Visiting

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Sam is the only one left who would understand, and maybe even get a chuckle out of it. I want to tell him what happened last night, if I can remember to get all the details right. A few notes might help me.

It's Monday, the first Monday of the month, so, as usual, I'll be visiting him. The bus to Long Island leaves at 11. A clean shirt and tie will do. I don't think I'll need to bring a newspaper this time.

Over the years I've suffered many losses. It seems that every few months I'm attending a funeral of one of my old friends, medical colleagues or former patients. Since Rachel died and I closed my practice, I've slowly become reconciled to being alone.

Sam is my only remaining dear friend.

Visiting Sam has always been difficult for me. I feel I have to go. Sam has no one else. I often procrastinate, finding things to do around the house. I tell myself that maybe I'll skip this month, because it won't matter to him. But, invariably, overcome by guilt, I go.

On the bus, I reminisce about our long friendship. Sammy has been my closest friend since grade school. I've always envied him. A prodigy, he was the top student at Bronx Science High School. Every day on the subway to school, he helped me understand physics and calculus! During the summer before college, he introduced me to his lovely cousin Rachel. Years later, he was the best man at our wedding, and was there with Rachel and my parents at my medical school graduation.

In the seventies, Sam became Professor Samuel Binstock of Cal Tech, the eminent particle-physicist, once rumored to be on Stockholm's short list. I remember reading that a theorem had been named for him. What an honor! Rachel unsuccessfully tried to introduce him to eligible lady friends, but resolutely a bachelor, he was married to his research.

I knew he had retired several years ago, and must have come east to give a lecture or attend a conference. Then he had a massive stroke. I still don't know how the nursing home got my name. For the past two years, he's been

wrapped in diapers, strapped to a wheelchair in front of a TV in a nursing home dayroom. The sun-lit room has others in wheelchairs, placed in a neat semi-circle in front of a droning TV. It is saddening for me, an old man, to be in a room of vacant stares, soft moans, waxy skin, foul odors, and swollen legs, fearing this might be *my* fate.

Every month, while holding his cold hand, I read him the Science section of the *Times*. I can't bear to look at his mute, unblinking face, and only stay an hour. After each visit, I vow that this would be my last. On the bus home, I sit wiping away tears.

For the past year, my mind has been playing tricks on me. On some unsettling days, important memories disappear like grains of sand blown by a desert wind—the names of my grandchildren, my telephone number, even my date of birth—but I can still remember childhood friends and happy times. I know what is happening to me, but there is nothing I can do about it. It was best that I retired from medicine when I did, before I had made serious mistakes.

On today's ride to the nursing home, I think about last night's dream. I'm sure Sammy will appreciate hearing about it.

I know the way to the day room. I spot him sitting rigidly like a statue in his wheelchair. The TV is showing some idiotic game show.

"Sammy," I say, "Last night I had a dream I have to tell you about. Now, listen up, old buddy." I move my chair closer, and speak loudly.

"Well... there was an angry gray-bearded rabbi dressed in black, *yarmulke* and all, yelling at me. I think it must have been in Yiddish. He was pointing his gnarled finger right at my face. Can you imagine? I woke up scared. I felt like I was still a little kid. It took a few seconds for my mind to clear, then I knew who it was, and laughed. 'So it's you, Rabbi Piltz, you tyrant!' I said to myself. 'You can't frighten me any longer. Come to haunt me, eh? Go back to your grave. That's where you belong.'"

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“You remember Piltz, don’t you Sammy?” I said, excitedly. “Remember that day in Hebrew school almost seventy years ago? That’s right, *seventy* years ago! You were in the second row tugging on my shirt. ‘Morrie, don’t,’ you whispered. You must’ve known trouble was brewing.”

“All I did was raise my hand, and ask, ‘Rebbe, *why* is there a God?’ An honest question, really. He was so angry that he expelled me! When the Rabbi called that night, my father, always stern, screamed ‘Big mouth, smart aleck, mister wise guy, you have disgraced our family.’ He dragged me to school the next morning, made me apologize, and pleaded with Piltz to allow me to continue. The rabbi listened, tweaked my nose hard, and nodded. Do you remember, Sammy, that for a while I was in my glory, a hero to our classmates. I basked in a feeling of found courage, though it really was foolhardy of me. We laughed about that for years. I should have listened to you.”

“Tell me . . . did he ever ruin *your* sleep? You knew the Torah inside out, and how to deal with him. You really

should have been on that Quiz Kids radio show. You were that smart. Wasn’t that a strange dream?”

His immobile face, with the angle of his mouth sagging to the side, is pointing towards the TV set.

It is as if I’m not here. Sammy doesn’t know me! I’ve been talking to *myself*!

Am I beginning to lose my mind? Am I going mad? I feel like a mourner talking to a funeral casket, a family member pouring out their heart to a cold gravestone.

I have never felt so alone, alone with only my memories. Every time I’m here I wonder: *who* will read to me and hold *my* hand?

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