-opening of the world-well, at least her little corner of it.

"Oh, Ira, one more thing," Barbara said. She'd caught him at the door to the garage, her thoughts already casting into the future that began right after she gathered the balance of her meal and bade farewell to her house. Down to the Chagall lithographs. Down to the custom-tailored draperies. Down to the wooden curtain rods she'd contracted special from Vermont—termites, that's what the craftsman used, to create their custom tubular shape without leaving so much as the faintest seam.

"Since you're up," she said, "be a lamb and pop this sake in the microwave."

When Dr. Rosen returns later that night, with the shikse on his arm, he finds Barbara gone, off to suffer her fall from grace in the only apartment complex in town.

The couple slinks in from the garage. He sports a thin-lipped smile on his fat, self-congratulatory face. She squeals with girlish delight at the lavish digs her whoredom has provided. They ache to consummate their new living arrangement, and can't get five feet into the kitchen without pausing to neck. They lean in. His bulbous nose clangs against her svelte, mildly upturned one. She giggles like an idiot. He groans pathetically. She tosses her head back, then side-to-side, like she just stepped out of a salon.

Dr. Rosen reaches for a pair of breasts that are not pendulous, lacking the fleshy comfort of his banished ex-wife's. The shikse pops her

gum. These breasts are tough breasts, unyielding breasts. They handle like rubber spaldeens, the kind he once played stoopball with as a boy. He palms them. She arches her back in hopes the so-called skilled practitioner might relieve her of her brassiere, because it's kinda uncomfortable what he's doing and he's stretching it all out, he's destroying that bra exactly as he destroyed all the others but whatever she'll just add Victoria's Secret to the list of establishments to visit tomorrow and the next day with the Visa Platinum he gave her in the Jag on the way over. And it is as he finally gets the hint, right as he's about to unhook the clasp and stare these miracles of modern medicine right in the plasticine nipple, that he catches his first whiff.

"Do you smell that?" he asks.

"Smell what?"

It is a pungent odor, dense as fog. The two have ceased their forward progress. Her shirt hangs open. His prick deflates.

"It's like fish, like stale fish."

"Sorry, I can't," says the shikse, who lost her sense of smell last year after a botched rhinoplasty. "I lost my sense of smell last year after a botched rhinoplasty."

Dr. Rosen remembers the sushi feast and thinks oh, it's Barbara's leftovers stinking up the garbage. Go on into the living room, he tells the shikse, I'll be right there. Don't start without me, heh-heh-heh, and she skips barefooted across the cold linoleum.

His trash can, similar to every kitchen trash can in the neighborhood, is hidden inside a pull-out drawer built to appear like a regular cabinet. Ira steels himself. He holds his breath and winces in anticipation, unnecessary as it is, because the can is empty, save the Art Garfunkel Box Set on four LPs. But Dr. Rosen leaves nothing to chance. He twist-ties the bag. He Glades the bin, the cabinet, and the air around him, standing, momentarily, in a miasma of Country Lilac. But wait, the smell's still there, lurking beneath the surface like Godzilla in the depths of Tokyo Bay.

Okay, he thinks, spying the window above the sink. It has to be the dump. Sometimes, especially in summer, when the wind is right, Dix Park gets treated to the funk of its refuse. So Dr. Rosen shuts the window and takes Art out to the curb. He tips back, sucking in a good, long draught of mid-September night. The sky is starless, backlit by

Dix Park Driving Range in all its high-watt glory, the air clean, crisp. So if it's not the dump, he wonders, what the hell is it? Or is he just imagining things? And if so, why that, and if that, why now? He knows he's smart—you have to be to get where he is—but it's too real, too palpable for him to have conjured with his mind. It must something else. Something or someone. He posits for a moment, then comes to this conclusion: What kind of schmuck leaves a beautiful woman to go stand around a driveway? I'm sure it's just the kitchen, he tells himself as he heads back inside, stroking the flank of his sports car as he passes. I'm sure it will go away.

In the living room, the shikse sprawls naked on the imported Scandinavian sectional. She's Scandinavian, too. Well, maybe not Scandinavian, but definitely Nordic. Or English, perhaps, with a drop of Scotch-Irish, or plain Irish, or Dutch, or some other fair-haired region where the women are lanky and don't grow visible moustaches. But she's been imported all the same, by the only ethnic thing about her, namely the man she's stopped dead in his tracks. He's slobbering at the sight of her freshly-mowed pubic hair, manicured into a tidy blonde landing strip.

"You like?" the shikse asks. Arpeggios of soprano sax woof and tweet from an impressive pair of wall-mounted speakers.

"Absolutely," he says, and means it. Barbara never went in for that kind of thing; her bush crept across her upper-thigh region like black ivy on two clock towers.

He yearns to get down to business, but the smell, the smell-his living room's ripe with it, too. Worse than in the kitchen. It wafts over the coffee table, leafs through the magazines ear-marked for his waiting room, the golf journals and financial reviews, the *Time*, the *Newsweek*, the ladies' monthlies, the *Ranger Rick*, and that damn *National Geographic* Barbara had him subscribe to—she always carried a torch for the exotic.

"I need a little suction, doctor," the shikse says. She is touching herself now.

It's a simple procedure that he's planned for her, one that requires a minimum of instruments. Yet he finds himself tortured as if by obscene halitosis, or those discourteous lunch-hour patients who don't brush before visits.

"Do you seriously not smell that? It's everywhere," he exclaims.

"Forget it, Dr. Rosen," she replies. "Come here and fill my cavity." "Orthodontists don't do that," he corrects. No one understands the difference between specialties.

"If you won't come to me, then I'll come to you," the shikse says, propping herself up on her knees. "But either way, we're both going to come."

As the music trembles toward its adult contemporary crescendo, the shikse juts forward, grabs hold of Ira's waistband, and yanks it, along with his red Jordache bikini briefs, down around his ankles. She's exposed a bundle more ball than cock, and into her mouth it goes.

"All right, all right," he struggles to say through the conflicting sensations of queasiness and fellatio. "I'll call someone in if it's not gone by tomorrow."

"That's what I love about you most, Dr. Rosen," says the shikse. She's a pro at this; she hardly sounds muffled. "Your willingness to throw money at problems."

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, Barbara tries to enjoy what's left of her life. But it's not ski season yet, the phonograph's busted, and monitoring stock quotes proves unabashedly unfulfilling. So, too, do her friends, who seem awfully consumed by other people's misfortunes. Besides, the juiciest tidbits are always the freshest, and at this particular junction, they all concern Barbara. It's uncomfortable for everyone, the ladies agree, let's let things cool off, touch base around Hanukkah? She even abandons her adult-ed classes—they're not nearly as provocative as described in the catalogue. And not an hour goes by where she doesn't think about the house. Her without it, it without her. She's a woman pained by irrevocable loss. What solace can there possibly be in Microwave Cookery and Talking Talmud II? There does remain one bright spot, however. Dix Park Apartments abut Dix Park Corners, where, wedged between Pizza Explosion and Hymie's Bagelrama, Asia Garden West does a very brisk business, and Barbara dines alone two meals a day.

We must stop meeting like this, Chef Suzuki tells her one day, emerging from the back, beaming as usual. She blushes. Work for me, Mrs. Rosen, I'll teach you to make sushi. Well, she thinks, that's something different. Private instruction, he says, winking profusely.

Barbara's blush deepens. How long has it been since someone spoke to her this way? The wiry proprietor forks over an apron. If he won't take no for an answer, then she won't force him to. Okay, she says, where do I start? At the bottom, he answers as he ushers her to the dish room. But you're a sharp lady. You'll advance fast.

Not one week later, when Shinjo calls in sick, Barbara's new boss hands her an insulated food carrier. See, Mrs. Rosen, you move up already, but one of the receipts freezes her cold. The name is her own, and so is the address—or was, once. Map's on the wall, he says, and she hears her reply tumble out her mouth. No, she says, I know the neighborhood. That's how Barbara returns to the scene of her crime, delivering a Spicy Maki Combo, edamame appetizer. She rings once, twice, three times, no answer.

"Delivery," Barbara shouts. She does not want to pound; she's hurt her baby enough as it is. It's me, she coos and starts back toward the van. I love you, I miss you, I haven't forgotten you. But the front door opens and someone is speaking. It's a tallish woman, hastily wrapped in a red satin robe.

"Is that my sushi?" this woman asks, back arched in a slow yawn.

The robe slips from her shoulders, betraying a set of tan-line-free implants, and, between her legs, a patch of fuzz vaguely reminiscent of Hitler's mustache.

Barbara doesn't know what to say. She averts her eyes. Not because the shikse is naked, but because the shikse is the shikse.

"That comes to \$14.95," Barbara manages. She pushes the charge slip at her.

"Not here," the shikse says. "By the pool. Dr. Rosen would shit if he caught me eating fish in his house."

Barbara walks inside. The shikse leads them out by way of the living room, which is, Barbara notices, still rank with her handiwork. The whole place, actually. How can the shiske stand it? By and large they're more petite, and tend to be less hooked, but have goyishe noses not the same sensitivity?

"Don't I know you from somewhere?" the shikse asks, as she shuffles onto the deck. For a split second Barbara thinks the jig is up. Tears glisten in her eyes, partly from the odor, but mostly from the pain, the pain at now seeing—or, rather, smelling—the full ghastliness of the harm she's inflicted.

"I'm so, so sorry," Barbara begins to confess, but the shikse interrupts her.

"No biggie, it'll come to me," she says. Again she loses her robe, this time intentionally. "Anyway, listen, I treat myself to sushi all the time. In the future, bring it right here so I don't have to get dressed." "All right," Barbara says, relieved she'd been pre-empted. Weekly visitation rights, now there's a serendipitous prospect. Perhaps the storm will clear after all.

"That's it!" the shikse exclaims, as if she's discovered cold fusion. "You were in my Spiritual Health seminar. I told you I'm good with faces. Why'd you stop coming?"

"Work."

"Trust me, you're not missing anything," the shikse says, and collapses into a chaise lounge. Her toned posterior barely leaks through the cracks. "Between you and me, I'm so bored with all of this. That's why my dentist's letting me redecorate."

"Orthodontist," Barbara corrects. The whine of a leaf blower dies in the distance.

"I'm thinking mirrors on the walls, zebra skin on the floors."

"For the bedroom, you mean," Barbara says, hopefully.

"No, every room," the shikse says. "I need a project."

"But what about the carpets?" Barbara says. In a flash, she recalls the warehouse in Chelsea, a weekend debating broadloom with that solicitous sales rep: saxony or needlepoint, wool or seagrass, what do we think about tufted sisal blends?

"Hideous," the shikse says. "Everything's hideous, so everything's gone."

"Everything," Barbara repeats, laboring not to choke. She doesn't want the answer, yet still she asks. "The curtain rods, too? They're quite magnificent."

"Firewood," the shikse says, picking at a California roll.

"And Dr. Rosen—that's his name, right—Dr. Rosen's okay with that?"

"Are you kidding? This place has the taint of his ex-wife all over it. He said do what I want, once he gets rid of some smell he keeps talking about."

Barbara feels the old rage waxing. She turns to leave before things get ugly.

“See you next week,” the shikse calls to her. “Door’s always open.”

“Don’t worry, Mrs. Rosen,” Barbara calls back, thankful she’s carrying four other orders. “I’ll make myself right at home.”

“Great,” the shikse says. “But don’t call me Mrs. Rosen; it gives me the creeps.”

From then on out, Barbara does as directed. She lets herself in, she lets herself out. And she always packs extra—plenty of extra—remembering to bring her Phillips head screwdriver. If the shikse ever wonders what Barbara’s doing there, an hour after deliveries and surrounded by empty tins, she never asks. She never tells either.

Weeks breeze past, and still the smell. As promised, the carpets are steamed, the house draped in a circus-like tent by Dix Park Fumigation, LLC. But the smell loiters like an ungrateful houseguest come to town in search of work. Maria quits during the second month—*no, senor, no quiero mas dinero, es horrible, no mas*. Since the lady of the house refuses to lift one acrylic-tipped finger, Dr. Rosen faces the monster himself, rooting around rubber-gloved, while the shikse sunbathes nude out back, which she does every day at lunch, rain or shine, well into November. He sweeps, mops, and dust-busts. He gets tough on grease, kills 99% of germs on contact, polishes his home to a lemony shine. It doesn’t work, either. He inspects every last crevice—at least that he can think of—but only discovers dead ends: a cucumber liquefying at the bottom of the vegetable crisper; a charred-up squirrel carcass wedged in the chimney. His friend pulls some strings with the Suffolk County PD, and the canine unit turns up a shriveled baggie of grass, nothing more. Dr. Rosen evades arrest by blaming a non-existent son, though not without a stiff donation to the Police Athletic League.

Sex, on the other hand, is less puzzling to eradicate—who the hell can concentrate with that beast in the house? Well, one person can, but she learns to funnel that energy into constructive pursuits. Headlong, the shikse dives into his bank account, which wouldn’t place nearly the same strain if only she could be prevailed upon not to park her new Beamer in the fire lane. How quickly expenditures multiply when you accessorize each shopping trip with a fabulous cash outlay to the impound lot.

There are those still on friendly terms with the man: Rabbi Lefkowitz,

for instance, whose holiday pledge drive can’t afford to lose a single congregant, or Douglas Spitz, MD, who upholds a measure of professional courtesy. But they’re also men. They contribute suggestions like “make your home a kosher home” and “have you ruled out neurological disorders?” The opposite sex reacts more coolly. If elicited, a few offer homespun wisdom—tomato juice, try tomato juice, dab some perfume on your light bulbs—but that’s every bit as fruitless, and many women don’t. Whatever the problem, says general consensus, Dr. Rosen brought it on himself.

So the smell strengthens and everyone’s talking. What began as a simple aromatic reminder whips itself into a hurricane of putrescence, likened by some to ten Chinatowns in the middle of August. It chases not only friends and servicemen, but also real estate agents and prospective buyers, so Barbara’s heard, who literally run out the door vowing never to return. It’s a gossipy town, Dix Park—she knows from past experience. There are far too many with far too much possessing far too little to occupy their time.

Barbara was flitting around her studio, doing a million things at once—pulling on a soy-spattered tunic, clipping shut a bag of low-fat veggie snacks, reviewing documents for her upcoming legal malpractice suit—when the telephone rang.

“Barbara Green,” she said by way of salutation.

“I must have the wrong number,” said the person on the line.

“Ira?” she said. “I’d recognize your whiny voice anywhere.”

“Thanks, I guess,” Ira said. “Since when have you started going by Green?”

“You didn’t think I’d keep your last name, did you?”

“I don’t know what I thought.”

“Yeah,” Barbara said distractedly, as she belted her hounds tooth chef’s pants. “Hey, tough break about the practice. You worked so hard for it.”

“That’s what happens once you’ve fixed a whole town’s teeth,” Ira said, and sniffed. “People stop coming in.”

“Could it be that they don’t trust a man who plays doctor in his dentist’s office?”

"Orthodontist's office," Dr. Rosen said. He sounded desperate.

"How's the house, Ira?" she asked, sensing his imminent lie.

"Couldn't be better," Dr. Rosen said.

"That's a relief," Barbara said. "Because people say it smells like a worldwide bouillabaisse convention."

"Really?" he said, though he didn't sound surprised.

"I only know what I've heard. But then, I'm not plugged in how I used to be."

"Exaggerations," he said. "Okay, I had, what, call it an inconvenience."

"Also 'ten Chinatowns in the middle of August,'" she said. "That's my favorite."

"You wouldn't happen to know how it got like that, would you?"

"I thought you said it was no big deal," Barbara said.

"It's not," Dr. Rosen said. "I mean, it wasn't. I took care of it weeks ago."

"Good for you. Now if you don't mind, Ira, I'm going to be late."

"Late for what?" he said.

"You remember Asia Gardens West," Barbara said.

"Should I?" he said. Apparently he hadn't been reading his Visa statements.

"I'm a chef's assistant and driver there, now," Barbara said. "But Hideki—I mean, Chef Suzuki-san—says not for long."

There was a silence here, not awkward, simply two used-to-be life-long lovers speaking to each other from places that defied prediction.

"I don't mean to keep you," Ira said. "I just wanted someone to talk to."

"What about the shikse?"

"At Fortunoff's," he said. "She's breaking me, Barb. I had to sell off my baseball cards, at less than market, too, because they sm—"

"Because they what?"

"Weren't as high in value as my guy originally appraised them."

"We all make our choices, Ira," Barbara said. "Now, I really have to run."

"Wait, wait, wait," Ira said, finally approaching the heart of the matter. "I've got a proposition for you."

For the next ten minutes, Dr. Rosen laid on her a sob-story to end all sob-stories, in which he played protagonist, a cabal of realtors the antagonist, and the sale of his home the obstacle to overcome. He was

being cheated, he said. Organized conspiracy, he said. Suspected anti-Semitism, he said. And then, he made his pitch.

"I'd be willing to give it to you for," he said, and cleared his throat, right before tendering an offer maybe half the normal asking price. Barbara Green had to bite her knuckle lest she erupt with glee. She had an income now, and alimony, at least until a certain master chef decided to make an honest woman of her. Her Roth IRA would cover the difference; the penalty for early withdrawal wouldn't be too bad. Still, Dr. Rosen was trying to pull a fast one, and Barbara had no qualms at all about countering his number with one \$50,000 lower.

"Otherwise, sayonara," she said. It felt indescribably good.

"Since you've got a sentimental attachment to the place," Dr. Rosen said. Barbara could see him, nose plugged and pumping his meat-hook in misconstrued victory. "But you have to sign the papers right now."

Within an hour, Barbara Green's signature sealed the deal.

Their reunion took place a week later, for the purpose of transferring keys. Barbara rolled up to a portrait of Dr. Rosen, imperious as ever, directing the crew from Dix Park E-Z Move. They all wore surgical masks as they hustled out the door humping boxes marked "Small Appliances: Handle w/ Care." Barbara watched from outside the house, breathing deep the late-autumn Sunday. She'd gotten everything she wanted. And much, much more. They'd be happy here, she and Hideki—lord knows the neighborhood could use a little color. And yet, she couldn't suppress a nagging twinge of pity for her ex-husband. If nothing else, the two had history.

"Where you headed, Ira?" Barbara asked.

"The cabin-cruiser, to meet Kristy," he replied. So, it was Kristy after all. "We're going to live there for a while, until I take care of that licensing issue."

Something about a secret begs it to be told, and examining Ira now, handkerchief clamped to his face, barking at the crew hey watch it that's my chocolate fondue fountain, Barbara honestly wished to set the record straight. You did this to me, so I did this to you, she'd say, as long as he copped to his end first.

"Ten Chinatowns in the middle of August," Barbara said, casting the bait.

“The things people say,” he replied. Perhaps it wasn’t in him to admit wrongdoing. Perhaps he didn’t realize that everyone already knew everything. For whatever reason, though, even with the E-Z Move foreman dry-heaving into the rosebushes—and who could miss that?—Dr. Rosen declined to own up.

“Right,” Barbara said, and Ira checked his watch.

“Take it all, boys,” he called to the crew. “Careful with those curtain rods.”

“You’re taking the curtain rods?”

“Absolutely.”

“What are you going to do with curtain rods on a boat?”

“There’re mine, Barb, so, you know, anything I want,” he said, while two watery-eyed movers struggled them into the truck.

“But I thought the shikse hated them,” she said.

“What gave you that idea?” he said. He jerked the cab door open, and hoisted himself into the passenger seat. Barbara Green couldn’t believe it—that S.O.B. was actually smirking.

“Use them in good health,” she said. “And send my best to the shikse.”

“Don't call her shikse,” he said. “It gives me the creeps.”

The cargo doors shut, the engine engaged, and there went Dr. Ira A. Rosen, DDS, off to suffer his fall from grace on a boat named *Tsurrus*. Of course, *Tsurrus*, in Yiddish, means trouble.