On the Holy Ground of the Institute

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The 400 block of Clymer Avenue in Mattapan once boasted a line of gorgeous houses with handsome lawns and sizable garages. Forty years ago those who knew the area would have called the block and a few blocks surrounding it the neighborhood of the hoi polloi. There was, however, a smugness about those who lived in that block, it was said. And because they were Jews, it was also said, they should have known better and treated others who didn't have as much more kindly. After all, if the Jews don't help each other, who will?

In time the neighborhood around Clymer Avenue changed. Most of the rich families moved to Jamaica Plain, Brookline, and Newton. Some families moved as far away as Lexington to the north. All but a few of the grand homes were torn down, and simple, efficient apartment buildings erected in their place. Where once only ten families lived in an entire block, now 120 families live. And where once there were lawns and paved driveways leading to garages, now there are garbage cans, basement entries, and cement passageways. Most of the trees were cut down and the street made one-way.

Morris Rappaport and his wife live in the 400 block of Clymer Avenue. Their apartment is on the third floor in the rear of the building. It is always dark in their home, in all of their three-and-a-half rooms. It is poorly heated, and to get plumbers to fix the main water pipes in the basement seems to be an impossible chore for the owners of the building. At sixty-eight Morris Rappaport and his wife Annie, who came to this country almost fifty years ago, feel they have nothing left to live for, except for a grandson, the only child of their only child. The boy is fifteen and attends school in Cleveland. He lives with the one dream that he will be allowed to come to Boston some day and attend the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

"Can you imagine how that makes us feel?" Morris Rappaport says, reaching to touch his Annie's hand. "What we've seen in all these years," he sighs, "what we've known, and what we've only dared to wish for. Forty years ago I walked our daughter down this street and admired the homes. I couldn't stand the people, but those houses, my God, they were something. Temples. They were like temples. Absolutely. Not like the nothing little place we'd go to *schul* in those days. Now they got apartments, a symbol of what my whole life has been about. A business here, a business there, a daughter who had to move a thousand miles away. You can't stay close to your parents; you have to move a thousand miles. What's so great about Cleveland, I'm waiting for someone to tell me. What have they got there we don't have here better? At least let her go to New York. All right, that's big, a big-scale business world and a real Jewish population. But what do they have in Cleveland? What is he, my son-in-law? Bernard Baruch? He runs a store. I run a store. They have different money in Cleveland?"

Annie Rappaport smiles. Many times in my visits to their home she has talked about Morris's love for the grandson they see now perhaps once or twice a year for only a few days at a time. How her husband has prayed for the boy's record in high school to hold up and earn for him a spot at that place "I can hardly say."

"The Institute," I smile at her.

"Oh," she sighs, "it's more than just an institute. It's *the* Institute, with Technology and Science and Massachusetts. 'It's some terrific place,' Morris says. He wants it so much for David. He cries to me at night and says, 'Annie, if I had become something, if I'd had a chance in this world, maybe not be Jewish, had money, a name, I could have brought that Institute of Massachusetts to *him*. With my bare hands I would have taken it to him and he would have become a great scientist. Prizes, awards, books he would have written even, if I had become something. A *shamus* in a *schul* in Mattapan,' Morris says, 'wants his daughter's son to go, *nach*, not just to college, but the greatest college in the world. I could cry.'"

"And he cries," she recounts for me when her

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husband is away from the house. "He cries. Not only in the evening sitting watching the television, but in the morning when he walks to get the bus. I see him. He thinks I don't, but I see him. Every day I see him feeling this way. I see the wishes and plans from 1920, from before the war, gone, all gone, like those houses he tells you about all the time. How he hated those families who lived there. 'They're kikes,' he always used to yell at me. 'Loud, ugly kikes. They're living just like the *Goyim* want them to live,' he'd yell. 'And who cares about *us*, and *our* future, and *our* children? The *Goyim* care more about us than the people in those houses. Mr. Roosevelt,' he always said, 'cares more about us. A man who's never even seen a poor Jew, and he cares.'

"And so, my friend from this famous institute my husband and grandson dream about every night," Annie Rappaport will say to me, "what advice do I give to this man and this boy? That your institute isn't really so good? That America is rich and there are lots of opportunities, even for our kind who've never been well liked? How do I tell my husband that no one's life is ever lived in vain, and that every human being matters to God? I tell him this, tell me? Grandsons, institutes of science, how do I keep the only person I have alive? How do I help the only person who matters to *me*, since my daughter I have to believe doesn't think visiting and calling her parents is an important thing anymore? You think that if this boy, this genius or whatever he is, ever gets admitted to your institute, that his father will let him visit us? That's what this boy wants, you think, to take a trip around the Institute with a couple of seventy-year-old people? We're going to be seventy very soon. They have a day, tell me, at the school," she asks sarcastically, "when the students bring their grandparents to visit?"

"You have never seen the Institute, Mrs. Rappaport?" I inquire.

"From the other side of the river, once or twice, I would see it. Now, it's been, what, maybe fifteen years since we've gone by there. I wouldn't recognize it." She smiles kindly. "And it," she nods, "wouldn't recognize the Rappaports. Except for one, please God. They should give a long look at David. They don't have to know his mother was a Rappaport. They'll see his records over there, they'll see Shields. How will they know? He could be another Gentile. But do they," she begins nervously, "I mean, they ask all the boys their religion?"

"No," I answer seriously.

She is relieved. "Then he'll make it! He has A's in everything, including some things his parents and us don't even know what they are, and for a couple of months no one needs to say anything. So," she says aloud to herself, "how do you like that? They don't ask." Her face shines with pleasure and surprise. "Live and learn. Everyday a wonderful new surprise. Morris will be very pleased."

"Annie," Morris Rappaport said to his wife during one of my subsequent visits to their home, "you don't know that all these important places like the Massachusetts Institute don't have quotas any more?"

"They don't ask for anybody's religion," she replied authoritatively.

Mr. Rappaport smiled at me, patted his wife's hand, and breathed deeply. "We've made a little progress, Annie. Not me, but some of us. Not all of us, not the ones maybe who see their children any more, and their businesses decline, and people hating people, and poor people living right on the spot where the rich ones used to live, but we're making a little progress. Now it's not religion," he sighed, "now it's money. It's always been money. You got money, you go forward. You got less money, you go a little less forward. You got no money, people weep over your grave when you die, but when you're alive you go backward.

"Please God, I ask for so little, and have had so little, my parents had so little, I should only live. I should only stay alive long enough to see Duvidal arrive at that institute, and then once he should take me on a visit. It doesn't have to be long. A half an hour. One classroom, where he reads and does his work, then I can die. I'd like to take a simple walk with him, he doesn't even have to drive me home. I can find my own way after all these years. But I should only know that feeling of walking on the ground of that school, on that holy ground with my grandson. *Then*, Annie," he turned to her, "*then* the whole thing's not in vain. He should only hear." He glanced upward. "I'll make it a promise. Then He can take me."