

One Thousand Dollars (By O. Henry)

"One thousand dollars," said the lawyer Tolman, in a severe and serious voice. "And here is the money."

Young Gillian touched the thin package of fifty-dollar bills and laughed.

"It's such an unusual amount," he explained, kindly, to the lawyer. "If it had been ten thousand a man might celebrate with a lot of fireworks. Even fifty dollars would have been less trouble."

"You heard the reading of your uncle's will after he died," continued the lawyer Tolman. "I do not know if you paid much attention to its details. I must remind you of one. You are required to provide us with a report of how you used this one thousand dollars as soon as you have spent it. I trust that you will obey the wishes of your late uncle."

"You may depend on it," said the young man respectfully.

Gillian went to his club. He searched for a man he called Old Bryson.

Old Bryson was a calm, anti-social man, about forty years old. He was in a corner reading a book. When he saw Gillian coming near he took a noisy, deep breath, laid down his book and took off his glasses.

"I have a funny story to tell you," said Gillian.

"I wish you would tell it to someone in the billiard room," said Old Bryson. "You know how I hate your stories."

"This is a better one than usual," said Gillian, rolling a cigarette, and I'm glad to tell it to you. It's too sad and funny to go with the rattling of billiard balls.

I've just come from a meeting with my late uncle's lawyers. He leaves me an even thousand dollars. Now, what can a man possibly do with a thousand dollars?"

Old Bryson showed very little interest. "I thought the late Septimus Gillian was worth something like half a million."

"He was," agreed Gillian, happily. "And that's where the joke comes in. He has left a lot of his money to an organism. That is, part of it goes to the man who invents a new bacillus and the rest to establish a hospital for doing away with it again. There are one or two small, unimportant gifts on the side. The butler and the housekeeper get a seal ring and ten dollars each. His nephew gets one thousand dollars."

"Were there any others mentioned in your uncle's will?" asked Old Bryson.

"None." said Gillian. "There *is* a Miss Hayden. My uncle was responsible for her. She lived in his house. She's a quiet thing...musical... the daughter of somebody who was unlucky enough to be his friend. I forgot to say that she was in on the ring and ten dollar joke, too. I

wish I had been. Then I could have had two bottles of wine, given the ring to the waiter and had the whole business off my hands. Now tell me what a man can do with a thousand dollars."

Old Bryson rubbed his glasses and smiled. And when Old Bryson smiled, Gillian knew that he intended to be more offensive than ever.

There are many good things a man could do with a thousand dollars," said Bryson. "You?" he said with a gentle laugh. "Why, Bobby Gillian, there's only one reasonable thing you could do. You can go and buy Miss Lotta Lauriere a diamond necklace with the money and then take yourself off to Idaho and inflict your presence upon a ranch. I advise a sheep ranch, as I have a particular dislike for sheep."

"Thanks," said Gillian as he rose from his chair. "I *knew* I could depend on you, Old Bryson. You've hit on the very idea. I wanted to spend the money on one thing, because I have to turn in a report for it, and I hate itemizing."

Gillian phoned for a cab and said to the driver: "The stage entrance of the Columbine Theatre."

The theater was crowded. Miss Lotta Lauriere was preparing for her performance when her assistant spoke the name of Mr. Gillian.

"Let it in," said Miss Lauriere. "Now, what is it, Bobby? I'm going on stage in two minutes."

"It won't take two minutes for me. What do you say to a little thing in the jewelry line? I can spend one thousand dollars."

"Say, Bobby," said Miss Lauriere, "Did you see that necklace Della Stacey had on the other night? It cost two thousand two hundred dollars at Tiffany's."

Miss Lauriere was called to the stage for her performance.

Gillian slowly walked out to where his cab was waiting. "What would you do with a thousand dollars if you had it?" he asked the driver.

"Open a drinking place," said the driver, quickly. "I know a place I could take money in with both hands. I've got it worked out--if you were thinking of putting up the money."

"Oh, no," said Gillian. "I was just wondering."

Eight blocks down Broadway, Gillian got out of the cab. A blind man sat on the sidewalk selling pencils. Gillian went out and stood in front of him.

"Excuse me, but would you mind telling me what you would do if you had a thousand dollars?" asked Gillian.

The blind man took a small book from his coat pocket and held it out. Gillian opened it and saw that it was a bank deposit book.

It showed that the blind man had a balance of one thousand seven hundred eighty-five dollars in his bank account. Gillian returned the bank book and got back into the cab.

"I forgot something," he said. "You may drive to the law offices of Tolman & Sharp."

Lawyer Tolman looked at Gillian in a hostile and questioning way.

"I beg your pardon," said Gillian, cheerfully. "But was Miss Hayden left anything by my uncle's will in addition to the ring and the ten dollars?"

"Nothing," said Mr. Tolman.

"I thank you very much, Sir," said Gillian, and went to his cab. He gave the driver the address of his late uncle's home.

Miss Hayden was writing letters in the library. The small, thin woman wore black clothes. But you would have noticed her eyes. Gillian entered the room as if the world were unimportant.

"I have just come from old Tolman's," he explained. "They have been going over the papers down there. They found a..." Gillian searched his memory for a legal term. "They found an amendment or a post-script or something to the will. It seemed that my uncle had second thoughts and willed you a thousand dollars. Tolman asked me to bring you the money. Here it is."

Gillian laid the money beside her hand on the desk. Miss Hayden turned white. "Oh!" she said. And again, "Oh!"

Gillian half turned and looked out the window. In a low voice he said, "I suppose, of course, that you know I love you."

"I am sorry," said Miss Hayden, as she picked up her money.

"There is no use?" asked Gillian, almost light-heartedly.

"I am sorry," she said again.

"May I write a note?" asked Gillian, with a smile. Miss Hayden supplied him with paper and pen, and then went back to her writing table.

Gillian wrote a report of how he spent the thousand dollars: "Paid by Robert Gillian, one thousand dollars on account of the eternal happiness, owed by Heaven to the best and dearest woman on earth."

Gillian put the note into an envelope. He bowed to Miss Hayden and left.

His cab stopped again at the offices of Tolman & Sharp.

"I have spent the one thousand dollars," he said cheerfully, to Tolman. "And I have come to present a report of it, as I agreed." He threw a white envelope on the lawyer's table.

Without touching the envelope, Mr. Tolman went to a door and called his partner, Sharp. Together they searched for something in a large safe. They brought out a big envelope sealed with wax. As they opened the envelope, they shook their heads together over its contents. Then Tolman became the spokesman.

"Mr. Gillian," he said, "there was an addition to your uncle's will. It was given to us privately, with instructions that it not be opened until you had provided us with a full report of your handling of the one thousand dollars received in the will.

"As you have satisfied the conditions, my partner and I have read the addition. I will explain to you the spirit of its contents.

"In the event that your use of the one thousand dollars shows that you possess any of the qualifications that deserve reward, you stand to gain much more. If your disposal of the money in question has been sensible, wise, or unselfish, it is in our power to give you bonds to the value of fifty thousand dollars. But if you have used this money in a wasteful, foolish way as you have in the past, the fifty thousand dollars is to be paid to Miriam Hayden, ward of the late Mr. Gillian, without delay.

"Now, Mr. Gillian, Mr. Sharp and I will examine your report of the one thousand dollars."

Mr. Tolman reached for the envelope. Gillian was a little quicker in taking it up. He calmly tore the report and its cover into pieces and dropped them into his pocket.

"It's all right," he said, smilingly. "There isn't a bit of need to bother you with this. I don't suppose you would understand these itemized bets, anyway. I lost the thousand dollars on the races. Good-day to you, gentlemen."

Tolman and Sharp shook their heads mournfully at each other when Gillian left. They heard him whistling happily in the hallway as he waited for the elevator.

"One Thousand Dollars" was written by O. Henry. It was adapted for Special English by Lawan Davis. The storyteller and producer was Steve Ember.

The Last Leaf (By O. Henry)

Many artists lived in the Greenwich Village area of New York. Two young women named Sue and Johnsy shared a studio apartment at the top of a three-story building. Johnsy's real name was Joanna.

In November, a cold, unseen stranger came to visit the city. This disease, pneumonia, killed many people. Johnsy lay on her bed, hardly moving. She looked through the small window. She could see the side of the brick house next to her building.

One morning, a doctor examined Johnsy and took her temperature. Then he spoke with Sue in another room.

"She has one chance in -- let us say ten," he said. "And that chance is for her to want to live. Your friend has made up her mind that she is not going to get well. Has she anything on her mind?"

"She -- she wanted to paint the Bay of Naples in Italy some day," said Sue.

"Paint?" said the doctor. "Bosh! Has she anything on her mind worth thinking twice -- a man for example?"

"A man?" said Sue. "Is a man worth -- but, no, doctor; there is nothing of the kind."

"I will do all that science can do," said the doctor. "But whenever my patient begins to count the carriages at her funeral, I take away fifty percent from the curative power of medicines."

After the doctor had gone, Sue went into the workroom and cried. Then she went to Johnsy's room with her drawing board, whistling ragtime.

Johnsy lay with her face toward the window. Sue stopped whistling, thinking she was asleep. She began making a pen and ink drawing for a story in a magazine. Young artists must work their way to "Art" by making pictures for magazine stories. Sue heard a low sound, several times repeated. She went quickly to the bedside.

Johnsy's eyes were open wide. She was looking out the window and counting -- counting backward. "Twelve," she said, and a little later "eleven"; and then "ten" and "nine;" and then "eight" and "seven," almost together.

Sue looked out the window. What was there to count? There was only an empty yard and the blank side of the house seven meters away. An old ivy vine, going bad at the roots, climbed half way up the wall. The cold breath of autumn had stricken leaves from the plant until its branches, almost bare, hung on the bricks.

"What is it, dear?" asked Sue.

"Six," said Johnsy, quietly. "They're falling faster now. Three days ago there were almost a hundred. It made my head hurt to count them. But now it's easy. There goes another one. There are only five left now."

"Five what, dear?" asked Sue.

"Leaves. On the plant. When the last one falls I must go, too. I've known that for three days. Didn't the doctor tell you?"

"Oh, I never heard of such a thing," said Sue. "What have old ivy leaves to do with your getting well? And you used to love that vine. Don't be silly. Why, the doctor told me this morning that your chances for getting well real soon were -- let's see exactly what he said -- he said the chances were ten to one! Try to eat some soup now. And, let me go back to my drawing, so I can sell it to the magazine and buy food and wine for us."

"You needn't get any more wine," said Johnsy, keeping her eyes fixed out the window. "There goes another one. No, I don't want any soup. That leaves just four. I want to see the last one fall before it gets dark. Then I'll go, too."

"Johnsy, dear," said Sue, "will you promise me to keep your eyes closed, and not look out the window until I am done working? I must hand those drawings in by tomorrow."

"Tell me as soon as you have finished," said Johnsy, closing her eyes and lying white and still as a fallen statue. "I want to see the last one fall. I'm tired of waiting. I'm tired of thinking. I want to turn loose my hold on everything, and go sailing down, down, just like one of those poor, tired leaves."

"Try to sleep," said Sue. "I must call Mister Behrman up to be my model for my drawing of an old miner. Don't try to move until I come back."

Old Behrman was a painter who lived on the ground floor of the apartment building. Behrman was a failure in art. For years, he had always been planning to paint a work of art, but had never yet begun it. He earned a little money by serving as a model to artists who could not pay for a professional model. He was a fierce, little, old man who protected the two young women in the studio apartment above him.

Sue found Behrman in his room. In one area was a blank canvas that had been waiting twenty-five years for the first line of paint. Sue told him about Johnsy and how she feared that her friend would float away like a leaf.

Old Behrman was angered at such an idea. "Are there people in the world with the foolishness to die because leaves drop off a vine? Why do you let that silly business come in her brain?"

"She is very sick and weak," said Sue, "and the disease has left her mind full of strange ideas."

"This is not any place in which one so good as Miss Johnsy shall lie sick," yelled Behrman. "Some day I will paint a masterpiece, and we shall all go away."

Johnsy was sleeping when they went upstairs. Sue pulled the shade down to cover the window. She and Behrman went into the other room. They looked out a window fearfully at the ivy vine. Then they looked at each other without speaking. A cold rain was falling, mixed with snow. Behrman sat and posed as the miner.

The next morning, Sue awoke after an hour's sleep. She found Johnsy with wide-open eyes staring at the covered window.

"Pull up the shade; I want to see," she ordered, quietly.

Sue obeyed.

After the beating rain and fierce wind that blew through the night, there yet stood against the wall one ivy leaf. It was the last one on the vine. It was still dark green at the center. But its edges were colored with the yellow. It hung bravely from the branch about seven meters above the ground.

"It is the last one," said Johnsy. "I thought it would surely fall during the night. I heard the wind. It will fall today and I shall die at the same time."

"Dear, dear!" said Sue, leaning her worn face down toward the bed. "Think of me, if you won't think of yourself. What would I do?"

But Johnsy did not answer.

The next morning, when it was light, Johnsy demanded that the window shade be raised. The ivy leaf was still there. Johnsy lay for a long time, looking at it. And then she called to Sue, who was preparing chicken soup.

"I've been a bad girl," said Johnsy. "Something has made that last leaf stay there to show me how bad I was. It is wrong to want to die. You may bring me a little soup now."

An hour later she said: "Someday I hope to paint the Bay of Naples."

Later in the day, the doctor came, and Sue talked to him in the hallway.

"Even chances," said the doctor. "With good care, you'll win. And now I must see another case I have in your building. Behrman, his name is -- some kind of an artist, I believe. Pneumonia, too. He is an old, weak man and his case is severe. There is no hope for him; but he goes to the hospital today to ease his pain."

The next day, the doctor said to Sue: "She's out of danger. You won. Nutrition and care now - that's all."

Later that day, Sue came to the bed where Johnsy lay, and put one arm around her.

"I have something to tell you, white mouse," she said. "Mister Behrman died of pneumonia today in the hospital. He was sick only two days. They found him the morning of the first day in his room downstairs helpless with pain. His shoes and clothing were completely wet and icy cold. They could not imagine where he had been on such a terrible night.

And then they found a lantern, still lighted. And they found a ladder that had been moved from its place. And art supplies and a painting board with green and yellow colors mixed on it.

And look out the window, dear, at the last ivy leaf on the wall. Didn't you wonder why it never moved when the wind blew? Ah, darling, it is Behrman's masterpiece – he painted it there the night that the last leaf fell."

You have heard the story "The Last Leaf" by O.Henry. Your storyteller was Barbara Klein. This story was adapted by Shelley Gollust and produced by Lawan Davis.

Other People's Gods

Naomi Alderman

Mr Bloom led a blameless life until he saw Ganesha. Some people do. Some, like Mr Bloom, go to ophthalmic college at their mother's insistence although in their hearts they had yearned to travel to far-off lands. Some, like him, dream of spice islands and dusky maidens but settle for Telma stock cubes and the buxom daughter of the retiring optician, Mr Lefkowitz. Some, like Mr Bloom, raise a family and examine rheumy eyes and rub their corns at night and quite forget in all that piling-up of years that once they longed to stand bare-chested on a shore of golden sand, to go where man had never trod, to love as man had never loved. Some find contentment there, and others discontent. Mr Bloom, quite to his own surprise, found Ganesha. He was on a market stall, among bangles and saris, joss sticks and wall hangings. There, in the centre, a porcelain statue of a four-armed man with an elephant's head, or perhaps an elephant with the body of a four-armed man. He was bright pink, with large kind eyes and a golden headdress. One of his hands was beckoning, another motioning the observer to stay away. Mr Bloom saw at once that this was a god; what else could it be, enticing and warning at the same moment? He picked up the statue, the glaze smooth beneath his fingertips. The young man tending the stall, dirty blond dreadlocks falling into his eyes, said:

'Careful, Grandpa, yeah? You break it, you pay, alright?'

Mr Bloom thought of the story of Abraham our forefather, who condemned his father for *avodah zara*, by which is meant foreign worship, by which is meant idol worship. As a young boy, realising the truth that there is only one God, Abraham smashed his father's idols. When his father punished him, Abraham said, 'No, father, it wasn't me, it was the biggest idol. He took a stick and smashed all the others.' His father said, 'You idiot, idols can't move!' and Abraham replied, 'So why do you worship them, then?' The story does not relate whether at that moment Abraham's father was enlightened, or whether, on the contrary, he punished Abraham yet harder for stripping him of the beliefs which, in prehistoric Mesopotamia, must have been even more precious than they are today.

Mr Bloom considered all this as he held Ganesha in his hands. Those eyes were so tender, full of love for whatever they looked upon. Those arms were so strong; with him on one's side how could a person ever fail? Mr Bloom had never touched an idol before, never before considered that the sin of *avodah zara* could have any practical application. He looked at the smooth curl of the trunk, mighty yet comforting.

'I'll take him,' he said.

For a while, Mr Bloom thought he could hide Ganesha. He wrapped the god in plastic bags, cushioned him with hundreds of soft lens-cleaning cloths, and tucked him behind the stack of Passover dishes at the bottom of the wardrobe in the spare room. But it was no use. Somehow his wife always seemed to need something from right at the back of that very wardrobe and he was sent to retrieve it. Or one of his children would have left the door open. Whenever Mr Bloom went near the spare room, Ganesha's trunk would have worked its way out of its wrapping and waved at him, bold and pink, from the plastic-bag swaddling.

He wants to be worshipped, thought Mr Bloom, and knew at once that it was true, for wasn't that always what gods wanted? Love and gifts, or fear and wars, or sometimes both. But how to worship him? Mr Bloom was puzzled; he had never worshipped an idol before, and had not the least idea of the proper way to do so. He looked in his Bible. 'Thou shalt not make for thyself graven images,' he read. 'Thou shalt not bow down to them or worship them.' Then, later, God said 'an altar shalt thou make for me, and sacrifice thereon thy burnt offerings, thy sheep and thine oxen'. Mr Bloom had neither sheep nor oxen, and did not particularly want to make a burnt offering of his professional equivalent. He had once melted

a pair of spectacles by mistake and the fumes had been revolting. But bowing down and worshipping seemed fairly easy to achieve.

Mr Bloom placed Ganesha on a raffia footstool in the spare room, taking care to close the door first. Ganesha seemed happy, the fiery glint in his eye now one of deep approval. Slowly, mindful of the mild arthritis in his right knee, Mr Bloom lowered himself to the floor, then bowed so that his forehead touched the ground.

‘O Great Ganesha,’ he intoned, in a prayer he had composed himself, ‘I humbly thank you for gracing my home with your presence. I pray, O lord Ganesha, that you will bless all those who dwell here. And I especially beseech you, all-knowing and most merciful Ganesha, to help my daughter Judy in her law A-level for, O kind Ganesha, she finds the coursework very hard to understand. Ohhhhh mighty Ganesha,’ he said, attempting to raise himself up into a kneeling position again, to proceed with his prayer. But though his spirit longed to give Ganesha due praise, Mr Bloom’s back was weak. A muscle in his left buttock spasmed, he crouched down again and, waiting for the pain to subside, it was in this position that his wife found him twenty minutes later.

‘Reuben!’ she said. ‘What in God’s name do you think you’re doing?’

‘I,’ he said, ‘Sandra, my back, it’s gone again, bring the Deep Heat!’ He hoped to distract her long enough to crawl with Ganesha to the wardrobe and conceal him, but Sandra was more sharp-witted than that.

‘Reuben!’ she said again, ‘is that an *idol*? Were you *worshipping* an *idol* in our own home, with me so busy with the Pesach cleaning and the Rabbi coming for lunch on Shabbes?’

‘Sandra!’ Mr Bloom replied. ‘How can you say such a thing?’ For Mr Bloom hadn’t been married for twenty years without learning a thing or two himself. ‘No,’ he continued, ‘I found this *statue* on a market stall and I thought it might suit the colour scheme in this room.’ Mrs Bloom had nagged him for years to take a greater interest in such domestic matters. ‘I was just... examining it when I tripped and fell and hurt my back.’

‘Hmmm,’ said Sandra.

‘Deep Heat?’ said Mr Bloom. ‘Please, my love?’

Sandra, whose heart was kind although her tongue was sharp, hurried to the bathroom to fetch the tube of healing ointment.

In the meantime, Mr Bloom attempted, without a great deal of success, to replace the statue of Ganesha in his wrappings, to cover over his flamboyance and thus cease to distress his wife. But the trunk seemed unaccountably slippery, and the bubble wrap must have shrunk a little. When Sandra returned, Ganesha was still sitting on the floor. She massaged the soothing cream deep into her husband’s buttock while staring thoughtfully at the god. At last, her fingers still menthol-fragrant, she picked up the statue and examined it critically.

‘Do you know,’ she said, ‘I think it might do for the living room. On the sideboard. It’s very ethnic.’

And so Ganesha took up residence at the very centre of the Bloom home. The children objected naturally, as children always do.

‘Errrr,’ said Judy at breakfast, while munching her Marmite bagel, ‘I think it’s staring at me.’

‘Yuck,’ said David, flicking Ganesha with his fingernail as he hoisted his schoolbag. ‘It looks dirty. I bet it’s infested.’

‘The statue is hollow,’ said Mr Bloom mildly, wondering in his heart why God chose to turn delightful babies into charmless teenagers, ‘and his name is Ganesha.’

David rolled his eyes. Judy sighed. They went to school. As Mr Bloom was taking the breakfast dishes into the kitchen he paused for a moment in front of Ganesha, inclined his head slightly, and left a morsel of bagel on a saucer in front of him.

Mr Bloom could not help but notice that his life seemed better with Ganesha in it. When Mrs Rosenblatt, of the Rosenblatt Dried Fruit empire, missed her fourth appointment in a row, Mr Bloom did not tremble at the idea of rebuking her. Instead, he felt a mastery, a calmness, a purposeful strength. He picked up the telephone without hesitation and said:

‘Mrs Rosenblatt, your appointment has now been rescheduled for half past four. If you are not in my shop at half past four, Bloom’s Opticians will have no further need of your custom.’

‘But...’ said Mrs Rosenblatt.

‘No further need,’ he said again.

‘But Mr...’ said Mrs Rosenblatt.

‘Thank you,’ said Mr Bloom, ‘and good day.’

Mrs Rosenblatt appeared, punctual and meek, at half past four. As Mr Bloom ushered her into his eye-testing room he muttered a quiet prayer of thanks to Ganesha.

The rest of the family, too, grew increasingly fond of the god as the days went on. Ganesha’s gaze was so magnanimous, he filled the living room with a sense of quiet peace. Mr Bloom noticed that Sandra and Judy and David spent longer in that room now. David took to doing his homework on the table under the watching eye of Ganesha. And Mr Bloom noticed that, though Judy was still dismissive and disdainful of the statue, on the morning before her module exam she left a badge from her jacket on the sideboard in front of him. She caught her father’s eye as she turned to go, shrugged uncomfortably and said: ‘For luck. You know.’ And when Judy did better in that examination than in her teachers’ opinions she had any right to, Ganesha came to be looked on in the Bloom family home with a certain warmth.

At first, the Blooms did not speak of Ganesha outside their home. But Hendon is not a place for secrets. Perhaps it was that Judy’s friend from school, Mikaella, observed her placing a small handful of yellow mandel croutons in front of the god before she started her homework. Perhaps it was that David’s friend Benjy wondered why David rubbed the statue’s head before the final round of every Wii Tennis game. However it happened, soon one person spoke to another and another to a third and it became known in Hendon that the Blooms – yes, Bloom’s the optician, yes, Sandra Bloom of the PTA, yes, that nice David Bloom whose barmitzvah they’d attended only two short years before – those very Blooms had an idol in their house.

Now, it is made very clear in the Bible that the introduction of idolatry into a good Jewish home cannot go unchallenged. Were not 3,000 men put to death for worshipping a golden calf? And was it not for this very sin of idolatry that Jezebel was thrown from a window to be devoured by wild dogs? Of course, Barnet Council would be much alarmed should such events come to pass in Hendon. And thus it was that Mr Bloom was not awakened in the night by a party of eunuchs come to effect his defenestration, but instead received a telephone call asking that he should kindly pay a visit to the Rabbi at his earliest convenience.

The Rabbi was a young man, only recently finished with his seminary education. Nonetheless, his beard was neat and his manner suitably deferential to a man of Mr Bloom’s seniority.

‘Now, aheheh,’ he said, steeping his fingers, ‘I wanted to talk to you, Mr Bloom, about your, um, statue.’

‘Oh yes?’ said Mr Bloom. He did not feel perturbed. He had found that since Ganesha had entered his life, he had been less easily disturbed by all vicissitudes. He felt solid.

‘Yes,’ said the Rabbi. He fiddled with his beard nervously. ‘The thing is, Mr Bloom, there’s been talk. That is, there has started to be talk. Not, you understand, that I listen to talk, no, not at all, but a man of your position, a trustee of the synagogue, Mr Bloom...’

‘Talk?’ said Mr Bloom, mildly.

‘About your statue, Mr Bloom. People are talking about your statue.’ The Rabbi began to speak more quickly, clearly discomfited by Mr Bloom’s silence. ‘The thing is, Mr Bloom, it doesn’t do for a synagogue trustee to have a... to have a...’

‘A god?’ Mr Bloom volunteered.

‘An idol,’ said the Rabbi. ‘It doesn’t do for someone in your position to have an idol in your house. So, um, get rid of it, please.’

Mr Bloom thought about how his house had changed since the arrival of Ganesha. It was not, of course, that the family was unrecognizable. Not that there was no longer any strife or bitterness. They continued to argue, to complain; things continued to go wrong. And yet, the quiet presence of the elephant-headed god seemed to have strengthened each of them. Perhaps, thought Mr Bloom, it was his imagination. And yet he would rather not give the god up.

‘I think,’ he said, ‘that I would rather not.’

The Rabbi frowned and leaned forward in his chair, earnest and sincere.

‘Now look here, Mr Bloom,’ he said, ‘we can both be reasonable about this, can’t we? Of course you know and I know that you don’t *worship* the thing. But can’t you see that it looks all wrong?’

‘But I do,’ said Mr Bloom.

‘Ah,’ said the Rabbi, satisfied, ‘at least you can see that.’

‘No,’ said Mr Bloom, ‘I mean that I do worship him.’

And the Rabbi sat back suddenly as if Mr Bloom, the kindly optician, had struck him in the face.

‘Hmm,’ he said after a long pause, ‘we should talk more. Perhaps tomorrow?’

On the second day, the Rabbi telephoned in the afternoon and invited Mr Bloom to come to talk with him in his study at the synagogue.

‘Mr Bloom,’ said the Rabbi, obviously a little nervous, ‘I want to talk to you about God.’

Mr Bloom smiled and said, ‘that’s your field, Rabbi, not mine.’

The Rabbi smiled thinly, ‘Quite, quite. But the thing is, Mr Bloom, God is really quite specific about idols. Second commandment, you know. No other gods before me. Make for yourself no graven image. It’s really very clear.’

Mr Bloom nodded slowly.

‘I don’t see how you can say that you “worship” a statue and still keep your place on the synagogue board, you see, Mr Bloom. I don’t see how we can keep on letting you attend the synagogue at all.’

Mr Bloom said, mildly, ‘But I still keep the laws. I still pray to God. I’m still a Jew.’

And the Rabbi spread his hands wide and smiled nervously and shook his head and said: ‘Ah, but “I the Lord your God am a jealous God,” you know.’

Mr Bloom thought of Ganesha, his wide, kind eyes, his welcoming arms. ‘If God is so great,’ he said, ‘why is he jealous? I thought we weren’t supposed to covet.’

And the Rabbi’s face darkened, and he said: ‘I can see we will have to talk further about this, Mr Bloom.’

And on the third day, Mr Bloom received another telephone call. It was in the early morning; Mr Bloom’s shop was not due to open for another hour. The Rabbi apologized for calling so early and said: ‘Mr Bloom. I have thought a great deal about what you have said. I think I should see the statue for myself. I wonder if you would be able to bring it here, to the synagogue, this morning? I think that the whole matter could be resolved if you would bring the statue here.’

Mr Bloom agreed that he would do so. He had, after all, benefited a great deal from the synagogue and its Rabbis. He was still a Jew. Whatever arguments the Rabbi might wish to muster, he, Bloom, felt honour-bound to hear out.

Mr Bloom wrapped Ganesha in a soft blanket and placed him into a sturdy holdall. As he did so, he caressed the curled trunk reverently. He wondered if, like the prophet Elisha, the Rabbi intended to challenge Ganesha to a duel with the Almighty, Lord of Hosts. He was intrigued to see which god would prevail.

The Rabbi was waiting for Mr Bloom at the synagogue gates. The building was old and respectable. Constructed in the 1920s, its solid bricks had housed generations of prayer, of lamentation and of joyful song. The Rabbi led Mr Bloom through the corridors of the synagogue, not into the main prayer hall, but up via a winding cedar-scented staircase to the choir stalls, perched high above the Holy Closet in which the scrolls of the Torah reside. From here they could look across the ranged ranks of seats in the synagogue, those same seats which filled every Friday and Saturday with hundreds of Jews, come to worship the one and only God.

The Rabbi threw the windows at the back of the choir stalls open, inhaled deeply several times and then turned to Mr Bloom. 'Have you brought the idol?' he asked. Mr Bloom noticed that the Rabbi, too, seemed stronger and less nervous.

Mr Bloom nodded.

'Show him to me,' said the Rabbi.

Mr Bloom withdrew the god from the holdall, unwrapped the soft blanket and held him gently. He thought that perhaps the god was heavier now than when he had bought him.

The Rabbi's nose wrinkled in disgust. 'Do you not know, Mr Bloom, that this thing was made by men? That it is only china and paint? How can you give your worship to something that you could construct yourself?'

Mr Bloom shrugged. It seemed impossible to explain if the Rabbi could not understand it. At last, in an attempt to answer, he said: 'I followed my heart and my eyes,' but thought that this did not explain one tenth of what he hoped to communicate.

The Rabbi looked at Mr Bloom for a long moment. Then, with a little smile, he tugged on Mr Bloom's arm and brought him to stand by the window too. The synagogue is at the top of a rise, and the whole of Hendon can be seen from its windows, if one is able to peer through the stained glass.

'Mr Bloom,' said the Rabbi, 'I hope you know that God loves you.'

Bloom nodded silently. He gazed upon the contemplative and peaceful face of Ganesha.

'I have never encountered a case such as this,' said the Rabbi. 'I had to consult with the most senior authorities for a ruling.'

Bloom nodded again.

'They were of one mind. You must understand, Mr Bloom, that this is for your own good,' said the Rabbi. Then, in one fluid motion, too quickly for Mr Bloom to react, the Rabbi grabbed Ganesha from Mr Bloom's hands. He held him for a moment, clutching the god close to his body in an almost protective gesture and then hurled him in a wide arc through the synagogue window. With a crisply crunching report, Ganesha smashed into a thousand pieces on the paved area below.

'Now, Mr Bloom,' said the Rabbi beaming, 'don't you feel better, rid of that revolting thing?'

Bloom said nothing. He stared down at the paved courtyard of the synagogue, where bright pink and gold fragments radiated from the central point of impact. At length, he allowed the Rabbi to lead him away from the window and back to his own home.

Late that night, Mr Bloom – who had been synagogue treasurer for many years and remained a keyholder of the building – silently let himself in through the iron gate of the courtyard. He had brought a fine-haired clothesbrush and a carved wooden box from his living room, along with a bag slung over his shoulder containing one or two other, heavier items. Slowly, working in circles, he brushed the dust of Ganesha into the box and, when he

was finished, dug a small hole in one of the ornamental flower beds and buried it. He wondered if he should say a few words over the grave, but could think of none that might be appropriate.

Then, still moving without sound, he opened the door to the main building of the synagogue and slipped through. He had rarely been in this vaulted space alone at night, and never without a specific and necessary errand. He paused now, thinking of the many hours of quiet contemplation this place had afforded him, of the services he had heard intoned here, of the comradely chats, the bustling ceremonial, the joyful celebrations and the sombre days. The next morning, the synagogue officials were startled to find the building not only locked but its locks stuffed with wax. Fearing the worst, they called a locksmith who, after some effort, managed to remove the locks bodily from the doors. The officials – and, by now, a small crowd who had heard that something might be going on at the synagogue – entered and looked around with horror.

The synagogue was ruined. The benches were smashed, the drapery torn, the candlesticks twisted, the windows broken. And in the centre was Mr Bloom, standing with an axe by his side and perspiration soaking through his clothes.

And they said, ‘Why have you done this thing?’

And he said, ‘I? I? I did not do this. This was done by the Almighty.’

And they looked around again at the benches with the axe-shaped cuts deeply incised into them, and at the places where the upholstery had been ripped out in quantities the size of a man’s hand.

And they said, ‘God did not do this! God cannot destroy in this way.’

And he said, ‘Then why do you worship Him?’

But it is not recorded whether the people were grateful for this enlightenment.