ERLICH'S LEGACY

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HARRY ERLICH, ON the morning of his forty-fifth birthday, awoke trembling—and for a moment, still only partly conscious, he was confused; he thought he might be dreaming. But then abruptly he was fully awake, staring wide-eyed at the ceiling, and he understood: he was tense with longing. He wanted desperately to talk to his parents.

Erlich closed his eyes and groaned. His breathing was constricted; his chest pounded. He curled his fingers tightly against his palms so that his nails dug into the soft skin, and told himself the need would pass.

But it did not pass. All day he felt feverish and out of control. Though outwardly he was calm and efficient at the office—trading polite jests with his secretary in the usual way, methodically consoling distraught clients over the phone—all day the longing remained with him, powerfully and mysteriously. As he went about his work, and later during the evening's birthday dinner and throughout the nearly silent drive back to Manhattan from the Long Island steakhouse, he pondered it, argued with it, tried to dismiss it. Finally, near midnight, he mentioned it to his wife, taking great care to sound casual, even faintly ironic, as if he were joking.

But: "You must be out of your mind," Eleanor said.

Erlich sighed. Of course. He should have known it couldn't possibly be a joke to her. He sat on the edge of the bed, gazing into his lap like a child, searching once more for a logical explanation for what seemed, now that it had been spoken of, to be an even more wildly foolish idea than he'd imagined.

"They *are* my parents," he said. It sounded feeble.

"That's right," Eleanor said, "they are. You said that *then*, remember? As if that were reason enough to forgive them everything."

"That isn't what I mean."

"No? What then?"

"Well . . . I don't know." He sat silently for a moment, knowing without looking that she was watching him. "Listen," he said finally, "I don't know if this has anything to do with anything, but maybe . . . You know, their fiftieth anniversary is next week."

"So?" She made an impatient snorting sound. "My God, Harry, I can't believe this. It was so hard for you to cut yourself loose from them. Do you really want to go through that again? Torturing yourself that way?"

"No." Without lifting his head, he peeked at her. She was running through the motions of getting ready for bed— sitting in bra and slip at her dressing table, brushing her fine glossy black hair, examining herself in the gilt-edged mirror, nose to the glass. "But maybe I won't have to go through it again. They might have changed. People sometimes do, don't they, when they get older? Maybe they've learned to be a little more generous, a little more understanding. It's been known to happen."

"Changed?" She turned away from the mirror, frowning. "Your parents, Harry, are miserable people. Thoughtless, cold-hearted, ungiving people. They always have been and they always will be. I'll tell you right now: If you call them you'll be sorry."

Erlich grimaced and stood up, shrugging off his jacket. "I didn't say I was *going* to call them, did I? I've just been thinking about it, that's all." He went to the closet and hung up his jacket carefully.

"Harry?" She was behind him, on tiptoes, slipping her arms around his thick waist, laying her head on his shoulder. "Maybe all you need is a good night's sleep to make you see what a lousy idea it is." She laughed, but the sound she made was tiny and nervous and he stiffened in her gentle grip. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I don't mean to be hard on you. I just don't want to see you be so disappointed again. You know?"

He knew but he couldn't answer her. He nodded curtly and slid out of her arms.

Unable to sleep, Erlich lay in the dark and calculated how long it had been. Eight years, four months, and—he counted silently—three days. It disturbed him that he was still able to recall the precise day so easily. Call it eight and a half years, then, he thought. Eight and a half years since the morning he'd blown up at them and decided that that was *it*, he'd had it. Though it had been coming for years, of course. He had never gotten on well with them, not even as a child, not even when he had tried. They had never actually *liked* him; he had never been like them. As a boy he had been so polite, so good, always hoping

to make them care, to win them over, and they had never even liked that; they had acted as if he were making fun of them somehow, trying to show them up. And as an adult, a married man with children of his own, he had hardly ever seen them. Before the argument he had taken his family to Brooklyn perhaps twice or three times a year to spend an uncomfortable afternoon in his parents' house, all five brothers and their families assembled there with nothing to say to one another. His parents had visited *him* only twice: once, just after the twins were born, and then again, to have him "draw up some legal papers," and that had been the day they'd argued. He shuddered, remembering what an absurdly emotional scene it had been, in a family in which emotions had never had a place. But it shouldn't have been unexpected. He had known that a final angry split was inevitable—yet it had shocked him violently.

But hadn't he recovered, completely, finally, from that? When had he even last thought of them? Hadn't he written them off, accepted the finality of that last meeting? Evidently not, he thought. The sadness—or simply the memories, the old longing for something different between him and them—must have remained lurking somewhere within him. And now—now he was forty-five, and that meant that in nine days his parents would be celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. And so what? Erlich asked himself. And so what?

But the two dates—his birthday, their anniversary—had always gone together in his mind. Unpleasantly, since neither holiday had ever been celebrated with any enthusiasm. In his youth his parents had presented him with some useful article for his birthday each year, and that had been the end of it: no cake, no party, no fuss. Their anniversary they had acknowledged only when reminded by ever-dutiful young Harry, who brought them home a dime-store card. But this was fifty years for them, half a century! Surely they wouldn't ignore their anniversary now.

And so what? What did it matter to him? Eleanor was right. Why start it all over again? He was bound—fated, cursed—to despise them for despising him; no, worse, for ignoring him. But he had finished with them once and for all. He was through with the pain of their coolness toward him, through with the threat of a terrible argument because it had already happened, it was done with.

But it had never been completely clear what the argument was about. No—it had been clear to him, but what had been clear to *them* was something else entirely. Money! To them it was a matter of money. They didn't, couldn't understand that for him it was something far more significant, a matter of family ties, of love, of history

and heritage and *acknowledgement*. But how could he have expected—or even hoped—that they would understand this?

"Your brothers work with me, they're in the business, makes sense they should get the business," his father had said over and over again. It was as if he had memorized these words and their logic was too perfect to risk tampering with.

And his mother: "You think we're not leaving you money? In the will there's plenty money for you."

Money! Erlich kept trying to explain, to *move* them, to make them see that it wasn't the money from the business he cared about, it was the business—*Erlich's*, the family business he had grown up with. It was the idea of it being passed on to the sons, to all the sons except him.

But his father had sat there, tiny in the big soft chair, and repeated: "Your brothers work with me, they're in the business, makes sense they should get the business."

"What do you mean 'makes sense'?" Erlich had exploded. "I was there, Dad, every afternoon after school, right through high school. I ran errands. I swept up. I did everything my brothers did."

"And after high school," his mother had said, "no more. You went off to college, good-bye Erlich's. The others stayed. Only you left. You told us—big shot!—'Mother, Dad, I want something more, something better.' Better! So good, you got it. Now you're sorry? Too late for sorry."

Pacing around the living room, Erlich had raged: "I'm a lawyer, Mother. And I haven't noticed Dad *or* any of his other sons refusing free legal services all these years. I have worked for free for you, for all of you and for the business, since the day I finished law school."

"*Mazel tov*," his mother said. "It was only right." She sounded bored. She was fidgeting on the couch, playing with the tassels on the little velvet pillow beside her.

Erlich went to his father, kneeled next to the armchair. "Dad, don't you understand how it makes me feel that now that you're retiring you're passing Erlich's on to my younger brothers? And not me? Excluding me this way? I just don't believe this. As a kid I loved Erlich's. You *know* that. I loved it just because it was ours. That business is what you built up when you came here. Now you're casting me out when it's time to pass on what you built."

"Listen, Harry," his father began again. "Your brothers work with me—"

"No, Dad, *you* listen. Please. Would you rather I hadn't gone to college? To law school? Would you rather have had me spend my life tapping an adding machine and taking inventory? Is that what you

wanted for me?"

"Now he asks," his mother murmured.

"Come on, Dad," Erlich pleaded. "You were proud of me, weren't you?"

"You did what you wanted," his father said grudgingly, forced to use new words. "But, yeah, sure I was proud. It's a nice thing to have a son's a lawyer. Don't think I don't appreciate. But you left the business. And your brothers work with me, they're in the business—"

"*Dad*. Don't you see it? You're punishing me. You're punishing me for not being exactly like my brothers. But the business belongs to all of us."

"He was always different," his mother said conversationally, to Eleanor, who had been sitting silently at the other end of the couch. Eleanor forced a tight smile.

"Dad?" Erlich was afraid he was going to cry. Already he had displayed more ugency than he wanted to. His father was clearly uncomfortable. The old man shrank from him as Erlich tried to touch his shoulder. Erlich sighed and shook his head. "I wish I could make you understand what this means to me."

"In the will there's plenty money for you," his mother said. She wanted to leave; she was fingering her handbag, touching her stiffly sprayed bluish hair.

"It isn't the money!"

His mother pursed her lips and Erlich shut his eyes for an instant, mentally berating himself. Why bother to raise his voice? He knew there was no getting through to them; this was much too subtle a matter for them.

"Oscar, we got to get home now," his mother said. "Come, it's a long trip."

Erlich groaned. "Mother, I'll *drive* you home, for Christ's sake."

"We don't want to give you any trouble," she said.

"You don't want to give me any trouble," Erlich echoed.

His mother stood unsteadily. She looked lacquered, not well. Too many layers of makeup, too much of her stuffed into her tight turquoise dress. The tops of her stockings showed, just above her knees. Erlich looked away.

"Listen, Harry," his father said. His voice was hoarse. "You gotta understand this. Your brothers, they work with me—"

"That's it!" Erlich stunned himself by screaming. "I've had it. You don't care about me, you've never cared about me. You resented it when I left for school, you resented my having won a scholarship, you resented my being smarter than my brothers, you resented everything I ever did. What kind of father are you? Why do you treat me this

way?" Now he was crying, and hating himself for crying, but hating them more for reducing him to it. "Your other four sons are *morons*. Together they don't have enough brains to run the business without running it into the ground. But if that's what you want, fine. Go ahead. Go to Arizona, enjoy yourselves—sure, why not? I hope you'll enjoy hearing that the business you worked all your lives to build is being torn down by the ineptitude of your sons. I don't care. It's not my responsibility. But don't come running to me for help later." He couldn't stop his tears. The spectacle should have been pitiful, but they were both staring at him with mild detached interest, as if he were an unknown madman, on the street, muttering wildly to himself. "You are both unfeeling—unfeeling and ignorant and *evil*. You have always cut me off. All my life you have cut me off and I have had it with you. That's it." They stared unblinking at him and he screamed, "That's *it*. Out. I don't want to see either of you again, ever. Get out."

Calmly, his mother said, "Come, Oscar. We'll take the train."

Without a word his father got up and followed her to the door.

"Thank you for breakfast, Eleanor," his mother said. "It was very nice."

Erlich didn't move. When the door had slammed behind them he looked around dazed. "I should have known," he murmured. "I should have *known* when my father said he needed 'legal help' it would be something like this." He touched his cheek: it felt hot and he pulled his hand away quickly. For an instant he stared at the hand, then he made a fist and brought it down hard on his knee. "*Damn* him. It's outrageous, incredible. How could he have asked me for help in this? No, I know how. That's how he is—it's how he's always been. I know that. What an asshole I am."

Eleanor stood up. "I'll be in the kitchen if you need me."

For a long time after she'd disappeared, he had remained on the floor beside the armchair and cried, without trying any longer to stop himself, until his sobs had turned into painful gulps for breath.

Eight and a half years. And *still* the memory brought tears to his eyes and made him shake with rage and frustration. Why can't I let go of it? he asked himself. Why?

It was hours before he was able to calm himself enough to fall asleep—and even then, in his sleep, he trembled.

Erlich in the morning was just as anxious to speak to his parents as he had been the day before. He had even dreamed of them, for the first time in more years than he could remember. His mother had just washed the floors and was shrieking at him as he came through the door from school: "Don't step on the floor, don't you dare step on the

floor."

"I really don't think it's a good idea, Harry," Eleanor was saying, watching him cautiously over the rim of her coffee cup.

"I know. Still, I can't shake it." He shrugged. "I can't help wondering if I didn't overdo it, you know? I did drive them out of here. I did carry on as if I were a kid and they'd refused me something I wanted."

"You *are* their kid and they did refuse you something you wanted." She was leaning forward on her elbow; her expression was solemn. He smiled at her and her lips twitched in return. She would not let herself truly smile, and he felt moved by this, by her hardness. She had worked at becoming this way, he knew. For him she had acquired a certain coldness, against her nature; this had not been easy for her. She had tried so hard to help him. And she *had* helped him—but how could he help what he felt now?

"I'm too old to carry a grudge," he said. "It's so childish."

"No. You wanted it so much. And they were so malicious."

"No," he said. "They weren't malicious. They never have been. They just don't know any better." He knew this was true, but he wondered when he had begun to know it.

"You talk about them as if they were children. You're not *their* father. You haven't failed *them*."

He shivered, and suddenly he remembered a thought he'd had while shaving. "What time is it?"

"Why?" She glanced at the wall clock. "Almost ten."

"Then it's only seven there."

"In California?" He smiled, and this time Eleanor allowed herself to smile back. "So you're going to call your daughter to ask her for advice. You want *her* to tell you it's okay to get in touch with your folks?"

He laughed. "Maybe." He hadn't thought about it in exactly that way—he had only thought he would like to talk to his daughter about this—but he supposed it could be true. Advice from Jill? Well, why not? She was a sensible, thoughtful girl. Smart. And not so . . . so involved as her mother. Not so schooled in his psyche. She was bound to be more objective. He felt a small flutter of guilt as he thought this, and he didn't meet Eleanor's gaze as he said, "But maybe I just feel like talking to her. I've been thinking about calling her for a couple of days now." This wasn't much of a lie, but it made him feel guilty nonetheless. "You know," he said, "I'd sort of thought she'd call yesterday—to say happy birthday." The admission caused him to blush and he busied himself with lighting a cigarette. "I guess she's been busy."

"I'm sure she's busy. But I thought she'd call, too. Maybe she tried

last night, while we were out."

"Maybe. Anyway, I think I'll call her. See how she's doing."

"Good. And while you're at it, you can ask her what she thinks you should do."

"Well, why not? It's sort of a family problem, isn't it?"

Eleanor shrugged. "I don't know. Jill doesn't really know your parents. I'm not sure she'd understand the situation."

"She knows what it's like to be somebody's kid."

"And I don't? And *you* don't?"

"Actually, I don't."

"Ah, I see. Then why not call David, too?"

"Nope. I know he couldn't care less." And he hadn't called to say happy birthday either. He had probably forgotten. David had trouble remembering anything that didn't directly affect him.

"But he knows what it's like to be somebody's son."

"Are you making fun of me?"

"A little. I think you're being melodramatic."

"Maybe I am. And maybe I *will* call him."

"You should, you know," she said seriously. "You haven't spoken to him in a long time."

"That's because he never calls. And I'm tired of calling him—he's always bored or trying to pick a fight when I do. So don't make me feel guilty about him."

"I'm not trying to make you feel guilty," Eleanor said. "I just want you to talk to him. He's your *son.*"

My son. Erlich frowned, picturing his pale, morose son. Living by himself in the middle of the Massachusetts woods in a broken-down farmhouse. What kind of life was that? So far from him and Eleanor. Both of the children were so far away. It didn't seem right.

"Take a vote," Eleanor said. "Then decide whether or not to call your folks." She was smiling again. "And for the record, darling, my vote is no."

"I already knew that. And I appreciate it."

She stood and began to clear the table. "You know, Harry," she said, "I'm only thinking of you."

"Only of me?"

"And us."

Immediately he felt guilty. So much guilt! he thought. Where did it all come from? Where did he find room to store it all? "I know you are," he said softly. Of course she was. He was too, now. He could remember in painful detail how bad things had been between them in the weeks after the argument with his parents. He had sulked and whined like a child—and he had ignored the kids, who were sulky

adolescents themselves then and resented his behavior, seemed to think he was mimicking them. Eleanor was forced into the uneasy role of peacemaker, tactfully explaining his behavior to the kids, keeping them away from him. And throughout, she had done her best to understand what he was going through. *Why* did he want the business? she had asked him. And if he wanted it so badly why hadn't he ever mentioned it before? He told her it hadn't occurred to him that they'd exclude him this way—but the truth was he couldn't recall having thought about the business at all. But it was *his*, it was his right to have it. Couldn't she see that? Her incomprehension was a barrier between them; it was difficult for him to talk to her at all. He talked to himself, wondering aloud if he'd made a terrible mistake, offending them so deeply he'd never be able to undo the damage. And, listening in, Eleanor would scold him, insisting he had done the right thing, he had done what he had to do. He was aware that she was learning to hate his parents for him; but there was more to it than hate, and the rest she couldn't know. "They're my parents," he had told her again and again. "They're my *parents*."

No matter how hard she tried, she would never understand how he felt. She had had such a happy, painless childhood: the only girl, the youngest child, lavished with loving attention and praise all her life—and even now she spoke with her parents daily and saw them once a week; they delighted in the details of her activities, however mundane. So how could she know what it meant to be Harry Erlich—a son whose parents had paid him no attention at all? Except to say no to anything he asked for—and he had rarely asked, having learned early the humiliation of their rejection. The idea of his going to college was so ridiculous to them they didn't even laugh at him; they didn't laugh because they thought he was making a stupid unfunny joke. But why had it never occurred to them that he might be serious?

He had never been able to figure out why his parents didn't act like the parents of his friends. Where was all that suffocating love, that smothering affection? Where was the burning desire for the betterment of their children's lives that his friends complained—proudly it had seemed to young Harry—it was impossible to live up to?

His parents had come to America as teenagers, like the parents of everyone he'd grown up with. Erlich knew nothing of his parents' first years in New York. They had never volunteered any information and he had never felt right about asking. Eleanor's parents, on the other hand, told and retold their stories about living in an apartment on Essex Street with Eleanor's mother's sisters and their husbands. They enjoyed telling these stories. They were proud of being old-country Jews and continued to nurture this even after fifty-eight years in

America: there was a sense of tradition, a feeling of pride. Erlich's parents had never seemed to care about being Jewish. Not that he and Eleanor, in their years together, had ever made much of a fuss about it either, but he continued to feel that he'd been deprived as a child of something everyone else had. And he'd long ago concluded that his parents' lack of interest in the old Jewish ways—in keeping separate dishes, in lighting *shabbes* candles, the way Eleanor's parents did—was not due to a principled decision to eschew tradition. No, it was just because they didn't want to be bothered. It would have been too much trouble; they didn't want to think—about anything. And his mother was worse than his father, because she was consciously non-thinking; he simply didn't know any better, or he had decided early on to let his wife take over and make the decision not to think, not to do, not to give. Erlich had for years marvelled over their having discovered each other in that mass of immigrants. He wondered if they realized how well-matched they were, if they appreciated their good fortune in having found each other.

A better question, he had often thought, was how *he* had turned out as he had. How had it come to be? Where had his desire to learn come from? His curiosity? His warmth? How had he come out of that relentlessly cold, unthinking family so different? How had he come to understand how important it was to escape?

His dull, plodding brothers and their wives—every one a plain, plump Brooklyn girl—all had stayed in Brooklyn, living within a ten-block radius of his parents' house. It was incredible to Erlich that his brothers were raising their children in the neighborhood in which he'd grown up. Would these children, the nieces and nephews he barely knew, grow up to have anything different from what their parents had? What kind of parents were his brothers? What were they doing to their children? Erlich knew what they were doing *for* them: nothing. It disgusted him. He had tried to do everything for his children. He knew so well what parents could do to hurt their kids; he had wanted from the time the twins were born to do only good for them. And he'd had Eleanor's help in this, Eleanor's simple deep understanding of how sweetly secure a family could be.

Leaning back in his chair, watching Eleanor load the dishwasher, he told himself that they had been good parents, he could be certain of that. While his children were growing up, he had frequently assured himself that he had been supportive and loving and conscientious, and that he continued to be. He guided them; he helped them. And they would never know how lucky they were. The thought filled him with great satisfaction. That they would never have to know how lucky they were—that attested to his success as a parent. Yes, he need have

no doubts about that; he could be satisfied with the job he'd done.

"Hello, honey, it's your father."

"*Daddy*. I know it's you. You don't have to announce yourself that way all the time."

Erlich was hurt; he laughed to hide it. "I'm your father. How would you like me to announce myself?"

"Don't announce yourself at all. How would you feel if I called you and said, 'Hello, it's your daughter.' Doesn't that sound pompous?"

Erlich sighed. Off to a great start, he thought. "So," he said, with forced cheer, "how's my little girl?"

"All right. How are you?"

"I'm fine, just fine."

"Good."

He cast about for an opening topic. "So . . . tell me, honey. How's your money situation?"

"Daddy, why must you always ask me that?"

He made himself laugh. "Why must you always ask me why I ask? I care, honey, that's why."

"I know you care. But I'm taking care of myself."

"Are you broke? Is that what all this defensiveness is about? Do you need money? I'll send you a check."

"*No*. I'm doing fine."

"Okay, so you're doing fine. How much money have you got in the bank?"

"How much do *you* have in the bank?"

"*Jill*." He was about to lecture her but stopped himself in time. She was so edgy; something must be bothering her. "How are you doing in school?" he ventured.

"Fine."

If not school, what? "Well, tell me what you're up to honey."

"Nothing. You know, just going to classes, working."

"You don't have to work, you know. I'm sure it doesn't have too good an effect on your grades. And your thesis . . . have you—"

"Daddy," she cut in, sharply, "I want to work. Okay?"

"Okay." He studied the pushbutton face of the phone. "So how's the job?"

"It's fine."

"You get a raise yet? Because, you know, you deserve one. You ought to just go in there and—"

"Daddy, I can handle it myself. And I will, when I'm ready."

"Why won't you just hear me out? You think you can handle everything, don't you."

"No. You do."

"Jill, I'm trying to help you and you're too proud to listen to me."

"Daddy," she said, very softly, "what's up? You must have called for something besides yelling at me."

"I didn't call to yell at you. I called to say hello to my daughter." He forced another laugh. "Come on, honey, I just called to make sure my little girl was being good."

"Never good enough."

"Ha ha," Erlich said. "Very funny. All right, listen."

He hesitated for an instant, then took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "I did sort of have a reason for calling, to tell you the truth. I've been thinking about calling your grandparents."

"Mama and grandpa? What do you mean? Has something happened?"

"No." He was annoyed. "My parents, not your mother's."

"Oh." There was a pause. Then, tentatively: "But why?"

"Because . . . I don't know why, exactly." Now he was sorry he'd started this. "Because they're my parents."

"Some reason," she said. "Well, what do you want me to say? You want to say hello to them for me? It's all right with me."

"No. I mean, not unless you want me to. I just wanted to see what you thought about it." No, he didn't, not really.

"About what? They're your parents. I hardly know them."

"So don't you have an opinion?"

"Daddy." She laughed. "I don't even know what we're talking about. What *are* we talking about?"

Erlich felt deeply disappointed and irritated. But what had he expected? "Nothing," he said. "Forget it."

"It's forgotten. Is Mom around?"

"Yeah, I'll get her. You take care, all right?"

"Yep."

He set the phone down and went into the kitchen. Eleanor looked up from her book with an expectant smile. "My turn now?"

Erlich grunted. He waited until she'd left the room and he'd heard the bedroom door click closed, then he sat down at the table and tried not to listen to the soft murmur of Eleanor's voice as she greeted their daughter.

She's just a kid, he told himself. I shouldn't let her upset me. So she's cocky and self-absorbed—that's how kids are. So what?

But dammit, he thought, she ought to be grateful, she ought to appreciate his concern. And she was completely oblivious to it. Oblivious to him. She couldn't spare a second from her preoccupation with herself to think about what he might be going through.

But he was making himself feel worse. He lit a cigarette and decided not to think about it.

Dialing his son's number, Erlich was nervous. Tensed for battle, he thought. Then: the boy's sullen "Hello."

"Hi, David. It's your father."

"Oh, hi, Dad. How are you?"

"I'm all right." Heartily, he said, "*So*—you're not getting tired of that country life yet, huh?"

"No."

Now why couldn't he sound a little more enthusiastic? Erlich had to fight a desire to say, "Okay, so long, then," and hang up quickly. Why did his son always make him so uncomfortable? "Well . . . what are you doing with yourself, David?"

"Same thing I've been doing right along."

Erlich tried to think of a way to make the conversation a proper father-to-son exchange. "Tell me, David, honestly now, what do you see in living way out there? Really, I'm interested."

"I don't think it's interest, Dad."

Erlich forced himself to laugh. It was getting to be quite a habit, pretending amusement with his kids. "So what is it, then?" he asked, trying to sound cheerful.

"Judgment," David said. "You wouldn't want to live this way so you can't see how I like it."

"Come on, you have to admit it's a little strange. You're so isolated, so—"

"It isn't strange. It's just different from the way you live."

Erlich closed his eyes. "David, why do you have to give me such a hard time? I ask a civil question, you think it's an attack."

"Dad, did you call to give *me* a hard time?"

"No, of course not."

"Then why did you call?"

"To say hello."

"Okay." David laughed. "Hello."

Again Erlich made himself laugh. "Hello."

"Is that it, then?"

"I guess so. You want to talk to your mother?"

"Not right now. Send her my love and tell her I'll call or write or something real soon."

It wasn't until after he'd hung up and flopped down on the bed, silently cursing his son for being so indifferent and distant and cold, that it occurred to Erlich that he hadn't mentioned his parents. But it was just as well. A good thing, really. It was absurd to think that David

would have understood at all.

A muffled cough beside him, and Erlich realized that Eleanor was not asleep. He rolled over and put his arms around her. "You awake?"

"Um."

He kissed her hair. "Tell me something."

"What?" she said sleepily. "Are you still thinking about your folks?"

"Actually, I was thinking about the kids."

Her eyes opened. "Our kids? What about them? Did Jill tell you something? Is something wrong with her? She sounded so happy on the phone."

"She did?" Erlich frowned.

"Well, what is it, then? Is it David? You were so evasive when I asked you—"

"No, David's okay." He let his hand drop onto her shoulder and traced a circle with his index finger. "El—do you think we're good parents?"

"What do you mean? Of course we are, you know that." She smiled. "But it's easy for us to be good parents. We have good kids."

He laughed—insincerely, he knew. Pretending even to his wife. Why did he have to fake amusement with the whole damn family when *nothing* seemed funny to him lately? "So we did a good job, huh?"

"*Yes*. Harry, what's with you? Does this have something to do with your parents? Do you want to just decide to call them tomorrow? Will that make you feel better?"

"I don't know. No." He didn't like her conciliatory tone. "Maybe I don't have to call them at all. I don't know." Suddenly he felt sleepy; he had to blink to keep his eyes from closing.

"Of course you don't have to."

"Why should I call? To say happy anniversary? There's no point in that, is there?"

"You wouldn't listen to me if I told you what to do."

"Right"—his forced laugh—"I know that."

"But if it's going to keep bothering you . . ."

"No, no. It'll go away in a few days. I'm sure it will." But he knew he was lying. Somehow at that moment he understood—he was absolutely certain—that now that it had begun, now that it had crept up on him, it would never leave him.

He rolled away from his wife, onto his back, and let his eyes close. It would never leave him. He had to accept that. He had been fooling himself all these years. It wasn't something he could "get over." It would keep bothering him, aching him, the rest of his life. There was

no getting away from it: it was his, forever, final. But why dwell on it? How *could* he dwell on it? There were other, more pressing concerns. He had, after all, his own children to worry about, to help. He had to do something for them. If he couldn't help directly, he could start trusts for them, invest for them. Or give them gifts. Something.

Surely, he thought as he drifted into sleep, there had to be something he could do for them. It was only a matter of determining what it was.