The Book Peddler

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The Book Peddler

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Chapter 1

I had been planning on riding the train all the way to Coney Island, but I looked down at Southern Brooklyn from the elevated track and found myself getting off a few stops north of Coney, at the Sheepshead Bay station. This was the first time I’d gotten off there in close to ten years.

An old Hassidic man walked down the station steps in front of me. His body was hunched so that his long beard came almost to the sash of his black gabardine, which itself came almost down to the floor. He held the railing tight
with his right hand, and took half a step at a time, shuffling from the center to the edge before dropping down to the next one.

I moved at the old man’s pace, not trying to dart past him, not scowling or grunting in complaint. I felt like a good person, waiting, like I was being handed down a small set of commandments in the form of the man’s gait, and was doing my duty by complying.

When we got down to street level, I had an impulse to grab the man by the shoulders and shake him, to let him know I’d guarded him the whole way down. If a crowd had wanted to knock him down the steps, they would have had to get through me first. I didn’t live correctly by halachic standards, or really any reasonable standards, but I had a real Hassidic fire in my soul. I feared the Lord, longed for the coming of Moshiach. My patience should be recognized.

I didn’t act on the impulse. The old graybeard tottered off his own way, to attend to only the Lord knows what business, and I turned south, towards the water.

It took me a minute to get my bearings, but I remembered that Sheepshead Bay Avenue curved down towards the bay itself. All I had to do was trust in the path and it would lead me there. I passed a sushi restaurant that had not been there before, and an Irish pub that had always been there. Just under the exit ramp from Shore Parkway, there was a small side street, also called Shore Parkway. This is where my father had lived. I peeked down the street, hesitantly. His building was gone. This was a relief to me. In its place was a newer building, a box coated in lumpy plaster, with blue trim and shiny railings on the narrow
balconies that faced the exit ramp. Even back in the mid-‘90s, when I used to come to stay with my father in his little walk-up apartment, developers had been starting to build this type of building in the area, but they had not yet found their way back into my father’s little nook of a block.

I walked down Emmons, along the bay. I saw the ducks and the swans and remembered bribing their forefathers into friendship with bits of stale rye bread. I’d always loved the bay. It connected to the ocean, and the whole wide world of adventure and chaos, but as it was squared off against the avenue, it still held the safety and domestic comfort of a Brooklyn block.

I noticed strange things sticking out of the trees down past the flat end of the bay. Bits of steel and brick, it looked liked. I couldn’t figure out what they could be. I didn’t worry about it too much. Brooklyn was full of things that did not make sense and were not explained; this was part of the reason it had been such a source of wonder and terror to me as a kid.

Beside and below me, those ducks and the swans swam together. There was no problem. There was plenty of food for all, even though most of the food was just garbage. I passed a guy fishing. He had two big ocean rods and a little five-foot fresh water rod, all three propped against the railing, their lines stretched taut out into the water. He sat behind them in his low beach chair, drinking from a carton of orange juice and smiling. I nodded at him, because I wanted to be part of the situation. He nodded back.

Two old men sat on a bench, debating in Russian. They spoke slowly, considering their arguments, and I was able to make out the gist of the discussion.
There was a government conspiracy to fill in the bay with cement, on that point they were in agreement. One of them said that it would happen any day now; the other contended that the project would be held up with bureaucracy for years.

I realized that what I was walking towards at the end of the bay was the Holocaust monument. Holocaust Memorial Park had not been completed when my father lived down here. The local Jews were still arguing then about the details of its construction. My father had agreed with a popular sentiment in the neighborhood: it was wrong for the city to try to include the Roma in the monument’s lengthy text. Why should the Jews be disgraced by having to share their history with some damn Gypsies?

When I got close, the details came into focus. Oversized strands of fake razor wire threaded around a spiraled column. The column was made to look like the bombed-out ruins of something old and brick, but was clearly one piece freshly molded out of red cement. Around the top, I read the word “remember” in English and Hebrew and Russian. Presumably the Yiddish word said the same thing. When I got through the trees, I could make out dozens of small black gravestones snaked in rows through the park, each bearing the story of some atrocity or death camp or partisan leader, in whichever of the four languages the donor had felt most comfortable. Little round stones rested on top of some.

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My mother, sister and I had been out in Nassau County for about a year and a half when my dad came back into my life. I had just turned eleven. My stepfather, Bernie, had taken me and some of the guys from my class to the batting cages for my birthday. We had not seen Al for two years. The last time was at our old apartment on East 92nd St. in the city, where we lived before we came to live with Bernie in his big Long Island house. Neither my mother nor my sister mentioned my father, and so I didn’t either. My sister and I had received a few postcards from places like St. Louis and Las Vegas when we still lived in Manhattan. He wasn’t much for writing, a few words here and there, but he filled the backs of the cards with little sketches of him and ourselves. We hadn’t received any since moving out of the city, and it didn’t seem that the postcards had survived the move. Maybe he didn’t know our new address. For long periods I didn’t think of my dad at all. We had Bernie, who was more attentive than many actual fathers, more attentive than Al had ever been, in fact, so there wasn’t a glaring absence.

People where we lived liked to talk about Israel a lot. It seemed to be for them some sort of fantasy world, not quite real, but terribly important, where they were a stronger and purer type of people. The word was spoken with slow reverence, and conversation ceased when the region was mentioned on the news. People walked around fearlessly when they wore their green IDF tee-shirts, as if the thin fabric was bulletproof. They stuffed cash into preprinted envelopes in the belief that it would blossom into trees as soon as it arrived in Eretz Yisrael.
When I heard the word, “Israel,” I saw my father, because he had actually lived and even fought in a war there. He was the only real thing I could associate with the place. But I couldn’t be sure he wasn’t part of the fantasy too.

Bernie called my sister and me into the dining room. We came in to find him and my mother sitting at the table. The dining room was generally reserved for serious business. We ate here on holidays or when we had company; otherwise we sat at the table in the kitchen. The only person who used the room on a regular basis was Bernie, who would spread the files he brought home from the office out on the table in the evening. My mother warned Becca and me against entering the room when Bernie had his files out, for fear that we would disturb one of his carefully sorted piles. She would shout at us if we even made too much noise in another room of the house while he was working, but he himself never complained. He just smiled half a smile, without looking up from the screen of his laptop or the sheets of numbers in front of him.

When Becca and I came into the dining room that day, though, there was nothing on the table except my mother’s mug of tea, and the paper towel she had used to protect the finish of the wood from the heat. The mug was still full to the brim, and the paper towel was shredded into little pieces. Becca and I sat down facing our parents. Were we in trouble? We must have been, because my mother was silent. But I hadn’t done anything.

“And I have been in touch with

“Your mother,” started Bernie. We looked at her, but her grinding fury was terrifying, and we looked back at Bernie. “And I have been in touch with
your father. I should say, he’s gotten in touch with us. He’s back in New York now, in Brooklyn, and he would like to see you kids.”

“You don’t have to see him,” my mother interjected. “Don’t feel bad if you don’t want to. There’s nothing he’s done for you that you need to feel obligated.”

“No,” said Bernie, “You don’t need to feel obligated. You needn’t feel obligated one way or the other. This is a decision you have to make for yourselves. He’s invited you to spend next weekend with him. If you need some time to think about it—”

“I don’t want to go,” said my sister Becca, who was fourteen and getting pretty good at saying things with indifferent confidence. “I’d rather spend the weekend with my friends. It’s Sarah’s sleepover party, and you said I could—”

“That’s fine,” said Bernie.

“I think you made the right decision,” said my Mom. “There’s no reason, considering how well you guys have adjusted, that you need to—”

“I’d like to go,” I said. I didn’t know if this was true or not. But they were dangling something in front of me – something they didn’t really want me to have – and I had to snatch at it. “I’d like to see him.” Becca glared at me, like I’d said it just to spite her. My mother frowned, but nodded in acceptance. Bernie smiled his usual distant smile behind his round glasses and neatly clipped beard.

Bernie was going to drive me into Brooklyn, but he got called in to work. Al, of course, didn’t have a car. My mom made different excuses for why she
couldn’t take me. In the end, Bernie and Al worked it out that I would take the Long Island Rail Road. My mom dropped me off at the station, and Al would meet me at Atlantic Terminal on the other end.

There was no one waiting for me when I got off the train at Atlantic Terminal. I leaned against a pole and listened to my headphones. I had just gotten Tupac’s ‘Me Against The World.’ I was just a kid in Brooklyn, chilling, listening to my headphones. No big deal. I tried to look cool and tough.

I became afraid that he wasn’t going to come. I became sure he wasn’t going to come. He wasn’t going to come. Maybe if Becca was with me, because he couldn’t leave his princessa alone at night. But he wouldn’t come just for me. He had better things to do. Business that came up, that he had to take care of. Maybe he’d never meant to come. Maybe he wasn’t even in the city. Maybe Bernie had misunderstood. Maybe I had misunderstood.

A body flew at me from the shadow. I stuck out my arms in defense, but failed to block the hard jab to my side.

“Getting big, eh there, fella?” My father jabbed me again in the side with his right, faked a third right, then landed a light left to my chest. “Come on, now, fella.” He put his arm around me, and we walked off towards the subway. I was still shaken from his greeting, and chafed at the tightness of his arm around my neck, but the last thing I wanted was for him to let go. I was proud to be walking down the street in Brooklyn with him. Of course he had come.

We didn’t talk too much on the train. He asked me how I was doing, how my sister and mother were doing. I told him they were fine. I was struggling
hard to remember that he was my dad, the same man who had once lived with us, danced with my mother to the radio in the kitchen, and taken us all to Greenpoint on Sundays to eat cheese dumplings and potato pancakes. He wasn’t part of a Middle Eastern fantasy. He was a man, a real man, with strong arms and a little potbelly. He tucked into the Daily News, and I pulled a book from school from my backpack.

We picked up a pepperoni pizza and a two-liter bottle of Coke on the way home from the train station. The only table in Al’s one bedroom apartment was the coffee table. We sat on the couch and ate the pizza straight out of the box. We both drank Coke with ice. My dad poured arak into his. The sweet licorice smell filled the room. Above the couch there was a large black poster, bearing the coat-of-arms-like-logo of the rock band Queen. The only other decorations on the wall were a plastic Israeli flag and an old snapshot of the four of us in Central park, when I was about six and my sister maybe nine. Like the flag, the photo was held on the wall with bits of black electrical tape. When I went into the bathroom to pee, I saw a faded pink bra hanging on the shower curtain rod.

There was hardly any furniture besides the coffee table and couch in the main room, and the bed in his little bedroom (the apartment was not really much smaller than our old two-bedroom in Manhattan, but living on Long Island had already warped my sense of scale) but the two rooms did not feel empty because of the stacks of books everywhere. There were some paperbacks, I think, spilling out of banker’s boxes, but what I remember most were the large hard-covers, which were stacked in piles so dense and high I thought of them as integral
structures, not stacks of individual objects. I asked him if he had read all these books.

“No, no,” he said. “In my life I’ve left behind two entire libraries. I wouldn’t risk another. I read a book and let it go.”

“So what’s all this?”

“This? Merchandise. Got to make money, kiddo. You’ll learn that sometime. Hey, take a look at this.” He pulled out an old leather bound atlas from the middle of the stack and showed me the various places he had lived. I could locate Israel by myself, but wasn’t quite sure where Poland was. It turned out it was tucked in the shadow of the USSR.

My dad had a small TV, which sat on one of the stacks of books, and we watched the TGIF lineup of sitcoms on ABC. I followed the plots, while my dad made comments about the teenage actresses.

“Your girlfriend look anything like that?”

“I don’t have a girlfriend.”

“A good looking guy like you? Not even one girlfriend? I find that very hard to believe.”

After a few shows, and a few more araks for my father, he turned off the TV.

“Look, I know I ain’t been around lately, buddy.”

“OK.” I wished the TV was still on.

“No, it’s not OK. It’s gotta change. It’s gonna change. But fella, listen. It’s never been that I don’t love. I’m father, of course I love. It’s just, I’ve had
my life. You see, I am the wandering Jew of Europe? It’s a curse, maybe. Old story. OK, this is life I’ve had.”

“OK.”

“Izzy, buddy. We’re friends?”

“Sure we’re friends.”

“Becca couldn’t come with you?”

“No. She wanted to. She had to go to her friend’s bat mitzvah.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.”

“Tell her what I tell you.”

“OK.”

“But you and me, fella.”

“Yeah.”

“We’re friends.”

“Yes.”

“Hey, fella, I was thinking, in the morning we go crabbing?”

“What’s crabbing?”

“Like fishing. You know. But for crabs, instead.”

“OK. Sure.” I still didn’t exactly understand what we’d be doing, but I knew that other boys’ fathers took them fishing. “That sounds fun.”
I didn’t wonder where I was when I woke up in my father’s apartment the next morning. I felt no more awkward waking up on father’s couch than I did waking up in my bed out on Long Island.

For breakfast, my father put out slices of black bread. This bread was far denser than the bread I was used to eating, and though it seemed a little stale he didn’t offer to toast it. I vaguely remembered eating bread like this when I was younger, but I’d grown used to eating fluffy grocery store wheat bread. I smeared on lots of butter (at home we were only allowed margarine), and used all the muscles in my throat to choke the morsels down.

When we were ready to go, he hoisted a sack of gear onto his back, and handed me an empty cooler to carry.

“What about the rods?” I asked.

“Rods?”

“We’re going, like, fishing. Right?”

“No rods, fella. For crabs you use traps.” He tapped his pack.

We walked down the Coney Island boardwalk. I’d been there a few times with my family, but only in the afternoon. Families didn’t hang around Coney after dark back then. Now, in the early morning, it was pretty much deserted, aside from a few old Russian women who looked like they were rushing even though they were strolling, a shirtless man drinking a can of beer, and some homeless people who’d crawled out from under the boardwalk, squinting at the sunlight.
We turned off the boardwalk and up the T-shaped fishing pier that stretched much further out into the Atlantic Ocean than I could swim then, or can now. A pile of break rocks extended out from the shore, parallel to the pier, and we stopped just across from where they ended.

“Here,” said Al, kneeling down to reach into his backpack. He pulled out two hooped wire baskets, and a greasy brown paper bag.

“What’s in there?”

“Chicken necks.” He showed me the yellow grey lump of bumps before he began fastening it to the bottom of one of the baskets with a piece of twine.

“Those are the real necks of chickens?”

“Of course.”

“Where did you get them?”

“Butcher shop. Where else? It’s good crab bait. Cheap meat. Crabs are bottom feeders. They love this kinds of meat.” He scored the necks with his pocketknife, so that the yellow skin separated and the pink flesh was exposed.

“Do people eat them?”

“Sure, if they’re hungry. You eat chicken, don’t you?”

“Yeah, chicken wings. Not chicken necks. People cook them up like chicken wings?”

“No, there’s not so much meat for that. It’s more for a stew. Listen, trust me, if you’re hungry enough, you’d be happy to eat chicken neck stew. Maybe even today you’ll find this out, if we don’t catch any crabs.” My face must have betrayed my fear, because Al let out a deep laugh.
He tied the baskets onto some braided lines, and tied the other ends of the line onto the railing of the pier. The rail was full of grooves worn by similar lines, which made me think that what we were doing wasn’t so strange.

Al showed me how to toss the trap out over the water like a Frisbee. The baskets opened fully in the air, then fell straight into the water. We gave it a couple minutes to give the crabs time to smell the bait. When we finally pulled the baskets up, I felt sure that I felt the weight of crabs in mine, but as soon as the basket rose into the air I realized that it had just been the pressure of the water.

We threw the baskets back in. In the distance, there was a big boat, stacked high with different colored shipping containers. Beyond that, I could make out a distant coastline.

“What’s that out there?”

“There? A boat.”

“No, not that, the land. Is that New Jersey?”

“No. Staten Island. Still New York City.”

“Oh. So can you swim there?”

“Me? Sure I can.”

We pulled the traps in again, and to my delight there was a crab in my trap. I hadn’t actually believed that we would catch anything. It was a terrible thing we caught, with wart like growths and splotches of mud across its uneven shell.

“Look! Dad! I caught one!”
“Yeah, so I see. Or maybe it caught you? But it’s just a spider crab. No good for eating.” He took the trap from me and turned it upside down, shaking it until the crab fell back into the ocean. I felt a little cheated of my catch, but at the same time was happy to see the thing gone.

Next throw, we pulled up a couple spider crabs each. Al dumped them on the pier and kicked them hard, so that they skidded across to the other side. He walked over and kicked them again, booting them far out into the water. I understood why he did it. They were ugly, and deserved to be kicked.

“We don’t want them on same side as us,” he told me. “They’ll keep coming back now that they know about the bait.”

We moved farther out on the pier, and our luck changed. My father pulled in two rock crabs. They were about the same size as the smaller of the spider crabs, but they had smooth backs, and looked altogether more sanitary. After that, we started pulling them in left and right. “This is the spot,” my father said. Not counting four we threw back because they were too small, and one we threw back because it was pregnant (you could see its bloated egg sac hanging from its underside) we ended up with thirteen crabs. Five of them I hauled in myself. Not bad.

At one point, my dad, who had been sipping from his thermos all morning, went off to take a piss in the rest room on the boardwalk, and left me to watch our crabs. Now that we had moved farther out on the pier, we were close to the old men who had been out fishing when we arrived. Two of them sat across the pier from me on plastic crates, and passed a small bottle of something purplish back
and forth. Their long fishing poles were propped up against the railing. I wondered how they would know if there was a fish on the line. One of the men caught me watching. He gave me what would have been a toothy grin if he’d had any teeth, and raised his bottle in a mocking toast. He had a long filet knife stuck in his belt. It looked like a fearsome dagger that could cut me wide open. I was scared, but then I remembered that my father would be coming back any moment.

On the ride back to his apartment, I sat with the Styrofoam container on my lap. I couldn’t believe that I had a box full of wild sea creatures with me on the train, and I kept lifting the lid to look at them, until my father told me to stop.

When we got back to his apartment, he took the cooler from me and dumped the crabs into his empty bathtub. A few of them landed on their backs. My father found a flat screwdriver on the windowsill, and flipped those ones right side up. A few more adventurous crabs scuttled across the floor of the bathtub. The rest sat where they landed, flicking their little mouths and occasionally flexing their pinchers. One didn’t seem to be moving at all. My father jabbed it with the screwdriver. Its little mouth moved, and some bubbles flitted through the little bit of stagnant water pooled in the bathtub. They were alive. Life was the opposite of death. That they were really alive meant that we were really going to make them dead. A stream of liquid trailed behind one of the scuttlers.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“It’s shit. You don’t know shit when you see it? That’s something you’re going to have to learn, you want to get by in this world.”
Al turned on the faucet, washing the shit and sand down the drain. When they were clean, he grabbed them one by one by the back legs, and tossed them into a paper grocery bag. We went into the kitchen, where he put the bag into the freezer.

Al put his one pot on the stove, and twisted together a long tinfoil spiral.

“What’s that?”

“A rack. To hold the crabs.”

He cracked a twenty-ounce beer from the fridge, took a good long swig, then poured the rest into the pot.

“Why did you pour that in there?” I asked.

“We’re going to steam the crabs in the lager.”

“I’m just a kid, I can’t have beer.”

“Feh. Already I was drinking beer when I was your age. Besides, the alcohol boils off.”

“Oh. So can I have a sip of the beer?”

“No.”

He took the bag of crabs out of the freezer, and dumped them into the pot. I peeked in. They weren’t moving.

“Are they dead?”

“No, no. You can’t cook dead crab. Bacteria. They are just stunned, slowed down from the freezing.”

“So we’re going to eat them alive?”

“No, of course not. They will die in the steam.”
“I don’t think I want to eat a crab.”

“What? We go to the trouble of catching nice crabs all morning, and you don’t even want to eat them?”

“I don’t, I don’t think so.”

“Look at the rich American boy, so soft, so picky. So pechech. Maybe you’d prefer lobster? Well, fine then, more crab for me.”

“Listen, I don’t want lobster either.” I reached for any justification other than the fact that I was a pussy. “People can’t eat shellfish.”

“Oh, can’t they?”

“I mean, shouldn’t. It’s wrong?”

“Where did you hear that?”

“At the synagogue.”

“What synagogue? Who took you to the synagogue?”

“Bernie.”

“Who’s Bernie. Nu?”

“You know who Bernie is. My stepfather.”

“No. Wrong. Stepfather? Feh. What’s that? He’s your mother’s husband.”

“OK.”

“I’m the only kind of father you got.”

“I know.”

“You know this?”

“Yes.”
“Good. It’s good that you know.” He turned on the burner. The beer began to boil. Soon the crabs would die a hard death in the pot. I took a deep breath. It was ok. I went into the cabinet, found some plates and silverware and began to set the table.

“So you’ll be doing the honor of sharing the meal with me?”

“Yes.”

The crabs were surely dying now. Soon they would be dead and cooked. My father and I would crack them open with butter knives and eat their flesh with desert forks. The meat would be the richest thing I’d ever had in my stomach, and bits of sand we had not managed to wash off would grind down my teeth. The crabs were dead, but I was alive and my father was alive, and we were together. If the crabs had to die to make this happen, then so be it.

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Chapter 2

I thought about walking back to the Sheepshead Bay Station and taking the same ride my dad and I did that day, but I decided to walk the rest of the way instead. I made my way down through Brighton Beach, stopping to buy pirozokh stuffed with cabbage off a folding table outside a grocery store. I didn’t know my way around the area too well, but as long as I could keep straight in my mind where the ocean was, I would be okay. Once I got to the shore, it was a straight shot. I walked west on the boardwalk, following past the Aquarium and along through Coney Island proper, all the way up to that old fishing pier. I looked out. No one was crabbing. It was a little late in the day for that. I turned off the boardwalk at W. 18th St., and walked up until I found the address I had been looking for.

I was a bit taken aback; I’d been expecting a residence of some sort, or maybe a shoe shop with pocketknives and refurbished radios in the window, but certainly not a museum. The building had in fact been a tenement once, but the windows had since been bricked over, and the whole structure painted black. Above the door was bolted a sign that read, in hand-painted letters: ‘The R. Galuth Museum.’

I double-checked the return address on the envelope in my pocket: 2871 W. 18th St. There was no need; the fact of the matter was, I’d read the letter so many times that I knew the entire thing by heart, including the address:
Dear Mrs. Edel –

I am writing you to sadly inform you of the recent death of Alojy Edel.

I have known the Alojy for many years, and it was a great tragedy, his passing.

I thought you may want to know of this occurrence, both for the sake of sentimentality as you were once his wife, and also for the fact that there may be issues of estate or outstanding debts or accounts which you feel obligated to settle.

Do not hesitate to write to me if you have questions on these issues.

Yours and truly,

Mr. Semyon Goldov

This was the place I was looking for. I climbed the two cement steps, took a deep breath, and rang the doorbell.

At first I thought no one was coming. I was relieved and turned to walk away. Then I heard footsteps and heavy breathing through the closed door. I could feel myself being scrutinized through the peephole. The door opened.

“Welcome to the Galuth Museum!” The pale skin of my greeter’s wrinkled face – wrinkled, you could tell, more from worry and torment than from age – was overshadowed by the orange and purple streaks of his acrylic sweater. The few words he’d spoken were enough to catch a scent of Eastern Europe. This was the right man. This was Goldov. He stepped aside so I could enter the museum.

The walls had been knocked out, so that the bottom floor was one wide-open space. There were no windows, and the electric light was not quite adequate to properly illuminate the framed pictures that circled the room at eyelevel. The
proprietor drew my attention to a plexi-glass box mounted next to the door. I put in a five-dollar bill. Though it pained me to see it go, I wanted to get off on the right foot.

We started our tour to the right of the donation box, with an old black and white snapshot that had been blown up beyond recognition, and adhered to another piece of plexi-glass.

“This, here, is the only known photograph of R. Galuth.” I squinted. I could see how maybe it was a picture of a slim young man, wearing a suit and hat. “Very little is known of the life of Galuth, one of the most illustrious painters of the 1930s.” Goldov seemed to be reciting a memorized script. “We know that he arrived in New York City from Europe in the mid-1920s, and that he apparently returned there in 1939. Nothing more was heard from him. Presumably, like so many great artists, he was killed by the Nazis.

“His home, for much of the period he spent in America, was this very house. Very few of his paintings survived, but almost of all of the ones that have are collected in this museum.

“Over here, we have one such painting.” I followed the him down the wall. “The Sea Beach Line. It depicts an unfortunate but true-to-life incident, in which goons hired by the Sea Beach Line Company to eject fare evaders. They murdered innocent passengers by throwing them from an elevated portion of the line.”

“It’s a very beautiful painting,” I said. It was a New York street scene, a whole world in one intersection. The old elevated tracks slashed across a purple
evening sky. Cruel faces peered from the open windows of the stalled, rust-colored train car. A young woman, tangled in her green skirt and half-unraveled braid, hovered in the air. There was something angelic about her, and you hoped that she was ascending, but the force of gravity in the painting was too strong to ignore. The individuals in the gathered crowd – each one a full portrait– looked upward, unable to save her. Their long backs stretched up from the bottom of the canvas, and as a viewer you became one of them, fighting to push yourself forward through the crowd, too get a better view of the girl in that last moment before she’d die. A boy in knickers picked a man’s overcoat pocket, but the personal victory did not exempt him from his share of the collective pain.

“Yes,” Goldov agreed. “Very beautiful. If you notice, even the expression on the face of this goon, this murderer, if you look at his eyes–“

“Listen,” I interrupted. I didn’t want to make eye contact with a long-dead thug. I had come here to try to make contact with a much more recently deceased thug. “Thank you for showing me this, but I didn’t come down here to see the museum. I, actually, I came for something else…”

“Oh and what’s that? You came for rollercoaster, maybe? It’s down off the boardwalk. You can’t miss it.”

“Ha, but no, actually… you see, Mr. Goldov…” He tightened up at the mention of his name. I saw his hands become fists at his side.

“Alright, mister, spit it out! What is it you want? Who sent you?”
I tried to smile, to show him that I came in good faith, in friendship, but I have a strange lean face, and when I try to look friendly I just end up looking creepy.

“My name is Izzy – Izzy Edel.” The hand I had stuck out in greeting hung in the air. We both looked at it. I took it back.

“My mother received a letter from you. About my father’s death. Alojzy Edel.”

“You? A slim thing like you? You, coming into my museum in your button shirt, are the son of Ally Edel? Is that not a thing!”

“Well, now, I’ve lived a different life than he led...”

“This I don’t doubt.” We stared at each other. “You know, Ally stole from me eight-thousand dollars, once.”

“I’m... I’m very sorry. I’m afraid that’s not a debt I myself will be able to make up to you... In fact, I’m sure if you added up all the child support he owed me...”

“Feh!” The man waved away my comments with his right hand, then waved me up the stairs with his left.

There were far more canvases upstairs than there were in the gallery. They were stacked all around, leaning together in both orderly and not so orderly piles. One, mostly blank, canvas stood on an easel by the window. Empty acrylic tubes littered every surface, and brushes stood upright in jars of turpentine. This was Goldov’s studio. In the corner was a bed.
“Goverish po Rusky?” he asked hopefully as he turned on his electric teakettle, which sat on the windowsill next to a hotplate and a small radio, all three of which were connected to the same rat’s nest of an electrical outlet.

“Da,” I said. “Goveroo chut chut.” My three and a half semesters’ worth of college Russian were totally insufficient for the conversation I wanted to have, but I hate to admit I don’t know things. I’d only started studying Russian in the first place because the school didn’t offer Polish. My accent was unconvincing, because when he spoke next, to offer me a seat, he did so in English.

“These are your paintings?” I asked him. I had to say something about them; they surrounded us. They were abstract expressionist in style, almost to the point of parody. The disordered thoughts of a frustrated man congealed into acrylic globs. I surmised that the materials were chosen because the old man could not afford oil paints in the quantities he desired. The paintings might not have appeared so terrible to me if the Galuth painting I’d just seen down in the gallery weren’t still haunting my mind, creating an unfavorable comparison.

“Yes, yes. My life’s work. Feh! You know, in Russia, all I ever wanted was to be free to be an artist. I was kicked out of the academy, in Leningrad, you know, for ‘abstractions indicative of a bourgeois nature.’ And I always knew… if I would make it to the West, my creativity would flower. Such a scene I would make. I come here, I learn, they let you do whatever you want, because it’s nobody that will care.”

The timer on the kettle buzzed. Goldov stood up and placed tea bags in two glasses, which he then filled with water.
“Would you like jam for your tea? I’m sorry I have no lemon.” He pulled a half-full plastic tray from a box of orange cream cookies and placed it on the table. “I don’t entertain so often.”

“No, thank you. It’s fine like this.” He shrugged, then sat down and began to spoon jam into his own glass.

“You know, your father studied art back there too. That was one of the things him and me had in common.”

“In Russia?”

“No, Poland. But same thing. Communism. He studied at the academy in Warsaw. That was a typical move on his part, to be born a Jew in Poland, after the war. A Russian Jew in New York, that’s nothing special. Kok sebak ni riezniak. But to be a Jew from Poland, in modern times…. typical Edel. Always had to do things the wiseass way. No, we didn’t study together. I just meant that we both possessed a solid appreciation of art, despite having had a solid socialist art education inflicted on us.”

“Oh. I see.” I smiled, to show him I understood about the socialist art.

“That was the nature of our business together, you know. We sold art books, on the street in Manhattan. There is money in that. Art books are not cheap. People in lower Manhattan are mostly not poor. There was plenty of business.

“We were partners in that endeavor. Business partners. Until he stole our money and left town.” Goldov’s face became to contort into something ugly.

“I’m very sorry that that happened.” I didn’t doubt that it was true.
“Why should you be sorry? You didn’t do anything.”

“That’s true. I just mean. He was my father.”

“Your father. Yes. Ladna. I don’t hear from him again for almost two years. The next thing I do hear, he’s in jail in Las Vegas. Passing bad checks, I believe. He described it as just a misunderstanding. He needed bail money.” The old painter sighed, then chased the sigh with a gulp of tea. “I sent him the money.”

“Why did you do that?”

“Huh? Why?”

“Yeah. Why did you send him bail money, if he’d already robbed you?”

“Oh. I wish I knew. Thing is, your father was, to me, like a drug. The best and worst friend ever I had. A bad habit. I could never shake him. Besides, I thought maybe he’d still pay me back someday.

“Well, he’s shook now. Gone. I’m very sorry. I heard it as a rumor, then talked to a man who knew. Another bookseller, name of Mendy. I remembered your mother’s name – lucky she didn’t change it when she remarried – and the lady at the library helped me find her on the internet. We found her crafts internet page – the candles she makes look very nice, by the way – and I sent a postcard to the address listed on the page.

“I felt I should let your family know. My condolences.”

“Thank you. Is there anything else you could maybe tell me about my father?”
“Anything about Ally? Let’s see. I don’t know. He could charm any woman. I saw him one time chatting up a nun. She blushed, but she listened. People didn’t walk away from Ally Edel. I don’t know. He carried himself fearsomely sometimes… he could be very intimidating. Which was great for me! I’m just an artist, a frail Jewboy. Ha. It was good to have a man like that with me on the street. He was not a guy who took any guff.”

“Do you know how he died, exactly?”

“No, no, I am afraid not.”

“Not even some idea?” The man held up his arms in a helpless shrug.

“Or where he’s buried?”

“The potter’s field on Hart Island, I imagine. That’s where I’ll be going.”

“Yes, I guess so. Do you know where he was living before he died?”

“No, I’m sorry.

“Something…”

“Nothing. I had not seen him in a long time. We weren’t on such good terms. Now and then, I did see him, but there was the money problem between us, always, so that kept him from letting me get a hook in too much. The last time I saw him, he called me up, said he wanted to talk bout the money he owed me, maybe paying some of it back. When we met up, well, of course he didn’t have the money. All he had was excuses. I don’t know what it was he wanted from that meeting. He didn’t have to call me in the first place. It didn’t make any sense. I left him there on the bench.
“No, I’m sorry. I’ve nothing else for you, I’m afraid. Maybe Mendy knows something more.”

“Is there a telephone number where I could reach him? This Mendy? Or an address maybe?"

“No.” Goldov shook his head. “No telephone. And I’m not knowing his address. But he sells on West Fourth Street in Manhattan, by the Southwest corner park there. He’s out on the street most days, providing it doesn’t rain.”

I walked down Mermaid Avenue to the Stilwell Avenue Station. The terminal is the last stop for four train lines. There’s always a train there, and they all go to Manhattan. As I sat waiting for the doors of the Q train to close, I found myself thinking again about that good period, which had lasted nearly two years – from when I was eleven to when I was thirteen – when my dad had had lived at that apartment in Sheepshead Bay. We spent a lot of time waiting for these doors to close. We could have taken the B36 bus home to his apartment just as easy, but my father preferred the train. Trains were one of the things he respected.

He was very clear in my mind, as the Q began to move back towards Manhattan, but I couldn’t be sure how much was the environment bringing back my own memories, and how much it was me assimilating Goldov’s memory. I didn’t want to mix up my own image of him with one painted by the failed artist. My own memories were so fragile, I didn’t know that they could withstand too much cross-contamination.

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Chapter 3

It was getting on towards evening by the time I made it back to my sister’s apartment on the Upper East Side. It was a newer, doorman building by the water in the East Eighties, and though it was only about fifteen blocks from the walk-up apartment where Becca and I had lived as young kids, it was very foreign to me. Getting through the years on Long Island had always felt like something of a trick; I spent eight years waiting for them all to figure out I didn’t belong.

Becca’s building aroused in me an even more concentrated version of the same feeling. I tried my best to pass the shibboleth of saying hello to the gold-epiletted doorman in a superior tone; he would take deference for weakness and pounce. I held my head up high as I walked to the elevator, for fear that if my shoulders slouched for a moment, I would feel his hands on them.

It was a bit past six o’clock, but my sister and her fiancé generally worked pretty late into the evening – she was a junior executive at a credit card company, and he managed a hedge fund – so I had the apartment to myself.

I decided to make myself a macaroni salad. Macaroni salad was my favorite food, the only one I liked, really. Whenever I used to get a sandwich platter at a deli, I would savor the macaroni salad and maybe the pickle, but rarely finished the whole sandwich. My mom would bitch that I was throwing away Bernie’s money when I threw away quarter eaten sandwiches, but it took me a while before I realized that I could just order a whole container of nothing but
macaroni salad. They give it to you in clear plastic containers, the same size and shape as what cream cheese comes in.

I was nineteen before it occurred to me I could make the damn stuff myself. Only through making it myself did I come to realize that there were different tastes coming from the different ingredients. The reason I liked the macaroni better at some places than others was not inexplicable: it was simply a matter of did they use enough vinegar to balance out the sweet and creamy mayonnaise base. Also, it helped if there were little pieces of good red pepper.

By now, I had it down to a science. While the macaroni boiled, I prepared the fixings, grating the carrots and chopping the pickles and of course red pepper. When the macaroni was nice and soft, I drained it in the colander, then poured it into bowl. I put mayonnaise in fast, so the macaroni didn’t clump up. I mixed in the fixings, and poured it some pickle juice. I was careful to leave enough brine in the jar that the remaining pickles didn’t dry out. The pickles were Becca’s. I felt like a mooch living in her apartment, even though she said it was fine, and I made sure to keep my own supply of pasta, peppers, and carrots. I figured it was okay to use her pickles and mayonnaise though, because that was just using some condiments from a jar, it wasn’t really eating her food. The fact of the matter was that I was scared to take as much pickle brine as I needed to make the salad taste right, so I supplemented it with a good amount of white vinegar. That was hers too, but it was a big container and I don’t know that I ever saw her take it out of the cabinet herself.
After I ate, I made a cup of tea (my teabags, her honey), settled into Becca’s big leather armchair, and tucked into a paperback I had borrowed from Bernie's shelf before I left New Mexico. The picture on the cover, of a young man with a yarmulke and payis, swinging a scimitar above his head, had caught my eye. “The Yeshiva Bocher,” the cover read, “The rediscovered treasure of Benjamin IV.” I asked Bernie if it was worth reading. He shrugged and said, "It's a book. I suppose it's on my shelf for a reason. Before Benjamin IV was Benjamin III, but that was just a character." I didn't try to get anything else out of him. The truth was, Bernie hardly spoke at all anymore, unless prompted. During the day he worked in his home office, dissecting files for clients back in New York. Evenings, he sat on the back patio and read mystery novels from his childhood and before, or occasionally a book of Jewish history. Weekends, he drove my mother to craft fairs in hippie towns throughout the Southwest where she sold her candles.

The paperback was a 1963 Jewish Publication Society translation from the original Yiddish. According to the blurb on the back, the author – whose real identity was not known – published three books in Warsaw under the pen name of Benjamin the Fourth, between 1926 and 1938. The Yeshiva Bocher was the only one that survived.

It told the story of a cocky young Yeshiva student who spends a shabbos dinner at the house of his rabbi. The rabbi has another guest, a visiting Torah master. The student has too much wine to drink and steps outside to take a leak. On his way back to the house he is swept up by the Tsar’s Army and taken off to
fight in the Crimean war. He serves for several years, becoming an expert rifleman. He kills twenty Englishmen, and just as many as Frenchman, though some of those may have actually been Sardinians. By the time he has killed his fifth man, he has forgotten every word of Aramaic. By the time he has killed his tenth man, he has forgotten every word of Hebrew. By the time he has killed his twentieth man, he has forgotten every word of Yiddish.

On the journey back to Russia, he is captured by Black Sea privateers, and sold to the Turks as a slave. He works his way up from the quarry to a position in the Palace, where he seduces an Ottoman princess, who frees him so he can become her husband. A woman like that cannot be trusted, though. She betrays him in their sixth year of marriage, and plots with her Azeri lover to kill him.

He escapes at the last moment, switching his poisoned wine for his wife’s untainted glass, and takes to wandering. The one-time Yeshiva Bocher, now well into his fourth decade, was walking down the road towards Isfahan when I heard the key in the lock. I glanced at the digital display on Becca’s DVD player. 9:33 pm. My eyes went to my own keys, which were splayed out on the counter. My sister would freak out when she saw them. It was her belief that placing keys on counters scratched up the counter. She would, shrieking, grab a coaster to shove between the keys and the counter. I had tried to explain to her that even if placing the keys on the counter could scratch the finish, a coaster wouldn’t make a difference once the keys were still. It was no use. Her house, her conception of reality. I had remembered to wash all the dishes I’d used before she came home, but had forgotten to move my keys.
It wasn’t my sister, just her fiancé Andrew who came through the door. He had a place of his own down in Hell’s Kitchen, but he slept over with Becca most nights, so I wasn’t too surprised to see him. He’d taken off his tie, and the complicated collar of his striped shit was unbuttoned. There was something slightly sweaty and crumpled about him, but it was hard to pin down because he walked in the door standing up straight, like always. The man had magnificent posture, as well as a great physique, which his closely tailored suits made clear. He blinked twice when he saw me, then grinned.

“Hey there, Big Edel.”

“Hello, Andrew.” His buddies all called him “Wolfy” – his last name was Wolfson – and sometimes they even made a little howl when they greeted him, but I could never bring myself to call him anything but Andrew. He swung his briefcase and a black plastic bag up onto the kitchen counter, and extracted a six-pack of imported beer from the latter.

“Brew?” He tipped a barrel-shaped bottle my way.

“Oh, no, I’m OK.”

“Sure?”

“Well, actually, why not.” He tossed me the beer, which I caught with two hands. Andrew grimaced involuntarily, and I knew that my catch had been overwrought and embarrassing. Maybe I had closed my eyes. I just didn’t want to drop it, and get beer and broken glass all over Becca’s wood floor.

Andrew became aware of his grimace, and forced it back to a grin. He wasn’t such a bad guy. He tried his best. I knew that the same traits he found
alluring in Becca – a slight, boyish frame, soft brown eyes that never met anyone else’s, a general refusal to laugh at good natured jokes – he found simply off-putting in me. Still, he tried to treat me in a big-brotherly way, because I was his girl’s little brother.

“How was work?” I asked him. The beer had been a nice gesture, and I wanted to meet it with one of my own.

“Rough.”

“Yeah?”

“They’re gunning for me. I mean, some of these guys are really gunning for me. It’s a cutthroat business.” I wasn’t exactly sure what business he was in. A hedge fund involved funds. Finance, I guessed. But not stocks. Something different. “But I can hold my own.”

“Sure you can, man.”

“Yeah. Yes, sir. It’s a lot of stone-cold bastards out there, though.”

“It’s true. I see them everywhere I go.”

Andrew coughed out a chuckle. It was genuine, but I couldn’t tell if it was directed at me or at the bastards “Yeah, I bet you do.”

Andrew picked up the remote and turned on the TV. Some cartoon characters were sitting at a table in a bar, drinking bottles of beer and telling jokes.

“This OK?” he asked.

“Fine by me.”
We watched for a while. Andrew had two beers and I finished my one. I felt like I could drink six or seven more, but I didn’t want to ask him for permission to take a second. I took my empty bottle and teacup into the kitchen and rinsed them out.

“Alright, Andrew,” I said, “I think I’m going to hit the hay,”

“You’re sister will be home soon, if you want to wait up.”

“I’ll see her tomorrow night. I have an early morning.”

“Oh yeah? Job interview or something?”

“Yeah. I mean, something. An appointment, actually, I’m going to talk to a guy down at NYU.”

“Cool. Well, nail it, Big Edel.”

I grabbed my keys off the counter, and headed into the nook where I slept beside Becca’s elliptical machine. She’d offered me the couch, numerous times, but I felt better tucked out of the way in my sleeping bag.

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Chapter 4

I woke up at seven-thirty-six to the sounds of my sister and Andrew getting ready for work. The pressure in my bladder was uncomfortable, but I’d rather suffer a little discomfort than face my sister’s wrath if I got in the way in the morning. It was wisest to stay hidden as they put on their war paint and chomped their energy bars.

Finally, I heard my sister’s exasperated, “Are you coming or not? I’m late. I can’t wait,” and the answer of Andrew’s galloping loafers. I gave it a minute after the door slammed to make sure they weren’t coming back for anything, then made my way to the bathroom. I took great pleasure in my strong, clear stream. I knew there was some prayer about being glad that all your pipes were in working order, but I didn’t know the words. The important thing was I had been given another day on earth, and that I make the most of it. I looked out my sister’s living room window, at the newly risen sun over the East River. It had been sunny for days. I figured all the booksellers would be out on the street.

I was not up and out like the booksellers. I was not a motivated person like Becca. The evil urge was strong within me, it came out not in the form of violence but, more insidiously, of sloth and it kept me from using the time Hashem gave me. I lay back down on the leather couch and lost two hours to lustful half dreams and plain laziness. Well, even Solomon was rebuked for sleeping late, with the key to the Great Temple under his pillow. The sun woke me back up around ten o’clock, but I don’t know why, because the sun wasn’t
brighter then than it was when I lay down. Maybe moving higher had it made it
shine down from a different angle, and that was enough to rouse me. I got up and
drank some tea, and put on the TV with no sound because I couldn’t stand the
chatter. The movement of the colors on the screen helped get me into a more
mobile mindset.

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It was almost eleven o’clock by the time I got down to West 4th Street. As
soon as I turned the corner from Broadway, I began to make out the booksellers.
They were a feral element in the landscape, standing out in contrast to the purple
NYU flags and the attendant crowds of clean students. The booksellers were a
black mold growing through the new paint.

At the first table I came to, a man wearing an old army jacket and a black
beret
was taking science-fiction paperbacks out of a Poland Spring box and arranging
them on the edge of an already crowded card table. He lined the books up evenly
with each other, letting as much of each one hang off the edge as he could without
them all falling onto the sidewalk.

“Excuse me,” I said. He looked up and shook his head ‘no.’ “No,” I said,
“I just wanted to–” The man shook his head again, and pointed to another man,
who leaned against a large cement planter in which nothing grew, wearing a long
heavy coat that seemed a bit much for the tail end of a warm winter. He was bent
over in a half-hearted attempt to hide the wad of cash he was counting. A
cigarette dangled from his mouth, but he neither drew nor ashed, and I waited to
see if he might catch one of his bouncing dreadlocks on fire. As I watched, a gust
of wind dispersed the quarter inch of grey ash into the air.

“Excuse me, “ I said.

floating in a glass of dirty water– darted up towards me for a moment before he
resumed counting his money. It wasn’t a huge sum of money, but he kept getting
confused and starting over.

“I was just wondering if you knew if there was a bookseller around here
named Mendy?” The man stopped counting and looked up.

“Mendy? Mendy, Mendy. Mendy? There might be.” He turned at
shouted at the man with the beret. “He wants to know is there a Mendy around
here?” The man with the beret smiled warily, and clutched his box of books
tighter. “Yeah, there’s a Mendy around here. What do you want with that
asshole?”

“Nothing, it’s just that somebody told me I should talk to him.”

“OK, OK.” He put his money in his pocket so he could gesture with his
hands. “But look: if you got some books to sell, you might as well go ahead and
bring them to me first. Because I, frankly, will give you a better deal than that
bastard.”

“No,” I said. “I don’t think…”
“What do you mean, no? You can ask anybody out here on this street. It’s the truth. I can give you a better deal on your books. Don’t get me wrong, I can’t make you rich. Used books are worth very little. But compared to that stinker down there, well, let’s just say that he will not treat you so good as I will treat you.”

“No. Okay, I mean, I’ll keep that in mind.” I held out my empty hands. “It’s not about books, though, it’s about something personal.”

“Aw, feh. I don’t care about nothing like that. Mendy’s down that way.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “Down there at the corner where the park starts. Old guy with a beard. That is to say, older than me, with a bigger beard than mine.” Our interview concluded, he went back to peering at his bills through his thick glasses.

I passed two more tables before I came to Mendy’s. His set up was by far the most expansive on the block, stretching along the sidewalk for a good twenty feet. Sheets of plywood spanned several card tables, and on top of them the books were packed tight in long, snaky rows, held at the end by the t-shaped metal book-ends librarians use. Between the rows, other books stood upright. Some of them were encased in plastic slipcovers.

Debris was strewn underneath and behind the tables: empty water boxes, the red and white woven plastic bags they sell in Chinatown, weathered two-by-fours. A box of tissues. A shiny handcart. Stacks of books. Always, more books.
The whole setup gave me the impression of a kid’s clubhouse. I half expected to find a twelve-year old sneaking a smoke under the table. I peeked, and there was indeed someone hiding there, but he was a grown man well into his sixties. He was hunched down, busily cleaning book covers with rubbing alcohol and tissues, but I had a clear profile view. There was something Hassidic in his lean face and long cloudy beard, but his soiled wife beater and sinewy arms – surprisingly muscled for so old a man – betrayed more than a passing familiarity with the material world. He caught me staring and rose to an upright position. His eyes stayed locked on mine, as if he’d just discovered me inside his house, and couldn’t decide if I was a harmless sleepwalker or a burglar.

“Were you looking for something particular? Something I could maybe help you with?” Each word was a testing jab.

“No, I’m not looking for… I’m just looking.”

I picked up a thin book called ‘The ABCs of Anarchism’ and made myself read a few pages. The author was trying to convince somebody about something.

“The guy that wrote that,” He gestured at the book in my hand with the one he held in his. “Berkman. He’s the one that shot Frick.” I didn’t know who Frick was, but the old greybeard sounded like he was happy he got shot. “During the Carnegie Steel strike. He was Emma Goldman’s lover.”

“Yeah.”

“You’re familiar?”

“No. Is your name Mendy?”

“Yeah. It is. So?”
“My name is Izzy. Izzy Edel. Alojzy Edel was my father.”

“Oh, I see. Jesus.” He took off his glasses, and rubbed his palm over his eyes and face and beard. “Ally, Ally, Ally. Poor Ally. I didn’t even know he had a son. A daughter he’d mentioned, a few times…”

“Yeah, that’s my sister. Becca.”

“Sure. Right. Hey. Listen.” He put his glasses back on and stuck out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you Iz… Izzy, was it? I’m very sorry for your loss.” We shook. His arm looked very frail, but his grip was very strong. “For whatever that’s worth.”

“Thank you.”

“We could sit and talk, a minute? If you’d like?” He led me across the wide sidewalk to a short stone ledge that extended off of the New York University library.

“Had you been in touch?” he asked me once we’d sat down. “With your father?”

“No. Not in a long time. Years.”

“Oh. Well. I can’t say that surprises me. So how did you find your way here, then, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“We only found about my father’s death because we got a note from a man named Goldov. I met him yesterday. He mentioned your name.”

“Goldov? Sure. Sure. Excuse me.” Mendy turned to shout to a potential customer, who was holding up a volume of Greek myths. “The price is on the front page. No, that’s the cover. I said the front page. That’s right. There. What
it says. Three dollars.” The customer came over with a ten-dollar bill, and Mendy made change from the fanny pack around his waist.

“When my own father died,” he said to me, “I felt him around. I kept thinking he was just in the next room. Which was sort of funny, because it was not like I was used to him being around, ever actually being in the next room. I mean, there were years, as an adult, where I hardly saw my parents at all. It was mostly like that, more years that were like that than not. I always would think of him, but in a distanced way. Then he died, and all of a sudden, and for months, I kept thinking of him, in a much closer way. Like death made him more present.”

“Excuse me!” A man in a jacket and tie jabbed a stack of books at us.

“No,” said Mendy, “Excuse me, I’m having a conversation here.”

“Sure, I just wanted to make a purchase, if you can imagine that.”

“Listen, I don’t care what you want to do. I told you I’m having a conversation.”

“Are you serious? Is this the way to run a business?”

“No, I don’t think this is any way to run a business, you’re right about that, pal.” The man started to say something else, but couldn’t think what and shook his head instead. He tossed the books onto the table and stomped off.

“My father,” I said.

“Your father. He sold down here, off and on, for years. Everybody down here knew him. He was, I don’t know, he brought something out in people. Women especially. There were always women looking for him. “Mendy smiled. I imagined my father and this man exchanging little jokes about women’s bodies.
“But he could talk to anyone. He would just as soon stay quiet, he wasn’t one to run his mouth for no reason, but he was capable of talking to anyone. The gift of gab I guess they call it. He spoke like six languages.”

“Six? English and Polish and Hebrew….”

“Some Yiddish. Some Russian. A little Arabic, I found out. Spanish.”

Mendy looked at his fingers. “Now we’re up to seven. He had all that up on me. I got English, scraps of high school German, and some house Yiddish. That’s about it, for me. It all adds up to just English, really. My parents never let me learn Yiddish proper, because they didn’t want I should have an accent. Better I should speak like an American. They came from Poland too. But before the war. When there were Jews in Poland, still. Lots of them. I talked to Al about that, sometimes.”

“About what?”

“About Poland, and the Jews that lived there. The history of it.”

“Oh. Ok. Is there anything else you can tell me about him, though? I mean, him personally.”

“Personally? He was a rough person. But kind. He had zeaceyte. You know the word? There’s no other word for it. I know he did some things. I know he hurt Goldov. I imagine he hurt others. Maybe he hurt you… if I might be so bold, as to interpret the look on your face. He was involved in I don’t know all what. But I always thought of him as kind. I remember – I had a van for a while – I told Al he could borrow it one time, when he needed to move some books. He
was shocked. He said, ‘Mendy, you’re really trusting me with your van?’ I said, ‘Al, is there a reason I shouldn’t trust you?’”

“I don’t know how he died.”

“I don’t know either, I’m afraid. I know he died in St. Vincent’s. I heard he was dying… from Goldov, as a matter of fact. I went there to see him, but they wouldn’t let me in because I wasn’t family. They wouldn’t tell me anything. I came back the next day, he was dead.”

“I see. I don’t. I don’t. I don’t know where he was living.”

“Living? I don’t know if you could say he lived anywhere, exactly. But his, you could say, base of operations, where he kept his books, was this storage space down in Soho. Where I do believe he slept sometimes, though he was very private about things like that. Very guarded.”

“You know where it was?”

“Sure I know where it is, it’s practically right next to my space. In the same facility. It’s the only one downtown with twenty-four hour access.

“So his stuff is still there? You don’t think it’s been cleaned out?”

“No. No one’s been by to clean it out. I keep my eyes open.”

“They don’t throw stuff out, when a person dies?”

“They throw stuff out, when someone stops paying the bill. Not that it’s my business, but I believe a man named Timur, who your father knew, took care of those details. I guess it’s paid up, because they haven’t cut the lock yet.
“Matter of fact, I got the spare key to that lock in my own space there. Al had me hold onto a copy in a neighborly sort of way, in case of emergencies. If you come back with me in the evening, I can let you in.”

I ended up hanging around with Mendy for the rest of the afternoon. He said I could just meet him down on Varick Street in the evening, but I had nowhere else to go, and I was curious to spend a day like Al spent many of his days.

I helped Mendy clean old price tags off of some books he’d gotten that morning. If they were left on, people would try to get the price on the tag, not the price Mendy penciled in on the first page. He showed me how to do it. First, you had to dissolve the glue by putting a drop of lighter fluid onto the tag, then you scraped the tag off with a razor blade. When that’s done, you wiped off the tag residue, and any other grime, with a tissue and bit of rubbing alcohol. You had to be careful you didn’t use too much alcohol, or you’d end up wiping off some of the ink from the cover picture. I did this a couple times with old paperbacks, but Mendy didn’t seem to care too much.

“This,” he said. “Is why I am not in the antique business.”

When Asher, the dreadlocked bookseller I’d spoken to earlier, saw that I was sticking around, he came by and introduced himself properly. I was also introduced to Assid, a skinny Moroccan who set up between Mendy and Asher and spent his day quietly reading Sufi books underneath an umbrella, and Newt, a rare book man who did his selling on the internet, but hung around the block to
talk shop and see if any interesting volumes surfaced. All of these men nodded with respect when they heard who my father was.

Customers had been trickling by all the while, but around one o’clock they came down like a wave. The socializing stopped, and everyone went back to his own table to focus on making money.

“The lunchtime rush,” Mendy explained. I helped out by packing peoples’ purchases into old Gristedes bags while Mendy tallied the prices. He ran up and down the length of the table, making sure he connected with each and every customer who was interested in making a purchase. After a customer left, I’d straighten out the books they’d disturbed. The people that didn’t buy anything seemed to leave the biggest messes. I referred most questions to Mendy, but after a while I started to get a sense of what Mendy had and how it was all organized, and was able to point a few people in the right direction on my own.

After business slowed down I went off and got a quart of macaroni salad and a diet coke from the deli and ate it in the park. When I came back, Mendy asked me if I’d mind covering the table why he used the restroom and got some food. He handed me a bankroll from his fanny pack of cash to make change with. I felt weird that he trusted me with his cash, but then I remembered the story about my dad and the van.

I sold a couple books and wrote down the names so I could tell Mendy what they were. An NYU coed with sweet brown dates for eyes thumbed through an anthology of DA Levy’s work. She was looking at the collages, and she asked me if I knew him and was he a good poet. I said he was, and told her about the
love poem he wrote to the fifteen-year-old girl that turned him into the
“Subversive Squad” of the Cleveland Police Department. I guess I wasn’t very
convincing, because the girl went away without buying the book.

Another wave came down on us at five o’clock, dropping off just at the end of dusk. It got colder as the sun went down, and Mendy put on a big green sweater he pulled from one of his many bags. The sky was hardening, closing in. Between the sky, the pavement, and the brick buildings along the square, I had the strange feeling that this wasn’t the outside, just a giant room.

Mendy sat down beside me on the curb. “This is the dinner time lull. There’ll be one more chance to make some good money, starting around eight o’clock or so, then we’ll pack it in.”

The whole world felt calmer than it had half an hour before. The people had gone off the street into homes and restaurants, or else down into the subway. The air had grown thicker and lazier. The cabs that had rushed by earlier were now on some other block. Mendy, for his part, was not longer running up and down the length of the table, and had taken out a yogurt container and a metal spoon.

“So what do you do with yourself, Izzy?” he asked between slurps. “You in college or something?”

“No. I was there for a while. It didn’t really work out.’

“Sure. College wasn’t for me either. I felt – this was in the sixties, early sixties, maybe things are different now – but they didn’t have anything I wanted.
I always think of that scene in Casablanca. The guy says, ‘What brings you to Casablanca?’ And the other guy, the Humphrey Bogart character, Rick, I think, says, ‘I came for the waters.’ ‘But Rick,’ the guy says, there’s no waters. ‘Oh,’ he says, ‘I was misinformed.’ That’s how I felt about the university.”

“I’m not sure I follow.”

“I was misinformed.”

“Ah. Yeah. I get you. But I mean, I liked it okay. The information… like they give you a little magazine, informing you about school and they were straight with me. There was water and everything. I was swimming along. I would have liked to stay, but I just got in to some trouble.”

“Brawling, huh?”

“What’s that?”

“Got into some fist fights?”

“Oh, no. Nothing like that. It was, uh, well, drugs, actually. I hooked some kids up with some acid and when they got in trouble they turned me in. I mean, I’d been hooking up a lot of kids with stuff… but these two kids turned me in to the school.”

“Life’s rough like that. You try to be a nice guy, and help another guy out. And then that’s what you get in return.”

“That’s what you get, alright.”

“Still, you’re lucky you’re a free man. A friend of mine got in some trouble like that once… they gave him ten years for two sheets of blotter acid. This was back in the seventies. It was the eighties by the time they let him out.”
“Well, this wasn’t that much. Just a few tabs. I was just trying to help them out, you know? I’m not a drug dealer or anything. But yeah, I was scared there was going to be some police stuff. But my stepfather got involved, and smoothed things over best he could. I agreed to withdraw from the school voluntarily, and I agreed to go to counseling. I mean, I didn’t actually go to counseling or anything, it was just something I agreed to. But then I was gone, so who cared? I just, I don’t know, I went and stayed with my parents in New Mexico, where they live now.”

“Your parents?”

“My mother and my stepfather. They sort of retired down there, I guess. The climate’s good for my stepfather’s asthma. I mean, he still works, but from there. There wasn’t really any reason for me to be there. I’m staying with my sister here in the city, now.”

“I see.”

“It’s where I’m from originally. I guess I feel more at home here.”

“Me too. I’m the same way.”

“Hey, why did you guess it was fighting they kicked me out for?”

“I guess I thought maybe you had that part of your father in you.”

“He got in a lot of fights, out here?”

“Well, look: he was always a nice guy to me, and everyone else who treated him nice, but if someone crossed him, oh boy, it was on. His face, the shape of his face could physically change. It was terrifying. He had a thing about respect. If you were respectful to him, fine. But if he felt disrespected…
“This one time, he forgot his heavy jacket out on the street by mistake, his own mistake, after he’d packed up for the night. He comes back the next day, and asks Spider – who is a guy, street guy, who hangs out around here – if he’d seen the jacket. Spider says yeah, right after Al left, this guy who walks by here walking a little white dog every morning and every evening, he came by and picked up the jacket.

“So Al, he waits until the guy comes by on his morning walk and approaches him. He says, ‘Excuse me, did you pick up a jacket from here yesterday night?’ The guy says, ‘No. I didn’t.’ And Al, says, ‘Oh really, that surprises me, because, you know my long-term acquaintance Spider, who’s never steered me wrong on any factual matters, says you picked up my jacket that I forgot.’ The guy says, ‘Fine, so what if I did, what I find is mine. It’s none of your business what I pick up off the street.’ Al, I could tell he’s on the verge, he says, ‘Maybe you didn’t realize it was my jacket. But it is, and I’d like it back.’ The guy says, ‘No, fuck you, it’s my jacket now.’

“Al looks at him calmly. So calmly the guy thought maybe he’d won, but the thing is, your father at his calmest was your father at his most frightening. So he looks at the guy and says – his tone just as friendly as could be – he says, “That’s fine. I just want you to understand, though, that after I finish beating the shit out of you, I’m going to beat the shit of your dog.”

“The guy went right on home and got the jacket and brought it back.

“Later, I said to him, ‘Damn Al, that was something.’ He says, ‘What do you mean?’ I said, ‘Al, I mean, you were really going to beat up a little doggy?”
He says, ‘Look, Mendy, I knew by the fact he’s every day taking this little dog for walks in the fresh air, that he really loves that animal. If people cross you, then you have to hurt what they love.’

“But at the same time, Al wasn’t petty. I’m not saying that you’re father was going to hurt the little dog because he was petty about the fucking jacket. You asked him for a fucking jacket he’d give it to you. Matter of fact, this sweater I’m wearing right now,” Mendy tugged on the green fabric that hung loosely from his frame, “he gave it to me.”

As the last rush was dying off, we started packing up. The sun was long gone, and there was only a sliver of the moon in the sky, but there were enough electric lights around that we had no problem seeing what we were doing. Mendy had a whole system worked out. The books came off the table in order, row by row, and went into particular, numbered, boxes. His handcart folded out into a long four wheeled card, and all the boxes and folded tables and pieces of wood and plastic bags each had their own set place. We were tying the whole thing up with rope when the used husk of a street hustler slithered up beside us.

“How you doing, Spider.”

“You need some help with the cart tonight?”

“This squirt here? Who the hell is he?”
“Oh, sorry. This is Izzy. Izzy, that’s Spider.”

I nodded at Spider. He blinked back at me.

“He’s Al’s son,” explained Mendy.


“Polish.” I said, as if there was some pride in the word for me.

“What the fuck I care what kind of Russian your daddy is, boy?”

“I’ll talk to you later, Spider,” Mendy told him.

I pushed the cart from behind, while Mendy pulled from the front, steering with a little length of rope. We walked down the middle of the street, out of necessity. I knew that the city streets sloped down on the sides for drainage, but I had never realized how extreme of an arch it was until I had to keep a moving cart from tipping over. We pissed off more than one cab driver, and hearing the honks and shouts right behind me made me nervous. Mendy didn’t seem to notice them at all. He calmly snapped back the mirrors of parked cars that threatened to clip us, and maneuvered us around potholes with hardly a glance at the ground. The cart was heavy on the uphill blocks. I wasn’t used to this kind of work.

At the very end when we had to cross Varick Street. It was well past what I though of as rush hour, but the street was still fully inhabited by the caravan of cars trying to find their way back through the Holland Tunnel. The traffic was jammed up through the intersection, but Mendy forced a way across for us, staring drivers down or banging on their hoods until they backed up enough to let us through.
We cut through a parking lot. Cars were parked four stories high on metal girders, and I couldn’t make out the system that raised them up there. Mendy nodded at the parking attendant, who nodded back from his little booth, and we came to the back door of the Manhattan Mini Storage.

It took us a few tries to get the cart into Mendy’s storage space. There was just enough space between the boxes to fit it in, and we kept it getting in at an angle and jamming ourselves up, so that we had to pull back out and try again. When we finally got in, I let myself sink down to the ground. I sat there and sweated. I still hadn’t caught my breath from the walk over.

Mendy counted out some money from his fanny pack and held it out to me.

“Here you go,” he said.

“What’s this?”

“Sixty-four dollars. It’s what I figure is fair, considering how long you worked, and what I made, and what I can pay.”

“I wasn’t doing it to get paid…”

“Well, you earned it. If you weren’t helping me, I would have had to get Spider to help me. He would have been doing it to get paid. I’m giving you the same rate I give him. It was most of your day. It made my day easier. Take it, or I won’t feel right. I don’t need one more thing to keep me up at night.” I took the money and put it in my pocket.

“Now.” He snapped his fingers. That other thing.” He extracted a shoebox from his cluttered storage space, and rummaged through it until he pulled
out a small key ring. He lifted his glasses and pulled the keys close to his eye.
Satisfied he had the right ring, he tossed it to me. “That’s the key to your father’s
space. It makes more sense for you to have it than me. The number written on
the keychain is Timur’s… I was supposed to call it if your father got jammed up
or something. You can sort things out out with Timur yourself.

“Well, there it is,” he said, pointing to another unit down the same aisle.

“Your legacy. I’ll say goodnight now, and leave you to it.”

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When I opened the metal door I found a handcart, stacked high with water boxes. The rig was tied up with bungee cords, ready to hit the street. Beyond that were stacks and stacks of water boxes, labeled in shaky sharpie. “HC Mysteries.” “20th Cent. Art.” “Photog.” “Catchers In the Ryes.” It occurred me that I could sell off this stock myself. I had enjoyed spending the day working with Mendy, and wouldn’t mind spending more days on the street.

I could tell that the space extended quite a bit to the left, and I climbed up over the cart and the stacks of boxes. In the little light that filtered in from the fluorescent tubes high up on the hallway ceiling, I could make out a field of books, with a clearing in the middle. My eyes adjusted and I saw that the clearing was an inflatable camping mattress. This had been my father’s bedroom. I jumped down onto the mattress, the only place I could land. Next to it was an upturned milk crate with camping lantern on it. I switched it on. It was bright enough to give me a fairly full view of the cell.

I lay down on my father’s narrow mattress. It was comfortable enough, with the sleeping bag and army blankets he had laid out. I was a lot skinnier than him though, and if he tossed and turned at night – as he always had – he must have butted up against the collapsing stacks of books.

I leaned my head back against the pillow and felt something hard knock against my skull. I moved the pillow aside to reveal a gun, of sorts. It had started life as a bolt action .22, not unlike the rifles we’d fired, prone, at the summer
camp I attended in the Catskills when I was in junior high. The barrel of this one had been dramatically shortened and the stock sawed off altogether, so the gun could be held and fired more or less like a pistol. The magazine extended straight down, longer than the tape wrapped grip.

I went back over the boxes and pulled the door shut. The storage unit doors are made to only lock from the outside, but Al had rigged up a chain and a deadbolt to hold the door closed from the inside. I fastened them both.

I was not surprised to see the gun. I’d handled a gun of my father’s once before. It was about a year after he’d given up the apartment in Sheepshead Bay. He was gone for ten months after that, in which time I received four postcards from him, three of them from Nevada and one from California. When he came back, he moved into in a residential hotel up in Ridgewood. Most of the other rooms seemed to be occupied by twitchy Serbian men. I imagined that they were all war criminals who had come here on forged passports. Between the Serbs and the fact that we were in Queens, I got the impression that my father was hiding out. It didn’t help matters when he showed me the revolver he kept under his mattress.

“Is it real?” I asked.

“Of course.”

“Is it loaded?”

“What good would it be, a pistol with no bullets?” He let me hold it, making sure that I kept my finger off the trigger and away from the hammer. It was heavy, and I kept thinking it would go off or even explode in my hand.
My most instructive interaction with guns had come on the trip to Israel I’d taken with my temple youth group trip the summer between my junior and senior years of high school. I kept a precise mental log of everything I saw on that trip, so I could talk to my father about it when I saw him again. We spent a day and a half on an IDF base, a desert outpost in the south, where we got to shoot Galils with the soldiers. The unfired shells were as long as my middle finger. So much power came out of the barrel, and yet I barely felt any kickback against my shoulder. My father had served in the IDF in the pre-Galil era. He once told me that the first rifle he was issued was Czech Mauser. These guns had been built for the Germans, but remained undelivered at the end of the war, and the fledging Israeli Army bought them from the Czechoslovakian government wholesale. The outline of a swastika was still visible in the stain of his gun’s butt, underneath the riveted-on IDF insignia.

They tried to sell us on joining the Israeli Defense Force as overseas enlistees after high school. I considered it, but not seriously, and went to Oberlin on Bernie’s dime instead, where I attended a couple meetings of Jews Against the Occupation, read Edward Said’s Orientalism in class, and dated a Lebanese girl name Mariam. She was from a Christian family. I think her dad had been in one of the militias. She liked to talk about her Arab-American identity and denounce the murderous Zionist state, because it made her feel less guilty about the fact that her father had probably murdered Palestinians himself. We broke up after three months, not because of religion or politics, but because I would always get nervous halfway through sex and lose my hard on. I came maybe six times during
those three months I was with her, and only two of those times when I was actually inside her. I was already smoking a lot of weed and messing around with pills and acid, but I don’t think that had much to do with it. I think I’m just not that good at sex.

I pulled open the bolt of Al’s sawed off. An unfired round ejected, and another one popped up at an angle, ready to be slammed forward into the chamber. I’d never been alone with a loaded gun before, and wasn’t entirely comfortable with the feeling, so I started to eject the rounds one by one. There was probably a simpler way to do this, by ejecting the entire magazine from the bottom, but I didn’t know how do that. And, as much as I didn’t want to leave the loaded gun around, I enjoyed the feeling of loading each round into the chamber before I ejected it. For a moment, I let my finger rest on the trigger of the loaded gun. I could shoot a round off into the concrete floor, if I wanted to. I took my finger off the trigger and ejected the round. I kept loading and ejecting until there were sixteen shells on the floor and none in the gun.

I collected the shells, and placed them in the grooves of the plastic crate, next to the lantern. I put the gun down on a pile of books, leaving the bolt open. It looked wrong – too casual – so I picked it back up and leaned it against the metal wall, next to a gallon jug half full of water. I raised the jug up with both hands and took a drink. Water ran down my cheeks. I flinched as the water hit my skin, and realized how cold I was. My father had drunk this same water. It probably tasted less stale then. He wouldn’t have minded the coldness, though.
Three or four pint bottles of Mr. Boston blackberry brandy were piled on the floor. I shook each one of them. Only one had a little left in it. I finished it off.

There were so many books packed into the small space, it was hard to see them as anything but one oozing mass. As I became acquainted with the space, I could see that there was a vague order to the piles. One book though, caught my eyes as being different altogether. It was an artist’s sketchbook, not a published book, and it had newspaper photos of what appeared to be bombing scenes, maybe in Iraq or Pakistan, scotch taped to the fake leather cover. A mosque burned in full color. A market lay in ruins.

Inside was more of the same, only drawn by hand. Smoke. Flames. Smaller flames bursting from the barrels of guns. The crying faces of children with Middle Eastern features. Their bodies writhed and burned. Details of Israeli insignias appeared through the smoke. Guns were rendered in full detail, while bodies faded into ghosts.

I flipped through the pages quickly. I was afraid if I dwelled too long on any one page I’d be sucked into its horror. Then, a third of the way through the sketchbook, the foreign faces gave way to faces I recognized. There was my mother and my sister. There was me. There were neighbors I remembered from our old building on the Upper East Side. The olive trees were replaced with the foliage of Central park. My mother was so beautiful. I hoped Becca and I had really once been as small and sweet as my father portrayed us.

By and by, these few happy scenes faded into smoke themselves. New York burned slowly. Our East 95th St. sidewalk smoldered. Then the curves
straightened, the lines became thicker and darker, and began to bound controlled
hashmarks. There was a narrower street, and ragged, blocky buildings. One – a
cross between a birthday cake and a prison – loomed above the rest. Another page
showed a close up of the interior of a streetcar. The picture seemed to focus on
one tired, middle-aged couple, who sat close together, looking out the window.
Their faces were drawn in more detail than the others. The man had an
unmistakably Jewish nose, and wore a cap low over his eyes. All the severely
Slavic faces seemed to be staring at them. The Jewish man looked sort of like my
father. Were these my grandparents?

I sat in the quiet storage space, an interstitial zone between the painful
world of the sketchbook, and the outside world where people went about their
business. Occasional footsteps and clatterings broke through to me. At one point,
the clattering was in the same row as my space, and shook my walls. There was
a protracted, hollered exchange in a language I didn’t recognize. I didn’t even
have a context for its sounds. It seemed that each of the two voices was coming
from behind a different one of my walls. There was a thump, and then some
laughter.

I was sure the facility had employees patrolling, and that made me
nervous, although I supposed I was, as Mendy had said, an heir to the contents of
the space, if not the space itself, and had some sort of right to be in there. But
then again, probably my father hadn’t even been supposed to be sleeping in a
storage space the first place. Was his bill paid up? Maybe he died owing money,
or a new bill had accumulated since he died. People were probably doing shadier
things than I was in this place, late at night, but that was not actually the most comforting of the thoughts. I decided it might be better to have a loaded gun after all. My father had had it here for a reason. I fumbled with the magazine, but still couldn’t figure out how to get it off. There was a latch that I thought was the release, but I couldn’t get it to budge. I didn’t want to force it, in case it wasn’t the release. In the end, I just inserted one bullet directly into the chamber with my fingers, and slammed the bolt closed. There didn’t seem to be any sort of safety mechanism.

I sat back down on the bed, with my dad’s gun across my lap. I believed he was dead – it felt true – though now that I thought it over, all I knew for sure was that two old men I’d just met believed he was dead. Three times he’d left me, and twice he’d returned. I’d assumed there would be a third return, to even out the balance once again.

I hadn’t thought he’d attend my bar mitzvah. He had actually helped me prepare, a lot, on my Sheepshead bay visits. He hadn’t had much religious education himself, but he was fluent in Hebrew, having gone through the military Ulpan and lived in Israel for ten years. Modern Hebrew and Biblical Hebrew are not so different from each other as people will tell you. Hebrew is Hebrew. My Mom had agreed to let me bring him an invitation, but he knew as well as I did she didn’t want him there, and none of us really pictured him showing up to a family event on Long Island.

My Torah portion was Exodus 30:11-16. They just give you the reading that corresponds to the week of your bar mitzvah. Usually that’s your birthday
week, but it depends on the scheduling. My bar mitvah was two weeks after my thirteenth birthday. At Reform synagogues, they give you both your Torah and Haftarah portions in these little orange booklets. You don’t even have to go digging through the whole TaNaKh. Exodus 30:11-16 is called the Parshat Sheklaim. It deals with the taking of a census, and how many shekels each person should pay as a tax (it’s one-half of a shekel). It’s about obligations, Bernie told me. Responsibilities.

The corresponding Haftarah passage is 1 Kings 1:1-17. There’s more exciting stuff in there. It tells of Moab’s army facing off against Elijah the Tishbite. At Elijah’s behest, fires come down from heaven and consume one hundred and two enemies of Israel.

“I also,” Al told me, “Have seen fire came down from heaven and consume enemies of Israel.”

“What do you mean?” I asked. “This was bible times.”

“Bible times, sure, also bible land. In Israel, such things continue to happen. 1973, I was called back up and sent up to the Golan. We used napalm against the Syrians. It is a horrible thing to see. They should have written that in the book, as well.” He didn’t say anything else about is. We went back to trying to scratch a passably fricative ‘chet’ sound out of my smooth American throat.

I learned the sounds and words well enough, and chanted my way through the portion without any great embarrassment. As I stood on the bima and took that first sip of wine from my shiny new Kiddush cup, I caught a glimpse of Alojzy sneaking out the side. I hoped our eyes would eyes would meet and he
would wink, but he didn’t look back, his eyes were focused on the door. The important thing was, he’d come. He’d been there. The last time I saw him was also out in Nassau County, three years later, when I was sixteen. I hadn’t seem him for over five years, now, but I often found myself half expecting to catch a glimpse of him sneaking away. The fact he was dead didn’t seem to change that. I wasn’t sure the footsteps I heard passing by the locked door weren’t his.

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I woke up to the sounds of street vendors beginning their day. Carts rumbled and creaked, and sometimes crashed into metal doors. People shouted at each other in different shades of English. Boxes landed with thumps. I took a drink from the plastic water jug, hid the sketchbook and the gun under the air mattress, and stumbled over Al’s boxes to the door. I took the key Mendy had given me out of my pocket, and locked the padlock on the outside the storage space.

In the corridor, two Russian girls were arguing over a stack of tee-shirts. One fell to the ground as I passed by and I picked it up. The shirt had an image of a woman with her finger to her lips. “Nee Boltaee,” she said. “No Gossiping.” I handed it to one of the girls, but she didn’t thank me. I pictured my father flirting with these girls. I wondered if his Polish schoolboy innuendos translated smoothly into Russian, if the girls giggled and blushed. A dreadlocked woman pushing a cart piled high with wood carvings came up the aisle behind me and yelled at me for blocking the aisle with my big butt.

I went out into the lobby. I took a piss in the men’s room and bought a diet coke from the vending machine, then went over to the payphone to call the number Mendy had given me.

“Aló?” demanded a Russian voice. I could hear the imprint of a square jaw on the word.

“Um, yes, hello. Is this Timur?”
“No. This is not. That person does not speak on the telephone.”

“Oh, so how do I speak to him?”

“You don’t. You speak to me. I am his representative. But do not waste my time. It is not as valuable as his time, but still, I place value in it.”

“Oh, okay. I’ll be quick. My name is Izzy Edel. It’s just that my father died, and I’m going through his stuff at his storage space. And I was told that Mr. Timur had paid the rental bill, and I wanted to, you now, touch base and see—”

“You are the son of Alojzy Edel?”

“Yes.”

“I will call you back on this number in five minutes.”

I stood next to the phone. A man came up and asked if I was done using the phone. I told him no. He picked up the receiver and proceeded to argue in French for the next six minutes. I knew my dad would have told him to get off the phone, but I didn’t know how exactly. Finally, the guy hung up. I waited another five minutes, but the phone didn’t ring.” Maybe Timur’s man had called back, but got a busy signal and gave up. But it was also possible that he wasn’t ready yet, and would just be annoyed if I called back. He didn’t sound like a man I wanted to annoy. I debated for three minutes, then decided to go for it.

“Halo?”

“Yeah, this is Izzy—“

“Yes. Edel. I told you I would call you back.”

“Yeah, I know, but I hadn’t heard from you and—”
“That is because you didn’t tell me you were calling from a pay phone. Don’t you know that a pay phone cannot accept incoming calls?”

“No. I didn’t know that.”

“Well, know you are knowing. It’s because of the gang bangers and their pagers.

“Oh.”

“Yes. Do not get me wrong. I have great respect for these people. To make an innovation of technology used only by doctors, so as to facilitate untraceable communication for crack deals. It was very clever.”

“Sure.”

“Still, I do not have time to be calling a phone which will not ring.”

“I’m sorry.” Who was this guy? He was angry that I wasted his time, and yet he had time to give me a history lesson about crack dealers?

“Forget it, you did not know. Now, Timur would like to speak with you in person. Do you drive a car?”

“No.”

“Okay, take the Q train to Brighton Beach Avenue. I will meet you on the southwest corner of Brighton Avenue and Brighton 6th St. 7 pm.”

“Okay.”

“Hast la vista, baby.”

I walked across Soho to catch the 6 train on the East Side. There were already street vendors out all along Spring Street, selling art and jewelry they had
made themselves. There was a lot of bright colors. Plastics and acrylics. Fake feathers.

Up at Becca’s place, I took a long, hot shower and put on some clean clothes. I was making a cup of tea when the phone rang. I was going to let it go on ringing, but when I saw the New Mexico number on the caller ID, something got the better of me – filial piety, or loneliness maybe – and I picked up.

“How do you know it’s me?”

“My mother’s papercuts. She made these beautiful papercuts. He got all that stuff when they cleaned out Bubbe’s apartment.”

“That was like, six years ago.”

“I know, I know. But I’ve had so much to deal with. Now, I finally feel like I have the time, and I wanted to get out those papercuts that your grandmother had done, and take a look. Maybe do something with them? But your uncle is giving me a hard time, saying he’s too busy with work to deal with this.”
“He might be busy. He is a lawyer.”

“I know he’s a lawyer. I know he works. But honestly, this shifty way he’s acting, it makes me think he’s just thrown everything away, and doesn’t want to come clean about it.”

“I don’t understand what it is you’re talking about, exactly. Papercuts?”

“Yes. Papercuts. The intricate art of cutting designs into paper. Don’t you know?”

“Like the snowflakes we’d make in grade school?”

“Snowflakes? Like snowflakes? No, not like snowflakes, thank you very much, for Christmastime. Traditional Jewish papercuts, I’m talking about, here. Like they used to use for Ketubaot? To frame? To hang on the wall?”

“I can’t picture them. It’s not calligraphy?”

“No. Wouldn’t I say calligraphy, if I meant calligraphy? It’s papercuts. Cut paper. Carved paper. You go to school and study all this modern art. Then, you borrow books from Bernie about Hassidism and tsadiks, *Nineteen Gated Mystics* or whatever, to read when you’re stoned from smoking your dope in my house.”

“Mom.”

“And yet, you don’t even recognize a basic Jewish folk art when it’s described to you?”

“Mom.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind about the dope. I know you’re finding yourself. But you’re thinking about going back to school now, I hear?”
“Mom.”

“Yes, my darling?”

“The papercuts?”

“Yes. The papercuts. Your grandmother made these beautiful papercuts. Beautiful little things. The whole time I was growing up.”

“I don’t remember.”

“Well, she had to stop on account of her arthritis.”

“Oh.”

“Yes. It really was quite a shame. But she had made so many beautiful things, and saved them in a box. Now that I’m retired, and for the first time able to do crafts – Bernie says I can say art, but it’s not art to me; maybe arts and crafts – I wanted to go back and look at my mother’s work. And it seems that Howard has prevented me from doing this.”

“They’ll turn up.” I remembered my tea and took a sip. It had cooled considerably, and was not pleasurable to drink.

“How do you know they’ll turn up? Maybe they won’t. And you didn’t answer my question.”

“What question?”

“You’re looking at going back to school?”

“What? No? They didn’t want me back.”

“Not there. I know. But I talked to Becca, I thought she said you had an interview at NYU?”
“Huh? Oh, no, that was something different. That bonehead Andrew must have gotten it confused.”

“He’s not a bonehead. Maybe he doesn’t know a whole lot about subjects like art… and I don’t care for his sense of humor. But he’s a go-getter. He’s becoming quite a successful young man.”

“No, sure, I like the guy.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’d go that far, myself… but he’s good for your sister. So you’re not going to apply to NYU?”

“Are you serious? There’s no way they’d let me into NYU.”

“Well, no, it might be a reach. But there are other schools. I went to Hunter, you know, in the city. It’s not such a bad school.”

“I know.”

“Well. So what are you doing? Have you been looking for work? You’re not sitting around smoking dope all day are you?” I wouldn’t have minded a joint, actually, after this conversation.

“No, no. I’m doing things, I was just on my out the door.”

“Oh, to where?”

“To talk to a guy. A friend of Dad’s.”

“One of Bernie’s friends? Who? Oh, did you call finally call that Mr. Clybourne, like Bernie suggested? I’m sure he could he help you find a job.”

“No, not Bernie. Alojzy. A guy who knew Alojzy.”

“Oh. Ah.”

“Yeah.”
“Issac. Isaac Edel. I don’t think that’s the best kind of person for you to be spending your time with. The kind of life your father led… it was attractive to me, when I was very young. He led me down a lot of roads I wouldn’t have gotten to go down otherwise.” Her voice had grown soft, dreamy. We had both noticed it, and she didn’t speak for a moment. I heard her sigh, build herself back up so she could tear him down. “Well, alleys, maybe. But there were dark places down there. There were reasons I had to get away from him. There were reasons I got you kids away from him.”

“He was always good to me.”

“What? Are you serious, Izzy? When he abandoned you – for the second time! – when you were a teenager, it broke your heart.”

“Broke my heart? I don’t think I was heartbroken.”

“You didn’t smile for six months.”

“So? I was a teenager. Listen. Mom. I’m trying to figure out what happened. I talked to that guy, Goldov.”

“Goldov?”

“The guy that sent the note about Dad dying.”

“Oh. Yes.”

“But did you hear anything else? From anyone? I mean, how do we even know he’s dead.”

“What?”

“Do we know for a fact my father is dead?”
“Yes. Yes we know. He’s dead. Your father’s dead. Of course he’s dead.”

“But how do you know?”

“Bernie checked it out. He’s a forensic accountant, after all, he finds out details all day long.”

“He called the hospital?”

“Yes, but first he called the Social Security Administration and gave Al’s S-S-N. It’s the quickest way. Even if Alojzy gave a fake name at the hospital – which he would have, if he thought he’d live to be given the bill – they’d fingerprint the corpse at the morgue, and his police record would pop up. They’d know who to declare dead.”

“I see. And you said he talked to the hospital too?”

“Yes. He tracked the death back to Coney Island Hospital. He spent two days in the hospital, before dying of heart failure. It was all in the records.”

“I see.” What she was saying made sense, and I certainly trusted Bernie’s competency. Still, I was eternally skeptical that these things written on paper could prove things about real people and their lives.

“I’m sorry, sweetheart, but he’d dead. He was your father, it’s true, but he wasn’t a very good one, and now he’s dead. Let him go. I let him go a long time ago. There’s no use chasing down any alleys for something that isn’t there.”

“Mom, I have to go.”

“Where, to hang out with Alojzy’s hoodlum friend?”

“Mom.”
“Lie to me. Tell me another. Tell me you’re going to speak to an admissions counselor at Hunter. Or to meet a nice Jewish girl for coffee.”

“Bye mom.”

I didn’t want to be late to meet this Timur character, and I rushed down the sidewalk. I knew my mother was right. Alojzy was dead. I wished I was rushing to meet Alojzy. I wished it was all in my control, that if I was quick enough, I could catch him.

As I crossed 1st Ave., a yellow cab, speeding to make the turn onto 87th St., almost struck me and another woman in the crosswalk. The woman jumped forward; I pivoted around the front fender of the cab as it stopped short. I punched downward into the hood of the car with both fists. The full weight of my body was behind the blows, and I swear I felt the metal dent.

“Fuck you!” I shouted, not looking back.

The cab, suddenly in less of a hurry, followed beside me down 87th. The driver was shouting and gesturing. I refused to give him the courtesy of turning my head to look at him. He was angry that I had hit his car, but I didn’t hear any authority in his voice. There was too much pleading.

I stopped and turned around. The car stopped short, skidding forward so that we were neck and neck. I leaned down towards the window. “If you get out of your car,” I said, “I’ll fucking kill you.” I was as surprised as the cab driver. I had never threatened anyone’s life before. I recognized the voice, though. It was Alojzy, as I’d heard him in numerous street interactions in Brooklyn. He was
gone now. It was time for me to stand up for myself. I looked right at the
cabdriver. He was bigger than me, but a lot older and a little flabbier. I hoped he
wasn’t as crazy I was. Maybe he was. I don’t know what life he’d led in Pakistan
or Bangladesh or wherever before he came here. Maybe the bastards had killed
his dad, too. I knew I wasn’t special. It didn’t matter. Right or wrong, I couldn’t
back down. “Drive away,” I said. He shrugged and drove away. Probably he had
kids of his own now, and couldn’t risk it. Fuck him, and fuck his kids too.

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“Izzy.” I turned around. The man facing me was a few inches shorter than me, and built like a weight lifter. Under his black blazer he wore a silk shirt with the top third of the buttons undone. I imagined the shirt had popped open when he flexed his muscles. It was strange, to see a short, balding, middle aged man who possessed such virility.

“You’re the man I spoke to on the phone?”

“Yes. I am Roman.” We shook hands. “Come.” He put a hand on my back. “Timur is waiting.”

Roman led me down a side street to a restaurant that looked closed. He pushed the door open, then held it for me to follow him inside. Though no light had escaped through the blacked out window, the restaurant itself was brightly lit. On the wall, Turkic warriors rushed heroically towards death. Up by the ceiling, on a muted flat screen TV, girls with long black hair twirled to computerized backdrops, while men waited for them, leaning against their Mercedes. At a small table against the side wall, a man with a long white beard and a man with a short black beard were drinking tea.

The only other occupied table was set in the back corner. At it was seated an elegantly dressed man with his back to the wall, sipping mineral water and scrolling through emails on his phone. He rose as I came in.
“Isaac! Welcome!” He came around the table and gave me a hug like an uncle would give you. We sat down, and the table was soon filled with platters of kebabs and onion, salads, big loaves of flat bread, and a pot of tea.

“Please, Isaac,” Timur urged me. “Eat. No, no, take more. You are my guest. Sayyid here will be insulted if you don’t partake of his cooking.” The white beard looked up from his tea and nodded in our direction. “As will I,” said Timur, placing his hand over his heart like he was pledging allegiance to the flag of the United States of America.

So I ate. The food was delicious. I didn’t eat meat very often, and I hadn’t known I’d been missing anything until my teeth tore through the tender cubes of lamb. The kebabs were served over beds of onion. I scooped up onions with slabs of bread, and the juice drenched onions tasted as good as the meat itself. Roman – who had produced a bottle of vodka from somewhere – advised me to pour vinegar on everything, to bring out the sweetness of the spices with a bit of the bitter.

“Listen, Mr. Timur–”

“Just, Timur. You didn’t try the veal kebabs.” Another tray of kebabs has appeared on the table.

“Oh, thank you, I’m stuffed.”

“Nonsense. Sayyid will be offended. Here, take.”

“Thank you.” I accepted some veal onto my plate. “But listen, Timur, thank you for very much for your hospitality here.”

“It is my pleasure!”
“The reason I called you. I wanted to ask you about my father’s storage space.”

“Ah, yes, I handled your father’s storage bill. It was the least I could do, after all the kind favors he had done for me at different times.”

“Well, uh, much appreciated. Do you know what the current status of the bill is? I mean, how soon I’d have to get the place cleaned out?”

“Oh, don’t worry about that. I handled the payments on an annual basis, so you’re good until the end of the year. And I’d be happy to handle next year as well if need be.”

“Oh, I don’t think that’ll be necessary. Thank you, though.” I didn’t think that it would take me more than a month or two to sell off Alojzy’s remaining stock, and get the space cleaned out.

“Of course. As I said, your father did a great many favors for me. On that subject, in fact, perhaps you could do one thing for me, as you happen to be going back the storage center?”

“Of course.

“Do you know Zoya?”

“I don’t believe so.”

“Her girls sell Soviet tee-shirts.”

“Oh, sure.”

“I have been meaning to get up to see her, and giver something, but perhaps you could bring it to her for me?”
“Of course. No problem.” I was happy to be trusted with a task. Roman passed me a thick envelope, which I tucked into my jacket. More platters of food appeared. Glasses were refilled.

“So, Isaac,” Timur asked, “Are you employed?”

“Not currently. I’ve just come back to the city recently. I’m still looking around.”

“Of course. What field are you looking around in?”

“I’m not sure. At school I mainly studied art history.”

“Ah, you’ve been to university! Excellent. And you know something of art.”

“A little.”

“Excellent. Excellent.”

“Could I ask you one more question?” The words were out of my mouth before I had fully made the decision to speak.

“Of course.”

“Do you know how my father died?”

“Yes. He died like a man.”

"Let us drink to that," said Roman, and refilled our water glasses with vodka. We raised them up. "To the memory of your father, Alojzy Edel," he toasted, and I drank it down in one gulp.

On the train ride back to Manhattan, I finished reading *The Yeshiva Bocher*. The student had grown old by the end of the last chapter. He had lived a
hard life and was dying in the poorhouse in Baghdad. As he took his last gasping breaths he noticed three letters traced in the thick dust by another dying old man. Hebrew letters, letters from the beautiful Aleph Beth he had forgotten long ago on the battlefields. A Bet, a Shin and a Tav. From those three letters, he put the whole alphabet back together in his mind, and from that he was able to assemble the whole of the Torah he had studied long ago in his youth.

With all his strength, he pulled himself to his feet. He took one step and found himself stepping back into the Shabbos dinner in Poland he'd been stolen from so many decades before. In the time it had taken him to live his life, only one minute had passed at the rabbi’s table. The traveling master winked at him, and poured him a small schnapps to settle his nerves.

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I took to sleeping in Alojzy’s storage space. I’d go up to Becca’s apartment once or twice a week, to shower, do laundry, eat food that wasn’t from a deli, and let my family know that I was alive, but other than that I stayed downtown. It was especially important to wake up in the storage space days when I was selling Alojzy’s books, so I could get out on the street as early as possible. There wasn’t really any money to be made in the morning hours, but it was necessary to get out and get a good spot, so you’d be well positioned for later in the day.

I had given the woman, Zoya, the sealed envelope, without looking inside it. She had simply taken it from me, said, “Okay,” then gone back to helping her girls sort their shirts. Still, from that point on, all the Russian girls looked me with recognition, if not respect. People on the street started to recognize me too. I came to know all the other booksellers by name. There was Asher, who I’d met the first day, and his friend, Roberto, who liked to play psychedelic rock on a tape deck smoke weed under his table. There was Steve Lesser, the Vietnam vet, who hadn’t gone to California after all, and the other Steve, who drove in from Jersey.

I got to know some of the other park fixtures as well. The homeless people, the hot dog vendors, the pot dealers. The undercover cops. The guys who acted more like undercover cops than the undercover cops, but were actually plainclothes NYU security guards. The street musicians who performed in the park for tips from tourists. One lean old man played a tenor saxophone in the
northeast corner of the park, Broadway tunes over a prerecorded string backing. He reminded me of my father’s friend Kurban Vileshchay, who used to play on the Q train.

The first time I met Kurban was when he pushed his way from the previous subway car into the one where my father and I were sitting. Back then, people passed between cars all the time; it wasn’t a big deal. You wouldn’t get a ticket. With one hand, Kurban pulled a luggage cart behind him, with a Casio keyboard blasting an auto-beat and chord progression. With his other hand, Kurban held a large wooden flute to his lips. The music was already playing when Kurban came through the doors; there must have been a moment when he was playing in the space between cars, for nobody to hear.

When Kurban saw my father, he nodded in recognition, but he kept playing, and didn’t come greet us until the song was finished and he had collected his hat-full of dollar bills and coins.

My father introduced me proudly to Kurban as his son.

“What kind of instrument is that, Mr. Vileshchay?” I asked.

“This, my young friend, is a balaban. I carved it myself from a single piece of mulberry wood.

“I know mulberry,” I said. “There is a big mulberry tree on King’s Highway.” The branches were too high to reach, but my father had lifted me up on his shoulders, and I had eaten until I was sick.

“Yes,” said Kurban, “I know that tree well. It has white berries.”

“Yeah!”
“The white berries are much more delicious than the red ones. Well, gentleman, I bid you a safe journey.” The little man tipped his cap, and crossed through the door into the next car. Through the window, we could see Kurban playing his song, but we couldn’t hear him. Then he moved forward and we couldn’t see him anymore either.

The second week I was out selling, I bought a bag of weed off a Rasta in the park named Malachi. I knew enough by then to know that he was an actual pot dealer, and not an undercover cop. I hadn’t gotten high since I’d been in New York, and because I was a bookseller Malachi offered me a twenty sack for fifteen, which sounded like a good deal. “The man in the street must look out for the man in the street, no?” I gave the old dread my three fives, expecting him to hand me a baggie in return. Instead, he nodded at a kid on a bike. I asked what was up, but Malachi said, “Have patience now.” Two minutes later, the cyclist returned. “Ah,” said Malachi, “Here is Merlin now.” I shook hands with Merlin, and he slipped the baggie into my hand.

I smoked some of the weed in the storage space that night, out of a diet Coke can, after stuffing the gaps in the door with rags. I expected it to be shit weed, and smoked a couple bowls in quick succession. It wasn’t bad weed at all, just slow and creeping, and twenty minutes after I smoked up, I was tweaking out. I became very paranoid, blitzed out of mind in my dead father’s cell. I convinced myself that the facility staff had smelled the weed through the vent, and had called the cops to come get me. I started thinking that some men my Father had
robbed a long time ago would come looking for him, and kill me when they found me in his place. I thought, for a moment, that Alojzy’s ghost might get inside my body and stop my heart. Then I decided his ghost was on my side, but I was still freaked out thinking about being alone with a ghost whose voice I couldn’t hear.

I stayed up all night, cowering in the corner of a storage space with Alojzy’s sawed-off rifle in my arms. I finally came down and passed out around five am. I woke up close to noon, by which time it was too late to go out selling. I flushed the rest of the weed down the toilet. I was done with that shit. It hadn’t been fun, and even if it had been, I didn’t want to let it cost me any more days of selling. It was my job now.

It was about a month later, on a Thursday, that I first met Rayna. I had gotten deeper into my routine, and I knew by now that Thursday’s were the best selling days. They’re the last full day of NYU classes, so the students are up and about and need schoolbooks, but it’s the end of their week so they’re more impulsive with their spending. Fridays are the worst; the students are hung over, and the weekend tourists haven’t rolled in yet.

I had spent the previous night, Wednesday, preparing my stock, to make the most of the Thursday. I sorted the boxes I took out on the street, checking which categories I was low on and what common titles were missing, and replenishing them from books in storage. Over the course of a couple weeks, I’d looked through all of Alojzy’s boxes and taken notes, and had a pretty good idea of what he had in back stock. In the process, I’d found a few more filled
sketchbooks, as well as found his cash stash, about sixteen hundred dollars, all together. I had initially planned to just run through Alojzy’s inventory, but the longer I spent on the street, and the more I started learning how to make money out there, the more began to see that buying was as much a part of the game as selling. The booksellers were generally pretty protective of their wholesale sources, and I didn’t try to develop my own connection. The last thing I wanted to do was bring even more boxes into the crowded unit. As I grew confident in my knowledge of what sold and what it sold for, though, I began to buy books from people who approached me on the street.

After restocking the street boxes, I’d gone ahead and loaded and tied up the cart, so when I woke up at eight in the morning, all I had to do was hit the can and get dressed, and I’d be ready to go. I’d given up my nice button down shirts; I went to work in just an undershirt, keeping one of Alojzy’s sweaters around to pull on if it got cool in the evening.

Mendy was already out on the street when I got there. I got my card tables set up to claim my territory, and asked Mendy to keep an eye on them while I ran over to the deli on Broadway. I bought hot tea and a butter roll for my breakfast, macaroni salad and a diet coke for my lunch, and a cream soda for Mendy. He hadn’t asked for the soda, but I knew the sugar was about all that kept him going through the day, and it was the only nice thing I knew how to do for him.

When I got back, a strange figure was setting up a table on the other side of me from Mendy. A fake deer-hide stretched across his massive back. A fur
cap with earflaps graced his head, and extended to a good six and a half off the ground.

“What’s that?” I asked Mendy, handing him the can.

“Oh, thank you, you shouldn’t have. I hope you didn’t feel obligated.”

“Not at all.”

“Good. That there is Edmund. He used to be a seller down here, but then he sort of drifted off from it. He still comes around though. He only lives up in Gramercy, I think, at that one SRO they still have up there. I guess he’s selling again. Come on, I’ll introduce you.” Mendy liked to introduce people, and I liked being introduced. We walked over. I saw that the man had only a couple of hardcover books on his table. The rest was bric a brac: A red bowling ball. Decorative glass bottles. Several ceramic birds.

“Edmund.” The man turned around. His unkempt grey beard blended with the synthetic fur of his hat. Dozens of vaguely Native American pendants dangled from his neck. No smile stretched across his troll-like face.

“Mendel,” he said. “Still out here in your strange short-pants outfits, I see.”

“Yeah. So. OK. I’d like to introduce you to someone. This here is Izzy. He sells out here now. These are his tables.” The man looked me up and down, like I was a stained shirt at a second-hand store, then abruptly jabbed a stout finger in my face.

“Izzy! What do you know about the New York Yankees?”

“Not much, I’m afraid.”
“Harrumph! Harrumph rumph rumph! They are a bunch of crooks, and they play like crap.” Having said his piece, he turned back to his work, which at the moment consisted of unwrapping a wooden lawn jockey ornament from faded newspapers.

I had thought that brief interview would be the extent of my conversations with Edmund, but I was very wrong. Mid-morning, he put an arm like a dead dog around my shoulder and directed my attention to a police car parked on Washington Square East, halfway up to Washington Place.

“You see how they’re watching me there?” The cops were facing away from us. I couldn’t see the one on the passenger side form where we were standing, but the one in the driver’s seat seemed to be eating a sandwich.

“Uh, I don’t know. I guess they could be.” I had already had a pretty good morning. I’d made a few early sales, and an NYU student who’d just been expelled – he didn’t say for what – sold me a whole crate of good books for twenty-five bucks. It was a lot of staples, Hegel and Locke and stuff, and all in mint condition. You could tell he’d never opened any of them.

“You’re damn right they could be! In fact, they are. They always got their eyes on me, those bastards. Like this one time I was walking right down here by Sheridan Square when this cop starts following me on his little scooter.

“I had a kitchen knife on my belt in a sheath. The cop says ‘What you got there?’ I say, ‘You know what I got here. You don’t protect me so I protect myself.’ He starts grabbing at my knife and manages to pull it out. I say ‘You got
what you wanted, now why don’t you leave me alone now?’ But he didn’t. He grabbed me, slammed me against the, wall handcuffed me.”

“Damn,” I said. Edmund ignored me and kept talking, his eyes focused on a larger, invisible audience.

“I seen him the other day when I came out the hotel where I live. He says, ‘You got any more knives for me Edmund?’ I say ‘I’m watching you, you bastard. I know what you are doing, and I will burn your ass.’”

Edmund started up again during the lunchtime rush. It pissed me off, not just because it was annoying to me, but because I was afraid he would drive away customers. This time, there wasn’t even a cop car, it was just an NYU security guard that set him off. The guard, Hakh, wasn’t even a bad guy. A lot of the guards were assholes, and got off on harassing homeless people and booksellers, but Hakh wasn’t like that. Mendy had introduced us a couple weeks back. He only worked as a security guard so he could take NYU classes for free, and when he came by it wasn’t to bother us, just to check out what books he had.

“”Lay off of Hakh, Edmund,” Mendy pleaded, “He’s just looking at the books.”

“Yes, lay off me, please.” Hakh said. “I’m not even on duty.”

“No, no, no.” Edmund slammed the butt of his walking stick against the ground. The sharp crack made everyone browsing at Mendy and my tables look up. No one was browsing at Edmund’s table. “They are all, always, on duty.
‘Off duty’ is just a trick. They can’t fuck with me cause I know their tricks and I will burn their asses.”

Hakh shook his head and walked off. I sold a customer a Chuck Palahniuk book. The guy had the collar of his polo shirt up over the collar of his blazer. He rolled his eyes towards Edmund as I gave him his change, grinning at the nut. I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to side with Edmund’s idiotic tirades, but I didn’t want to enter into a secret alliance with a yuppie against another street vendor.

“It’s in my blood.” Edmund shouted. “You go over to Warsaw, you’ll see there’s a big statue of the underground who killed police during the war. That was my relatives! There should be a statue of me like that. In fact, there will be, after I sue the city. They’ll have to put one up, solid marble, it’ll say: Edmund will burn your ass.”

By two thirty, the lunchtime rush had ended and Edmund had tired himself out. The block was peaceful. I took out my macaroni salad and a plastic fork began to eat. The few students walking down the street were all far away. They didn’t want anything from us. There was a little breeze. It would hold you up if you fell. You’d still fall, but not so hard.

A girl appeared at the table. Her long skirt fluttered and I had the feeling the wind had blown her up against the table, like it did with plastic bags sometime.
She looked down at the table but her eyes didn’t focus on any book. She looked familiar to me. Maybe I’d seen her around. I would’ve remembered more distinctly, I thought, because there was something very striking about her. It wasn’t that she was beautiful. Well, maybe she was a little beautiful, but not in a contemporary way. Sort of like a picture of Sarah Bernhardt in a book I hadn’t managed to sell. Not because she looked like Sarah Bernhardt but because she looked like a black and white photograph.

From her gaunt face, long black sleeves, and nervous nature I made the judgment that she was a junkie working up the nerve to sell me something. They find books in the trash, or sneak them off of coffee shop tables, and bring them by Fourth Street. The asking price is always based on the cost of a bag of dope in the projects on Avenue D, never the actual value of the book, so you can occasionally come away with a good deal. That being said, nine times out of ten it’s a waste of time, because they’re irrational and because they usually only come around with three or four books at a time, sometimes only one or two.

In my third or fourth week of selling, a tall junkie in a formless blue polo shirt, three sizes too big for him, flipped out on me when I wouldn’t give him twenty books for a shoebox full of Louis L’Amour books. I tried to explain that this was New York, people didn’t really read cowboy books, and even if they did I couldn’t pay more than five dollars for a small box of mass market paperbacks.

“Do you think I’m some kind of hick?” he asked. “I been in these streets for years and years.” He started ripping handfuls of pages out of the Louis L’Amour books and throwing the pages in the air.” I was disoriented by the paper
fluttering back down, and afraid that after he was done tearing the books apart, he’d turn on me. In the end, he lost interest and tromped off in search of a fix.

But this girl wasn’t holding anything at all to sell, not one book. She looked more like a ghost than a junkie, truth be told. As I studied her, Her stomach growled audibly. I grinned involuntarily. She blushed with genuine embarrassment, and tried to hide her face in a delicate hand.

“Are you hungry?” I asked her.

“Yes.”

“Would you like some of my food?” I held out my plastic container of macaroni salad.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t.”

“It’s OK, I have more than enough.”

“That’s kind of you. But no, my stomach….”

“It’s only macaroni salad. I don’t eat rich foods. It’s good. It’s only macaroni, some shredded vegetables. Just, macaroni, just prepared as a salad.”

“I could eat something like that, I think.”

“Sure you could.” She ate the whole thing, and thanked me, and then she was gone.

***
The girl started coming by occasionally. I’d buy extra food in the morning, just in case she’d show up. She liked bread, and bananas. She would eat, thank me, and then she’d run away. No, I never saw her run, just like I never saw her approach. It was more that she’d disappear when I turned my back. As the days and weeks went on, she started coming more often, and sitting for longer and longer before she’d disappear. I felt like I was taming a wild animal.

After a while, she’d even talk to me a little. “You enjoy being around all of these books?” she asked once.

“Yeah. I like them, OK. I mean, it’s because they were my dad’s that I have them, not because I like them. And now it’s a business, I have them to sell them. So I’m not attached to them. But I do like them okay.”

“By my dad were a lot of books too.”

“Yeah? Like these?”

“No. They weren’t so colorful. And none had paper covers.”

“What kind of covers did they have?”

“Black and leather mostly. Some of them were red, or green. But black mostly.” There was some tinge to her voice that was familiar but from across a great distance. A perfume they don’t make anymore. “Blue and black,” she said.

“Were they novels?”

“I don’t know.”
“I mean, were they story books? Or scientific books? Did they have pictures?” I normally didn’t ask her so many questions. I was afraid if I said the wrong thing she would disappear right before my eyes, and maybe for good. But she intrigued me, and I wanted to know more about her.

“No. No stories. No science. No pictures. Law.” I wanted to ask more, but I was interrupted by a customer. I could have ignored him, but it seemed like he was interested in buying a fifteen dollar illustrated Blake book, and I wanted the fifteen dollars. I had decided I was trying to make a go of the business, and turn a profit so I could support myself. The guy didn’t buy the book, and when I turned back around the girl was gone. She hadn’t said much, but each sentence stayed with me for the rest of the day. I tried to hold the words in my mind as tightly as I could, without squeezing them into nothing.

There was always been some resonant overtone to her voice, some echo that reminded me of my mother’s family. Thinking over the phrase she’d used, “by my dad,” I finally realized what it was: Despite being so young, the girl had a slight Yiddish accent.

***

One day the Yiddish girl appeared and asked me, “Do you sleep out here, with your books?” I hadn’t seen her for a few days, and had been getting worried. Business was slow, because it was a Friday, and because Steve Lesser, who set up at the corner by LaGuardia Place, was clearing out his stock. He was moving out
to California, which was great for him, but he was selling all his paperbacks at
two bucks a pop, or three for five, and undercutting everyone else’s business. I
had nothing to do but sit and read volume four of Schuster’s ‘Fantasies of The
Jews,’ and wonder if old Moses would have been better off if he’d married a
Jewish girl, and speaking of Jewish girls, wonder if I’d see the girl from the street
again, and if she was okay. Then I did see her, standing in front of my table,
looking more disheveled than I’d ever seen her, asking with wide-eyed sincerity,
“Do you sleep out here, with your books?”

“No. I pack the books up and take them to a storage space.”
“What kind of place is a storage space?”
“It’s a big closet, with a lock on the door. Inside a big warehouse.”
“And you sleep there, too? With your books?”
“Yes, I have a little mattress, and I sleep on the floor, next to the books.”
“That sounds safe.”
“It is safe. The walls are made of metal, and there are three locks on the
inside of the door.”
“This sounds like a very good place.”
“It is pretty good. Where do you sleep?” She shrugged, looked away.
“You have somewhere to sleep, don’t you?”
“Well, I slept in tree, and it was nice, for a while.”
“A tree?”
“Yes, a tree. In the park, down there.” She pointed east, towards
Tompkins Square. “There is a big branch, that crooks downward, and has room
enough for me inside it. I would climb up after dark, and no one would know I
was there. The police would lock the gates, and I would be safe.”

“What happened? It’s not safe anymore?

“No.” She shook her head. “I don’t think so. There’s a man who comes
over the gate in the nighttime. He is too fat too climb the tree, but he stands at the
bottom and grins up at me. It is a wicked grin. The past two nights he has done
this. If he catches me I’m done.”

“So where are you going to sleep now?”

“Last night I didn’t sleep at all. I walked around all night. Quickly, so no
one could catch me. I’m very tired now. I can’t walk around so quickly for
another night.”

“I wouldn’t think so.”

“I know people sleep on the subway train, but I’m afraid.”

“You think someone will get you down there?”

“No. Yes, but it’s not that. The subway is underground, and makes
twists and turns. If I fall asleep, and don’t see where I’m going, the train might go
on a different track and carry me down to Sheol.”

“Yes, I know. I often think the same thing.”

“Don’t tease.”

“I don’t. I’m not. I don’t see who’s driving the train. It could be a devil.
The ground could open up further, they’ve already opened it too far. Come stay
in my room. You’ll be safe there.”

“I don’t know.”
“You see me. You know me.”

“I need my bag.”

“Where is it?”

“Hidden in the tree branch.”

“Go and get it. The fat man won’t be there?”

“No. He comes in the dark.”

“Good. Go and get your bag. And here,” I handed her a twenty from my bankroll. “Go and get us some food. Some bread, and good things, for us to have for supper. Then come back here before dark, and you’ll sit with me while I pack up. And you’ll come back to my storage space with me and the books. I’ll lock the door from the inside and we’ll be safe and you can sleep.”

“The other men, they call you Izzy.”

“Yes.”

“Is that your real name?”

“It’s short for Isaac.”

“My name is Rayna. Will you be here when I come back, Isaac?”

“Yes, Rayna. I’ll be here.”

That night, we lay down next to each other on the mattress in our clothes. She had been nervous when we got into the storage space, looking over her shoulder and jumping at every sound, and I assumed it was because she’d be locked in alone with me, a man she didn’t know very well. I tried to give her as much as space as I could, but as it turned out, she became calmer once I locked
the locks and came to sit beside her. We ate the bread and cheese and hardboiled eggs she’d bought from the Korean green grocer, and washed it down with a few sips of brandy from the bottle I’d taken to keeping beside my mattress.

“Thank you for your hospitality,” she said.

“It’s my pleasure. You’re the first guest I’ve had here.”

“It feels safe here.”

“It is.”

“Have you lived here for a long time?”

“No. Well. I guess it’s been more than a month and a half now. Is that a long time? But I guess I officially live at my sister’s. But I feel like this is where I really live. You know what I mean?”

She didn’t respond. She had closed her eyes and drifted down across the bed. It was warm and stuffy in the storage unit, and I normally slept in my underwear, but I was afraid if I took off my clothes she would think I was trying to have sex with her and freak out, so I left them on. I woke her up, trying to squeeze my way onto the mattress. She snapped up with a start, recognized me, then lay warily back down.

“I’m sorry,” I told her, “I only have the one mattress. There’s no other space. We have to share.

“This is no problem. Back home I had to share my bed with both my sisters.”

“Where is home?”
“Brooklyn. Boro Park. It seems so long ago.” With that she was asleep.

The poor thing had been walking around for two days straight. I was tired myself. It was always exhausting to spend twelve hours out on the street, even if you were standing still for a good eight of them. I leaned over her to turn off the light, but stopped short before I turned the switch.

So close to me, in the glow of the electric lantern, I knew where I’d seen her before, why she’d seemed so familiar the first time we met: She was the girl from Galtuth’s painting I’d seen in Coney Island, the girl thrown from the elevated track in nineteen-twenty something, and dashed to death on the pavement. The painting had seared itself in my mind. I called it up, and examined it. It supposed it was possible I was going back and grafting her face onto the memory. But no, it was her. I knew it was. I was sharing the bed with a ghost. Or had she come back to life. Or she’d never lived before, was conjured from imagination by M. R. Galuth, and had just now walked out of the painting. I didn’t know about such things, other than that they did happen. I turned off the lamp and lay back down. I put my arm around her waist, because there was nowhere else to put it, and soon we were both sleeping the sleep of the dead.

***
Rayna shook me awake early the next morning. “Isaac!” She pleaded.

“Isaac, wake up!”

“What is it, Rayna? Are you okay?”

“What is going on? Such clatter. Like stones against metal, from all directions!”

“Huh? Oh, don’t worry about all that. It’s just other street vendors starting their day. Getting their carts out. I’m used to it, now.”

“I see. This makes sense. But I guess I thought… maybe it was pursuers.”

“No. Just street vendors. There are no pursuers.” I was stiff with morning wood, and strained against the jeans I’d slept in. I didn’t want to her see my erection. She might be creeped out. Or she wouldn’t be, and I would be embarrassed. I hoped it hadn’t brushed or pushed against her in the bed. I didn’t want her to think that I was a pursuer. “I’m going to sleep a little longer. If you’re OK.”

“Don’t you have to bring your pushcart out today?”

“Today?” What was today? Saturday. I was planning to go out, as a matter of fact, because Saturday was a good day to make money. Tourists came down to the Village. You could sell them every Kerouac and Ken Kesey book you had, and name your own price. “No,” I told Rayna. “Not today. It’s Shabbos. There’s no need to work on Shabbos.”
“Really? Your street cart is shomer Shabbos?”

“Yes.”

“But you pushed the cart home well after dark last night.”

“Yes. It’s true. It was an infraction. It was wrong of me. But Shabbos is one sixtieth of paradise.” I felt the erection slipping away as I spoke. I would be decent by the time I stood up. “We can still salvage at least an eightieth of paradise, I think or a hundredth. One percent of paradise. That’s something.”

The lights in the storage facility were all motion activated, which is annoying when you’re sitting still, working on your stock and they click off, but meant that I didn’t have to further break Shabbos in front of Rayna by turning on any light switches. But when we stopped by the green grocer to buy a picnic feast, I realized I’d have to handle money. I apologized but she just laughed.

“I’m glad you aren’t working today, but the rules don’t really matter. I don’t live in my father’s house any more.” She chose pickles, hardboiled eggs, plums, three chocolate bars and a liter bottle of Fanta. I chose a big container of macaroni salad, an equally large container of a different kind of pasta salad that had pesto in it, a wedge of brie, a loaf of crusty bread and a bottle of wine. It would have been cheaper to go to the grocery store, but I didn’t know that either of us could handle being in a place like that, with the lights and people and aisles, and anyway I had plenty of cash.

We went to Washington Square Park to have our picnic, sitting in the far Northwest corner so none of the other booksellers would see me. We spread an army blanket I’d brought from the storage space, and laid out our bounty. We
nibbled. Squirrels and pigeons came too close. They were not afraid of people, and they wanted a bite of our food.

“I knew a boy,” said Rayna. “Who thought he was a pigeon.”

“Yes.”

“I sat, enthralled. This was the most amount of words I had ever heard Rayna speak. It was clear that she was repeating a story she had heard—perhaps even told—many times before. Still, I was happy that she was telling it to me.

“All day long he would hang out in the park with the other pigeons, naked, pecking around. There’s these stone tables in the park there? With chessboards for tabletops? Where old men play, sometimes? He’d go around and around the base, all day long. He would eat chips that kids dropped on the ground. It was very embarrassing to his family. They were able to get him back inside at night, but only by shooing him in with a broom. He’d coo at his mother—who he’d always loved—and eat the challah she baked, so long as she ripped it into little pieces and tossed them under the table.

“The Hat King tried everything. He brought in the boy’s old friends from yeshiva to visit, but he didn’t seem to recognize them. He brought in Rabbis, gypsy hypnotists, doctors with theories. What do you call them? Analysts? But
none of them could convince him. He wouldn’t respond but with a peck and a flapping of his wings. Arms.

“What could the family do? They kept on in as best a manner as they could. They build a nice coop for the boy to sleep in, and threw scraps from their nice meals on the ground. They had to get rid of the family cat, because who could bear to watch their son chased around the house by a little pussycat?

“Then, one day, a man came to the door. A stranger. He said that he just arrived in the neighborhood, but had already heard about the boy from the neighbors. He thought he could help. Sure, said the father, come on in, be my guest.”

“So the man took off his clothes, got down on the floor, and started pecking away under the table. The son came up to him and said, “What the heck are you doing?”

And he said, “What do you mean what am I doing? I’m a pigeon, like you, anyone can see that. I’m pecking at crumbs, like I always do.”

“Well, listen pal, you don’t look like any pigeon I’ve ever seen.’

“Well, you don’t look like any pigeon I ever seen either. But if you say you are, you are. I guess we’re both of us just a couple of pigeons.’

“I guess we are.’ The two pigeons became intimate, sharing their coop at night, walking in circles together during the day.

“After a few days, though, the man appeared under the table with his clothes on.
“‘Say,’ said the son, ‘I’ve never seen a pigeon wearing human clothes. You are sure you’re a pigeon?’

“‘Coo!’ Said the man. ‘You know me, friend. Of course I’m a pigeon. Is there a rule that says a pigeon can’t wear clothes if he wants to? Can’t we pigeons do anything we want? What kind of pigeon would be so insecure he would think that wearing clothes made him less of a pigeon?’ The son was skeptical, but the days grew colder, and he eventually pulled on some clothes himself.

“Then, one morning, the man sat at the table and ate breakfast with the rest of the family. Again, the son confronted him, questioned his pigeon-ness. But again, the man argued back, saying, ‘Is there a rule a pigeon can’t sit at a table? Maybe it’s a more comfortable way for a pigeon to enjoy his meal.’ The son acquiesced, and pulled himself up into a chair for the first time in over a year.

With every new action, the man convinced the Hat King’s son with the same argument. ‘Is there a rule a pigeon can’t drink wine, if he likes the taste of it? And is there a rule a pigeon can’t converse with humans, if he has something to add to the conversation?’ And so on.

“The son was never cured. He never stopped believing that he was a pigeon. But he did come to believe that he was a very clever pigeon, and that it was all right for a clever pigeon such as himself to take a human wife, and run a very successful hat company, making money off the humans.”

“What happened to the other man?” I asked. “The helper?”

“He went away to help other sick people.’
I poured us each a cup of wine. The police liked to give people a hard
time down there, so we kept the wine bottle in a paper bag, and drank out of
coffee cups. We sipped our wine and lay in the grass very near each other and
were calm. I didn’t know if Rayna was real, if we were really here together, if the
ground itself was solid. I didn’t know that I wasn’t a pigeon or a squirrel, who
just thought he was a human man. It felt nice, though, to be sitting there, in the
grass with Rayna, sipping wine. I knew that much.

I leaned forward, and tried to kiss her. She pulled back like a scared
animal. Her face stretched with pain, and she wrapped her arms around herself.

“I’m sorry!” I told her. “I didn’t mean anything but it. You just looked
very pretty. I was afraid that I had broken the spell.

She was very quiet for an unbearably long minute, and then she said, “You
tell a story now,” she said.

“No. I don’t think I know any stories.” I knew a few, but I was afraid of
telling the wrong one. It was clear that I didn’t understand the rules here.

“None?” Pleading. All she wanted was to hear a story.

“No. Well.” I thought of one of my father’s stories, one he told Becca and
me several times when were kids. “I know a story my father told me.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, when my father was a little boy he lived in a big new post-war
apartment building in Warsaw. One of his friend’s dad was a building engineer,
and he told the boys that the cellar of the original apartment building as still there,
underneath the new basement. All of the boys were interested, and they made
plans to go down and explore. When it came down to it, though, all the boys were scared to crawl down into the dark sub-cellar. They all dared each other to go first, and only my father stepped forward. He thought the others would follow him, but they were all scared and they all ran off. My father found himself alone in the dark cellar.

“All of a sudden, something jumped out at him from the darkness!”

“What was it?” asked Rayna, with genuine concern.

“A devil!”

“Oh no!”

“Yes. My father was scared at first too, but then he saw that it was just a little devil, and not very strong at that. My father wrestled at school, so it only took him a couple minutes to overpower the devil and grab him by the toe.”

“My father held the devil upside down, and said, ‘I expected more of a fight from a devil!’ ‘Well,’ the devil said, ‘Twenty-five years ago, things would have gone a good sight differently! I can tell you that! But you see, a Jewish devil like me feeds off the fears and doubts of Jews. In the good old days, there was a whole building and a whole courtyard full of religious Jews here. They were full of fear and doubt. The more pious they were, the more doubt. But, then, it came to pass that there were no Jews here at all. I nearly starved to death.

“ ‘I am very grateful for this new housing project the government has made. There are no religious people left, but there are a few Jews tucked here and there, in one apartment or another, and there are bits of faith – and bits of doubt –
tucked in all of their hearts. There is enough sustenance for me to survive, at least.’

“‘Now,’ said the devil, how about letting me go?’ ‘What’s in it for me?’ asked my father. ‘If you set me free,’ said the devil, ‘Then I’ll be your slave and do your bidding. I will do all your chores and all of your homework for three years.’ So, my father set the devil free, and never had to do one page of homework, or carry any trash or coal, the rest of the time he was in grammar school.’

“Your father was a man who consorted with and made deals with devils?” Rayna asked me, frightened.

“Yes, but only little ones.”

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Chapter 11

Rayna sort of cleaved to me after that. She didn’t have anywhere to go, and I didn’t want her to go. I didn’t try to kiss her again for a whole week. This time she pulled away again, but not so fiercely. It was okay. I liked having her close to me, even if she didn’t want to kiss and touch. And anyway, aside from the fact that I liked having her around on a personal level, she became a big help to me in the business. The books and the money were more than I could keep organized on my own. Her practicality made her seem less otherworldly. She didn’t mention her past, other than very vague references to her sisters and religious rituals, and I pushed the question of her origins from my mind. I didn’t think about Alojzy so much either. For once, I was happy to live in the present.

We spent a Friday afternoon going through the stock for the weekend. I climbed up on a stepladder, to look through a box of books from the Classics of Western Spirituality line. They were big sellers. Rayna sat on the ground, with a box we’d pulled off the cart.

“Do we have a St. Augustine?”

“Yes.”

“Anabaptist Writings?”

“Yes.”

“Apocalyptic Spirituality?”

“No. Hand me that one.”

“How about Hildegard of Bingem?”
“Hall…?”

“Hil-de-gard.”

“Oh. Yes. Go on.”

“Ibn ‘Ata’ Illah?”

“No.”

“Here. Rabbi Kook?”

“Yes. Who was he?”

“Kook? A Rabbi. In Palestine. He was like a Litvak and a Hasid at the same time.”

“Oh, that’s good.”

“Yes. Manahem of Chernobyl?”

“No, we need that one. Listen, Isaac, after these, should we take a look at the Penguin Classics?”

“Absolutely.”

We worked hard. Our accomplishment was measured in the three empty water boxes we cut down and recycled when we were done. The street boxes were all fully stocked; the empty spaces stuffed with extra Vonnegut and Burroughs books.

In the late evening, we walked up into the Village to buy some good bread from the Italian bakery. I went into the market and bought us some olives and cheese and hummus and candy. These were the things we liked to eat. We went back home and before we ate, Rayna said the prayers and lit a tea light. The first time she did that I was afraid it would set off the fire alarm, but it was OK.
After dinner, we sat on a bench out on Sixth Avenue, by the statue of General José Gervasio Artigas, the father of Uruguayan independence. There were electric lights around the Artigas statue, and I read to Rayna from Caravan of Cats, a book we’d discovered in the storage space. She had been attracted by the cover of the slim hardback, which portrayed, in the style of an Orthodox icon, a lion thrashing as it died from the spear sticking out of its chest. According to the note at the beginning of the book, Caravan of Cats was the translation of a work by Farid Shenouda, who was an assistant zookeeper at the zoo in Cairo in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Shenouda was from a devout Coptic family, but practiced his own personal religion, a form of atavistic animism. His few friends were British zoologists. He was killed by a mob loyal to King Fuad in 1922, possibly because of his colonial associations, possibly because of his fanatical ant-monotheistic and anti-monarchist beliefs, or possibly by chance.

Caravan of Cats is a book-length poem, telling the historical saga of the lions of the Near East, as seen from the perspective of the domesticated cats of Egypt. In the time of the Kingdoms, the lions – who were known as the guardians of the Eastern and Western horizon – lived where the lush land met the desert, and were admired from afar by their tamed and diminutive cousins. As the desert grew, the realm of the lions shrank, and the prides dwindled. The few lions that remained were hunted to extinction by the pharaohs. Amenhotep III killed over one hundred lions in one day of hunting alone. The families of the court cats who were mummified in Amenhotep’s tomb were shamed by this knowledge. The last
lion of Egypt died out in the desert, not from a king’s arrow but of starvation. Her flesh was torn apart by the hated and cowardly jackals.

In time, the cats of Cairo heard tell of the Lions of Judea. A caravan set out to the East, crossing the Sinai and entering into Gaza, where they were fed and housed by the monks of the monastery of Saint Hilarion, a few of whom even knew the secret language of cats. Taking leave of the kind humans, they headed north into Judea where they were graced with an audience with the Lions of Judea on the banks of the Jordan. This tribe was made up of lean Asiatic lions, who were much smaller than the Barbary lions of Egypt had been, but strong and proud nonetheless. Alas, these prides perished too, with the onslaught of the European crusaders. In the end, it was left to a humble mouser of St. Catherine’s Monastery of Mount Sinai to put the history of the Levant lions down on parchment.

After I’d read to Rayna about the lions for a while, we came back inside and went to bed. It was early, not quite ten o’clock yet, but we wanted to be ready to get up and get out onto the street in the morning. We went to sleep nestled together. I put my arm around her and held her close. Her hair filled my face, but I didn’t mind. I gave her a little kiss on the back of the head. These were the only kisses that were allowed, but they were enough.

***
Chapter 12

Saturday was not generally a day of rest on West Fourth St., especially a Saturday like this one, when the sun was out, and tourists and first-semester freshman were wandering the streets. Mendy was out, of course, and Assid too. There was Asher and Roberto, and both Steves. Edmund, thankfully, had never returned. There were others, who didn’t have their own books, but helped out. There was Assid’s girlfriend, Soon-ok, and Jersey Steve’s wife, whose name I never learned. Asher had his silent friend Milton, (he was a vet too, a Marine apparently, because Steve Lesser referred to him as “that stupid Jarhead.”), and Mendy had Spider helping him out. Spider still referred to me as “the boy.”

Then there was Lionel and Sonya, a homeless couple who hung around the plaza drinking beer. The plaza was actually a public alley running from 4th to Bleeker that NYU had appropriated, bricked over and filled with tables and chairs. The streets had parried the University’s thrust, and the people that inhabited the park soon claimed the plaza as their turf too. Lionel, in particular, preferred the plaza to the park, because a rock singer whose band Lionel had once roadied for was now a fixture in the crackhead scene in the park’s Southwest corner, and Lionel said he had heard enough of the man’s shit for one lifetime. Lionel worked for most of the booksellers at time or another – he had been in the Coast Guard, and was very good at tying knots – but not on mornings like this one, when he was already too drunk. He kept offering me a swig of his Steel Reserve, which I declined. I never saw Sonya offer anyone a sip of her beer, or do
a lick of work for herself or anyone else, but on this particular day she brushed and braided Rayna’s hair, while Rayna cleaned and priced stack of books. We were selling a lot of books, and had to keep getting new stock ready to put out on the table.

We didn’t sell any of the expensive books I’d brought out – three different full translations of *Remembrance of Things Past* (or in one edition, *In Search of Lost Time*), Reich’s *The Function of the Orgasm*, an Aleister Crowley tarot deck – but the West Fourth Street standards kept flying off the table. Kerouac, Tom Robbins, Bukowski. Kids who were new to the city picked up *Bright Lights, Big City* and *Slaves of New York*. Suburban women picked up Jodi Picoult novels for the train ride back to Jersey. Many young NYU students believe there is a place for them in the theatre; Sam Shepard, Edward Albee, and Lee Strasberg pranced off the table.

“I’ll give you ten dollars,” a professor type said, tossing the bill on the table, and gesturing to a stack of paperbacks he’d assembled.

“You’ll give me?” I said. “You’ll give me? It’s not an issue of what you’ll give me,” I said, “But about what I’ll take. And I aint taking your shit. Get the hell out of here.”

“Don’t you want to make a sale? Don’t you want my money?”

“Feh,” I said. “I’ll do without it.”

Sonya and Lionel and Spider went off at two-thirty to get a meal at the Jewish Center. Spider didn’t like that the Jews made you go through a metal detector to get inside, but they all agreed that it was the best free meal in the area,
much better than the Methodist Church, or the soup kitchen on the West Side. I was happy to see Lionel and Sonya leave. They were fun, but they were distracting, and by that time of the afternoon, tourist traffic was in full swing. Rayna and I had books to sell.

***

We arrived on W. 4th St. one Sunday morning to find Mendy standing on a milk crate like a statue of Aegeus, his beard blowing in the wind, his eyes fixed on a distant point.

“Mendle,” said Rayna, “Are you OK?”


“What’s wrong?”

“The police are destroying Roberto’s book’s. See?” We did see, down at the far corner, that men in green sanitation uniforms were throwing Roberto’s books into the back of a trash truck. Roberto had no storage space; in the evenings he wrapped a tarp over the table, fastened it with packing tape, and took his chances. The jaw of the truck came down and crushed six water boxes worth of paperbacks.

“His books,” said Rayna. “They can’t do that to his books.”

“Yes, Raynele,” said Mendy. “I’m afraid they can. They shouldn’t be able to, but they are.

“But it’s wrong,” said Rayna.

“Yes,” said Mendy. “But these people don’t care. I mean, look, the Nazis in Germany. They burned all the books. Then they burned all the people. Guys I
grew up… the things they did in Vietnam, they burned people too. To sell books, that’s a First Amendment thing. But the Constitution, that’s more paper for the trash truck.

“We can’t do anything about it?” I asked. “There’s no legal recourse?”

“There was some lawsuits by a group of vendors. Now, in New York, sometimes you can have your First Amendment rights. Unless they throw the lawsuit papers in the trash truck too. That’s why NYU security waits until the books are unattended, and calls the city to sent the sanitation guys. It’s not written up as a vendor issue, with tickets issued, and a voucher for the seized merchandise. If your books are vouchered, they send them to this storage facility in Queens where you can go claim them. Theoretically. It’s the same place bicycles go, when the police clip locks. It’s classified as seized property, so there are some personal property rights still intact with that. But if they decide to call it refuse, rather than merchandise, than it’s no longer an issue of personal property or the First Amendment issue for them. Then it’s a waste disposal issue. That’s how they always saw it from the start, I guess.”

“So what can we do?” I’d grown up thinking I had rights. My father had tried to disabuse me of this notion, but Long Island is a powerful illusion.

“We can’t do anything. The First Amendment offers you nothing. It is predicated upon the Second Amendment, which also we don’t have. Gun control is not a right wing/ left wing thing. It’s a rich/ poor thing. Us working people, they took our guns from us, now they can take our books. Ludlow, for god’s
sakes! They’ve always taken our labor. That’s why they hate us. Because we
don’t work for them. They can’t leave you with nothing. Nothing.”

“But still,” said Rayna. “They should leave the books alone.”

“Yes,” said Mendy. “They should.”

A curse had been cast on the street. By three in the afternoon, Rayna and I
had only made forty dollars, and decided to pack it in. When we left, Mendy was
still sticking it out.

I saw Roberto a couple days later, coming down 4th St. from Sixth
Avenue.

“I saw what happened, man,” I said. “The other day.” He was walking
with his head up, enjoying the warm sunshine on his skin. He had little smile on
his face. I guessed he hadn’t heard, and wanted to head him off and break the
news before he got to his corner.

“Huh? Oh, my books.” He took off his sunglasses. There was a small
cut on his cheek; for some reason it was covered with scotch tape, not a band-aid.
“Yeah,” he said with a shrug. “Snap, crackle pop.”

“You’re not upset?”

“I guess I could be. I mean, yeah, it sucks. But hey, easy come, easy go.”

It was true, Roberto’s books were for the most part curb salvages. He noticed
Rayna, and winked at her, but she looked away. Roberto looked pained. I was
afraid that Rayna had offended him, but then it occurred to me that he was more
upset about the books then he let on.

“What’re you going to do now, man?” I asked.
“Oh, shit, I don’t even know. I guess maybe it’s about time I headed back down to Florida. I haven’t seen my sister in a year. I don’t know, though. I really don’t know.” He surveyed the street and the park, then put his shades back on. He stuck out his hand, “Well, if I don’t see you.” We shook hands, and he bopped on down the street.

***

My own books spent their nights safe and sound with us in the storage space. Timur kept on paying the bill. I didn’t speak to him or Roman, but I did a few more favors for them. One time Zoya came to me, and asked me to hold two boxes in my storage space for a week. She make it clear each time that she was asking for Timur, not for herself. I observed the power that Zoya held over her girls, and suspected she was a witch, but that was none of my business. I was happy to be able to help Timur. Another time, an elegantly dressed woman dropped an envelope off at my table. Attached was a note from Roman asking me to hold it for two days, then hand it off to a man in a tracksuit who came and asked for it. Sure enough, two days later, a man in the tracksuit appeared and asked for “the title Roman had recommended.” I made sure to not remember what either of these people looked like. I never looked in the box, I never looked in the envelope, and I didn’t mention any of it to Rayna. I was proud to contribute, and earn my keep. I was proud to show that I could take care of business, and I was proud to show that I could keep my mouth shut.

***
Asher reappeared on W. 4th St. one Monday, after an absence of a couple weeks. I had never sure, from that first day I came down to the street, if he ever remembered who I was. He would look over in the direction of me and my table without seeming to register that he saw anything at all. This day, though, he walked right up to me, and his eyes gripped mine completely.

“I was up in Central Park,” he said. “Up there in Central park, near the pond and the street and the street and the pond. I was all set up.”

“You were selling up there?” I asked.

“Selling. Yeah. Selling everything. The people walked by, they looked at me. They looked at, you know, what I had, they didn’t understand what I had. All these things. For my mother.”

“You were selling thing for your mother?”

“What the fuck do you know about my mother, man? I mean, who told you about her?” The anger was only a quick flash; his face sank back to sadness.

“I mean, look, man, the shrine. OK, it was a shrine for my mother. I built it up for her. But I wanted to be pure, so I sold some things. Some other things are left. I need to get rid of all of them.” He began to pull things out of his pocket. A handful of pens. Some string. A piece of fabric that looked like it had been ripped off his flannel over shirt. Then he pulled off the shirt, almost losing his balance as he worked each arm out of its sleeve, and threw the whole thing on the ground. He tried his pockets again, but there was nothing left. “There’s no
money. You can’t have money. You can’t. You can’t handle it. And you have to rent your shirt.”

“Rent your shirt?”

“Rent it? Fuck no. Sell it! Give it away!” He reached his hand into one of the holes in his Lynyrd Skynyrd tee-shirt and pulled, ripping the shirt nearly in half. He got his hand tangled up, and frustrated, pulled the whole shirt off and threw it on the ground. He stood barechested and proclaimed, “I have to go to my storage space and get the rest of their stuff. I have to get rid of all of it. It all has to be pure for her. I’m going to sell everything. The people walk by. They understand what I had. All these things. For my mother. I’m going to build her a shrine. I haven’t slept for two days. I don’t sleep. You sleep on the floor, by the coffin. No mattress allowed. I have to build the shrine. For my mother.”

“Asher,” I said. “Maybe you should get some rest before you try to build anything.”

“What? What?” He looked at me sharply. The loop had been broken, for a moment. I felt guilty for interfering. “I can only sleep on the ground. I have to rent the garments. I’m sitting shiva for my mother. I’m going to build her a shrine. Up at Central Park. Are you paying your respects?”

“Yes,” I said. “I pay my respects to your mother.”

‘Yit'gal v'yit'kadash,” said Rayna. She had shied away when Asher approached, but now she stood beside me. “Come on, you can say it.” She stood upright and looked him in the eye. She was in her element, speaking to the dead. “Sh'mei raba....” She waited for Asher to start chanting with her. He looked at
her and blinked. His mouth opened as if about to form the Hebrew words, then snapped shut. He picked a few objects out of his pile and stuffed them into the pockets of his shorts. He picked up the ripped Skynyrd shirt, and tied it around his head like a turban. He looked at Rayna. He looked at me. His eyes were filled with confusion. He turned and walked off through the plaza, towards W. 3rd St.

Mendy came over and asked what it had all been about.

“He was really worked up,” I said. “Manic, like. Freaking out.”

“Yes,” said Rayna. “He was sad because his mother died. He’s sitting shiva. His behavior can be forgiven, in these seven days.”

“The thing is,” said Mendy, “Asher’s mother has been dead for three years.”

I went and sat down beside Rayna on the curb. There were tears in her eyes. I wondered if it was just that Asher’s behavior had upset her, or maybe she had a dead mother of her own to think of. I imagined my own mother dying. I didn’t feel like crying, much less going crazy and tearing up my clothes. I wonder if that meant that I was cold hearted, or if it just meant that I didn’t have a very good imagination. My father had died. I hadn’t cried. But I thought about him all the time. Maybe if I cried, I wouldn’t think about him so much.

I asked Alojzy once about his own mother. All he said was, “In Israel, she died.” That’s how it was. You’d get answers to your questions, but not really the sort of story you could do anything with. Asher’s junk was still lying on the sidewalk. The crumpled flannel shirt looked like dead dog lying on its side. I
thought of a story my father had told me when I’d asked him another question: where he’d gone when he left us.

“After your mother and I were split up? I went upstate to worked at the Selkirk train yard. These railroad jobs are very hard to get in America, but my old Rasar – that would be like Master Sergeant in the US Army – had become a big shot with Zim Shipping, working out of Virginia headquarters, so he called in a favor for me with his contacts at Conrail.

“Let me tell you what it has been like: One time, they have us cleaning up a derailment just about thirty, forty miles south of the yard. Engineer fucked up, went off the rails. It was tankers mainly, that they had been pulling, and there were pools of spilled chemicals all over the ground. A lot of it was bound for the Fisher-Price toy factory. They were still manufacturing the toys in America. They were still a couple years from going over to China.

“It was the middle of the night, in nowhere upstate New York, but from somewhere comes this scruffles dog. Stray, no collar. He trots right up and starts drinking out one of the pools. We chased him off, but he keeps coming back. He had these big eyes, and these big floppy ears.

“I chased him off as far as I could. ‘Yallah, kelev. Yallah yallah.’ But we are in full protective gear, and in my Hazmat suit, I couldn’t run so well. I felt like I was a cosmonaut running on the moon.

“And this dog. He was running with me, nipping at the baggy legs of the suit. He thought we were having fun, playing game. Finally, I hit him in the side
of the ass with a rock, and he ran off to the top of a hill. Not a hill, just a little
rise, but out of reach of my rock throw.

“He lay down low – not resting, but prone like a sniper – and looked back
at me. He had the most betrayed look on his face. You don’t think of a dog as
having such strong expressions on their faces. But let me tell you,” My father
gestured at me with his empty beer bottle, “When your mother found out I was
cheating on her, the look on her face was not half as devastating.

“I went back to work. I could not worry about a stray dog’s hurt feelings.
There was work to be done. A derailed train to clean up. This is a six thousand
ton train, a dozen tankers ripped open, thousands of gallons chemicals spilled.
We came back the next night, and that dog was lying there, dead.”

***
The storage space smelled. It smelled of glue and old paper and my sweat, which hardened into my clothes when I came in from pushing the cart. The stiff, oily cloth rubbed against my skin as I walked, leaving my thighs and armpits painfully chafed.

Rayna smelled too. There was a sweat to it, but more womanly. More bodily. In such close quarters I couldn’t deny the reality of her corporeal form. What I saw and heard could be illusions, astral manifestations, but her smells were real.

It wasn’t that we weren’t sanitary. I kept a big bottle of Dr. Bronner’s castile soap. It could be used as toothpaste and shampoo and regular old body soap, and we used it to wash up in the restrooms. I bought the tea tree oil kind, because I am prone to acne and the tea tree oil dries the zits out. But my skin became too dry. My hands chafed from the dryness and from pulling the ropes tight when I tied the boxes to the cart.

I used a lot of rubbing alcohol in my work. It was the easiest way to keep the books clean and the covers shiny. If we spilled any food in the storage space, I cleaned it up with the alcohol. Our bed was very close to the floor. My sweat dried hard, binding my skin to the nylon of the air mattress, when Rayna’s tossings had pulled the separating sheet away. My big nose, hanging off the edge of the mattress, was just two inches from the alcohol smell of the floor. It made
me nauseous and it also made we want a drink. But better alcohol on the floor than cockroaches swarming, hiding in the pages of my books.

We were in dire need of a cleaning day, and so one Tuesday we trekked uptown to my sister’s apartment. She had a nice shower with a big shower head and sliding glass shower door and a dial so you get the water to just the right temperature. In the little room with no door and a treadmill where I used to sleep was a little combination washer dryer. It was a small machine but neither of us had very much to wash.

I always came during the day, on Mondays or Tuesdays or other rainy weekdays, and never saw my sister or Andrew. Becca must have noticed I’d come by a couple times, because when Rayna and I got there, I found a note waiting for me on the kitchen table. It was dated four days previous. That’s the kind of thing you could count on Becca for, to date a note so you’d know when it was written.

Izzy –

I don’t know when you will see, but I’m sure when you get dirty enough you’ll come by. There are clean towels in the closet, but please put them in the hamper when you are done. There are Chinese leftovers in the fridge, but Andrew will probably have eaten them by the time you come by.

Where are you staying? What are you doing? Are you on drugs again? What is your problem? Call me. Don’t call this number, I’m never here. You have my office number, I think, or just call my cell. But first, call Mom, she’s worried.

-Becca

I flipped the note over and wrote a response.
Becca –

I am OK. I am living with a nice girl downtown. I have a job selling books. We don’t have a phone, but I will give Mom a call soon. Tell her I am OK. Thank you for the clean towels, I will put them in the hamper.

-Izzy

I sat on the couch in Andrew’s bathrobe, waiting for our clothes to dry. I was reading a pulp book about a bike messenger trying to outrace danger on the streets on Manhattan. He was a convicted felon, and messengering was the only job he could find with his record. He had been trying to stay out of trouble, but he couldn’t resist the easy money of doing a quick cocaine delivery for a friend. When he makes the delivery, he unwittingly steps into a scene of carnage, and before he knows it he is involved in an intrigue that goes way deeper than he had imagined. I heard Rayna came out of the bathroom. Out of the corner of my eye – the part not on the page – I saw vaguely that she was brushing her hair.

“What are you reading?” she asked.

“This same crime story, from before.” I looked up at her. She wore one of Becca’s purple towels around her body. Her head was tilted to the side as she struggled to get the knots out of her long, wet hair, and the side of her smooth neck stretched taught and smooth. Her breasts were normally suppressed in her high blouses, but now I could see them, full and flush, threatening to tumble out of the top of the poorly tied towel. She turned and saw my face. What she saw
was plain. She jumped up and ran into the bathroom, pulling the door shut behind her.

It was three-quarters of an hour before she came back out. “I was cutting my hair,” she explained. I could see that it was true. Her hair was much shorter. We folded the laundry together in silence, and headed back downtown.

***

I woke up on a Wednesday morning, and turned the weather radio on. It said there was thirty percent chance of rain. “Chance” meant, how much of a chance was I going to take by going out on the street. Best case scenario, the thirty percent would be enough to scare off other sellers, but not enough to actually rain me out, and I’d have more of the market share. Worst case, though, there really was rainstorm it came too quickly for me to get my books covered. The water could ruin them. I asked Rayna what she thought we should do. She didn’t know. She shrugged, said we should wait.

We hung out for a while, outside the storage space. It didn’t rain, after all, but by the time we knew that is was too late to go out on the street. After a while, Rayna said she was going to go out walking by herself for a while. I decided to sort through a box of books I’d bought off a woman the day before. They had been her father’s, and she’d sold me the whole box for thirty, which was a good deal considering the books were in excellent condition for their age.
I got caught on one of them, a paperback memoir from the ‘70s, by a sabra who’d served in the Haganah. The man had had some falling out with the Haganah leadership – which was never fully explained – and was sentenced to death by execution in 1946. The hit squad, made up of his old comrades, came to his apartment in Jerusalem, but he managed to escape, and make his way in Cairo. He lived there until the 1953 revolution, when he had to escape again. He went to Mexico City and from there, eventually, to Cincinnati, Ohio. He lived his life in fear that Mossad agents would come for him. He purchased the firearms that were readily available in his adopted land. He kept his eye on the window, kept his eye on the door.

I fell back to sleep. I woke up. I had been dreaming. I didn’t remember what had happened in the dream, and the images were in and out, but the emotion of it, the strong feelings of constriction and fear stuck with me. I couldn’t get it straight in my head, if there was a reason to be having these feelings, or it was just the dream lingering. Rayna had walked out the door. Eager IDF volunteers I’d gone to high school with were battering the door. I was filled with fear. How did these things fit together? Everything was mixed together in my head and I wanted to go out walking too.

I found Mendy sitting on the concrete loading dock outside the storage space. His little luggage cart, with cardboard boxes and plastic bags strapped on as always, rested beside him. He looked lost in though. I thought about walking by and letting him be, but I wanted to talk to someone. I called out a greeting
from several feet away, announcing my approach, so I wouldn’t be upon him when I startled him.

“‘Izzy,’ he said, looking up “How you doing?”

“I’m okay. You decided to sit out the iffy weather too, huh?”

“Yeah, you know how it is. I made a decision – it’s all subjective, I mean, it’s more your own comfort level than a meteorological reality – I made a decision not to go out. Not to risk it. The weather channel was saying thirty percent this morning. Other times, in the past, I might have gone out in those kind of conditions. But not today.”

“Yes,” I said, “I wasn’t prepared for battling the elements today myself.”

“I’ll say.” He examined my face. “I mean, you do look a little – forgive me for saying so – thrown. Everything’s alright?”

“Yeah. No. I mean, everything is actually fine, I think. I was asleep… some times when I wake up, it feels like it takes me a long time, like maybe all day long, to figure out which parts were the dream and which parts were real life. If that makes sense.”

“No, I know exactly what you’re saying. Only, I wouldn’t be so quick to assume that this part is the real life, and the other one is the dream.”

“Ha.”

“Well, it could be wishful thinking on my part. You know, I often hope that there’s something I’m missing. That things are better than how I experience them. Listen. Last night, I thought about killing this guy, I really did.” He stopped talking, his face clenched up line between sadness and rage.
“Nu?”

“Huh? Oh. See, I was walking around last night, maybe ten o’clock or, which is unusual for me, so late. But I was walking around, and I wanted to buy a cream soda. So I walk into that little store down there, on the corner of Bleeker. And there’s this group of guys that’s standing in front of the cooler talking, so I have to ask them to move. But they just stand there. I thought they didn’t hear me, but then one of them says, ‘Why do you need in there? So you can steal something?’ I knew I heard that, but I thought maybe I heard wrong. ‘I said, excuse me, what did you say?’ And he goes, ‘Oh I think you heard me.’

“That’s messed up. What kind of guys were they?”

“I don’t know. NYU type guys. Clean cut. Maybe a little older than college… the Law School is right there, probably they were law school guys. That would figure. But still, what makes them treat me like that?

“It hurts me. I’ve lived there thirty years, and the neighborhood has changed around me. And I don’t belong there. I’m not welcome. Where else could I go though? All I wanted was a cream soda. I know how I look, and I had my little cart.” He patted the luggage cart’s handle like it was a dog’s head. “But what the hell gives them the right to do that to me? Or anyone? Huh? Why would they do that?” It seemed like he really wanted an answer.

“I don’t know, Mendy, I really don’t know why people do what they do.”

“I was pissed. I went… they use this expression, saw red. That’s literally how I was. I was almost blind, and just seeing the color red. So I was gonna fight this guy. He said, ‘Bring it on, old man.’ Oh, I was gonna bring it on, that’s for
damn sure. But his friend was just a little bit smarter than him. He took a look at me, saw the fucking plain murder in my face, and he said, ‘It’s not worth it, Bobby, he’s got less to lose than you do.’ Which is true, though he said in this dismissive kind of tone, so they could save face. I would’ve liked to shove his face in, too. So they dragged him outside. And I was so mad, I forgot to even get my cream soda.”

“Damn.”

“It reminds of when I used to live on the Lower East Side, in the sixties. There was a group of tough guys, real hoodlum types, that hung out in what we used to call a candy store. I know it’s different now, but back then, around Rivington Street, it was real rough, a real drug kind of neighborhood. But this group of guys, they’d mess with me every time I came down the street, to the building where I lived. I don’t know if it was because I was white, or more the way I looked, in terms of long hair and dirty clothes and all. Or maybe they were just bullies. But one day, I just sort of had enough. I was walking down the street and before they could come fuck with me, I walked into the candy store and said, “Listen. Next time you guys wanna start with me, you’re gonna have to kill me. Cause otherwise, I’m gonna kill every fucking on of you.”

“What happened?”

“Nothing. I walked out. They never messed me again.”

“They didn’t call your bluff?”

“Who was bluffing?”

“You would have killed them?”
“At that moment? Yeah, I was ready to kill them.”

“They could have killed you.”

“Sure,” he nodded. “Sure they could have. Absolutely. I’m a little surprised they didn’t, thinking back on it. But, you know, there aren’t as many killers out there as they’d have you believe. Most people, they talk a certain way, I don’t think they necessarily cross that line. It’s easier, now, with the guns. But still. Back then, they would have had to stab me. Which they might have.”

“Well. I’m glad you’re alive.”

“Thank you. But am I?”

“Are you alive?”

“No. Am I glad I’m alive? Am I glad I lived another forty years since then?

“Oh. Are you? Glad?”

“I don’t know.” He thought about for a moment, then shrugged. His boney shoulders stuck out from his wife-beater; the shrug was full and genuine. “I guess so. I mean, I don’t think I want to die. If I did, I could have thrown myself in the river by now. But I didn’t give a fuck at that moment. I still don’t really. I felt like that when I was a little kid, someone who tease me, or make a comment and I’d lose it. And since that time… I don’t know that anything’s changed. I feel just about the same as I did when I was nine years old. Nothing has changed. Nothing has been gained. I don’t understand other people or myself anymore now than I did then.”

“You haven’t gained any wisdom?”
“No, I don’t think so. I don’t know if I learned anything in all this time of being alive.” He turned to face me again. “I understand, maybe, that you’re asking for yourself as much as for me. Like you want me to tell you that you will grow wiser, that some of the dust will clear from your eyes. I hope it does, Izzy, for your sake. I do. But me, I got off on a wrong foot somewhere – before I can remember – and I never got on the right one. Since then, I’ve just lived the days.

I said goodbye to Mendy, and went and treated myself to some pesto pasta salad at a student café up by West 4th. I think student cafes were cheap along time ago, but now they are expensive, designed for girls who have their dad’s credit cards, and don’t really understand how much money things cost. The pasta salad was good though, and came with a chewy breadstick. It was seven dollars, but the fact of the matter was that the money in my pocket was my dad’s too, so I wasn’t different from the kids in the cafeteria, except that I smelled worse and none of them talked to me. I was somewhere between them and Mendy, but I didn’t know exactly where.

I went back to the storage space, and made myself finish sorting the box I’d started in the morning. I puttered around for a bit, and got a few other things done. When I lay down for the night, Rayna still hadn’t come back home. I was a little worried, but then, I didn’t want to be possessive, or pretend I understood what she was or where she needed to be.

I woke up some time later to find her climbing into bed, nestling her back in against me. It was night. I put my arm around her, kissed her hair gently, and fell back asleep.
I woke up again and Rayna was struggling against me. Struggling to throw my arm off, nearly wrenching it out of the socket. She was scratching my face. Moaning with fear. Something like a suppressed scream.

Before I knew what to think, I was defending myself, fighting back. Had I done something to her in my sleep. Had I rubbed against her? Tried to mount her? No. No. I didn’t believe I had. We were still in the same position, more or less: I on my side, she curled up in front of me, cupped in my arm, though now twisting towards and away from me. I had fallen asleep with my arm around her – like always nothing more – and I hadn’t moved. It was only for her that things had changed. My arm was not holding her any longer, but holding her down. Her eyes were open but I could see she didn’t see my face. Who was I to her? Her murderer? I had woken up in her nightmare. When ghosts dream, are they back in their real world? But she wasn’t a ghost. How could I think of her that way, when her nails were digging into my face? This terror went far behind any ghost story. I grabbed her arm. She fought harder. Whoever I was, I was now a man who grabbed her arm, restrained her. I shook her. She woke up, recognized my face, and didn’t seem to know what had happened. We went back to sleep, a sleep less deep, thank G-d, where neither of us dreamed.

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Chapter 15

The next day, Thursday, the weather was good. We went out on the street. As soon as the table was set up, people started buying books. It was all we could do to keep up with the demand. I was happy to be kept busy.

By the time afternoon lull came, though, I was ready for a break. Rayna and I sat on the curb and drank seltzer. We watched as an orthodox man with a neatly trimmed beard approached Mendy. They seemed to know each other. Rayna took one look at the man, and slunk under the table, just like she did when any of the NYU frat boys looked at her.

“Listen, Izzy,” Mendy said to me, “Could you keep an eye on my table for a minute?”

Mendy and the orthodox man went down into the plaza, behind the flowerbed, and began to do Tai Chi moves. I had seen Mendy practicing his forms early in the morning, outside the storage space, and it was rumored that the last time someone had tried to attack him on the street, he’d snapped the man’s arm with one smooth movement. The two bearded man seemed locked in some sort of ritual. People who didn’t know what Judaism was would probably see this and think that it was some sort of Jewish thing.

The orthodox man seemed to be more of an expert; he did the moves slowly and Mendy followed him, with close attention to form. When they were done they shook hands, and the orthodox man headed into the NYU library.
“Is that guy a Hassid or something?” I asked Mendy, after the man had passed through the gate through which no bookseller ever passed, because I wanted to ask something.

“Well, no, I don’t think he’d phrase it like that. He studies mysticism. That’s why he’s always going into the University. Kabbalah, I guess. Luria, and things from Spain, I think. But no, I don’t believe he considers himself a Hassid, or follows a particular rebbe or anything.

“His father is a bookseller too,” Mendy added. “In Paris. Right on the banks of the Seine, is how I picture it, though I’ve never been to Paris myself.”

Then the after work rush came upon on us, and it went on like that, through dinnertime and into the evening. A couple tourists tried to snap photographs. We all hid our faces. I guess to them, we were classic and picturesque.

Back in storage, Rayna counted the money. She was better at keeping records than I was, and copied the numbers neatly into photocopied tables. She said that our take for the day was two-hundred and twenty seven dollars, which was even a little bit more than I’d been expecting.

We went on doing well. At some point, the Spring semester ended. There was a dip in business for maybe a week, but then the summer session started, and the summer tourists started coming. The street got hotter and hotter. We stood out there and sweated and sold books.
I went to see a fortune teller. Her name was Madame Yemaya. I saw her flyer taped to a utility pole in the village:

*Madame Yemaya will answer all your questions.*
*Am I on the right path? And what is my destiny?*
*Psychic Readings – Astrology – Tarot Cards*

What caught my attention was not the words, though, but the picture. A woman wearing a long white robe gazed into the camera. Her face was framed by her long black hair and some sort of jeweled tiara. I had seen the face before, in one of Alojzy’s sketchbooks. I ripped the flyer down and took it home to be sure. I hadn’t looked at the sketchbooks since Rayna had moved in, but once the book was opened I couldn’t close it. In Alojzy’s depiction Yemaya was nude, but there was no question that it was the same face.

On the next overcast day, a Thursday, I left Rayna at the storage space, and went to Madame Yemaya’s storefront, on Carmine Street just off of Hudson St. The place was tiny, but the neon made it easy to find. Madame Yemaya sat inside at a small table, reading the Daily News. She looked tired. She was draped in scarves and beads, but they were all carefully arranged so that her giant breasts were largely exposed. In Schuster’s *Fantasies*, it said that King Saul had fallen because he visited a witch.

She saw me hesitating at her door, and jumped up. She held me with her big black eyes until she could get close enough to grab my hand and pulled me inside.
“Come in! Come in! You have a question? You have a problem?
Madame Yemaya will help you out! You look like you are very much troubled.”
Her accent reminded me of old vampire movies. “For you, I will only charge ten
dollars for a reading.” She pushed me down into a chair, and took her own seat,
without letting go of my hand.

“I can see you are a troubled young man. I can see you chase ghosts into
their graves. I can see you must change–“

“Look, I’m not here to have my fortune told.”

“No? I see.” She put her other hand on top of mine and leaned close.

“What is it you are searching for then? You do not have questions about the
future? You are looking for a mystical experience in the present?”

“No, I actually wanted to talk about Alojzy Edel.” She dropped my hand
on the table and cursed in Spanish

“What the fuck is this?” she asked. “Did he owe you money too?” She
took out a pouch of tobacco and began to roll herself a cigarette. “I can’t help you
with that.” Romania was gone from her voice, replaced with the South Bronx.

“No, he didn’t owe me anything. He was my father. But I found a picture
of you in his sketchbook, and I wanted to see how you knew him.”

“A picture of me? You mean those nudie pictures of me he loved to draw.
Christ. He loved my body. But you’re a little pervert, ain’t you? No wonder you
wanted to hold my hand when you came in here.”

“No, I didn’t. I mean. I just want to know how you knew him?”
“I laid on the bed and let him draw my naked body. So how do you think I knew him?”

“You were his girlfriend, you mean?”

“Hah. Sure. I guess.” She lit the complete cigarette and took a deep drag. “The funny thing is, I was actually dating his best buddy, Simon.”

“Simon?”

“Yeah, a painter. From Russia.”

“Oh. Semyon? Goldov?”

“Yeah. But then he brought Al around. Biggest mistake her ever made. Because the minute I met Al, man. What a man. I’d do anything he told me know. Just anything. But so when he told me to forget about him, I did. He’s dead.”

“Yes. How did you find out?”

“How do I know he’s dead? I’m a fucking psychic. And not for nothing. And yet, I don’t know why you’re here.”

“Well, I just hadn’t seen him for a long time. And now that he’s gone I’m trying to find out more about him.”

“I wish I could tell you something more about the guy. But I realize I never really knew him. I realize also that I don’t care. Mira, I never knew nothing about my own daddy. He left my mother and went back to Puerto Rico when I was two years old. I never saw him again. No problem. Now you can leave, and I’ll never see you again. But first, let me get the twenty-five you owe for the reading.”
“The sign says fifteen. And you said ten.”

“The past costs more than the future.”

***

Repointing is the process of renewing mortar joints in masonry construction. The mortar goes quicker than the stones. I didn’t know this until the contractors began to repoint the big red blocks of NYU’s Bobst library. I felt that it was a good thing to do. The scaffolding slowed foot traffic on W. 4th slightly, but I’d take that over having the stones falling on our heads.

They started working on a Monday, and were still going the following Thursday. Rayna and I were sitting on the curb with Sonya, listening to one of her tales of woe. She and Lionel were planning on sleeping on the subway the night before, but Lionel drunkenly pissed on the platform, right in front of a cop. He had some warrants for open containers, and got taken to the Tombs. Sonya was too scared to fall asleep by herself on the train, and had spent the whole night sitting up awake.

“Why don’t you go take a nap in the park?” I suggested.

“Nah, I’m too wired now. There’s no point in trying to sleep. Listen,” Sonya said. “I’m a Quaker. You know that. But sometimes I think about murdering that idiot. I’ll put rat poison in his Steel Reserve.”

One of the construction workers came over to the table as we were talking, and awkwardly pretended to survey our selection. When I came over to see what he was after, he pulled a piece of paper from a pocket under his tool belt and jabbed at me.
“What’s this?” I asked, not reaching for it.

“It’s a scam,” said Sonya. “Or a subpoena. Don’t touch it.”

“Is it a subpoena?” I asked him.

“Don’t speak English,” he said with a thick Slavic accent.

“Goverish po Russky?”

“Look,” he said, in English. “I’m not involved. I’m just to give you this.”

He jabbed the paper again, and I took it. “I go back to work now.” He went back to work, and didn’t look in my direction the rest of the day.

“Call Roman,” the note said. “If you are ready to do some real work.”

Then there was a phone number, a different one than I’d called before. Yes, I was ready. I was grown now, and ready to do any work that Alojzy would have done. Rayna and Sonya kept an eye on the table, while I went to the payphone and dialed the number.

***
Chapter 17

Roman had said that he would pick me up the next night nine p.m. in a white Honda Civic. I waited in the little park on Sixth Avenue, under General Artigas’ shadow. I didn’t know if it made it easier for Roman in terms of timing to not have to turn off of Sixth Avenue, or if he didn’t want to be caught with me on the security cameras at the storage place. When he pulled up, I got in without a word. He just nodded, then zoomed down Sixth Ave. towards Canal.

We went straight across town on Canal, then up to Delancey and over the Williamsburg Bridge. On the bridge, Roman turned to me and spoke. “This is a real hoot for me, you riding there. In the passenger seat. I think of the times Alojzy rode with me.”

“He rode with you a lot?”

“Not a lot, maybe. But they were memorable times.”

“Oh. But I mean, he worked with you guys often?”

“No. Not so often.” I hoped he’d offer a story or two, but he didn’t. I didn’t press. Fine. Maybe we’d get pinched tonight, they couldn’t have me snitching on old crimes. “The thing is,” Roman said, finally, “He was a loner, did his own thing, he wasn’t part of any organization.”

After a while, “You are wondering where we are going.”

“I am,” I said.

“But you did not think you should ask?”

“No.”
“You were correct.” I grinned, but Roman did not. He did, finally, let me know where we were headed. Apparently, there was an area of the Brooklyn Navy Yard where the warehouses were climate and humidity controlled for the preservation of artwork. Collectors, galleries and even museums rented space there to store excess artwork. Some of these pieces of art were quite valuable.

We pulled into an open warehouse in deep South Williamsburg. Two guys were waiting for us. Roman greeted them without making any introductions. They both had Jamaican – or some type of Caribbean – accents. They wore well-used work clothes, and I got the feeling from their tired faces and rough hands that they were actual workers, not gangsters. Roman and I changed into new Dickies coveralls. Roman still looked like a gangster. G-d knows what I looked like.

“You guys clear on the plan?” Roman asked them.

“Plan, chief?” The older one asked, playing dumb.

“The plan. Nu? What is your understanding of what is happening tonight?”

“The plan, chief, is that my partner and I go in, and we do our job. Which is strictly HVAC. Make sure everything is in order with the system. This is a routine check, as is done every month.”

“And?”

“And I am telling you, by way of a heads up, that for safety reasons I will have to cut the electricity for the area exactly eight minutes after we enter, and
that the electricity will stay off for exactly fifteen minutes. This includes the electricity for the lights and the security cameras. Who knows what goes on in the dark? I only see the section of vent in front of my flashlight. Same goes for my partner. We are very focused when we work.”

“That is the right way to work,” said Roman, nodding.

“What should I do?” I asked.

“You will do as you are told.”

We all climbed into the Jamaicans’ HVAC truck, them in the front and Roman and me in the back. The guy in the passenger seat put on a Brooklyn Tabernacle Choir CD, and no one talked after that. A few minutes later, we pulled up to the front gate of the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Our driver showed a work order and ID to the lone guard, and we were waved in.

We reached the old stone warehouse where all the art is kept, and entered just as easily. Inside, it wasn’t all that different from the storage facility where I lived. The same track lighting, the same thin carpet. The same rows of steal lockers. The only difference was the lockers had key panels instead of padlocks, and the air conditioning was turned up much higher.

When the other guys got the electricity cut off, Roman took out an LED flashlight, and let us down the row until he found the unit number he was looking for. He had a couple numbers written out on a scrap of paper, and he got the door to pop open on the second try. Inside, about a dozen paintings sat on a metal rack. The paintings were contained in bulky wooden storage frames that were clearly
not display quality, but allowed enough space for the paintings to be wrapped in polyurethane without having the wrap actually touch or constrict the paint.

“I’ll go grab the hand cart,” Roman told me, “While you locate the painting. It will be made with a lot of red paint. The subject will be a cow, which could also be a train, and you will not be surprised to know that it was painted by a woman with black hair.” I was nervous that I wouldn’t be able to find the right painting, but when I came to it, just a peek under the plastic wrap was enough for me to see that it was just as Roman had described it.

He came back with the cart, and together we carefully slid the painting down onto it. The painting was long, and awkward to move. The old oil paint was already cracking, and the canvas probably couldn’t take too hard of a bump without some if flaking off. I could see why Roman had wanted to bring a helper along.

“This way,” he said, directing me to a corridor which led, into another, nearly identical room of storage units. We stopped in front of one, and Roman typed in another number from the sheet.

“We’re not carrying it out?”

“No,” Roman answered. “Some art handlers will come and carry it out a few week from now in a crate. It will be a routine, legitimate job for them. No one will pay any notice. But enough questions, let’s get it in there.”

After we’d dropped off the HVAC guys and were headed back into Manhattan, Roman was in a much more talkative mood.
“You didn’t live with your father when you were a kid, huh?”

“Not really. Only when I was very young.”

“I know how that is. I left my parents at the age of twelve to go to special gymnasium school.”

“A gymnasium? Like, a preparatory school?”

“No, like a school that’s a gym, where you work out and do athletics. I was a strongman. I mean, really, a real strong guy. I am still, but then, oh buddy. So you know how some people go to university? Or like your papa, he went to the arts institute? I went to the weight lifting institute.” We turned up Beford Avenue. The street was full of Satmar families. I don’t know why Hassidic families always have their kids out on the street in the middle of the night.

We crossed over the bridge.

“You know, said Roman, your father liked to go out and have a good time.”

“I guess he did.”

“You ever went partying with the old man?”

“No. I was too young to drink the last time we spent anytime together.”

“Too young to drink… I’m not understanding.” He looked over at, and it seemed like there was pity in his eyes. “You too young to drink now?”

“Nope.”

“Well, let’s pull over and wet our whistles, now, then? There is a place I like on Avenue B.” That sounded fine to me.
“You know what they said when I first moved to New York City?
Alphabet City: First you come to Avenue Awful, then Avenue Bad, then Avenue Crazy, then Avenue Dead. Now it’s all changed. No thanks to me. Haha! But I like the changes, truthfully. Nice place to get a drink, now.”

We went into a bar called The Sack. There were high backed stools at the bar, and overstuffed chairs upholstered with animal print fabric elsewhere in the room. The place was very dark, even though there seemed to be bright lights everywhere. We sat at the bar and Roman ordered us each a shot of vodka. He offered a toast to my dead father. Then we got another round and I offered a toast to his family. Then Roman proposed a toast to the family of the bartender, who was so kind in keeping the shots coming quickly.

“I was always a strong boy,” Roman told me. “Even before I went to weight lifting institute. One time, I was ten years old, and I came home with my mother to our apartment in Odessa. We couldn’t get up to the staircase, because these three drunks, passed out in front of the door. Me, I just picked them up and moved them out into the courtyard, far away from the door. I stacked them neatly, one on top of the other. Because I was still a good boy, then.

“I liked it there, you know, in Odessa, when I was a boy. People talk about how terrible communism was, and they are right. But there was niceness, when I was a kid. There were no more purges, everyone had enough to eat. You lived with your parents in apartment. Everyone lived with their parents, in the identical apartment. You came down into the courtyard and played with your
friends, who wore the same sweater to keep warm. Then you went upstairs and ate the dinner.

“I come here, it’s whole other world. In Brooklyn, black thugs walk around with unloaded pistols in their belts, trying to lecture you from the book of Corinthians. Hassids ask you on the corner if you are Jewish. Some of them want to circumcise you. Some of them want to sell you stolen laptop computers.

“I am Jewish too, you know? You know?”

“Yeah?” He didn’t look Jewish. Maybe it was the muscles.

“Oh yes! It’s just, you know, there wasn’t ever anyone around to show me how it is to be Jewish. What to say, or do like a Jew. I never got to learn any of the, you know, the book.”

“The Talmud?”

“No. The book.”

“The Torah?”

“That’s the one. You see, my parents, maybe they didn’t know much about it either. I didn’t have any grandparents… there were not many people from the generation of The Great Patriotic War around.”

“Your grandparents died in the war?”

“No, I don’t think so. My family is family of thieves. A long line of Odessa Jew thieves. You know about Odessa Jews? When Tsarina Katerina built her great port, she insisted there be some Jewish smugglers there, so it could be a real respectable port. She had to pay the Jewish smugglers to smuggle in the Jewish smugglers. Probably, my grandparents were all to sent to the gulags for
attempted profiteering. But I couldn’t say, really, no one ever spoke about it.
Another round, bartender! To the dead Jewish thieves of Odessa! To the Tsarina!”

The bar was spinning, and my face felt very hot. I said that I had to get going, but Roman kept grabbing me by the shoulder and forcing me back onto my stool. “More shots!” he shouted “Many shots for my friend and I!” He started buying shots for people around us as well. I finally managed to slip out as Roman was trying to lift a giggling blonde girl over his head.

When I came out of the bar I was so drunk I couldn’t walk in a straight line. I stopped to wretch into a trashcan, but nothing came up. I wanted to lay down on the street and go to sleep, but I forced myself to walk all the way across town to the storage facility. I knew that Rayna would be waiting for me.

***
Chapter 18

Rayna and I arrived on the street, one morning, to find Mendy’s cart standing unpacked in his spot. I looked around for him and saw that he was sitting in the plaza talking to a man wearing a wool cap. Their backs were facing me, and I couldn’t really make out the other guy, but there was a stack of large format books between them on the bench, so I assumed Mendy was making a deal with him.

Mendy glanced back our way to check on his stuff, and saw Rayna and I.

“Oh, good morning!” He stood up. “This fellow here was looking for you.” The other rose slowly. There was something so familiar in his frame, in his movements. For a moment I believed my father had returned. I stepped towards him. He turned towards me and I saw his face. It was Goldov.

“Isaac,” he said.

“How have you been, Goldov?”

“Unwell, to be honest,” he said. “My lungs, you see. But don’t worry about me. I’ve survived worse. So. Rumors are true. You have taken over Edel’s book business.”

“Yes, I have.”

“Like father like son.” I shrugged. I didn’t know if he meant it as an insult or not. “Chip off old block.”

“I guess so,” I said.

“And does this mean you have taken on his business debts as well?”
“Children shall not be put to death for their fathers.”

“Shto?”

“Is that why Mendy said you were looking for me?”

“Eh? Oh. No, no. I was only making a joke about debts. It is actually I who am paying you. You see, I was coming up primarily for Mendy to take a look at some art books I had to sell, but also to deliver this to.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a white envelope. “From our mutual friend Roman.” I took the envelope and put it in my pocket.

“My duties at the museum,” Goldov said, by way of explanation, “Involve occasionally the handling of paintings other than Galuth’s.”

“I see. Well, thanks. I appreciate you bringing me this.” Goldov wasn’t listening to me anymore, though. He was too busy staring over my shoulder at Rayna. I didn’t like the hungry way he looked at her. She turned her face away.

My cut from the heist turned out to be seventeen-hundred dollars. I thought that Roman had said that I would be getting twenty-seven hundred, but it was possible that I was mistaken, or that Roman had exaggerated. Either way, it was a hell of a lot of money for moving a painting from one closet to another closet.

Rayna and I took couple days off from the street and enjoyed the unearned money. We went to a restaurant for the first time together, a nice old Italian place in the West Village. We ate olive salad and marinated eggplant and pasta with white sauce, and drank a bottle of red wine. Rayna bought two new dresses, and
convinced me to buy myself a shirt, purple fabric with darker purple buttons and a stiff collar. I bought her a bouquet of Japanese irises, and we walked all around lower Manhattan feeling bright and untethered.

***
Chapter 19

Rayna shook me awake. Both of her hands gripped my one arm, and I thought that she was back in the world of nightmares again. But when I opened my eyes Rayna’s eyes were wide open.

“Do you hear them, Izzy?” I did. Our door was creaking, more than that, straining. Some invisible force was trying to muscle itself into our world. I wrapped my arms around Rayna and we huddled close in the far corner of our room.

The door snapped open and two men pushed in. Alojzy’s locks had stood strong, but the first man in the door – a bear in a black hooded sweatshirt – had popped the other side of the hinges with the crowbar he carried. The man behind him was much smaller but wore the same black pants, black hooded sweatshirt, and black beard. Instead of a crowbar he held a pistol.

“I don’t have it,” I told them. I didn’t know what “it” was, but I assumed they were looking for one of the things I’d held for Timur.

They ignored me. The big guy came over and grabbed Rayna with the arm that wasn’t holding the crowbar. For all her nighttime moaning, she was silent now. I tried to pull her back, but the smaller guy leveled the big, black semiautomatic pistol at my face and I let go. Rayna started to say something, but the guy holding Rayna clamped his hand over her mouth. Over the whole face, really. He tossed her over his shoulder and stepped out of the storage space. I
heard two sets of footsteps clatter down the hall, and realized that a third guy must have been standing watch outside.

The smaller guy backed out of the room slowly. He held the pistol with two hands for stability, and kept it trained on my face until he was gone.

I listened to the sounds of his sneakers hitting the thing carpet as he ran down the hallway. Even after they had disappeared I sat frozen for a moment, afraid of what I would encounter when I stepped out the door.

I snapped out of it, and grabbed Al’s .22 from where I’d hidden it in a box when Rayna moved in. I started for the back door the men had evidently exited through, but it occurred to me that they might be expecting that, and would ambush me when I stepped outside. I circled around to the front corridor, winding past the bathrooms and onto the loading dock. I came out onto the dock just in time to see a black van peeling out of the parking lot. I couldn’t see in the tinted windows, but I knew it was the bearded men’s vehicle, and that they had Rayna in there.

The first time I did acid was during my junior year of high school. I went into the city with two guys I hung out with, Matt and Adam, because Adam had an older brother at NYU who could hook us up. We took the LIRR in and went to his dorm on 3rd Avenue. We all chewed two tabs but nothing happened and we sat on the edge of the two dorm beds. We smoked a couple bong loads with Adam’s brother’s friends to bring us up. It still felt like nothing was happening,
but I guess we started to come up or at least get rambunctious because they kicked us out.

We headed back to the subway. The day was a bust and we figured we’d just get the train back home. I picked a busted yellow plastic radio up off the street by Union Square. Matt and Adam made fun of me for carrying a piece of garbage around, but to me it was beautiful and giant, like a boom box from a real live 1970s ghetto and I could see the music notes coming out of the speaker. On the subway, I realized I could control the speed of the train with the volume knob of the radio.

We were all peaking by the time we got off the train at Herald Square, and we ended up walking all the way up to Central Park where there was slush on the ground and our feet froze. We were too gone to understand that the feeling was coldness, and that it was a warning. We spent the next three hours running through the Ramble, believing we were being pursued by the police.

The memory of that day came back to me as I sat alone in the storage unit. In particular, the feeling of being able to control the speed at which things moved. I wished I had that power now. The men were gone with Rayna before I could react. The SUV zoomed off into the street. Time was slipping away from me, the story was going forward and I couldn’t control it. I wished for the power of kfitzat haderekh – the juggling of time – that the Hassidic masters had possessed. I wished I could control time with the turn a knob. I reached my hand out into the air but there was no knob to grasp. I wrapped my hands around the barrel of Al’s
sawed-off instead. I shook back and forth. If anyone was watching, it might have looked like I was dovening. But no one was watching and I wasn’t praying.

I should have found a way to fight back. I should have been holding the gun when the men came in. I shouldn’t have let them take Rayna. It had been my duty to protect her, and I had failed her.

I had failed my father too, the last time I saw him, almost four years earlier. He had called, and said he wanted to stop by and see me. He didn’t mind driving out to Long Island, but he didn’t want to run into my mother at the house. I told him it was okay, I would be the only one around.

He pulled up in a blue Astro van I hadn’t seen before. The back seat was filled with boxes.

“This is the house?” He looked over my shoulder, with apprehension. He had never been there before. I think the house was bigger than he expected.

“Yeah. We live here. You want to come inside?”

“No. I don’t want to go in there.”

“I think they have some Sam Adams in the fridge.” I knew they did, because I’d been pilfering them all day. “If you want a beer?”

“No.

“OK.”

“You doing alright, boychick?”

“Sure.”

“How is Becca?”

“She’s good. She’s up at school.”

“Boston University.”

“Yes. Boston University. She is doing well in her studies?”

“I don’t know. I guess so.”

“She has a field of study?”

“A major? Marketing, I think.”

“Marketing. Ah. Advertising. Selling. Smart. She is like her papa.”

“I think it’s marketing. Something like that.”

“Listen. Takhlis: I have something going on, out west. Something big. I’m going out there now.”

“Now?”

“Yes. It is sudden. But the situation out there. And the situation out here. You know, I could use a partner.”

“A partner?”

“Yes, road partner, business partner. You interested?”

“You want me to help you?”

“Sure. Who else would I turn to, buddy, except my own flesh and blood.”

“I don’t know. I’d like to.”

“Nu?”

“I mean, I can’t just go. I mean, I have school…” It was very sunny out.

A man was watering his lawn across the street. He eyed the Astro van suspiciously.
“What’s that Jew prick looking at?” Alojzy said. He gave the neighbor a hard look. The neighbor turned off the hose and went inside his garage. Alojzy turned back to me and sighed. He looked sad. I felt that something was slipping away, but I didn’t understand what it was, and I was scared to grab for it.

“Of course. Of course. You should be in school. You are a real good fella. Study hard. Go to Boston University.”

“I’ll see you before then.”

“Of course. I’ll see you soon.”

“You can’t stay now, for a while?”

“No.”

“Maybe I could go with you, if, just in a couple days. If I talked to –“

“No. You’re right. It was just a thought I had. You should be in school.”

We talked a little more. He took me to the Dairy Queen for sloppy joes, then dropped me back at the house. I never saw him again.

Now I’d never see Rayna again, either. I was like the old shtetle Jews, who hid in the closet and watched Cossacks rape their women. I should have been a strong Israeli Jew like Alojzy. I should have gone in his van with him. I shouldn’t have let Rayna go away in the thugs’ van. I needed to become a stronger man.

***
Chapter 20

The front desk opened at 5:30 am. I told the guy that we had damaged the door with a moving cart the night before. He gave me a hard time about it, but I eventually convinced him that the hefty repair charge added to my bill would not be disputed. It would be easier to settle that with Timur later than to raise the suspicions of the management now and get the police involved. They gave me the temporary use of a smaller storage space to lock my stuff in it, and I spent the next three hours transferring everything into there. This new storage space was just a storage space, and nothing more.

By the time I got my stuff moved and secured, it was well after eight in the morning, so I figured it was late enough I could call Roman. I didn’t really know what else to do. The fact of the matter was, I had no idea who had taken Rayna. It obviously wasn’t a random attack. But who was really the target? Was someone after me because of the art heist, and decided to use Rayna as leverage? Was this something older, involving someone Alojzy had crossed? Or was it someone from Rayna’s past who’d been tracking her down? Any one of these things was possible. There could be another angle I couldn’t see.

In any case, I didn’t have anything to go on, no way to start looking for Rayna. Having to move the boxes down the hall was good, because the work kept me from thinking. It was a rainy day, mercifully, and I didn’t have to face Mendy or any of the other vendors as I worked. But time was still slipping away. I had to reach out to Roman. He and Timur were in a position to see things that I
couldn’t. And if this was related to the theft of the painting, they’d have an invested interest in the situation.

I got Roman on the phone, on the second number I tried, and explained the situation. He told me to keep calm, lay low for a few hours, and let him look into it. I should meet him that afternoon at Sayid’s restaurant, and hopefully they’d have some information for me.

I opened up the new storage unit, put my cash, a couple paperback books, and a couple changes of clothing into a backpack, and headed out. I went to a deli near W. 4th St., and spend the rest of the morning drinking coffee and trying to read a book about the Golden Dawn. I thought about buying a book of tarot cards and trying to divine where Rayna was, if she was okay. I hesitated, though, because that could have been a suggestion the devil was placing in my mind to take advantage of my weakness. Besides, I was too nervous to focus on the book enough to learn anything about reading tarot.

The hours passed, somehow, and then it was time for me to get on the F train to Brighton. When I got to the restaurant, Timur and Roman were at their same round table in back of the otherwise empty room. I was too upset to eat any of the food they put on my plate, but I did knock back three glasses of Vodka. Timur asked if Goldov had given me my money. He said that I had done a good job, and there might be more work for me in the future.

“I appreciate that,” I told him. “I do. But I wanted to talk to you about what happened last night to my friend Rayna. I’m very worried.”

“I can tell you,” Timur said, “That there is no reason to worry.”
“Why not? Do you know where she is? Is she okay? Please tell me.”

“You are close to the girl, Isaac?”

“Yes. Very close.”

“Do you know much about her background?”


“Do you know who her father is?”

“She mentioned him once or twice. I got the impression he was pretty religious. Is he still live?”

“Well, yes, you could say that he is religious. And he is very much alive. In fact, he is the rebbe of a Hassidic dynasty, The Glupskers, in Boro Park. They are a small, but very well-connected group. He has been searching for his daughter since she ran away. When he located her, he sent his sons to bring her back to him.”

“So you know where she is? Can you help me get to her?”

“Maybe you did not hear me correctly. They are a well-connected group. He is their leader.”

“Yeah, I heard you, but what does that—” Timur held up his hand, signaling silence, and I obeyed.

“You should be grateful that he is a holy man, and not vindictive. Otherwise, you would have quite a bit to worry about. I would not be able to protect you. As it is, you are not to worry yourself about this Rayna any more.”

“But she was kidnapped.”

“No. It was simply a family matter. No one was wronged.”
“I was wronged! She was wronged.” I banged the table with my fist
“This is all fucking wrong.” Timur gave Roman a nod, and before I understood what was going on I pulled up out of my chair, and walking out the door with Roman.

“What’s the idea?” I said.

“You have gotten overexcited,” Roman said. “Perhaps too much too drink. What you need is some fresh ocean air.” He steered me up onto the boardwalk, where we sat down on a bench facing the water. After a couple minutes of me stewing with my fists in my pockets, and Roman staring out at the waves, he spoke.

“After I had been here for seven years, I had enough money to bring my papa over. I hadn’t lived with him since I was twelve years old, but always he was a good papa to me. I was making money, I had my big condo upstairs in the Oceana with more room than I needed. My mother was dead, my father was all alone in his Odessa hovel. The situation was worse and worse there. I applied for a family reunification visa, spent a few dollars to push it through the system, and brought him over.

“We get along OK. He was happy to be here. But I am busy doing jobs for Timur all the time, and my father is past the age where he makes friends. He started to wear a yarmulke, because of the freedom of it, but he doesn’t have the patience to sit at the Chabad house and learn. All he did is walk up and down Ocean Avenue, walk up and down Brighton Beach Avenue, walk up and down
the boardwalk. When his knees act up, he had to stay in the apartment all day and watch the Russian language channels.

“One day he was walking on Neptune Avenue, and a parrot starts following him down the street. Honest! A little green parrot, strolling beyond him. It followed him for blocks. Finally, he sees the parrot isn’t giving up, so he picks him up, puts him on his shoulder like a pirate captain, and brings him home. Now he is happy. He has something counting on him, something to take care of. Something to feed. They are the best of friends. They sing dirty songs together.

“The Jewish service, they send an aide. To look in on my father, make sure he takes the medicine for his diabetes, this sort of thing. He doesn’t care, he doesn’t want someone telling him what to do. The old aide, he had a deal with. She never showed up, but when the service called to check, he’d say she was there. Then she’d come by and give him a kickback from the wages. I take care of the old papa, give him everything he needs, but it makes him feel good to have his own deals, you understand? Be a little bit independent. But this woman, I guess she ran too many scams and got fired. So they sent a new aide, last week. She comes in, her first day, and says, oh my god, my parakeet Barbara! She escaped out my car window on Neptune Avenue! I thought he was dead!

“My father said, ‘Oh no, you are mistaken, this parrot I purchased at the pet store a year ago. I can see your mistake, though; parrots often look very similar to each other.’”

“Did she believe him?” I asked.

“I doubt it. But what could she do?”
“I have to go now, Roman.” I stood up.

“Sure. So long. But Isaac.”

“Yeah?”

“If the woman comes back seeming like she means business, I will tell my father to give it to her.”

“Won’t he be lonely?”

“Most likely. But he has been lonely before. Besides, I can buy him a new one at Pet World on Avenue U. It’s what, a couple hundred bucks? What the fuck do I care? Or I’ll buy her the new one. It’s just a bird.”

***
I walked in the front door of Becca’s apartment building. The usual doorman was at his little post, with the phone to his ear. He neither welcomed me nor moved to stop me. He lowered the phone to the cradle with his gloved hand, and his eyes followed me across the lobby to the elevator. I banged on the buttons. They lit up but the door didn’t open. The light was stuck on floor eight. Becca’s floor. Where I was trying to go. I waited for the eight to decrease to a seven, but it didn’t, and the uniformed man was still watching me. I walked over to the staircase and pushed the door open. I liked it well enough in the staircase. It was made of steel and cement to withstand fire.

I got up to Becca’s floor and pushed the door open. My tired arms moved the heavy door slowly, which was a good thing: As soon as I had it open a crack, I saw that the whole hallway was full of cops. A uniformed officer was holding the elevator door open. No wonder it hadn’t come. Another uniform and two other guys in suits were carrying out cardboard boxes from Becca’s apartment. I pulled the door closed as quietly as I could.

Roman must have tipped the police off about me, how I was involved in the theft. Would he know Becca’s address? Sure. Timur and Roman, they knew everything. It made sense: they didn’t want me around to cause trouble for them with Rayna’s father, and they needed a patsy to take the weight for the stolen painting.
Then again, it could have been Rayna’s father himself was trying to set me up. Did he know about the robbery? Maybe he said that I was the one who kidnapped Rayna. That I was the one who had hurt her. She had been to the apartment before, and might have been coerced into giving up the address.

It didn’t really matter, at the moment. Whoever tipped them off, the police were here. And if the police knew about Becca’s house, they damn sure knew about my storage space. Not that I could get that far, anyway. The doorman had seen me, and had probably already tipped the cops off that I was in the building. There was no escaping. I could give them a run around through the different floors, but what would be the point?

I stepped out into the hallway. One of the plainclothes cops was about to step into the elevator, which was full with his cronies. I walked up to him. He turned and stared at me.

“I’m Izzy,” I said. The guy blinked. “Isaac Edel.” He stared for another moment, trying to place the name.

“Oh. Okay. Well, this is the last of it. We’re done in there. You can go in.” With that, he stepped into the elevator. Becca stepped out of the open apartment just as the elevator doors were closing.

“Izzy? Christ. About time you showed up.”

“Becca. What’s going on? I thought... I thought they were here for me.”

“For you? No. Why would they be here for you? No, don’t answer that, please. I don’t want to know. I have enough crap on my mind.”

“Then what’s going on?”
“They were gathering evidence on Andrew.”

“On Andrew? Why?”

“Don’t you read the papers?”

“No.”

“He was arrested yesterday for fraud. I guess he fucked up the funds he’s been managing far worse than anyone knew. I assumed you read about it, and that’s why you were here.”

“No. I’m just here.”

“So you are. Well, come inside, then.”

I followed Becca through the open door of her apartment, and pulled it shut behind us. She walked into the kitchen. I sat down on a stool on the living room side of the counter that separated that room and the kitchen. We were in two different rooms, but could see each other.

“I’ll make you a grilled cheese,” She said. She was already pulling things from the fridge.

“Okay.” Becca used to always make me grilled cheese for dinner. There was a time when we were old enough that the two of us could be left home by ourselves, but I was still too young to use the stove, so it was on Becca to cook for me. Alojzy was already gone, and my mother worked late at the office. We were to stay in the apartment, with the door locked, until she came home. Becca was only eleven or so; the only things she really knew how to make were macaroni and cheese and grilled cheese. Her secret was that instead of oiling the skillet, she buttered the outsides of the slices of bread. I don’t know where she learned this
trick. Other than that, she kept it pretty simple: thick slabs of cheddar, a couple thin slices of tomato. I have tried the buttered bread method myself many times since, but have never gotten it right.

I watched her grill the sandwich, quickly and deftly. She put it on a plate and placed in front of me. She’d only made the one sandwich.

“Aren’t you hungry, Becca?”

“No, I’m not hungry. I’ll just have some tea.” I ate the sandwich while she put the kettle on.

“What’s going to happen to Andrew?” I asked her.

“I guess they’ll send him to prison. I mean, not prison; just some country club prison in Connecticut or something. He’ll be okay.”

“How much time do you think he’ll get?”

“I don’t know. It depends on how mad the SEC is, and what all comes out in the investigation. A couple years maybe? I guess I don’t really care.”

“Isn’t he still your fiancé?’

“No. An engagement is a promise about the kind of live you’re going to live with someone. Committing imprisonable felonies breaks the promise.” She put two coasters out on the counter.

“So he’s guilty.”

“Of course he’s guilty.”

“And you don’t want to wait for him?”

“No.”

“Oh.”
“Look, Andrew isn’t a bad person. I don’t condemn him. I don’t hate him. I just don’t want to be like Mom, wasting half my life in love with a fuckup who’s in and out of jail.”

“We’d never have been born,” I said, “If Mom hadn’t been with Dad.” I thought of a line from the Talmud. “It would have better if you’d never been born. But since you were…” And then everything else comes. The teakettle whistled. Becca got up and poured a mug for each of us.

“I’m glad you’re my brother, Izzy. I don’t know if I’m glad Alojzy was our father. He was so cruel to Mom. Don’t you remember?”

“No.

“You were too young to remember.”

“No. I remember. I remember them dancing in the kitchen.”

“Sure. They’d dance for a song or two, when one he liked came on the radio. But don’t you remember him shouting at her, and punching holes in the kitchen wall?” She looked over at the clean condo wall, as if there would be a hole in that one too.

“No. But I hurt my hand that same way, arguing with Maryam, the girl I dated at Oberlin. Its one of the reasons she broke up with me.”

“Don’t be so proud of that.”

“I’m not proud. I’m just telling you. Don’t you remember going down to the Lower East Side? On Sunday afternoons? We’d go to the diner on East 12th and eat pierogis?”
“Yeah. He always had to go see that creepy guy, Oleg, on Second Avenue. The apartment smelled like cat piss and cigars. He’d look at me weird. Call me a pretty girl. Put his hand on my head. I hated it there. Alojzy always had to give him some envelope. I don’t know what they were involved in. Some sort of gambling thing, maybe?”

“Probably. But don’t you remember that afterward he would take us to that bodega next door, where they made egg creams? And we’d each get a chocolate egg cream in a little plastic cup? Then we’d go up to Tompkins Square Park?”

“I don’t know what he was thinking, bringing kids around all those junkies that hung out there, then.”

“No one ever messed with us. We just rode on the swings. Don’t you remember that he was so strong he would stand behind and push both of us, one with each hand? And his left arm was just as strong as his right arm, so we were always neck and neck? And we went so high? And then he’d suddenly grab us off the swings, one arm each, and hug us close as we screamed?”


We were both exhausted. Becca put out some clean sheets on the couch for me, and went into her bedroom. I lay there and thought about how kind my sister was to me. It was a surprising thought, because I’d spent so long with an animosity against her in my heart.
One time, not longer after we’d move to Long Island, some older guys jumped me on the way to the bus stop. We started at our new school right after Christmas break; when this happened there were still islands of dirty snow left between the roads and the sidewalks. The two guys came up behind me and started jabbing me in the back with a lacrosse stick. That was one thing that I noticed when I moved to the suburbs, everyone was always carrying lacrosse sticks. Well, they kept poking me and calling me a faggot and I kept stumbling but I didn’t turn around. Finally, they whacked me really hard across the legs and I fell down. They gave me a few good kicks that knocked the wind out of me, and I couldn’t get back up. One of them pulled out his dick and took a long piss into a pile of snow. They picked me up and rubbed my face into the piss snow.

A while later, I saw Becca hanging out with those same guys at the mall. I waved but she ignored me. That wasn’t the only time she did something like that and I’d held on to every one. I know it wasn’t easy for her. She had the same hook nose as the other girls, but no daddy to buy her a nose job. The fact that she was a little older than me when we moved out there meant that she missed shared bonding experiences like Hebrew school and first sleepovers. It also meant she had a little city sexiness in her step that made the suburban girls feel threatened. I didn’t know that’s what it was at the time; I wouldn’t have thought to attach the word sexiness to my sister. I just knew that she was always looking for a fight, and I was usually the one to take the beating, one way or another.

There were other things, though, that I ought to have held onto too. I don’t know how many of these grilled cheeses she’d made me. And I
remembered one time, right before we moved to Long Island, we were at a car dealership. My mom was spending a lot of time going back and forth between our apartment and Bernie’s house, and she decided she needed a car of her own. Probably Bernie helped her with the down payment.

She went into the office to sign the paperwork, leaving us in the waiting room. The salesman had given each of us a big orange lollipop to keep us occupied. I was so excited to eat the orange lollipop, beyond excited, desperate to taste the sweetness. But when I pulled open the plastic, the candy shattered somehow, just shattered into a dozen little pieces that fell to the carpet and gripped the dirty fuzz.

About a month before he left, Al borrowed a car from a buddy, and took us all driving out in New Jersey. We made a whole day of it, going far out into the country. We stopped at a roadside produce stand, where my mom bought fresh vegetables, and me and Becca got to pet a big dog. We got ice cream from Dairy Queen and everyone was having a nice time. My mom was laughing, and my parents were getting along. Then, out on the turnpike, a truck kicked up a rock. At first we thought it was just a little knick, serious enough to send Alojzy into a fury of curses, but minor enough my mom could still calm him down. But as we drove, the crack spread. Two rays of the tiny star spread slowly and evenly, curving out in opposite directions. As the crack grew, Alojzy’s rage grew inside the car. By the time the glass was divided by a giant ‘S,’ the rage was choking us. No one spoke.
And when he was left, no one said a word then either. There was no explanation. He was just gone. I asked Becca. She said it wasn’t any of my business, and not to bother mom. I guess Becca didn’t know either, and she was anxious and just holding it together. And mom was holding it together. Everyone had to hold it together except for me. I got to cry in the waiting room of a car dealership.

I cried for a long time. Dad was gone and the crack was spreading through everything. Dad had gone for a good long time by then, and a little while later we’d be gone too, to Long Island. Even the little token of sweetness they’d offered me was ruined by the spreading crack.

What Becca did next was so strange. She took her own lollipop, unbroken and unwrapped, and handed it to me. The messed up thing was, she always liked lollipops so much more than me. She genuinely likes sweets, the way I like vinegary things. But she handed me that lollipop, said she didn’t even want it. I grabbed it from her and stuck it in my mouth. When my mom came back out of the salesman’s office, Becca didn’t say a word about what had happened.

***
The next day, on Becca’s suggestion, I called my mother. Bernie answered the phone. He said she wasn’t home.

“But Isaac. It’s been a while. Your mother has been worried about you. Have you been alright?” I had never really talked to Bernie on the phone, but I guess he wanted something to tell my mother in case I didn’t call back.

“Yeah. I’ve been okay.”

“And Becca? She’s holding up alright?”

“I think so. It’s hard to tell. She always has a tough front.”

“That’s true.”

“But hey, Bernie, you’re an accountant, can you explain this Andrew mess to me?”

“Well, I don’t know all the details, of course.”

“But generally.”

“Generally: Andrew had quite a bit of success early on in his career – too early in his career – and was subsequently given a responsibility he could not handle. People entrusted him with funds, expecting him to continue to deliver large returns. What he delivered instead were losses. Rather than owning up to this, he put an astounding amount of time and energy into creating the illusion that the profits were continuing. This is known as fraud. Unfortunately, the longer Andrew continued with this fraud, the more people were motivated people to entrust him with even larger sums of money.”
“And he lost those as well?”

“Yes.”

“So he’s guilty.”

“It certainly looks that way, from what’s been publicized. But there could be factors we don’t know.”

“In one of your books, that I read, they talk about Gershom Scholem.”

“Yes?”

“And the Hassidim called him ‘the accountant.’ Like, an accountant knows more about the rich man’s wealth than he does, but can’t spend any of it, so it’s not worth much.”

“Yes. That was metaphor. For his relationship to spiritual wealth.”

“I understand that. But still, it involves a description of the position of an accountant.”

“Well, yes, it does. Andrew isn’t an accountant, strictly speaking. But I see the connection.”

“How come you became an accountant, Bernie?”

“An accountant, specifically? I guess I had a professor who encouraged me in that direction.”

“Okay. But generally.”

“Generally speaking, I wanted a good clean job. My father, from the day he came to this country, he was scrapping and hustling, and he never got himself settled. He always had a scheme, and he never got ahead. I didn’t want to have to lead that type of life.”
“Where did your father come from?”

“Poland.”

“Like my dad.”

“Yes. I suppose you and I have that in common.”

“But he was older. He must have been a Holocaust survivor?”

“Yes. He was never in a camp. But he was in the ghetto, in Lodz. He made it out somehow.”

“How come you never mention him?”

“I don’t have all that many good things to say about the man. And there’s not much value in speaking ill of the dead.”

“Well… he was a survivor, though.”

“Yes. But you know, it wasn’t necessarily the good ones that survived.”

“You think the survivors were the guilty ones?”

“Some of them. I think some of them survived by stealing bread from the others.”

“And you think Andrew is a bread stealer? That he’s a guilty one.”

“I don’t know that I’d say bread stealer. None of us know how we’d act in that situation.”

“But you think he’s guilty?

“Yes, I do. But that doesn’t mean I think anyone else is innocent.”

“What about the dead ones?”

“Maybe the dead ones. But I doubt that too.”
The phone rang a few hours later. I thought it might be mother calling back, but it was Andrew.

“Aren’t you in jail?”

“No. Are you disappointed?”

“No, I’m glad you’re not in jail. I just thought…”

“No, it’s cool bro. I know it’s a weird situation. I’m out on bail. But I’m pretty restricted. House arrest, with the ankle monitor and everything. They froze my bank accounts. I had to surrender my passport.”

“How did you post bail if they froze your account?”

“My mother bailed me out. She had to put her condo in Florida up as collateral. I didn’t want her to do it.”

“I see.”

“Yeah. I guess your sister’s not home?”

“She’s at work. You could try her cell phone.”

“I have. She’s not taking my calls. She won’t even send me to voicemail; she just clicks ‘answer’ then clicks ‘end call’ immediately. I tried to leave a message with the receptionist at her office, but I didn’t get the feeling she was going to pass it along. So I thought maybe I’d leave a message on the voicemail at the house here.”

“Do you want to hang up and call back, and I’ll let it go to the machine?”

“Nah. She doesn’t want to hear my voice. Hey, what’re you up today Izzy?”

“Well…” Before Andrew called, I’d spent a full hour doing nothing but
sitting on Becca’s couch and think about Rayna. “Nothing, really.”

“You know how to play chess?”

***

I took the 6 train down to Grand Central, then walked across town to what
used to be, and was once again, called Hell’s Kitchen. This route took me
through Times Square. Times Square was supposedly completely sanitized in the
nineties, but the street vendors never went away. Men from Egypt sold all beef
hotdogs for two dollars each. Looking for something sweet? That same two
dollars will get you a bag of honey roasted peanuts. New York’s finest gourmet
You look street smart. What’s your name? Street smart guy like you could dig
my mix tape. Five dollars now, I’ll even sign it for you. Well come on, son, I
already wrote your name. You look so handsome, with New York City as your
backdrop. A photo not enough. You need portrait drawing. Ten dollar. Your
brother wants one too? Sure he do. Tell you what, two for fifteen. These are not
caricatures, these are portraits. This woman is a true artist. She went to the
Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing.

For the past couple months I had been wearing a pair of Al’s boots. They
were a little big for me, but between the stiff leather ankles and the steel toes, they
were still a lot better for work than my old sneakers had been. I have a tendency
to drag my heels as I walk, and after two months of daily use, the rubber heels
were worn down. I rocked slightly backwards as I walked. I’d saved a bit of
money; maybe it was time I went into store and bought a new pair of shoes. I wondered what heel draggers with no money did. Rocked back forever, I guessed.

I got over to Eighth Avenue, an avenue still full of old drunks and dive bars and peep shows, thanks to the looming influence of Port Authority, the largest bus terminal in the United States of America. Al would have made sense on Eighth Avenue.

Past Eighth, I was firmly on the West side. Hell’s Kitchen. I read in a book once that the last Irish gang in the neighborhood, The Westies, supplied the union labor for the construction projects that gentrified the area, and drove out the remaining Irish families.

Andrew opened the door in sweatpants and a New York Islanders jersey. I was a little taken aback, as I’d never seen him dressed so informally. During the workweek, of course, he wore suits. Lounging around Becca’s apartment on the weekend, he wore khakis and polo shirts.

“Hey Edel. Thanks for coming by.” We clasped hands.

“Sure. My pleasure. How are you doing?”

“You know. Been better.” He shrugged, and turned back into the apartment. “Come on in.” I followed behind, noticing the bulky ankle monitor just below the elastic band of his sweatpants. The apartment was recently remodeled, and Andrew owned nice furniture, but the place was a mess. Dirty clothes lay across the floor. New looking sports equipment – a bag of golf clubs,
a pair roller blades, different sizes of free weights, a half-folded folding kayak – were piled in the living room. A PlayStation 2 video game system lay as far from a large television said as its cord would allow. There were books, too. Not a lot, but more than I expected. Business schoolbooks. Pop psychologies. *The Great Gatsby.* Some Michael Crichton. Some Jack Higgins. Two coffee table books about Israel.

“I’d offer you a beer,’ Andrew apologized. “But I’m not allowed to have any booze in the house.”

“That’s okay,” I said. “I mean, I’m okay.”

We put the chessboard on the table and set up the pieces. Andrew won the first game easily. He toyed with me a bit, letting me take few pawns and a knight, and lead myself into a trap.

“So, what happened, Andrew?” I asked, as I set up the board for the next game.

“I don’t know. I guess your sister just decided…”

“No, I mean, this thing you’re arrested for.”

“That thing. It’s fraud. They’re charging me with fraud.”

“But are you guilty?”

“Oh. Yeah. I’m guilty, I guess. I mean, I fucked up.”

“Why’d you do it?”

“Dude, it’s not like I sat down and decided I was going to commit this huge crime. I just, you know, I cut some corners. To keep people happy. And it added up. See what I mean?”
“And before you knew it, you’d crossed the line.”

“No. That’s the thing. There is no line.”

“I see.”

“You do, huh? Have you ever committed a crime, Izzy?”

“Yeah.”

“Right, that drug stuff.”

“No, I mean, that too, but I helped some guys steal something once. Something valuable.”

“Oh. I see. How did it feel?”

“Like nothing. It was just work.”

“Exactly.”

I was a more conscious of my long game the second time around, and managed to put up a little bit of a fight, but Andrew still beat me in the end. He took the third game too, with a queen sacrifice.

“So. Becca said you were living with this girl downtown.”

“Yes. I was, for a little while. Her name is Rayna.”

“Where is she from?”

“Brooklyn. Though she didn’t talk about that much. I guess she was from a Hassidic family.” I was afraid Andrew was going to make some sort of joke about Yeshiva girls gone wild or something.

“Was this the first time you ever lived with a girl?” His voice was surprisingly kind.
“Yeah.”

“It can be hard.”

“It was hard. I didn’t know what to do.” I found myself telling Andrew about what it was like between Rayna and me. I didn’t get into the details about the storage space or the abduction or anything, but I felt the need to try to explain how I felt about her. What it felt like to sleep beside her.

“Dude,” Andrew said when I was done talking. “It sounds like she has serious problems. Like maybe she was abused.”

“I know.”

“You probably shouldn’t have been living with her. She probably needed counseling. She probably shouldn’t have been living with anybody.”

“I know. It didn’t make any sense.”

“But you miss her?”

“Yeah.”

“How long has it been?”

“Two days. Is it weird to miss someone so soon?”

“No. I miss your sister.”

After two hours, I’d lost of five out of six games. I only took that sixth one because Andrew had become unexpectedly flustered talking about Becca. It hadn’t occurred to me that he loved her as much as he did. He was still a bread
stealer, but he would have given half his stolen crusts to my sister, for what that's worth.

“Do you want to play another game, Izzy?”

“No,” I stood up. “I have to go home.”

“Oh. For sure. Thanks for coming by.” We bumped fists.

“I’ll tell my sister you said hi.”

My mother got me on the telephone at Becca’s.

“Isaac. It’s your mother, Ruth Fischer. Do you remember me?”

“Vaguely. How are you doing?”

“I could be better. My children are worrying me to death. One was betrayed by a white-collar criminal, and the other is running in the streets doing G-d know what.”

“I was working as a street vendor, earning some money. But I’m not doing that anymore.”

“What is it you’re doing now? Looking for some indoor employment I hope?”

“Yeah, I guess so. I’m back here at Becca’s for a minute, trying to sort things out.”

“Oh. Well, it’s good that you’re with your sister. She needs your support right now. How is she holding up?”

“I don’t know. She’s doing fine I guess. She’s strong. You know that.”
“I know she acts strong. I did the same thing, every time your father disappeared.”

“Okay.”

“Andrew meant a lot to her. They were planning a life together. She was depending on him.”

“I saw him the other day.”

“Does Becca know that?”

“No.”

“I see. I wouldn’t tell her.”

“I didn’t. I won’t. It’s good to talk to you, Mom, but I have to go. I have to go see about a job thing.”

“Fine. Go. Though, I thought after all this time you’d want to talk to me more. But that’s all right. Wait! Bernie wants to talk to you. If Bernie is willing use the telephone it must be important.” I heard the noises of people shuffling themselves.

“Hello, Isaac.”

“Hello, Bernie.”

“Listen, when we spoke the other night, I spoke very negatively about my father.”

“Yes.”

“One thing I should have said, though, is that despite everything, I still said Kaddish over his grave.”

“You prayed for him?”
“Yes. It took me ten years, but yes. I said Kaddish for him. It’s a son’s obligation. There’s another prayer, the El Malei Rachimim, that is specifically for the deceased. But the Mourner’s Kaddish, that’s for the mourner too. For you.”

“My father doesn’t have a grave for me to stand over.”

“Well, he does, actually. It’s a mass grave, but it’s a grave. He’s buried in the New York potter’s field, out on Hart Island. I checked, when I verified the details of his death for your mother. The island is not public; it’s controlled by the Department of Corrections. But I believe family member with appropriate documentation can travel out there. I’ll send you the paperwork I have, if you’d like.”

***
Chapter 24

I didn’t want to go out onto the street, so I stayed in Becca’s apartment. I was tired of books, so I watched the television. TV shows about criminals and police, mostly. Gangster movies, too, and most of the *Lonesome Dove* miniseries. I spent a lot of time on the phone with the Department Of Corrections, but never got a clear answer about how – or even if – I could visit the island where my father was buried.

I took Becca out to dinner. I wanted to treat her, to show her that things had changed, and I wasn’t back to mooch again. We went to a diner on 89th Street, because she said liked the Greek salads there. They had egg creams, and I convinced her to drink one.

I made sure to buy groceries, every couple days. Not just food, but paper towels and sponges, and the other things we needed. One night I even cooked dinner for Becca. It was only my pasta salad, but I threw in some fancy spicy Turkey sausage and crumbled feta to make it more of a meal. I set the table, and had it ready to go when she came home from work.

“This is good,” she said, halfway through the meal. I knew she meant it, because she wasn’t prone to false praises, or any sort of praises, really.

“Thanks,” I said.

“I don’t think I ever tasted your cooking before.”

“No. You’re always the one that cooks for me.” I got up to serve myself a second helping of pasta salad, and poured us both a second glass of wine.
“You know,” Becca said. “I talked to my friend Judy. In HR, at my work.”

“Yeah?”

“She came buy once? Kind of pretty? With the long brown hair? But a weird nose?”

“Yeah, I think I remember.”

“She said they’re hiring another data entry clerk. She could get you on. Usually they hire kids who their BAs, but two years of college should be enough, and with my recommendation, she could get you on.”

“Oh. Cool. Good to know.”

“Do you want me to schedule you an interview?” I could use a job. I liked having a place to go. I didn’t want to watch the cash I had saved dissipate into the atmosphere of New York City. Still, I couldn’t imagine sitting in an office. I didn’t really know what people did in offices, and I suspected that the street had ruined me for indoor work.

“No. Not just now. I’m working on things.”

“Things? Izzy.”

“I know where I’m going. But thank you. I’ll keep that in my back pocket.”

“They’ll hire someone else if you don’t go out for it.”

“My sympathies to that man.” She glared at me.

“Don’t be such a little shit, Izzy, I’m trying to help you.”

“I know you are,” I said. I started to clear the dishes.
“Come on. Don’t get me wrong, Iz. I mean, I’m happy to have you here. But you can’t…”

“I won’t be here for long. Don’t worry.” I got up to clean the dishes. As I walked by her, I leaned down and kissed her on the forehead. She looked up in confusion. I don’t know that I had ever given her a kiss of any sort before. “But thank you,” I told her. “You’re a good sister.”

***

I went to visit Andrew again. It was a warm day, and old men were drinking beer outside Andrew’s building. Andrew had mentioned that the lower floors were filled with the residents of the SRO that had been here before the luxury rental building was built. This had been a stipulation of the deal that allowed the developer to build here. The old men would eventually die, and their apartments would go market rate. In the meantime, the type of life my father had lived and the type of life that Andrew lived were only separated by a flight of stairs.

When I knocked on the apartment door, Andrew shouted that it was open. I came in to find him sitting on the windowsill, staring out onto the street. I came close to enough to look out myself, but I didn’t see anything worth noting. I asked him how he was doing. He muttered a few things about lawyers, giving me the general impression that his legal situation was not progressing well. I didn’t press him for details.
We played a few games of chess. His heart wasn’t in it, and I won two in a row.

“Do you wish you’d done anything differently?” I asked.

“I shouldn’t have let you take my rook. But I wasn’t paying attention.”

“No. I mean, in general. These past months.”

“Oh. Yeah.” He leaned over the table, halving the distance between us, and resting the weight of his upper body on his fists. “I should have stolen more. I should have robbed everybody. I should have taken everything.”

***
Chapter 25

Becca lent me her old laptop so I could work on my resume, and look for a job. The resume said: Education: two years of college. Work Experience: bookseller, self-employed. The want ads said this and that, but I couldn’t find any job I could bear the thought of doing.

I searched the Department of Corrections website, but it yielded no information. I did an internet search and found a forum where other people who had relatives buried out on Hart Island posted information. There had apparently been sporadic opportunities for family members to visit the island by Ferry, but the most recent posting was four years old, and it referred to a visit made many years before that. I searched for more general information about Hart Island itself, and found that they had been burying people there since 1869. By 2008, there were 850,000 people buried there. The burials were all performed by prisoners from Rikers. In 1948, the prisoners erected a 30-foot tall monument to the friendless dead. The Island has a total area of 131 acres, and is located slightly less than a mile off of City Island. There were posts on kayaking forums by people who had paddled around the Island, and peered in from the water.

The term “potters field” comes from the gospel of Matthew. Judas returned his thirty pieces of silver to the high priests, but they couldn’t return them to the treasury because they were now considered blood money, so they decided to use the money to buy a field from a potter, to use as a burial place for foreigners.
I searched for the prayers that Bernie had told me to say – The Mourner’s Kaddish and the El Malei Rachamim – and did my best to memorize them off the screen.

I searched for anything about R. Galuth. I thought maybe there was an image of the *The Sea Beach Line* somewhere - I longed to see Rayna’s face again – but there wasn’t anything. I had better luck searching for information about the Glupsker Dynasty. To my surprise, they had their own website. There was a bit of Yiddish text on it, blue on a white background. The only sections in English were a page to donate tzedakah with a credit card, and a form where you could request a fifteen-minute audience with the Rebbe. I typed in my name and email address.

A couple of Daily News articles mentioned the Glupskers in passing, in relation to local Brooklyn politics. A blog called “HaAher” – written by a bitter, ex-orthodox man who went by the screen name of Elisha – mentioned the Glupskers, along with two other dynasties, in a rambling post about the cover up of sexual abuse scandals at religious schools. There were a few other sites in Hebrew and Yiddish that I couldn’t read, and one or two in English about Jewish charities.

There was a brief stub on the history of the Glupskers off of the “List of Hassidic Dynasties” Wikipedia page. All it said, really, was that they were a dynasty that had begun in Poland, and whose followers were now divided primarily between Boro Park and Jerusalem, with a few other members living in Montreal. Below, it gave the rabbinical lineage of the dynasty. It started with
Rebbe Pyotr Aharon of Uman (b. ?, d. Glupsk, 1823) and ended with Rebbe Schmuli Langer (b.1956, Brooklyn). Rayna’s father. I tried to imagine Rayna as a little girl, sitting on a rabbi’s lap. In between was a long line, cutting diagonally down across the screen: Rebbe this of Glupsk, Rebbe that of Glupsk. Little notes of miracles and pogroms. A rebbe’s daughter who defied her father, and disappeared to America in 1919.

The only citation given at the bottom the page was an article by Louis Ginzberg from the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia. The article itself wasn’t online, but there seemed to be a set of the encyclopedia down at the library on 42nd street, so I took the 6 train down to Grand Central and walked over. I’d spent months standing outside NYU’s Bobst library, never once being permitted entrance. Now, I walked up the marble steps of an even grander library, and entered with ease.

According to Ginzberg, the founder of the dynasty was the enigmatic Rebbe Pyotr, who appeared in the Augustow region sometime around 1812, eventually settling in the shtetle of Glupsk. He had traveled up from the town of Uman, in the Ukraine, and appeared to have spent some amount of time in Salonica and other parts of the Ottoman Empire, though there was no evidence he ever made it to Eretz Yisrael. His enemies claimed he was a secret Frankist, but his followers maintained he was a disciple of Nachman of Breslov, who founded no lineage. Pyotr’s beard was thin, and no one knows why he had a Christian name. Still, everyone agreed he was a man of great piety, as well a mesmerizing storyteller, and he attracted many followers. He is heralded as the author of one
legendary book, though no copies remain in existence, and no one knows what the nature of its contents.

While I was at the library, I searched the electronic card catalogue for R. Galuth. Maybe there was a plate – or at least a mention – in some forgotten art history textbook. The only thing that came up was a book called My Lives And Loves and Deaths In Greenwich Village by Moses Bodenheimer, that lived across the street at The Mid-Manhattan Library, the smaller circulating branch.

Bodenheimer appeared to have been a bohemian poet who had haunted Greenwich Village in the 1920s and 30s. According to the inside flap of his book, he was murdered on the Bowery in 1954, and the book was released slightly later that same year. Many of the short chapters were titled with the name of the cultural figure that it discussed. One of them was titled, “R. Galuth”:

Galuth was that most curious of creatures, a Greenwich Village painter who painted more than he drank or bragged. What’s more, he never chased after models or any other young women. Nor young men for that matter.

I had admired some of his canvasses at a local gallery, and we became friendly. Always, though, Galuth kept me – and everyone else – at an arm’s length. Rumors abounded about him (the Village was a village indeed, in those days!).
He simply appeared in New York one day, saying little more than that he had come from Europe. He made references, occasionally, to Paris. Some said that he was the son of a Hassidic rabbi from the Pale, who had rejected tradition for art. Others said that he was a deserted officer from the Kaiser’s army. He spoke gently, wore fine suits, and showed no signs of being able to grow a beard (which, for a rabbi’s son, would certainly be most strange!). Some said he was a homosexual, others that he was a hermaphrodite. He would lock himself away in solitude for days at a time, painting, and this only added to his mystery.

One evening, by chance, I found myself on the fire escape outside his fourth floor studio. I had been enjoying an evening of wine and romance with a young lady when her “husband” – a bull-dyke cab driver built like a dockworker – came home unexpectedly earlier. I managed to escape out onto the fire escape and across the roof, wearing just my trousers.

I realized that I had come down the side of Galuth’s building. An unprecedented chance to observe the mysterious painter – how fortuitous!

What I observed was more complex and more beautiful than anything that could be contained in rumor.

Galuth lay naked, posing on the couch. I could see that she was indeed a woman, and a comely woman at that. Truly, a muse
any artist would be blessed to have! Then she stood, and as she
talked her body tightened, contracted, and, while her parts did not
change, she assumed the masculine gate of the Galuth I met in the
street. He stood at his easel, painting the ghost of his female self
that lingered in front of his eyes. After a time, she returned to the
couch. Then he, in turn, returned to the easel.

This mesmerizing dance went on and on throughout the
night, the masculine and the feminine, the Shekhinah and the
Adonai, coming together only on the canvas.

***
Chapter 26

It was 10:30 at night when I left Becca’s apartment. I was glad that she was working late, and I didn’t have to explain where I was going with the backpack-style folding-kayak case I’d borrowed from Andrew strapped around my shoulders and waist.

I caught the Bronx-bound 6 train, and rode it all the way to the end of the line, Pelham station. I got my bearings, and got on the right side of the street to catch the City Island bound BX29 bus. If I had gotten on the 29 in the wrong direction, I would have ended up at Co-op City, where my mother lived with her parents when she was in high school and college.

Most of the bus ride was through the woods of Pelham Bay Park. It didn’t feel like we were in the city anymore, but we were. The bus went over a bridge, and then a minute later the driver was letting me and the two other passengers off on City Island Avenue.

I walked the four blocks over to the water without, luckily, seeing anybody. The entrance to the private marina was padlocked, and monitored by a security camera, so I walked up along the waterfront. I came to a school, and cut across their soccer field. There was only a six-foot high chain link fence in front of the rocks that led down to the water. I pushed the heavy bag over the top (hoping the fall didn’t do its contents any damage) and climbed over.

Andrew had showed me how to assemble the kayak in his apartment. It was relatively straightforward: You snapped the pieces of the aluminum frame
together, like a Knex set, fitted them inside the waterproof synthetic skin, then tightened the whole thing into place. I extended the telescoping paddle and pointed my kayak towards Hart Island. I wasn’t sure that the kayak was all that sturdy, or that I had understood the current charts correctly. Well, if I drowned, I drowned. I took a deep breath and pushed off from the rocks.

I had not paddled a kayak since summer camp, ten years before, and then it had been on a placid upstate lake with no current. Still, the months of lifting boxes of books had made my arms stronger than they’d ever been, and I was able to stay on course. The wind slapped my face, but I could take it. An airplane flew over me. It was low, descending towards LaGuardia airport, but I was just a dark speck in the vast waters; no one knew or cared that I was down here, struggling in the bay.

I made landfall after about fifteen minutes. I ran the kayak ashore, and managed to get out without stepping into the cold water. I pulled the kayak under a bush and walked out through the trees. In the half-moonlight, I could see everything – every branch and every leaf of every tree – with great clarity. I heard a rustling, and looked up to see an owl settling onto a tree limb. Its limp prey – a young squirrel, it looked like – hung from its talons. The owl spread its wings again and lifted away. I was truly alone, then, and not frightened.

I walked past long, brick ruins. Prison barracks, maybe, or an old workhouse. I gave it a wide berth. I had my own ghosts to contend with.

I emerged into a great field of scarred earth. I could make out long strips where the earth was more disturbed. These were the fresh trenches, filled with the
recently deceased. Alojzy lay inside one of them. How could I ever know where
he was? I had no dousing rod inside my soul. Should I say Kaddish over the
whole potters field? I didn’t think I could take on such a burden.

I came upon an uncovered trench. Pine coffins were stacked like stairs, or
the side of an Aztec pyramid. I walked down into the ground. Alojzy lay
somewhere beside me, in this same earth. I lay down in the center of the empty
trench, just behind the last coffin. I looked up into the glow of the firmament,
and prayed as best as I could for the soul of Alojzy, who had gone on to his world.
I made no vows. May his resting place be in the Garden of Eden.

Worst come to worse, if I rolled the dice and lost, if the bastards
slaughtered me and tossed me in the street, and no one ever loved me enough to
claim my body, I would just end up here in a trench like this one. I would come
home to Alojzy, and lay beside him under this island. There was nothing left to
fear.

Rain began to fall, softly. It caressed my face. I gave myself over to the
cold, and entered into a deep sleep, pure and un-muddied with dreams.

The light of the sun woke me in the morning. I stood, stretched, and
walked back up to the surface of the earth, running smack into a correctional
officer holding a pump shotgun. Suffice to say, he was more surprised to see me
than I was to see him. He squinted out from underneath his black NYC DOC
baseball cap
“Where the hell you came from?” He swung the shotgun up towards me as an afterthought.

“The grave,” I said. Two prisoners stood behind the blue uniformed man, holding shovels and wearing orange jumpsuits peeled down to the waist. They nodded in support of my response.

The guard handcuffed me, and led me back to the road where a bus was waiting. I sat in there for a couple hours. A few prisoners were brought on at different times, apparently relieved of work detail due to various infractions. Eventually, three guards came on, and drove us onto a ferry, which took us across to Rikers. I was brought to intake there, but since I hadn’t gone through Central Booking yet, they sent me down to Centre Street in Manhattan in an otherwise empty transport van. At Center Street, they realized that since I had been arrested on City Island, I should’ve been sent to Bronx Central Booking, not Manhattan Central Booking. In any case, no one knew who my arresting officer was, so there was no way to fill out a report. I was cut loose without being charged, around four in the afternoon. My money had been confiscated at Rikers, and I had to walk all the way uptown.

***
Chapter 27

I checked my email account for the first time in a long time. There was some junk mail. An email from my mother that didn’t say anything other than that she wanted me to call her. There was an email from someone I had hung out with at college, that didn’t say much of anything at all. They had written when they were drunk and nostalgic. It didn’t really have anything to do with me. Then there was an email from The Glupsker World Council:

BS”D

Dear Supplicant,

Per your request, you have been granted an audience with the Great Rebbe of Glupsk,

Your audience is scheduled from 4:15 to 4:30 on Thursday,———.

Rabbi Moishe ——
Secretary of The Great Rebbe of Glupsk

***

The waiting room I found myself in four days later was like one you’d sit in at a dentist’s office. People sat in matching chairs, stealing nervous glances at the closed door. Instead of a woman in flowered scrubs, the clipboard-wielding gatekeeper was a skinny rabbi with round glasses and pointy red beard. He
swooped around in front of the door to the rebbe’s office, like some exotic pet bird who had been made trusty of the birdcage.

Two eager Yeshiva bochers sat next to me. They sat upright on the edges of their seats, waiting for the red bird to squawk their names. Across from me was a fat man wearing Velcro sneakers and pinstripe suit with no tie. He punched furiously at his wristwatch, and I realized that he had an old school Casio calculator watch. A kid in my second grade class named Danesh had had one, and I thought it was the coolest thing in the world. Maybe the man was using the calculator to do gematria, to divine mysteries. He looked a little schlubby to be doing such work. Maybe he was one of the thirty-six hidden tzadiks. If so, he was well hidden indeed. No, he was probably a vendor of some sort, trying to determine what the rebbe owed him.

“Fischer,” the voice called. “The rebbe will see you now, Isaac Fischer.” That was me. When I had filled out the online form, I had used Bernie’s last name, lest the name Edel sent up a red flag.

I was swept into the rebbe’s office, and door shut behind me. The room was lined with bookshelves. The black, pictureless volumes Rayna had spoken of. Actually, there was one picture in the room: a small, oil painting of subway train in a freestanding glass frame placed on the shelf closest to the window. The window itself looked out onto the brick walls of an airshaft. The painting was the only bit of color in the room. The train was coming around the bend on an elevated track, with all the explosive fury of a troika pulled by three healthy stallions. I felt I had seen the image somewhere before.
“You’ve already wasted one of your fifteen minutes shuffling around, and staring out my window.” I looked at the rebbe’s face. His eyes were focused on documents on his desk, even as he spoke. His beard was still thick and black.

“Did you not come here to ask me something?”

“Yes,” I said. “I came here to ask you what you’ve done to Rayna.”

He took his reading classes off, and looked up at me for the first time. He squinted. “I suppose you are the boy. Edel. The peddler who was harboring my youngest daughter.”

“Yes. Where is she?”

“Is that any business of yours?”

“Yes. Tell me. Please. Where is Rayna? Have you hurt her?”

“Hurt her? Of course not. She is my daughter. My youngest daughter. My most precious jewel.”

“You send thugs to manhandle your most precious jewel?”

“No. I sent my sons to fetch their sister home. I don’t want you to get the wrong idea. My daughter is safe. She is inside the hundred gates. Mea Shearim, Yerushalayim.”

“I’ll go to there. To Jerusalem. To her.”

“I would advise against that. You will not be welcomed in that neighborhood.”

“I don’t care.”

“Many zealots have come from America to Jerusalem, and lost their minds. No one is surprised when they disappear as quickly as they have come.”
“But I love her.”

“You lust after her.”

“No. I never touched her.”

“So she also claims. It doesn’t matter. She has been matched with a young man, a righteous man who has the humility to forgive her impurity. They are to be married.”

“I should be the one to marry her.”

“You? You fancy yourself a good match for my daughter?”

“Yes. I’m the only one that took care of her.”

“You took care of her?”

“I tried.”

“You tried? Really? That’s so? Then why, when my sons came for her, did you not fight them?”

“‘How did you know where we were?’

“We have many friends. Why did you not defend her? Why did you allow her to be dragged away into the night?’ When I didn’t answer, he leaned back in his chair, and clasped his hands together. ‘She will be protected, now, by her husband.’

“If I had had a chance, I could have lived a good life and made a good husband for her.”

“Perhaps that’s so. Or perhaps you did have chances, and squandered them. I couldn’t say. Either way, it is too late for you, now. The evil is deep down inside you, and you will never be pure. Just go now.” He waved me away
with a pale hand, and turned his attention back towards his papers. “Please. Go. You are no longer part of our story.”

My hand was on the doorknob when I stopped and turned back toward the Rebbe.

“You know,” I said, “I believed she was a ghost.”

“Then you are a foolish man. Ghosts do not walk the earth.”

“My father was a ghost. He walked all over the earth.”

***
Chapter 28

I got down to the storage space at three o’clock in the morning, and pulled the boxes out of the small unit they were packed into. I’d gotten them pretty well organized when I shifted units, so I knew what was what. A lot of the stuff in there was worthless, old flashlights and bits of rope and other debris, as well as books not worth the saving. I carted all that stuff out to the curb.

I packed my father’s sketchbooks into a backpack. I took one of his old belts that I’d save especially for this purpose, and ran it through the trigger guard of his gun. I fastened the belt diagonally across my neck and chest, so the gun hung down on my side, under my arm, and then pulled on a big, loose sweater. I put a rain coat on over that, and shouldered the backpack.

I took the boxes of books worth saving, about a dozen altogether, and carted them down the corridor, to where Mendy had his storage unit, then sat down on one of the boxes to wait for him. He was a man of routine, and I knew he would arrive soon.

“Isaac,” he said, when he turned the corner with his little luggage cart and saw me waiting. “Good morning.” We shook hands. “What is all this?”

“I’m out of the business, Mendy.”

“Yes, I suspected as much.’

“Can you use my back stock?”

“Well, let’s see. Let’s see.” He tugged on his beard with his right hand, and gripped his bent right elbow with his left hand. “What did you want for it? I
mean, I’d have to see the titles, but knowing the general quality of your books…
I’m sure I could go four, four-fifty, at least.”

“No. I don’t need any money. I want to give them to you, Mendy.”

“Oh. I see. That’s very kind of you, Isaac. I know you mean it. But the thing is, there ain’t really such a thing as a gift. Everything comes with an obligation. It’s better to pay it off as it comes. So that people can part friends, with nothing owed.”

“Tell you what,” I said. “Give me fifty for the handcart, and I’ll throw in the books as part of the deal. To sweeten it.”

“I meant that price only for the books. That cart is worth at least a hundred alone. On top of what the books are worth.”

“The wheels are practically useless. The rubber is ground down, and one of the cotter pins is rusted in place, it’ll be a hassle to get it popped off when you do replace the wheel. Half of the books are too esoteric to sell quickly; we have to factor in your storage costs. Fifty for the whole lot is a fair price.’

“Okay,” Mendy said. “When you put it that way. Fifty it is.” He slid me two twenties and two fives. I pocketed them, and turned to go. I felt his hand on my arm, and turned back towards him.

“Isaac,” he said. “Take care of yourself.”

***
I got the D train at West Fourth Street and rode it all the way down to Coney Island. I spent the long ride looking through Al’s sketchbooks. The images on the pages no longer seemed as foreign or as frightening to me as they had when I’d first encountered them. I’d been living with them for a little while, now.

Stillwell Avenue was crawling with cops. As I passed the station, I crossed my arms to pin the gun to my side as tightly as I could. The police didn’t pay me any mind.

When I got to the museum, I pounded on the door until I heard Goldov shout, “I coming! I coming! What is so urgent so early in the morning?” He pulled the heavy door open. “Oh. It’s you. Alojzy’s boy. “

“May I come in, Goldov?”

“Oh. Well. Why not?” He stepped back into the gallery and I stepped inside, pushing the door closed behind me.

“Goldov,” I said. “I have come to settle accounts with you.”

“Oh? You are here to pay the money Edel owed me? For this I have been waiting.”

“I know you have.” I thought of the note he’d sent my mother nine months earlier. I’d taken it on face value, then, as a notice of Al’s death. Now, I also saw it as attempt to squeeze from us, the money that Al would never pay. “But that’s not my account to settle. I’m here because of what you took from me.”

“What I took from you? I took nothing from anyone. Always people have taken from me. Go home, malchik.”
I pulled the gun out from under my big sweater. It took me a second to get the belt unbuckled and Goldov watched me with confusion. When I did get the gun out, and pointed the barrel at his face, his expression changed. I un-clicked the safety with my thumb and held my pointer finger against the trigger. A thin layer of sweat instantly appeared between my fingertip and the trigger’s flat metal surface.

“Okay,” Goldov said. “Fine. So maybe I skimmed a little off of what Roman gave me to give to you. A courier fee. Maybe I took more than I should have. It’s still far less than what Edel owed me. But there’s no need for guns. This is a civilized country. I’ll give you your money.”

“You’re damn right you’ll give my money. But that’s not why I’m here.”

“I am not understanding.”

“Shut up. You’re the one who snitched to the Rebbe. We both know that. You work for him. Galuth was the Rebbe’s great-aunt, or something. That’s a self-portrait of her downstairs. The Rebbe is the benefactor of this place. He keeps one of Galuth’s paintings in his office. He’s your boss. And you snitched on Rayna and me for what, a little bonus?” Galuth stood silent and motionless.

“Nu? Nu?”

“Fine. Galuth was the aunt of the alter rebbe. She is the great-aunt of the current rebbe. And the great-great-aunt of your little playmate, for that matter. She studied with her brothers. She outpaced them in her studies, even delving deep into the kabbalah. Deep into aspects of the mysteries they could never understand. But a woman could never be a rabbi, so she fled to Paris and became
next best thing, a painter. The rabbis, they still respect her. If only in secret.”

There was reverence in his voice, and I could see that he respected her too. Then his face turned, became cruel. “But yes. So you are not a complete moron. I work for the Glupskers. So I told my employer I am knowing where his daughter is. What of it? It was the right thing to do.”

“The right thing to do? We were happy. We had our little world. We weren’t hurting anybody. And you destroyed it for us.”

“What do I care about your happiness? Besides, your world, your little closet, the books you sold. That was all Edel’s. He stole from me. He did worse to others. No joy is not built on someone else’s pain. What do you think Alojzy did to obtain the favor of Timur in the first place?”

“He was loyal to Timur. To his organization.”

“To be loyal to someone means to be betraying someone else. Alojzy’s great act of loyalty, do you know what it was?”

“No,”

“I thought not. A friend of his – a man from Israel who was trying to make a name for himself here in Brooklyn – made an overture to your father. They had served together in the army, and he wanted Edel to come in with him as he made moves on Timur’s operation. Edel pretended to go along with the plan, but only so he could inform on this man to Timur.”

“So Alojzy saved Timur’s life.”

“Sure, you could say so, but what do you think happened to his army buddy? His old chevre? How do you think his other Israelis buddies thought
about him after this? Are you proud to have his name? I would not be. I spit on your father’s name.”

Goldov spit on his own floor. I swung the gun down towards his leg and pulled the trigger. The gun popped, and disproportionately large flash erupted from the cut barrel. The copper casing hit the floor with a little clinking sound. Goldov screamed out in pain. A black cat leaped out from behind a stack of canvases, and darted out the door.

“Do you think that I am a liar?” Goldov demanded, bent over. He held the wound. The fact that he was still speaking with such hostility meant that the small bullet had not hit an artery or anything important, but only imbedded itself in the meat of his winter salami of a leg.

“No,” I said. “I know you’re not a liar.” I worked the stiff bolt, loading another round into the chamber. “So tell me the truth about how he died. No one else will.”

“Hado,” Goldov sighed. “He died of heart attack in one of Timur’s clubs. I guess the dancing girls were too much for his heart. The years on the street, I never saw him eat anything but cheese and cold sausage, so it’s no wonder. They couldn’t have the ambulance coming to a bordello full of Ukrainian girls with no papers, so some of Timur’s guys took him in a car and dropped him at the hospital. They mentioned it to me, because I was the closest thing he had to a friend.” He looked up at me, to see if I was satisfied. I nodded. “You believe me?”
“I do.” This sounded true. Alojzy ate horribly. He never excercised, and he never went to a doctor. He’d self medicate with liquor, or occasionally with the black market medicines that old women sold on Brighton Beach Avenue like it was dope. There were no great myseries. Just the usual bullshit and suffering.

“Now,” I said, “I want my money. That hasn’t changed.” I pointed the gun at Goldov’s face again. He gestured towards a coffee can sitting amongst the paint tubes on the windowsill. I pulled out the wad of bills without counting them, and stuffed them in my pants pocket.

“That’s my whole savings...”

“I don’t care.”

I turned my back to him and went down the stairs. I listened for sounds that Goldov might be making a move, to call someone or attack me from behind, but I didn’t hear anything.

I stopped in the gallery and took a long look at the Sea Beach Line. Rayna flew in the air, just above death, for all eternity. She’d been flying there before she was born, and she’d be flying there still when she’d grown wide and blank-eyed, holding one brat against her hip and pushing two more down a narrow street in a double stroller. For a moment, I thought I could reach out and catch her.

But I couldn’t. This was just a picture. It wasn’t a window to anything real.

I’d taken Goldov’s money, same as Al would have. Same as Al had. But he wouldn’t stop there, and wander out misty-eyed over a painting. He’d stay on his toes, play every angle.
I took a box cutter out my pocket, and cut the canvas from the frame. I rolled it up as carefully as I could, and tucked it under my arm.

I walked back up the stairs. Goldov was lying in the middle of the room, gripping.

“Something else you need to take?” There was fear on his face, and I knew he wasn’t mocking me.

“Yeah. I am taking this picture, *The Sea Beach Line*.”

“You know that the pictures do not belong to me. They belong to the Glupskers.”

“Yes, I know. Tell your boss, the Rebbe, that I’ll be happy to trade him back the picture for a meeting with Rayna. I won’t try anything. I’ll come unarmed. He can send his guards or chaperones or whoever. But if I can’t see her once more, I’m keeping her picture.”

I went out onto the fishing pier to ditch the gun. It had served its purpose and was now just a liability; if a cop caught me with it, I would be going back to Rikers, and for longer than a couple hours this time. If the Rebbe wanted to send Timur and his crew after me, one little .22 wouldn’t be anywhere near enough firepower to make a difference.

Luckily, the pier wasn’t too crowded, at least down at the end. There was a group of teenagers hanging out there, but they were coupled up, and too busy flirting and playing grab ass to notice anything an adult was doing. I managed to work the gun out from under my sweater, and tossed it out off the pier. The
weight carried it farther than I’d expected, and for a moment it seemed to hover in the air.

Out of the corner of my eye, across the water and down the boardwalk towards Brighton, I could see two men sitting on a bench talking. It was a hundred yards away if it was a foot, but I could see them with perfect clarity. They both wore nice, dark suits. The younger one wore a tie; the older man’s shirt was unbuttoned, revealing thick black chest hair and thicker gold chains. The older man had his arm around the younger man’s shoulder, and was whispering into his ear. The younger man was smiling and nodding. I was him. The older man was Alojzy. We shook hands, then stood up, walked across the boardwalk, and down the ramp to the street. We got inside Alojzy’s car – a white Italian sports car with red wheels – and drove to my house in Manhattan Beach, just across the footbridge from Sheepshead Bay. Our business was conducted out on the boardwalk, where there were no bugs, but business was concluded and it was family time. My wife was waiting for us out front. Her hips looked so good, wrapped in her long black skirt, as she leaned against the white column of our front porch. I was proud that she was my wife. She looked like she could be Jewish, but actually her people were Greeks from Yessentuki. Our fathers were friends. She kissed me on the lips, and gave my father a kiss on the check. She went aside and woke our son from his nap. He ran down the stairs, eager to greet his father and his grandfather, who gave him a crisp twenty-dollar bill. We sat down at the table, which was piled with fresh flat bread, salads and yoghurt dips, dolma and bliny, potatoes and roasted lamb. My father poured us all a glass of
good red wine (even giving my little son a few drops in his glass), then raised his own glass in a toast to my family and home.

I heard a splash, and turned back just in time to see the gun disappearing beneath the surface of the water.

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Chapter 29

The meeting was arranged for four days later. Rayna hadn’t left for Israel yet, after all; the Rebbe had just said that to discourage me. I would be permitted to speak with her at the airport, for a few minutes before her actual departure. I guess they figured I wouldn’t try anything too stupid in such a secure place.

Timur and Roman and were to escort me to Newark International. I had them pick me up on W. 4th St., which seemed like neutral territory. It was so early in the morning, no booksellers were out yet.

“The painting?” asked Timur, after Roman had patted me down, and let me into the back seat of their car.

“After I see Rayna.” Timur didn’t respond to me, but I guess the terms were acceptable, because we kept driving.

“You know,” said Roman, after a minute. “You scared the shit out of old Goldov. Put some lead in his leg, eh? He thought you were going to put some in his head as well.”

“Maybe I should have.”

“I thought you were smarter than this,” said Timur. No one said anything else. We entered the Holland Tunnel, and when we came out the other side, Timur turned on the Russian news on the satellite radio.

When we got to the airport, they dropped me off at Terminal B, and drove off to park the car. I followed Timur’s directions, and found Rayna sitting on a bench next to a newsstand. Her hair was still long, but instead of being wild and witchy, it was pulled back with a thick headband. Over her black blouse was
a gray cardigan, and beneath her black skirt were matching gray stockings. On her lap was a large and slightly shiny handbag, which she clutched tightly. I watched her for a long minute; her little movements were different than I remembered. Her arms used to float, but now they darted.

Her eyes darted up, and she saw me standing in the terminal, watching her. I sat down beside her.

“Rayna,” I said. “I thought you were gone from me forever.” I took her hand in my mine, but she pulled it back.

“I am gone from you.”

“No. You don’t have to be. I’ve gotten stronger. I can protect you now.”

“So now you are a hero?”

“Yes. For you.”

“Isaac. That is the thing. You are talking about a storybook hero. Always. We were playing as characters in a story.” I barely recognized this voice as Rayna’s. The nervousness was gone, but so was the sweetness. And when had I ever heard her speak the word ‘story’ with derision? “You were playing your father. I was playing a free woman. We pretended a closet was a castle. It was a nice story, but stories end.” “You seem different,” I said.

“I am healthier. I am on medication.”

“You don’t seem healthier. You just seem drugged up. Do you feel healthier?”

“I don’t feel anything. It’s better that way.”

“But they hurt you.”
“Yes. But I don’t hurt anymore. It doesn’t matter. I am going to live in Israel. As a married woman. I won’t think of you. And you shouldn’t think of me.”

“Think of me. Think of me always.”

“That’s a cruel demand, Isaac.”

“I don’t care. I demand it. And fuck Israel. It’s a terrible country. It forced my dad to become a killer.” I was angry. Not at Rayna, maybe, but at everyone else. Well, at Rayna too. I wanted her to want to run away with me. I wanted another chance to fight her brothers. “All the rules your haredim followed are from the Babylonian Talmud, anyway. You might as well go to Iraq, if it’s about living a frum life. The whole idea of Israel as a holy land is nonsense. New York is a holy land.”

“What does any of that have to with anything, Isaac? People don’t do things because of ideas.”

“Then why do they do them?”

“Because of the way things are.”

Just like that, my time was up. Two old yentas – one shaped like a potato, the other like a pear – bundled Rayna into a shawl, and hustled her over to the security gate. They had to wait in line for a couple minutes, but she didn’t look back once. Finally, she passed through the metal detector, and was gone for good.

“Now that that is concluded…” I turned to my right. I’d been so fixated on Rayna I hadn’t noticed Timur sliding in beside me. I turned to my left, and
sure enough, there was Roman. Once it was clear that he had my attention, Timur
continued. “There is the matter of the rebbe’s painting.”

“It’s in the storage space, on Varick.” It was the truth. I had been keeping
it at Andrew’s house (which was the safest place in the city, because it was
monitored by the feds), but I’d picked it up that morning and dropped it at storage
before I went to meet Timur and Roman. “You can get in easily enough, I’m
sure. It’s your storage space, after all. It always has been.”

“Yes, that’s true. It is good that you are remembering in whose domain
you dwell. In any event, how about you ride with Roman and myself, and we go
check it out?”

“That’s alright.”

“I must insist. To ensure the receipt of the painting.”

“How about this, Timur? How about I start shouting the word ‘bomb,’
and then all three of us can go with the Homeland Security agents?”

“He will do it,” said Roman. “We know how skilled the Edels are at
squealing.”

I sat in my chair for a while after they left. I figured they would only lay in
wait outside the airport for so long, before they gave up decided to go down to
Varick. I sat in the chair for an hour or more, thinking about Rayna, and the things
she’d said. I thought about getting on a plane to anywhere. Somewhere calm and
safe, maybe. In the end, I took the train back to New York.
Chapter 30

I enrolled in City College for the fall semester. I registered for three classes – two required courses for a business degree, and one elective in Modern Jewish Literature – and got a part-time job in the school bookstore. I continued to live with Becca, but I gave her a part of my paycheck for rent. It was a pittance compared to her actual mortgage payment and maintenance fees, but at least I was contributing. I stayed out of Brooklyn, and I never went downtown. Andrew pled guilty, and they gave him nineteen months in a minimum security federal prison in Pennsylvania.

I’d get up early to go out and buy fresh bagels for Becca and me. We’d eat together, then she’d go to work on the subway and I would jog to school. I jogged both ways, every day. I went up and over through Central Park, went a block out of my way at 110th Street so I could go up through Morningside Park, then cut back east so I could do the final stretch along the top ridge of St. Nicholas Park. It was like I was hardly even in New York City. As long as I stayed off the pavement and kept moving, the problems from the street wouldn’t catch up to me. Sometimes I felt so peaceful I would forget to look over my shoulder.

When I arrived at City College, I’d shower at the school gym, work my shift at the bookstore, then go to class. If I had time to kill between work and class, I’d go to the library and study. I ate lunch from the salad bar in the school cafeteria, did all my homework, and participated in class discussions. I didn’t make any friends, but I got along with my classmates and coworkers well enough.
There was one girl in my Modern Jewish Literature class who I would have liked to talk to. She wasn’t Jewish; her name was Nieves, and she wore a gold cross around her neck. She was very smart, when she talked about the stories of Isaac Babel, and she smiled at me when she came into the classroom. Sometimes, though, she closed her eyes and there was a look of sadness on her face. Rayna had looked that way sometimes too, though at the time I didn’t realize it was sadness; I just thought it was a mystery, and left it at that. I would have liked to walk with Nieves after class, to put my hand on her waist, just above her hip, and kiss her eyelids, but I didn’t want to have to know her story, so I never spoke more than a few words to her.

Every morning, when I passed through St. Nicholas Park, I would see a man practicing the 52 blocks inside a jungle gym. I had learned about the existence of this Black prison boxing style from Alojzy, who had once been cell mates with a practitioner. It was designed for fights in small jail cells and the narrow turns of housing project stairwells, which is why the man trained in the confines of the jungle gym. He had probably spent his best years in prison. Now that he was free, he still sought a cage every morning. Yet, he was in control. His blocks were precise, but unpredictable. You couldn’t tell which direction his arms were going to move in. I had never seen any man’s hands move so fast, let alone a man pushing fifty. He was ready for any blows that would come.

I myself was not ready, when the blow landed. It was a few weeks after the high holidays – which Becca and I had spent with cousins on Long Island – and I felt the whole past year was behind me. I was on my way home from class,
thinking about the mid-term papers I had to finish writing. The nights were coming earlier and earlier, closing in on the days, but the evening was warm. I jogged down the path that follows along the curves of Harlem Meer, the lake that forms the Northeast corner of Central Park. I came around a turn, and a stout figure stepped out from behind a tree to block my way.

"Roman," I said. He was six feet in front of me. No one else was visible, though I couldn’t see very far in either direction because of the dimming light and looping path.

"Isaac. Malchik. Sweet malchik. Such a pair of balls you have on you. I did not say so in front of Timur, but it is true. These men that even I fear, you think nothing of pissing in their faces." He came up beside me, moving very smoothly for such a stout man. He had spent his life working with his body, and knew how to control it. “Alojzy would have been proud. I myself am proud of you as if you were my own son.” He put his strong arm around my shoulders. I couldn't have moved if I wanted to, so I pretended I didn’t want to.

“Do you have children, Roman?”

“No. Well, I had a son. In Ukraine. I imagine he’s still there.”

“Maybe you should look him up, instead of me.” We were walking, but Roman’s grip remained firm on my shoulder.

"Perhaps. But you see, I am here not on behalf of myself, but on behalf of the Rebbe. He asked that I deliver a message to you. On the subject of sons, as a matter of fact. It is from Torah, I believe. But I am sure it will not escape a learned young man such as yourself.” Roman reached into his pocket for the
message. Then he stopped, and hesitated, a sad look on his face.

“Nu?” I said.

“Yes, the message. The Rebbe says to tell you: If a son is disloyal and defiant, if he does not heed us, then thereupon the men of his town shall stone him to death.” I tried to break away, but Roman was too strong. He pulled the screwdriver from his pocket and plunged it into my side. It really felt as I had been struck with a heavy stone. “Thus you will sweep out the evil from your midst,” I heard him say as I wilted to the ground. “All Israel will hear and be afraid.” And then, more softly, from somewhere in the spinning distance, just barely audible above my own gasping for air: “I am sorry, Malchik.”

A jogger found me a few minutes later. At first she was hesitant – afraid that I was faking the injury as some sort of a trap – but when she saw how much blood there was she called for help on her cell phone. The paramedics gave me a shot for the pain, and I passed out on the stretcher.

I came to in a hospital bed. Becca was there, fussing over me.

“Izzy! You’re awake! We were so worried. I’ve been on the phone with Mom…” I hated to see her like that. I hated to see her concerned. I hated to see her makeup smeared. If she wasn’t strong, there was no strength left on the earth.

My left kidney was lacerated, but not too deeply. Roman had hit me pretty hard with a flathead screwdriver, but his aim had been a little high, and the edge of my rib had taken most of the impact.

A detective came in to ask me some questions. I told him it was a run of
the mill Central Parking mugging. I hadn’t gotten a good look at the guy, because he came up beside me, quick, and he’d had a handkerchief over his face.

“What race was this attacker?”

“I told you, I couldn’t see his face.’

“What about his hand? What color was that?”

“He had gloves on.”

“I see. One more question: if this was a mugging, why didn’t he take your wallet? Or your watch?”

“I don’t know. You’d have to ask him. Maybe it was his first time. He’ll learn.”

“You aren’t going to be very helpful, are you Mr. Edel?”

“No. So you might as well go ahead and get out of my room.”

Becca came by again the next evening after work. I had asked her to bring me my backpack, with some clothes and books and a few other things to make me feel at home in the hospital. We watched TV together for a little while, then she went home to get some work done.

As soon as she was gone, I got up and started getting ready to leave. I was still a bit woozy, but I wasn’t about to stick around New York any longer than I had to. I couldn’t be sure whether or not Roman had avoided doing more serious damage by intention. In either case, I couldn’t be sure that they wouldn’t send someone else to finish the job. I flinched when I heard a nurse’s Russian accent.

I needed to get changed, get out of the hospital, and get down to Port Authority. I figured I’d buy a ticket to New Mexico, visit my mom and Bernie,
then keep traveling on from there. I’d never been to California. And Alojzy had always spoken highly of Las Vegas.

I pulled off the hospital gown. Before I put on my sweatshirt, I took a minute to examine the wound on my side. So, I thought, this is how it happens. Alojzy used to walk around the apartment with his shirt off. He always wore blue jeans, not ripped or dirty, but clean, bright blue jeans that he was proud of. He put his jeans and chains on right when he came out of the shower, but he’d leave his shirt off until it was time to leave the apartment. His torso was strong and manly, despite the gut. He had so many scars, all over his arms and shoulders and chest and belly. Some were thick and some were razor thin. Some had healed as raised, lumpy ropes, while others were flush with the skin around them. I asked my father about his scars once. He shrugged and said, “I have been cut. Is life. They will cut you too, boychik. You will bleed.”

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