

ANNA SOLOMON

*Alan at the Kirschbergs'*

Alan Zimmer had been staying at the Kirschbergs' for a week when he saw their daughter in the elevator at Brigham and Women's. She was in a wheelchair. Alan, behind her, recognized the yellow kinks of her hair, and the dark roots that cleaved to her part.

He stepped forward. "Jenna! What are you doing here?"

She turned slowly, as if his voice had arrived from a great distance, and appraised him coldly, staring at his slippers and working her way up: the thin gown he knew made him look slightly pregnant; the clutch of wires he gripped in his right hand, connecting like flight routes to the nodes on his head.

"Hello, Alan." Jenna's eyes were cupped by purple crescents. He'd met her only twice—since she turned seventeen, her parents joked, Jenna rarely made public appearances—and he couldn't remember seeing her eyes, buried as they'd been behind her mass of curls. But now those curls were tied back and she stared at Alan as though he were naked. He noticed the nurse behind her chair, saw the reproachful, twitching jaw, then, pinned to one ungainly breast, the Women's Care Clinic badge. He understood that he should not have said the girl's name.

"I'm here for my test!" he cried, his voice treble to bury the silence. He pointed at his head, then at the doctors beside him, then swirled a little nutso circle around his ear. "For my tingling! My problem! You know!"

Jenna didn't blink. He looked at her feet, in crepe-paper slippers that matched his own. He wondered if her toes were cold. Once, when Alan pressed one of his girlfriends, Sybil, to try the rhythm method, she'd told him about her own abortion. She was thirty at the time, didn't know who the father was, could barely pay her rent, yet what she remembered most clearly were the socks she'd worn to the operation—blue ankle socks, stained blackish by a pair of cheap shoes—and how, when the nurse told her to undress—*everything, dear*—she refused to take them off. *I thought I would die*, Sybil said, *without those socks*.

The girl shifted her slippers on the wheelchair footrests; he was gawking. He thought of the Kirschbergs, cocooned in their ex-urban

life up on the North Shore, trusting that their daughter was in school today. He pointed at his own feet. “Fancy duds they got here, huh?”

The elevator stopped, jolting him a little. He brought his face down near her ear. “I won’t tell,” he started to say—but then the door opened and Jenna was wheeled out into the bleached hospital glare. Cool air drifted up Alan’s gown. He straightened and coughed and was grateful for the wires in his hand, for something to hold, though he suspected that this was what the doctors wanted him to feel, that they’d offered him the wires like people let children hold keys until there’s something real to unlock or drive. It didn’t matter. Soon these men would hook his wires up to their machines and press a button and then, as if from heaven—if one believed in heaven—he would hear their voices boom: “Ah-ha. Ah-haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa.” And then he wouldn’t be crazy and he wouldn’t be afraid and he would know. He would feel like a man again.

He’d met Ruth and Paul Kirschberg the summer before, at “Jewish Camp,” which was what returnees like the Kirschbergs called the New Age, HinJew, JuBu retreat center set into the folds of a valley in the Berkshires. Julia had asked him to go with her, and because they’d so recently met, Alan understood that it was less a question than a test. Julia was olive-dark from summer then; with her fall of black hair, she looked like a Persian princess. The clinching factor for Alan was her claim that such an experience would improve the quality of their sex, which wasn’t bad to begin with. So he ate the macrobiotic food. He sat through hours of silent group meditation only to discover that chanting group meditation was even worse. He contorted his body through morning yoga sessions, Julia deep breathing like a hurricane next to him. In Triangle, he pulled a waist muscle.

On the third night, they were introduced to the Kirschbergs, Paul dark and bearded, Ruth in a pea-colored toga-style dress. Mid-fifties, Alan guessed—just a few years older than he was, but they were the couple who parented everyone and everything, and in their presence, he felt as young as Julia. Every night after that, he steered toward them, and by the end of the week, he and Julia had secured an open invitation to visit the Kirschbergs’ home in Gloucester. And though Alan guessed they’d extended the same offer to half the Jewish campers, and though he didn’t intend for his relationship with Julia to become the sort of

exclusive thing that required regular visits with other couples, he'd kept the scrap of paper with their address and phone number.

It was Ruth who answered. Alan hadn't planned to say anything about the tingling yet—he didn't want her to arrange for a healing ceremony or fast—but hearing her deep voice again, the way it seemed to contain space, invite you in, he wanted, suddenly, to cry. He'd been holding his terror like saliva in his throat, telling Sybil and Julia little bits of what was happening, but Julia's cooing only made him feel more frail, and Sybil was more concerned with what wasn't happening between his legs. He'd made it into a joke with both of them. Now he told Ruth everything, how the tingling started, two months ago, at home in Vermont, concentrating in his hands and feet before crawling into his chest, how once it claimed his face, curled over his ears, circled his head like a wreath of needles, how another time his eyeballs started to ache, as if his brain were squeezing them out from behind.

By then, he was prepared for this sensation; he'd already gone to the Rutland library and looked on the web, where he found nine neurological diseases involving tingling: one of these, Multiple Sclerosis, often presented itself in the eyes before moving on to induce weakness, lack of bladder and bowel control, and twitching. He told his internist, "MS," but the man barely seemed to hear him. At the hospital in Burlington, they slid him into the curved glacial cave of a Magnetic Resonance Imaging tube, where, inches above his face, a tilted mirror offered a view, out the back, of the door to Dunkin Donuts. The machine roared and clicked. Alan held himself so still that his left foot cramped and flew into spasm. Through the machine's guts, the technician spoke: "Mr. Zimmer, sir. Can you hang in there five more minutes?" He could. He did. Then they made him sign release forms and tapped his spine for fluidlike sap from a tree but this was water-clear, its benevolence shocking. They taped wires to his limbs and digits and shot him through with electric pulses. They sat him down and told him everything was normal. Normal! Even after he'd told them about his sudden loss of vision one day, which he'd read about, which belonged to at least three of the diseases! He said they were wrong. They got insulted. They referred him to a neurologist in Boston, which was an embarrassment. He'd grown up in the city. When he moved north to live "closer to the land," etc., and open his own cabinetry shop, when his city friends expressed skepticism about the services in such

a place—schools, restaurants, *hospitals*—Alan had called them snobs and moved. He couldn't ask them for favors now. And he couldn't afford a hotel. And his parents had died, of general inactivity it seemed; their apartment was long gone. He needed a place to stay for who knew how long; the treatment might be difficult, prolonged...

"Of course," Ruth said. "You'll stay as long as you need to. I'm so sorry. Of course. You'll be part of the family."

Which might have terrified Alan if he hadn't believed that Ruth would say this sort of thing to anybody.

Alan and his doctors got off on the fourth floor. One was tall and beak-nosed, the other young and dark with long womanish lashes—Indian, Alan guessed—and as he followed them down a series of hallways, he liked the asymmetry of their pairing. It was like cross-pollination, or layering oak with pine. Together, they'd do good work.

In a small, dim room, they attached his wires to the machine. The tall doctor talked as he worked, explaining the examination—"An electroencephalogram," he said, as if he'd learned the word before "mama"—and Alan sensed a great competence and vigor in the man's long limbs. The other doctor nodded, adjusted dials. Alan realized that his tingling was gone. This happened sometimes, for brief periods, and usually it was blissful—he'd never imagined what a pleasure it could be to feel nothing at all—but now it seemed problematic, possibly dangerous.

"My symptoms," he said. "If I'm not feeling them right now, will that affect the test?"

The Indian doctor looked up from the machine. He paused to let his lashes blink. "No, sir. This test is for central nervous system."

The white doctor said, "The nerve conduction velocity test you already had? That might be altered by immediate sensation, but this test is much deeper, so to speak." He leaned over Alan and pressed the nodes tight. "You'll feel a slight pressure, but that should be it. If it hurts, tell us. If you can't speak, raise your hand."

Alan closed his eyes. He felt optimistic for the first time in weeks. A rush of blood flowed into his scalp, then his left foot started tingling and he was grateful: he trusted the doctors, but still, wasn't it better to be consistent? Wasn't that what scientific "control" was all about? At the edges of his skull he felt a mild squeezing. He heard feet shuffling and tried to forget it, heard a pen scribbling and tried to let

it go; he wanted to focus, to make it easy for the wires to pick up what they were after—

“Well then.” The tall doctor’s voice. “That’s it. You can open your eyes.”

The Indian was removing the nodes from Alan’s head.

“That’s all?”

The men nodded.

“What did you find?”

“Results will take a few days, at least. We need to send our findings to the lab, then they’ll analyze them in conjunction with your spinal fluid samples.”

“What if something happens in the next few days?”

“What sort of thing do you have in mind?”

Alan ignored the tall doctor’s half-smile. They were all the same in the end, mocking, trying to placate. “Weakness,” he said. “Or paralysis. I could go blind.” He didn’t mention MS; he’d learned by now that they didn’t like patients who knew too much.

The man thumbed through Alan’s chart. “It’s been over a month, I see, since you began experiencing your symptoms. You seem to be in fine health now, yes? I think the chances of a sudden progression are very slim.”

“But still possible. That’s what you’re saying. It could happen tomorrow.”

The doctor closed Alan’s chart. “I’m not a fortune-teller, it’s true.”

“If it’s a comfort—” the Indian doctor stood slightly behind his counterpart, having removed the last node from Alan’s head. “If it would make you more comfortable, I can perform a clinical examination. Check balance, vision, memory, these sorts of basic indicators.”

“Is this where you make me walk on my heels and follow your finger with my eyes and remember silly phrases?”

A flush of rust bloomed on the man’s face. “These are several of the components, yes.”

“The other doctors did that,” said Alan.

“Are you under the impression that we’re paid to be original?” The white doctor began to unplug the machine.

Alan focused on the Indian. Perhaps he would find something the other one hadn’t. Maybe some problem that had been subtle before was further advanced now, and detectable.

“Go ahead,” he said.

The Indian smiled. He took out a safety pin and pricked Alan's toes. He gave Alan three things to remember: state of Arizona; blue fork; yellow ball. He took out a silver thing and clapped it against his hand, then stuck its cold flesh against Alan's arm and told him to nod when it stopped vibrating. He made Alan close his eyes and balance on his toes. He touched Alan's arm and asked how many fingers he felt. At the end, he asked Alan to repeat the three things. Then he said, "Good. All perfectly normal." And everything, even this final excruciating declaration, was the same as it had been in Vermont, except that the state had been Mississippi and the ball orange.

Alan let his forehead vibrate against the window of the train as North Station gave way to rail yards, then to cattails and marsh. He wanted the hill behind Julia's cabin, or the lane outside Sybil's house, crowded with saltboxes and old sheds and clotheslines. He wanted to be there with an erection. For a month now, he couldn't make it happen—as though a man in his condition did not deserve to perform an act that was designed to lead to procreation. He thought of the women who'd wanted babies—his babies—and some part of him wished he'd caved while he was still healthy.

He tried to comfort himself by thinking about how quickly they suffocated him. Just last week, he'd had to leave Julia's without any warning; he'd simply stood and dressed and left. She hadn't fought him; she knew he'd go to Sybil's anyway. But Sybil wasn't home. Alan had forgotten she had a date, a recently emigrated New York retiree looking for someone young to spend his money on—a man, Sybil added when Alan sneered, who wasn't much older than Alan. If he was rich enough, she said, who knew, maybe she'd rethink her uncommittment policy.

Alan felt ashamed now, on the train, surrounded by the waxy commuter faces, thinking about how he'd stood on Sybil's stoop, the house silent as stone, as the tingling spread up his leg and into his groin, then pushed up his stomach and into his chest. His breathing had gone shallow, his palms wet. Finally he'd gotten back in his truck and driven the twenty miles back over the pass to Julia's. Then he'd seen her shape through the kitchen window and thought, she'll think she's got me now. He backed out of the drive and headed aimlessly up the mountain, letting the engine's rumble mask his tingling, thinking of another woman, a third woman, who did not exist but who once would

have been available, a woman who was mending a dress perhaps, under a table lamp. Self-sufficient yet soft. She would solve everything. She would barely look up as he entered, yet she would know him, and want him simply, needles glinting in her mouth.

The entire right side of Alan's body was numb as he entered the front hallway. He heard the Kirschbergs singing: a wordless, cloying chant. In the dining room, the table was set for Shabbat. Paul was sweeping while Ruth polished a pair of brass candlestick holders. Alan nearly laughed when he saw their gentle, diligent work, their trusting faces as they looked up. A desperate act, he thought, turning routine into ritual. Pretending against the boredom of domesticity.

"How did it go?" Paul asked. "Learn anything new?"

Alan shrugged. "It'll take a few days for the results. I should probably go home..."

Ruth's hand was on his shoulder. "That's the worst. Having to wait." She dropped her cloth and embraced him, surrounding Alan with the high, heady scent of the polish, and he couldn't help but relax into her hold. He was sorry for his uncharitable thoughts. The Kirschbergs were good, good people, better than Alan, surely—and there was Paul, looking at him, if not with love, then something close to it. When Ruth released him, he felt suddenly guilty for not telling them about Jenna. On the way out of the hospital, he'd found himself hoping to spot her hair—but then he'd forgotten all about her.

"Really, I could go," he offered. "At least until they call with the results."

"Absolutely not," said Ruth. "We'll show you some long walks, a bunch of cafés in town. See it as a little vacation, a place to rest." She handed him the Kiddush cup. "There's Manischewitz in the cupboard above the stove."

When Alan returned with the wine, Ruth was preparing to light the candles.

"Are we starting without Jenna?" he asked.

"She's at her boyfriend's house," Paul said. He rolled his eyes, and Ruth laughed.

Alan coughed lamely, covering his mouth. He pitied them, the way he pitied most parents—their obvious intoxication, their gaudy adoration. They'd been duped, made feeble. He watched as Ruth struck the match, lifted a leaning candle, and held the flame to its base until wax began to drip.