

BY DEVORIE KREIMAN

Winner Takes All



*The old pawnbroker had a story he wanted to tell Doniel.
Doniel had a secret he wanted to keep.*

Doniel edges his car towards the curb in front of Sal's Pawnshop. The letter "n" is missing from the sign, so it reads Sal's Paw shop, above a row of neon banners: Buy and Sell. Gold. Jewelry. Cash loan. Open 24 hours.

He shudders. *At least it's still light outside.*

He looks around carefully, then gets out of the car and clicks the lock on his key fob. A reassuring chirp and flash of lights. He clicks it again to double check.

As he walks towards Sal's, he pulls his jacket closer, feels the bulk in the pocket like a sandbag against his chest.

He pushes the handle of the glass door, first towards him, then away from him. It's locked. He bangs on the door. Then he notices the dusty button on the side and hits it. Once. Twice. Three times. Until the buzzer sounds and the door opens into an entryway; there's another locked door in front of him, trapping him in a cell of glass. A streak of panic. He's never been okay in tight spaces. Another buzz, too loud, and the second door swings open.

He steps into the narrow room. Glass displays, crowded with color, stretch the length of the pawnshop on both sides. A young couple is laughing over a tray of jewelry. An elderly man, at the far end of the store, is standing next to a black case on the floor.

Doniel notices the cameras every few feet. All of them seem to be pointing at him.

"Can I help you?" The man who walks towards him has tattoos covering his arms and his fingers.

Doniel feels the sweat breaking out on the back of his neck. He pulls the slim leather

box and the velvet bag from his jacket pocket. He opens the box, takes out the watch, and hands it to the pawnbroker. The pawnbroker turns the watch over a few times in his hands. He holds a jeweler's loupe over his eye and murmurs, "Swiss movement." Then he slides open a cabinet beneath the counter, takes out what looks like a magnet and brings it close to the watch. Finally, he pronounces, "Gold."

Doniel shakes the cufflinks from the velvet bag into his clammy palm. He sets them on the counter carefully and tells the pawnbroker. "They're real emeralds."

The pawnbroker turns on a UV light and holds each cufflink beneath it. Eventually, he nods, still holding them. The cufflinks look dull in the pawnbroker's hands.

Doniel says, "On the website it says that you hold valuables in exchange for cash. You won't sell them. Right?"

"That's one option. Collateral for a loan. We'll give you \$3,500 for the lot. You have 30 days to pay it back, at 22.5% interest, plus the transaction fee. We won't sell your items during the 30 days."

Doniel gulps. "These pieces are worth a lot more than \$3,500."

"You'd get more money selling them to a jeweler. But this way you have a chance to get them back."

Doniel senses someone behind him. He whirls. The elderly man who'd been at the other end of the store is now at his elbow. That's when Doniel sees the big black yarmulke on his head. He feels the heat rush to his face.

What are the chances? In one of the worst neighborhoods in the city!

The man extends a hand. "Shalom aleichem.

I'm Ushi."

Zaide's handshake. Watch and cufflinks elegant against the crisp cuffs of his shirt.

Ushi has a surprisingly strong grip and a wide smile—through teeth that are stained and cracked. "And you are?"

Doniel's throat feels thick and dry. Like clay. He manages, "Doniel."

"Ahh... Maybe you're going to Flatbush? Anywhere near there? Even Remsen. I came on the bus, but it's hard with this." He nudges the black case at his feet. "You have a car? *Mamash a neis*. Meeting a *heimishe Yid* here."

Run. Take the watch and cufflinks. And run. From this shop. From this man who knows I came here.

Doniel sighs. "Okay."

The pawnbroker asks, "You want the paperwork?"

Doniel's eyes meet Ushi's. Ushi backs away quickly, leaving his case by the counter. He says, "I'll wait near the door."

Doniel hands over his driver's license and signs the papers without reading them. The pawnbroker counts aloud as he hands him the cash along with a slip of paper. "This is your receipt. You'll need it to reclaim your items."

It's very far from enough.

He lifts Ushi's case and turns slowly, like a man condemned. "My car is in front."

"*Yasher koiach*. Do you know what that is? It's a record player. A classic. For my son, Boruch. He's a few years older than you. What are you? Forty-five?"

"Thirty-three."

The buzzer sounds. Ushi holds the door for Doniel, then follows him into the space

between the two doors. Doniel tries to shift the record player in his arms to ease the ache on his shoulders as he waits to be set free by the second buzzer.

Ushi holds the door again, and Doniel feels the welcome freshness of air on his cheeks. He says, "It's the black car. It unlocks when I get close. Open the back door."

Ushi shakes his head. "Smart car. It knows you're coming. I like the feel of a real key. Nu! Someone decided this is better. Me, they didn't ask."

Doniel puts the record player down on the back seat and goes around to start the car. He watches Ushi lower himself carefully into the passenger seat and wonders how old he is; his movements are stiff, but there's something in Ushi's eyes, a liveliness that reminds Doniel of the way his children's eyes used to brighten when he walked through the door.

Ushi holds his hands out in front of the vents and rubs them. "Ahh. Heat. Nice car."

The notice came a few days ago—officially ending the grace period for missed payments and informing him that his car will be repossessed.

He still hasn't found a way to tell Suri.

Ushi says, "I was going to ask the man

The notice came a few days ago—officially ending the grace period for missed payments and informing him that his car will be repossessed. He still hasn't found a way to tell Suri.

Ushi's voice is lower now. Almost like he's talking to himself. "I drove him away. I yelled and criticized and threatened. So he left.

behind the counter to call a taxi when I saw you. *Min hashamayim*. And the record player! You want to hear? It's quite a story."

Doniel pictures himself flooring the gas, taking them into a crazed spin. *I'm losing everything. But, sure, old man, let's have story time!* He says, "Okay."

"My wife, Mira, was so sick. The *machlah*. And the treatment. What they put her through! She couldn't sleep, couldn't eat. Someone told me about Chinese herbs. There's a store on the corner, where we were. Not really a store; more like a closet. When I went to get the herbs, I passed this pawnshop and saw the record player on display. But I couldn't deal with it then. I bought the herbs and made it into a tea—very smelly. I forced Mira to take a few drops. I don't know if it helped. By then, she was in and out, on morphine. She died a few days later. Eight months ago."

Doniel says, "I'm sorry to hear that."

"Fifty-seven years we were married. Not enough time. So much left to say. But that... that was my fault. You know when things get really clear? When it's too late. *Ach*. I used to get so angry when I didn't get my way. Mira used to beg me to talk to Boruch. To really talk. And to listen to him. Boruch is our *ben yachid*. How much Mira went through until we had him! A miracle. You have children?"

Doniel says, "Five. *Bli ayin hara*."

"Boys?"

"One. Moishy. He's ten."

"Sweet age."

Last night. His phone on the dining room table. Moishy, looking up from his Rashi worksheet, "Tatty, what's a jackpot? A funny picture popped onto your phone, and it says lucky jackpot. It's—"

Snatching it. Barking. "Don't touch my phone. Ever."

Moishy's tears. "I didn't. I was just sitting here and it came on your screen. I didn't even touch it."

He grips the wheel. Ushi is still talking. "... couldn't stop thinking about it. Music runs in our family. My grandfather's brother is the *chazzan* Dovid Scharf. A voice like a *malach*. Boruch also. He used to sing *Kabbalas Shabbos* in the *rav's minyan*. When he was a little kid, we had a record player and records of *chazzanus*. Boruch would sit, with his eyes closed, and sing along. But when he got a little older, he wanted to be in a boys' choir. They would travel around and sing. I said 'No. You can sing in *shul*. That's it!'"

Ushi throws up his hands. "What did we know then? You think my father put up with shtick from me? You think I got to say I want this, I want that? We did what we were told.

But the next generation, you give, and it's not good enough. They need every *mishegas*.

"When Boruch was a teenager, he started to collect records. Classical music. I took them away. A lot of those composers were lowlifes. Not for a *yeshivah bachur*. It turned out that classical music would have been a *brachah* compared to what he got into after that... But I thought that if I could just knock some sense into him..."

The afternoon traffic is heavy. Doniel stops an inch from the bumper of the car in front of him.

At this rate, I'll miss Minchah.

Ushi's voice is lower now. Almost like he's talking to himself. "I drove him away. I yelled and criticized and threatened. So he left. He wrote us a letter telling us that he's okay, and that he wants to be on his own. He started a band. I sent people to look for him, and I found out that he was performing on Shabbos. I told Mira. 'I'm glad he's out of the house. I want nothing to do with him.' That was one of the only times she got angry. She kept saying, 'He's our son. I love him. He has a shining *neshamah*.'

"He called us every Friday. I would say hello and we'd talk—just string a few words together. I could tell that he was just waiting for my turn on the phone to be over so he could talk to Mira. They always talked for a long time. I have a feeling that he called a lot when I wasn't home. Anyway, at some point—though I'm ashamed to say that I don't even know when—he became *shomer Shabbos* again. He got married. His kids are already adults. *Mentchen, baruch Hashem*. Every one of them. *Nachas*. The real thing. And now he runs a special program in Tzfas

for teenagers who are struggling.

"I keep hearing from people about the wonderful work he does with those kids. But he doesn't tell me much. It's like I built a wall. Every time I lost my temper, I put up another brick. It's been more than 30 years since then, but the wall is still between us. We never talked about what it was like before he left. The way I used to explode at him. How frustrated he was. And now... Mira used to say, 'As long as there's life, there's time to fix.'"

Doniel moves an entire car length before the light turns red.

"So, when I came to buy the herbs, I saw the record player and told myself that I would come back for it. I know that no one uses record players anymore, but we still have the classical records Boruch loved. Those old originals. I have a whole box of them in the closet of his old bedroom. I thought maybe if I bring him this, it can be a way of saying that I'm sorry that I didn't see what he needed when he was young..."

Ushi puts his hand over his mouth. "There I go, talking too much. Mira used to tell me 'How to talk, you know very well. How to listen? That you have to learn!' Want to hear something funny?"

Doniel thinks: *Funny?*

Ushi says, "Now, I know how to listen. Funny. Because now there's no one to listen to. When Mira was sick, Boruch came from Tzfas. He sat with her every day for hours. But since she died, he hasn't come back. She was the pin that held the three of us together. Without her, we're not... we're like loose pieces. He still calls every week, asks how I am and tells me what he did that week... always the same conversation. Polite strang-

ers. This is going to sound crazy, but in a way, it was better when he was a teenager talking back to me. Even when he was *chutzpadik*, at least, then, he cared enough to get into it with me. Now, he's respectful, but I feel distant from him."

The first time Suri called from the grocery store, angry, humiliated, with a shopping cart full of food and all three credit cards declined. The story rolled off his tongue effortlessly. "We're changing the payment system at work. I didn't realize our credit cards were linked. I'll take care of it."

The frantic phone call to his sister. "Can you please call the store with a credit card number? It's a technical blunder. I'll pay you back as soon as it's straightened out."

The second time.

The third time.

Fury. And promises.

It hits him now—like a shock of ice water emptied over his head: it's been weeks since Suri said anything about money. Their credit cards are worthless, but there's food in the house. Somehow. Without him.

He says, "When they won't even argue, I guess they've given up on us."

Ushi keeps his eyes on the windshield. "Reb Doniel. It's not my business. But I'm thinking that everything is *hashgachah pratis*. That we met today. In the... you know... we met... and if you need some help, if I can, I'd like to. I have some money put away. I can spare a few hundred. Maybe even a thousand..."

Doniel laughs. Actually laughs. But it's a harsh sound. Then he says, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude. That's very nice of you. But, no, it's complicated. And too late."

"Complicated I understand. But too late? As long as there's life, there's—"

"Not everything can be fixed. Look, I don't want to talk about it."

Ushi nods. The traffic has eased, and they're moving smoothly.

One silent block after another.

Then Doniel hears himself say, "It's my fault."

He's surprised that he doesn't want this ride to end. Maybe Hashem sent Ushi to help him. A stranger—who doesn't act like a stranger at all. Maybe he should spill the whole story. It would feel good to unburden. But then he realizes that it's not Ushi he needs to talk to. No. Not Ushi. So he says, "Your wife sounds like a very wise woman."

Ushi says, "In the horrible months before Boruch left, Mira wanted me to go to therapy, to work on my anger." Ushi sniffs, and Doniel realizes he's crying. "I got angry at her for talking about how angry I get. I yelled, 'I should pay someone to sit and listen to me? That's going to change my son?' And she said, 'Not to change him, to change you.'"

He wipes his eyes. "Well... Mira wanted, more than anything, for Boruch and I to be close again, the way we were when he was a little boy. I let her down. Is there a worse feeling in the world?"

Motzaei Pesach, four days ago. Suri packed the Pesach dishes into boxes. He was supposed to carry them to the basement. He'd gone for his phone. "Be back in a minute. Just checking something." When he looked up from the screen, it was 3:15 a.m. and Suri was walking past him and up the stairs without a word.

That was the first time he had looked up support groups and found out that they meet in a

basement of a church. A new low.

Four days since then. Circling. Talking only about things that don't matter.

What had Ushi called it? Polite strangers.

They're driving through familiar streets now. "Where should I drop you off?"

Ushi says, "On Fourth Avenue. Next block. The building on the corner."

Doniel pulls to the curb in front of a fire hydrant. Ushi unbuckles his seatbelt. "You did a good thing today. Hashem should *bentch* you." He pulls a pen and a crumpled piece of paper from the pocket of his shirt. Doniel smiles. His father does that. His mother complained for years about the ink that leaked from the pens, the smears of color that ran from the papers... Eventually, she gave up and named his father's pockets "the office."

Ushi writes a phone number, tears off the thin strip, and gives it to Doniel. He says, "We have a shopping cart in the lobby of the building. I'll put the record player in and wheel it up. Wait. Okay?" He opens the car door, "*Yasher koiach. Tizkeh l'*—"

Doniel doesn't see him fall. He sees only that Ushi is there, and then he's not. Doniel shoves his door open and runs around the car. Ushi is on the street. His eyes are closed. Daniel hears a strangled moan, a desperately weak sound.

He kneels down on the street, the asphalt like sandpaper on his knees. "No! No! No!" It takes him a few seconds to realize that the screams are coming from him. The way he used to scream when he had nightmares as a child. He grits his teeth.

Ushi is breathing very quickly and his face is pale.

Someone is running. Someone else is talking very quickly. Feet all around him.

Ushi's forehead is bleeding. Doniel lifts the bottom of his shirt and holds it over the wound. His hand is shaking. He whispers, "Ushi?"

A tap on his shoulder. "Mister, you okay? What happened?"

More voices.

"Who is he?"

"Anyone have a blanket?"

"I called 911."

"Easy now. Don't move him."

Sirens. Hatzalah. People make room.

Radios. Static. "Non-responsive. Respiration. Pressure."

Someone helps Doniel stand up and leads him through the crowd.

Two police cars pull up. They park at an angle blocking Doniel's car.

Another ambulance.

And a fire truck.

People point at him. A police officer approaches. "Sir, is this your car?"

"No! No! No!" It takes him a few seconds to realize that the screams are coming from him. The way he used to scream when he had nightmares as a child.

He washes Ushi's blood off his shirt. No need to frighten Suri. One more secret on top of mountains of secrets and lies.

"Yes."
 "What happened here?"
 "I gave him a ride. He fell."
 "What's his name?"
 "Ushi. Uh... I don't know his last name. His wife was Mira. She died. And he has a son Boruch who lives in Israel. Tzfas."
 One officer is writing. Another is taking photos of the car. The sky is darkening and the strobe effect of all the lights are like needles on his head. The officer is studying him. "Did you hit him with your car?"
 "What? No! I was parked. He was getting out. He fell."
 "Is he a relative?"
 "I don't know him. He asked for a ride. Is he okay?"
 "You don't know him?"
 "No. I told you. I just met him."
 "Your license and registration please."
 Doniel opens his wallet and gives the officer his license. Then he sits down in the driver's seat of his car and leans into the glove compartment for the registration.
 The officer asks, "Where did you meet him?"

Doniel sees the Hatzalah member standing next to the police officer. He says, "Downtown. He saw me and asked me."
 "Downtown where?"
 He shakes his head. "I just did him a favor. He was fine in the car. Talking the whole time."
 He could show them Ushi's record player. But that would bring up the pawn shop.
 "Sir, we need to know where you picked him up."
 Doniel rests his head on the steering wheel. The Hatzalah member leans over and whispers, "I called Nochum Miller. The *askan*. He's good with these things."
 Doniel remembers suddenly. "Scharf. His grandfather's brother is the *chazzan* Scharf. So Ushi must be Scharf too."
 Nochum Miller is there minutes later. He talks to the police officers and then approaches the car. "You're Reb Doniel Stillerman? From Kensington?" and hands him a bottle of water. Doniel takes it gratefully. He hadn't realized how parched he was.
 The ambulance is pulling away from the curb. Lights flashing. Sirens blaring. Doniel says, "Where are they taking him?"
 Nochum says, "Memorial Hospital. You can check on him there. Are you up to talking about it?"
 "I didn't do anything wrong. Why are they treating me like a criminal?"
 "They need to gather information for their report."
 "I don't want to talk to them in front of everyone. Can I go to the hospital?"
 "I'll take you." Nochum says. "Come. My car is here."
 Nochum walks with him, keeps his hand on

Doniel's shoulder. It feels good, someone else taking charge. He sits in the passenger seat, lets his head fall back, and closes his eyes.
 He hears Nochum start the car. He's making call after call. He finds someone in Tzfas who knows Boruch Scharf.
Is a police report public information?
 The emergency room is quiet. Ushi is nowhere in sight. One of the police officers is in the waiting room.
 Nochum says, "Stay here. I'll find out what's going on."
 He's gone a long time.
 Doniel paces. He texts Suri, lets her know he'll be home late.
 Nochum comes back. "Mr. Scharf is in the trauma bay. His CT scan shows a fractured hip. They're preparing him for surgery. And he has a few cracked ribs, which is painful, but they can't do much for that."
 He stops. Watches Doniel's face. Then he says, "There's some concern about the head injury. Best case scenario, it's just a cut from hitting the sidewalk, but because he's not conscious they can't rule out a brain injury. They'll know more in a day or so."
 Doniel grabs Nochum's arm, like a drowning man. "It wasn't my fault. He was getting out of the car, and he fell."
 Nochum drops his voice and speaks very slowly. "Doniel, if there's something you're afraid of, something you don't want the police to know, then it's best if you don't say anything for now. We'll find you a lawyer. But if you didn't do anything wrong, then tell the police what happened. It's better that way."
 Doniel manages to look him in the eye. "I gave him a ride. Really. I did nothing wrong."

Nochum says, "You're ready to give them a statement?"
 "Yes."
 "I'll find a room where you can talk. Do you want me to sit in?"
 Doniel says "No" so quickly that he worries Nochum will be insulted. But Nochum nods and says, "I'll be right back" and walks off. Doniel wonders: Is there any mess Nochum can't clean up?
 But he knows: Of course, there is.
 He sits with the two officers. Explains. "I pawned the watch and cufflinks that my grandfather gave me before he died. They're mine. I'm going through some financial difficulties, and I prefer that people don't know. That's why I didn't tell you before." He pulls the paperwork from his pocket and tells them about Ushi's record player. "It's still in the back seat of my car, and he probably has his receipt on him."
 The officer says, "If it happened like you say, then there's no reason for your visit to the pawnshop to get out."
 The officers walk him down the hall. They say, "Don't leave town for the next few days—in case we have more questions."
 Nochum is waiting in the lobby. He drives Doniel back to his car. Doniel ignores the parking ticket on the windshield. It's only a matter of time... He'll come out of his front door, tomorrow or the next day, and the car will be gone.
 The lights are off in his house. A reprieve. No more questions. At least for tonight. He puts the cash and receipt in the safe. He washes Ushi's blood off his shirt. No need to frighten Suri. One more secret on top of mountains of secrets and lies. The visit to the

pawnshop, a slim last secret, might start a landslide. Everything will come down. And everyone will know.

At 5:00 in the morning, he gives up on sleep and leaves the house. Suri is sleeping. No, he's pretty sure that she's awake too, that she's pretending to sleep so they won't have to talk.

He *davens* at the *vasikin minyan*. It's been months since he's been there. Shimon is at "their" table, unfolding his *tallis*. He clasps Doniel's hand warmly. "Good to see you. How are you? Everything good?" And then he opens his *siddur*.

Doniel says, "Good. *Baruch Hashem*." He wonders why people ask, "How are you?" if they're not ready to hear the answer.

He *davens*. Not a guilt-ridden mumble. Not a distracted rush job. Today, he's looking at the words, summoning up the courage to ask... Today, he holds his *tallis* over his face so no one sees him crying: *Help Ushi. Help me!*

He's at the hospital before 7:00 a.m. The woman at the desk in the lobby pulls out a red sticker. "ID please. Mr. Scharf. Room 419."

Ushi is in a small private room that smells of alcohol with an undertone of bleach. His head is bandaged, and he looks like he's sleeping. Doniel pulls the chair closer to the bed and sits, strangely calm in the quiet. He can't remember the last time he simply sat still. Every few seconds, the IV clicks. It's a gentle sound. He takes out his *Sefer Tehillim*.

The door opens. Doniel startles. A nurse comes in, stops at the foot of the bed and lifts Ushi's feet. Doniel notices that they're encased in puffy boots. He asks, "Did he hurt his legs?"

She comes around and checks the IV. "The boots are post-op. Routine. To prevent deep vein thrombosis. That's blood clots."

Doniel asks, "How's he doing?"

"Stable. He's sedated to manage the pain, so he might be 'out of it' until they wean him off the meds. Talk to him. A familiar voice is soothing."

Doniel waits until the door clicks shut behind her. Then he says, "Ushi. It's me. It's Doniel. Not such a familiar voice. But, hey, it was just yesterday, so you should remember it. Anyway, I feel terrible that you got hurt. I *davened* hard today. And, believe me, that's a first! I mean, I've been *davening* every day, but I was just saying the words like a faker."

He takes a deep breath. "Ushi, yesterday when we talked, well, mostly you talked, but I was thinking that maybe you could help me. I haven't told anyone what's going on. Not my wife. Or my brothers. Not even my closest friends. I don't know if you can hear me. Anyway, it started last summer—"

The door opens. A cluster of doctors, in scrubs and clogs, form a semi-circle at the foot of the bed. Doniel jumps to his feet.

One of the doctors says, "Good morning. I'm Dr. Vanowen. This is the surgical team."

A young doctor—to Doniel he seems barely past his teens—reads from a paper. "Patient is 79-year-old male. Rib fractures and post-op day one of open reduction internal fixation of left hip. His pain currently well controlled on Dilaudid drip."

Dr. Vanowen checks Ushi's bandages. He says, "Confirm he's on DVT prophylaxis."

The young doctor glances at the boots on Ushi's feet. "Yes."

Dr. Vanowen turns to Doniel. "Do you have any questions?"

"Will he be okay?"

"The surgery went well. He's on a lot of pain meds. His CT scan didn't indicate severe injury, but we need to wean him off the meds before we can assess his mental status."

The doctors leave, and Doniel takes his seat again near the bed.

"Ushi, you have to be okay. You have to give Boruch that record player. It's still in my car. I'll bring it here so you'll see it when you wake up. Anyway, I was telling you about last summer. I was at a convention in a hotel in New Jersey. I sell paper goods wholesale; it's a good *parnasab*. I was there to meet vendors. In the hotel, they had a casino. I would never go into a place like that. But they also had this perk for guests. You get to play a game—that's what they call it, a game. They give you free cash, and you play. And you can do it from your phone in your room.

"I was curious. I played and won \$200. It was exciting. So, I played again. Lost. Played again. A whole night of this. The next day, I missed all the vendor presentations. I tried different games. By the time I went home, I'd lost more than a thousand dollars.

"I know, I sound like a complete idiot. But that night, I couldn't sleep, so I tried again. It was fun, like being on another planet. You forget everything. And I just kept going and going. They let me open a credit line. Long story short: Over the next couple of months, I cleaned out all our accounts—even the money we'd put away for Moishy's bar mitzvah. After that, I played on credit. So now, I owe more than \$60,000."

He drops his head into his hands. "It took on a life of its own. Became all I could think about. I started to hate myself. Such *tumah*. I was never *mechallel Shabbos*, but on Shabbos, I'd be singing *zemiros* or going through the kids' *parshab* sheets, and meanwhile I was feeling twitchy, actually counting down the hours until Shabbos would be over and I could get onto my phone. And last week, the three-day Pesach. I suffered! And I made everyone around me miserable even though they didn't know what was wrong. Only that I wasn't myself...

"Suri, my wife, she lost it with me a few times. Can't blame her. We're behind on a lot of payments. Every time she got upset, I told another lie, made another promise...

"Since Motzaei Yom Tov, that's five days, including today, I haven't gambled. It's the longest stretch I've gone since I started, and I'm terrified. I can't kick this without help. I need Suri to take away my phone and get rid of the computer in the house. And, if I have to, I'll even sit in a circle and admit that I'm an addict. But, here's the thing... I know I can't do this without her, and I can't bear to think of how she'll look at me when she knows. So, I have to tell her. And I can't."

Doniel leaves the hospital close to 8:00 and

He gives up on sleep and leaves the house. Suri is sleeping. No, he's pretty sure that she's pretending to sleep so they won't have to talk.

rushes to work. He makes an effort to concentrate on the invoices and orders, but his eyes keep closing. Finally, he gives up, shuts the door to his office and naps in his chair. No one disturbs him. He wonders if, like Suri, they've gotten used to managing without him.

When he walks through the door after work, Suri tells him she's on her way out to help a friend set up a *l'chaim* and will be home late. Another reprieve. This time, he's the one pretending to be asleep when she comes home.

Another long night. He drifts in and out of restless sleep. He gets up for *vasikin minyan* again and then drives to the hospital. He takes the record player out of the back seat and carries it in, leans it against the counter while he slaps the visitor sticker onto his jacket and heads to Ushi's room.

Ushi is flat on his back, as he was the day before, but his eyes are open.

Doniel puts the record player down on the floor in the corner—where Ushi can see it from his bed. He feels a bubbly joy. "Ushi, you're awake. *Baruch Hashem*. How are you feeling?"

"Uh..." Ushi sounds like he's forgotten how to form words. "Uh... Hello?" It comes out as a question.

"It's Doniel. From yesterday. In the car."

Ushi's hands go to his head. "Who?"

"Yesterday. I gave you a ride."

"Yesterday?"

Doniel says, "I'll be right back."

The nurse is working on the computer. He waits for her to notice him. "Is the doctor available? Vanowen."

"They're coming through on rounds soon."

"Ushi. Mr. Scharf. My... He doesn't remember what happened yesterday. Is that normal? He was fine. He had so much to say. And now it's like he has no idea what's what."

The nurse says, "I understand. It's upsetting. It could be that his medication is making him woozy. But there's also the possibility that the fall caused a traumatic brain injury that left him with memory loss."

"Traumatic brain injury?"

"I'll tell Dr. Vanowen that you asked to speak to him."

When Doniel comes back into the room, Ushi smiles and says, "Hello."

Doniel takes a deep breath. "Good! Now you know me."

Ushi stares at him. "I know you?"

Oh...

Doniel points to the record player in the corner.

"Remember this? I put it in—"

A man rushes through the doorway. Long beard. A backpack on his back. "Tatte. Tatte."

Ushi holds out his arms. A cry. Strong. "Boruch."

Boruch lays his head on Ushi's chest.

Tears.

Doniel's.

He backs away. Without a sound. Out of the room. He pushes through the door marked Exit and starts down the stairs. Halfway, he stops, takes out his phone and calls the most important number in the world.

"Hi, Doniel." She sounds wary.

"Suri." He holds onto the banister.

Steadies himself. "Suri, I'm coming home. There's something I have to tell you." □