



Mazel TALES

A FAMILY ALBUM

Alan Robbins

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Also by Alan Robbins

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The Stinking Rich Virus
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A Small Box of Chaos
An Interlude in Dreamland
Cypheriad

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Secrets of Gizmotics
The Ingenarium

“The world is made of stories, not atoms.”

Muriel Rukeyser

“Some stories are true that never happened.”

Elie Wiesel

“Humor is emotional chaos remembered in tranquility.”

James Thurber

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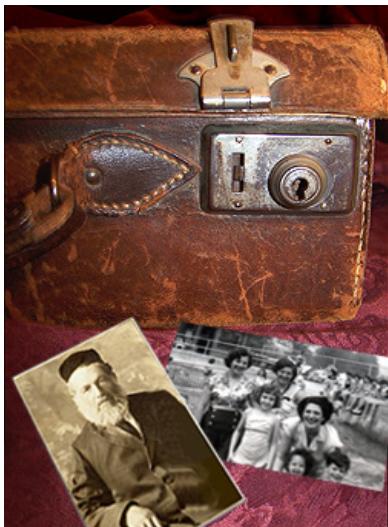
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PART ONE

The Story of My Mazel



It was just a box of old photos, nothing more.

You probably have one too. That collection handed down all through the generations, crammed and stuffed into some old box or valise. From Vilna in Poland to Brooklyn in New York, then to West Palm Beach in Florida. Then to Manhattan

with its dreams of the eternal now.

And so it sits in a closet somewhere, percolating. You forget you have it. Then one day it falls or shifts or drops and all of a sudden history – private history, tactile history – comes skittering out.

That is just what happened and when it did, I tried to stuff it all back in and forget about it again. But for some reason I could not do it. Not any more. Like a cabinet that will no longer stay shut; a secret that refuses to hush. Or maybe just that tune that you cannot get out of your head. I could no longer ignore it.

I kept wondering...who were those people in there? What lives did they lead? And maybe above all, what could they tell me about mine?

It was just a pile of photos sure, but maybe it was more than that as well. Pictures are always more than what they are because they are also promises. From a past that leads to this moment and

of a moment that nods to the future. They are a snip out of the onrush of time and timeless because of it. And there are stories in them, if only you can take the time to read.

As I did that, I began to feel that these were not just random snips but something much more stirring. They were the stories of my *mazel*. The word mazel means luck in Yiddish, so in a way and taken all together, they are the story of my good luck. Strange to say since these were the moments of complete strangers trapped in the scraps. Ancestors I never knew, distant cousins never met.

Yet it was true.

Without their lives, mine would never have come about. We are all the end of a long line of desires and choices. I was only here because they were. And without the old photos, these vivid ghosts would not have lived into my time and if they had not, then I would not be the me that I am. I was sure of that.

So these are the mazel tales of my family in a way.

But even now I hesitate to use that word because luck, as everyone knows, can always run out. And besides, I have heard it said that you only know if you are lucky once it is all over. Only then can you tell. Fine time to find out, I say.

Hym Yuda



The story of my family begins here with this man. His name is Hyman Shapiro but he was called Hym Yuda. I always thought that this was just a nickname, like a John is a Jack. I did not find out until much later that Hym was short for Hyman and that Yuda stood for Jude meaning Jew.

Hym Yuda...Hyman the Jew.

He was the first person anyone in the family knows about. Or at least has a picture of. Like all of us, he was somebody's son and grandson and great-grandson. But Hym Yuda was lucky in memory. He was the first in our family to be born into the age of photography. So his is the face that lasts, the one you remember. The one that begins it all.

I can almost see some of myself in there. At least I wish I could. That unwavering gaze, the determined look, the stubborn posture. I have seen the photo before but this time I began to wonder who he really was and what he thought life was all about. Getting through it, I mean. Did he try to be strong or think he had to stare it down? Was he a good man, a kind man, a stern man? Did he have a sense of humor or a streak of tragedy? If he had his doubts, as I surely do, you cannot see it in his eyes.

He was my mother's grandfather and I never knew him. But I did hear stories about him and about all the unknown relatives frozen onto the pages of our album. Yet seeing him there gazing up at me at that moment brought only one particular story to mind... the day that Hym Yuda met the angel on the road outside of town. That, after all, is where the whole secret of our family treasure first started. Yes, as I think about it, that is where the story of my mazel really began.

I have heard that it was a warm November day after an early snow, the sun peeking through thick white clouds. The year was 1871 and Hym Yuda was then a man of about 25. On the dirt road that led north from Vilna up towards the forest, he saw a figure standing by the roadside, perfectly still, dressed all in black. Hym Yuda was not educated, but he was no fool either. He knew right away that this figure in its wool suit and felt hat was no ordinary man. This was an angel waiting on the road, waiting to test him.

Maybe you do not believe in angels. I sure didn't. But I learned then, and know now, something more important than the difference between a truth and a lie. I know that a story is a story and that it keeps the world alive. And so I can easily imagine my Hym Yuda walking down the road, whistling maybe, glinting into the sun perhaps, and then stopping short before this odd figure of a man...and waiting. Waiting to find out what possibilities might be in store for him that day.

In Vilna, where angels appear just like people but without regrets, it was well known that if you outfoxed one of them, the angel had to give you a gift. This gift was called an *oytser*, a treasure. Hym Yuda stood there and waited, hoping that the angel would challenge him. With a task or a riddle or a wrassle – something, anything – so that he might win a prize for his family if he was quick enough. All day he waited. Hym Yuda was a very stubborn man and by the evening it paid off.

“What do you want, Hym Yuda?” the angel finally asked.

“Something for my family, for my children and their children,” he said rather bluntly.

“Why ask me? Do you think I am some kind of angel?”

“Exactly so.”

“And how do you know that I am an angel who might grant such a request?”

“Who else would be outside on such a warm day just standing in the sun and wearing a felt hat?” Hym Yuda said.

Then he answered the question himself: “Only an angel...or a putz. And there’s no harm in asking if you’re just some putz.”

Solid logic, the angel thought.

“Then tell me this Mr. Smarty,” the angel said. “If I am an angel, why am I not wearing a halo?”

Hym Yuda thought for a moment. He was not a Talmudic scholar by any means and he was no philosopher either. But he was a practical man and he knew the power of sensible thinking.

“Only a putz would walk around wearing a halo,” Hym Yuda said.

“Is that so?”

“An intelligent angel like yourself would never do it.”

“Why not?” the angel asked.

“Because a halo can cause problems.”

“Really?” the angel said.

“Yes. As everyone knows, a halo can easily slip down and become a noose.”

Hym Yuda was also not the village rabbi but he had a bigger advantage here. He had worked for a haberdasher and he knew about heads and necks. That halos slipped to become nooses was a common joke in the rag trade. Even so, his answer pleased the angel very much. So much that he decided to give Hym Yuda a small gift for his effort. Not because the answer was correct. It was not. Jewish angels never wore halos; that was all New Testament stuff. No, he gave him the gift because Hym Yuda’s answer made him laugh. And angels, as you can imagine, do not really have that much to laugh about.

Later on it became known around the town that Hym Yuda had had a *bissel mazel* – a little luck, that is – on the road outside Vilna. It was said that an angel had given him an oytser, a treasure, that could be passed down through the generations of his family. An heirloom like a diamond perhaps or a talent for finances.

Of course, being modern in their thinking, no one really believed any of this. Not in public at least. There was a saying... any man who relies on an angel for his wealth had better also have an uncle in the fur business. The people of Vilna were nobody's fools. And so the whole story was taken more as a legend than an event, and even more as a joke than a legend.

Still, no one made fun. No one mocked. Because they also knew that more important than doubting angels was the simple fact that you can never be too careful in this trying world.

As for me, I keep searching. Figuring that I will find the treasure somewhere hidden. In the family album maybe. Among the old photos, in the stories.

Or maybe not.

Letz



On any official maps the town was called Vilnius, its ancient name. I imagine that my ancestors had lived there as far back as anyone can

trace but maybe not all the way back to the 13th century when the Jews first went there.

It was said that the town came about because of a dream of wolves. Not a dream by the wolves themselves but by the Grand Duke Gediminas, who dreamed of an iron wolf howling on a hilltop. The pagan priest he consulted told him that the wolf represented a castle and a city that would be the capital of the great Lithuania.

I suppose he was right; wolves always seem to know what is going on. And so over the centuries the town flourished and grew; there was even an empire there once, covering parts of Eastern Europe. And someone or other always seemed to be fighting about this little dot on a map...the Russians, the Hapsburgs, the Prussians, the French, the Germans.

As though something valuable was hidden there.

Well...maybe there was.

By the time my family records begin, with Hym Yuda and the angel and all of that, Vilnius was part of Poland but even that was not always clear. In any given year, it might have been in Lithu-

ania or Ukraine or Poland or Russia; if the place was on the map, it was all over the map too. But of course not to the people living there for whom it was simply their home.

The Jews called the area Vilna Gubernia if they meant the whole province, and Vilna if they meant only the town itself. My people lived in one little neighborhood there that they called Bissel Vilna which means “little Vilna.” Or maybe sometimes just Bislvil as a shorthand. And then during the war and the occupation and the destruction, their section was known to everyone as the Letz Ghetto for reasons that no one seems to remember.

I guess they thought it was good to have lots of names for where you live, to make it harder for someone to take it away from you.

They were wrong about that, of course.

In any case, that was the way it went in this little dusty town on a shifting map, where the Jews of Vilna lived their lives and had their luscious language to comfort them, and their grand faith in irony to guide them, and above all their humor to sustain them.

On chilly nights in Brooklyn, my mother told me the tales of my ancestors there and showed me the pictures she had, and kissed me off to sleep and dream.

I don't know.

Perhaps this was a place that did not really exist, could not exist. I know that in the Middle Ages the word ‘letz’ referred to a spirit who imitated and mocked humans just to torment them. It is almost too perfect to imagine a ghetto named for one. So there is some notion that Vilna itself was a fabulous city – like Chelm or Shnippishok or Hotzeplotz – a place in which to place rumors and tales of illumination. A fabled town. A town of lessons.

I cannot judge this; I am many generations past these events. I live on my own little world on a different map, and still slip off to sleep and dream. All I know is that my mother and her sisters told me these stories as though they actually happened. And I chose to believe them. After all, what can we hold onto during the next shift of fate if not the tales of our mazel, of our good luck?

Dead Leaves



My mother was a teacher and a socialist, a feminist and very modern in her thinking.

Yet even she still knew the story about her great uncle – or was it great-great – who was an itinerant magician, traveling throughout Poland and performing little tricks for food. His name was Avrum something-or-other but he had given himself the fancier stage

name of Schmoolie the Conjuror and even had a sign printed up saying so.

Schmoolie the Conjuror visited Vilna only so often. The folks of Vilna were notoriously level-headed and there were other towns that seemed more willing to be duped and fooled. But he was a traveling magician and Vilna had children that loved his wooden puppets and minor palming tricks. What the adults thought of him is perhaps not worth mentioning here.

On an autumn morning near the forest, Schmoolie set up his stage, nothing but a table with some props and that fancy sign with the scrollwork, and waited as the townsfolk gathered. The kids were ready to be amused, the parents only there to make sure

their children got back to their duties as quickly as possible.

With great intensity, Schmoolie reached into his bag and pulled out a pile of dry, dead leaves. Then with even greater flair he went around and handed one leaf to each person there...man, woman, child. He said nothing as he did this, thinking his mime was theoretic. Most everyone else took him to be an idiot because of it but the kids seemed amused and so they went along with the gag.

Gesturing grandly, Schmoolie went through a series of motions with the leaf in his hand and impelled the others to copy him. He fluttered up, swooped down, held the leaf against the pale sky, muttered and gestured to it like a bird, and then...placed the leaf upon the top of his head. They all did the same. The children giggled, not so much at themselves but at the grown-ups who, tired and worn, were at least willing to do such silliness to hear their kids laugh.

But then...an amazing thing.

As the dead leaves lay there on the top of their heads – barely a whisper of weight – they felt the burdens of life lift and slip away. In that moment – standing near the forest under the dim sun and wearing that dead leaf like a hat – there was no toil or turmoil or threat. No war looming in the West and no coming dislocation. No nightmare of stunning swiftness. Only this moment and the silent acceptance in it of the joy of laughter and children smiling and the singular sound of life alive with life.

And then the sky darkened but they did not see it.

Not then, not then.

My Uncle Who Died of Radio



It was pure chance that the photo captured him early on, long before he died of radio.

You would not guess it from early pictures of him: in his twenties they show a nice looking man, smiley man, spiffy man. He looked perturbed in this one but who

does not on occasion. And in any case, he is still full of possibility in these pictures...rather than paranoid schizophrenia that is.

I was told that when my grandfather brought home the first crystal radio set, my grandma was so terrified by the noise coming through that she cursed it in Yiddish. He was a boy at the time and maybe that incident – or that curse – rubbed off. One way or another, the mishegoss slowly took over and we would visit Uncle Jerome at that crazy place on Long Island with the bars on the windows and try to say calm, normal things.

By the time I was in high school, he was the lunatic on the street, railing against anyone and everyone. He became a fixture on Flatbush Avenue, startling teenagers, terrifying old ladies, amusing the beat cop who knew after a few arrests that he was harmless and of no real danger to anyone. I suspect that like all lunatics, he was a dreamer and a deemer and he cared too much

about every damn little thing. I don't know for sure, but I also heard that he was gay at a time that such a thing could easily drive you over the edge. Something sure did. When he was discharged from the hospital to that room over the dry cleaners, he was alone with his nutball thoughts, increasingly enraged.

Alone, that is to say, with the radio.

It was all normal at first. The usual programs, comedy routines, dramas and jingles, but somewhere along the line it began to bypass his ear and seep like raw sewage directly into his skull. And as the vacuum tubes got smaller and the microwaves got shorter, his alarm expanded until he was in the throes of an occult romance with the ether. He thought he could see radio waves and that they were sharp, like blades, and nasty. He began to stuff his hat with paper to protect himself, spent frantic days turning the dial wildly and thinking that the babble was some kind of code. It was soon after that that he began listening to pure static. Full of distrust, he turned the sound all the way up until the scratching filled the room. It did not help at all when he realized that the word paranoid he had so often heard contained within it the letters of radio.

That was when the letters to famous men began. First to Jack Benny, then to General Sarnoff, and eventually to President Roosevelt. The letters were warnings, pure jigsaw lunacy, about the owners of the frequencies and how they were controlling the minds of America, trying to turn us into a race of Yankee doodles, and the Japanese were somehow involved and the Big Bands and the teamsters, and they were all shooting mind rays through the radios of the world, hidden on the innocent carrier waves of commercial broadcasts, and sometimes through the toilets too. He called them Varishana rays and they were the reason the war had started and he began to wear tin foil in his underwear to block the effects on his testicles.

And so on.

What he came to understand in that time was that everything, every single thing, was all hepped and haywire. Mixed, blotched, crumpled and creamed. Flipwigged, scattershot and turbulated. In a word...*farblonget*. But somehow this knowledge was not in

any way calming.

I always heard that he died from some sort of cerebral something or other. Could have been other things too but I am sure that radio waves were never on the list...even though that is the most likely explanation. Think about it. Think of the hundreds of thousands of watts, sparks, bolts, flashes, bursts, and pulses coming from countless TV and radio stations, signal relay towers, television sets, CB transmitters, garage door openers, radar scanners, missile guidance systems, interceptors, anti-missiles, anti-interceptors, tracking systems, eavesdropping hardware, detection, intruder, and alarm devices, microwave ovens, diathermy machines, medical scanners, satellite signals, industrial scanners, remote sensors, heating units for pencils and tobacco, and all that. Not to mention the cell phones that pickle the blazes out of your cortex, as everyone knows.

Radio is the least crazy culprit.

But at least the obituary in the paper got it incorrectly right.

It was short and sweet except for that weird little typo. No one noticed it; you really had to be paying attention to see it. And who would be? The linotypist had accidentally tapped an “r” instead of the adjacent “t” on his keyboard and so the final summary said that my Uncle Jerome, beloved brother of his four sisters and so on, had died of a “rumor of the brain.”

The Chutzvah



My cousin Himmel was a *chutzvah*, so they say.

This is a fake word mixing *chutzpah*, which is guts or nerve, and *mitzvah*, an ethical deed or good work. A chutzvah was someone who did something crazy trusting that the outcome would help other people no matter what. Not a hero but a bit of a well-intentioned fool.

Back in Vilna during the war Himmel met with the other town elders in an apartment in one of the abandoned buildings to discuss their future which was bleak. The army was set to burn the ghetto down.

Well one day their meeting was cut short when they heard the familiar sound of armored cars in the street. The men in the group knew that the soldiers would kill all of them if they found them but there was no time to escape. They instantly heard the shouts and footsteps of the soldiers coming up the stairs as they began to search through every apartment on each floor.

One of them pulled out a gun, ready to take a few of the enemy with him but Himmel signaled him to put it down because in the few moments they had left he had come up with a plan.

It was the plan, naturally, of a perfect chutzvah.

“Stand perfectly still,” Himmel whispered, “don’t move. And face the door. Now close your eyes, clear your minds, and raise your hands in the secret blessing.”

Himmel demonstrated this by lifting his hands up with the palms facing forward and the thumbs out, then pressing the first and second fingers together and separating these from the third and fourth fingers, also pressed together. This was a secret gesture used by the rabbis to bless the congregation and the elders were unnerved to see Himmel invoke it here. Still they obeyed simply because they had no other alternative.

“Now,” Himmel added with gravity, “concentrate all your will on invisibility.”

“What did he say?” asked one of the other men who assumed he had misheard. “Our ability?”

“Concentrate on being invisible,” Himmel repeated.

“Are you insane?” one of them whispered. “The soldiers are coming!”

“Do as I say,” Himmel insisted. “The Torah says that the vision of man is narrow. Let us pray for that weakness now.”

The others thought that Himmel had gone completely off his rocker. But they could now hear the shouts and footfalls of the soldiers outside the door to the very apartment in which they were standing. There was nothing else to do.

“Let your prayers float up to God to make us as transparent as the wind,” Himmel said as he took up the position right in front with eyes closed and hands raised, facing the door about to be opened.

One by one, the others mimicked his gesture and at that moment a young soldier pushed open the door to the room. It creaked as it swung slowly ajar. His rifle was drawn and his helmet was almost too big for his face as he stood there surveying what he saw. Imagine the scene...the soldier all orders and duty standing in the doorway looking into a musty old room. And facing him the old Jews standing still as posts, their eyes closed, their hands up before them in that peculiar gesture.

One shout to his comrades would have begun the slaughter but an uneasy expression flashed across the soldier's face. Was it a look of surprise, confusion, puzzlement? Maybe all of these at once. He stood there staring into the room for what seemed like an eternity. Then came the sound of the other soldiers as they moved back down and out of the building. The squad leader shouted from the other side of the door:

“Anyone?”

The soldier blinked once.

“Anything?”

“What?” he said.

“Is there anyone in there?”

“No,” the soldier replied looking around the room cautiously.
“It’s empty.”

“Let’s go then. There are many buildings.”

Thus ordered, the young soldier gazed across the room one last time then spun around on the heel of one boot and walked out.

The town did not fall that day although, as everyone knows, it eventually did.

So what do you think?

Did Himmel the chutzvah and the others really invoke the veil of invisibility? Did God answer their prayers and make them as transparent as the wind? Or do you think maybe the sun from the window dazzled the young soldier’s vision at just exactly the right moment. Or, and this is even more likely, that the soldier himself somehow understood the meaning of what he saw and decided not to be the one to challenge their prayers or to start the slaughter.

Who can say?

In the end perhaps it does not really matter. That, after all, is the beauty of being a chutzvah or even believing that there could be such a person.

No matter how crazy it sounds, all you have to do is try. Which means that sometimes the effort for a miracle is all the world needs to provide one.

But as everyone also knows...only sometimes.

Grandma Eaten by Wolves



Grandma Hannah, eaten by wolves.

That was all I ever really knew about her. She was not actually my grandma but someone else's somewhere along the line. I knew nothing else, so when I came across this photo that

had the name "Hannah" written on the back, I figured it had to be her.

I had heard many versions of this story. In one, she was attacked as she went back home carrying turnips that she bought at a nearby town. Wolves, when they get hungry, will eat anything... not only turnips but grandmas too. In another version, Hannah, feisty and snappish, threatened the wolves with a loaf of bread and even threw one at them, because they were following her. Wolves do not take kindly to threats which, in fact, make them growly. And in yet another, she was lured by the wolves with their seductive gazes and soft tails into the forest where they turned on her. Wolves are all about the yearning heart and the death at the end of every desire.

And there was this:

It was the night of a full moon deep in December. Hannah was restless in her bed. Vilna, barely a village then, was settled

into the cold winter frost but in her house at the edge of the town, Hannah felt something tugging at her soul.

In the dark of the house, she accidentally stuck her hand into the bowl of soup still on the table, stumbled to find that red over-coat she had sewn from the hides her husband Motke, still asleep, bought the previous year. As she opened the front door, air rushed in to fill the space behind her and this, even more than her will, pushed her out onto the road.

The moon cast long shadows on the ground and as she walked without thinking, Hannah watched her own dark form following her step by step. That feeling of being stalked in just that way was troubling but also in some way thrilling. As she walked towards the moon she began to feel that her destination might yet present itself but as a whisper, barely making itself known.

Just before the road turned into the forest, she saw something move in the dark. It was hidden in the shadow of a tree but she could feel it watching her, waiting. She thought to go back but something stopped her, some sense of expectation or maybe just wonder. Then it stepped out into the moonlight and it was a wolf, a female by its size, hungry by its weight. It was alone and when Hannah stopped in her tracks, the wolf did too.

There in the blue light of the round moon, the woman in the hide coat and the wolf in its fur stood stiffly facing each other, unmoving, unknowing.

“What do you want with me?” Hannah asked because it suddenly occurred to her that this was the reason she had ventured out in the first place. This was the magnet that had pulled her from her warm bed.

The wolf said nothing and only sniffed the air once, then continued to stare at her with those wolfish eyes.

“Are you judgment come for me?” she asked. “Because of my love with Luvel?”

The wolf beat its tail once and a dustup of snow scattered.

Hannah took this to mean that she was on the right track, not to dwell on the fact that the wolf understood Yiddish.

“I could not help myself,” she explained. “My Motke was gone for so long that year and I was terribly lonely.”

At this the wolf sat on its rear end and twisted its head slightly.

"Luvel is a good man, a kind man. I know he is my cousin but only through marriage. And his Golda was...well, you know."

At that, the wolf stretched out its front paws like a dog and lowered itself onto the ground and Hannah too took a seat in that great overcoat and explained the whole story.

As the moon rolled down to the horizon and the moonshadows lengthened across the trees and Vilna crackled deep into the night, Hannah told the wolf about the difficulties with Motke and the losing of the child and the separation that was much more than simple practicality and also about Luvel and his kind words that made her feel loving again.

When she was all done with this, the wolf raised itself up, rear legs first then front, shook off the cold, and slowly – so slowly – walked over to her until its breath was like a cloud in her eyes. She cautiously reached up to touch it and the wolf licked her hand and right then and there Hannah knew that she had been forgiven, that this was not death at all but some sort of kind spirit come to listen and help her let go of her sorrow.

It was not true of course.

The wolf had simply been separated from her pack and found the voice in the night air soothing, like forest music. It came over only to smell the hides Hannah was wearing and it licked her hand simply due to the traces of the soup from dinner.

All things explained.

To be honest, I have no idea if there really were wolves in Poland then. But if there were, I can easily envision the oil lamps in the homes at night and the flickering shadows on the windows and the eyes of the wild wolves gleaming against the black sky out there in the gloom.

Maybe you do not need a wolf to be forgiven; maybe only the thought of one is enough. And just maybe in the end, Hannah was really only eaten, as we all are, by that timeless time in which we doubt our choices.

And delayed only by the many moments in which we might forgive ourselves.

That Which Fades



My favorite photo of my father is really just about me.

Selfish I know, but what are memories if not a tidy excuse to see the world through our own eyes?

It is a simple black and white photo taken with one of those old flash cameras you see in flea markets now. The light within it is faded as though the picture was taken in a mist. He is not wearing a shirt and his thick waist fits firmly into the fluted rim of his trousers. He is facing sideways to the camera and there is a look of pride in his profile. He is holding me up and out, the way one would examine the label of a fine champagne. I cannot be more than a few months old there, held by him, his hand under my head, all held and looked at.

All held.

His first wife told him that they could not have children and he thought it was his fault, so I have heard. Then he married my mother and at the age of 47 became a father. My father. Everyone said he was so proud. Who knows what they meant exactly? Proud of me or of his sudden ability to have me? I do not know, but you can see something like it in that picture. I look at it every so often. It was the last time pride was showered on me like a

celebration for no better reason than that I was there.

The photo is fading as photos do and so it also makes me think about the day he died.

I had gotten up as usual, watched him put on his glasses, boxer shorts, socks, and all the rest, then I went to get ready for school. But I was drawn back to the bedroom by some sort of commotion. I stood in the doorway and saw him kneeling on the floor near the bed. He was holding his stomach, groaning, and I felt frightened about what that all meant.

Later on he seemed to feel better and I was sent off to school. But in the afternoon, my aunt Essie met me and took me home with her. I slept with my cousins that night and knew that something was wrong but I somehow could not conceive of what it might be.

When they brought me back home the next day, the house was filled with visitors. Shadows packed all the spaces. The TV was off and the lights were dim. The colors drained. My uncle from Chicago was there. Other figures walked delicately through the rooms. Then my mother, her face red and swollen, took me to my room and held me. Her arms were hot, her shoulders quaking. Her throat seemed raw as her voice receded into a distant tremor struggling through a flat soundscape. She told me then that he had died. I could see that she was fighting to be strong for me and losing the fight. I let her squeeze me and slipped into her anguish like a good boy. But I was ten years old and I did not know what it meant. Not really, not fully.

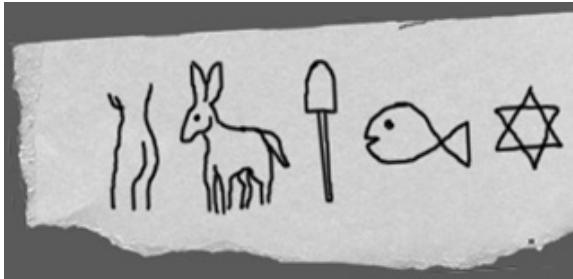
For years after he died, I had dreams that the doorbell would ring and that he would be there, coming home from work as if nothing at all had happened. He would take off his coat and hang it up neatly in the hall closet, then put his gray fedora on the shelf. Then he would hang his jacket on the hook on the door, wink at me and go into the kitchen to see my mother. That wink was a secret code. It meant I could search his pockets and find the candy bar he had hidden for me.

It took a long time to dream of other things.

And the decades and life flew by and I am older now than he ever was and I cannot look at that picture of him holding me without thinking of all of that...of life, of loss, of things that are vivid and those that fade.

I cannot look at it without thinking of myself. Cannot look without thinking. Without waiting for these memories to settle into some kind of wisdom and knowing full well that they refuse to do it and never will.

Kibitzer King



Stop me if you have heard this one...but on the other hand don't because it is a

real true heirloom. A legacy. It was invented by my Uncle Manny who was a kind of gag genius and I have the original scrap of paper in the album to prove it.

Manny was an artist in a sense, the only one in a family of teachers and lawyers. I used to imagine him painting portraits in an artsy studio when I was little but in fact, as I found out, he drew the weather map for a big city newspaper. I was not disappointed because a big city, as anyone knows, has a lot of weather in it. So he was a very busy man and a real working artist.

But he was also a kibitzer king, not of stale jokes and dumb puns but of visual tricks and tricky bits. One time he doctored a photo of my mom to show her walking on the beach in Florida with Paul Newman. He was the one who also showed me how to cut an orange to look like a bird and how to make a newspaper tree. Very entertaining that; I still can do it.

One day I went to visit him at his office where he told me about the buzz that day, the big news. Not on his weather map but from Page One. I was twelve and very impressed that he was in the loop about all that.

He said these archaeologists digging in Israel had discovered a cave with strange symbols carved on the wall. To make it all more vivid to me – because at that age I needed things spelled out

– he drew them on a piece of paper which I must have saved and stuck into the album somewhere along the line, sensing its great importance.

He gave me some time to examine the images on the paper, then explained that after weeks of study, a team of Jewish scholars finally made sense of the strange set of symbols.

My uncle put his finger on the first symbol and told me how one of the scholars, a sociologist, had explained: “This is a figure of a woman and shows that women were important to that society. Even then our people were socially advanced.”

Then another scholar, this one an anthropologist, pointed to the second symbol, he explained, and said: “And this is clearly a donkey which shows that they used animals to cultivate the land. It proves they knew agriculture and therefore commerce. Very industrious.”

“And that must be a shovel,” added the archeologist, ”which clearly proves that they were also sophisticated enough to create and use tools and even dig wells.”

Finally the religious scholar explained the meaning of the last two symbols: “The fish and the Star of David,” she said, “show that they were Hebrews who were not only advanced in all these ways but also knew the sea and respected its bounty.”

The scholars were very pleased with themselves, my uncle said, and very proud of their heritage. But then the kid who had been pouring water for them and was not much older than me, suddenly spoke up.

“Yeah, they were Jews all right,” he said, “but you are all forgetting one thing.”

“What’s that?” they asked, slightly insulted.

“Remember that they were Hebrews and they read from right to left. So obviously what this says is: “Holy Mackerel, Dig The Ass On That Woman.””

I know what you are thinking because I thought it too. Why am I telling you this? It is just an old joke with a new life online and in the cloud. Repeated endlessly like everything else out

there, a million iterations.

To you maybe.

But to me, this is another piece of my mazel.

Because like I said, my uncle was an artist, the only one in a family of teachers and lawyers. That fact inspired me when I was a kid. You can make art with that in your genes and that is no small thing.

True, but the older I get the more I realize that it is even better to have a kibitzer king in there as a twist in the old double helix. Because with that you can make funny and as some wise guy once said, the world runs on only two things – tears and laughter – and it is no great sorrow if we run out of the former.

A Khokem



Khokem.

When my mother said this word she used to huck it out, like she was coughing up phlegm. A khokhem, she said, enjoying both the sound and the spray, was a wise one, a learned person. Or maybe, in the way that Yiddish works and has served us so well over the eons, the exact opposite.

The story she had in mind was about a distant cousin of hers, a dancer named Adina. She was famous in Letz before the invasion for her brisk turns and floating motions. She was graceful and supple, thin as a rail, but also very savvy about people. A famous saying at the time was that a fool sees a man in his clothes but a khokhem sees the spirit in the man. And in this way not only could teachers be wise but dancers could too. Anyone for that matter.

When the first bombs hit there were terrible injuries and Adina was one of those casualties. She was crippled in fact, both legs smashed, and taken to a bed where she was forced to stay for the rest of the occupation until the inevitable end.

At first she accepted her fate with the serenity of...well...a khokhem. How could this happen, everyone asked? Not just about Adina but about all the victims then and later. Why would the Almighty allow this to take place...again? It was all so unfair, so inexplicable. But the Jews of Letz were philosophers too – they had to be, you see? – and they understood very well when Adina waved the cries away as though fanning smoke. It was merely, she said, an example of *zumzum*, of god's limitation. We could not very well destroy ourselves, she said, and then turn around and blame God. No more than a dancer can look to the floor for the slip. What took place was up to us alone, in other words.

But lying there for so long with her career finished, her zeal squashed, her beautiful legs bashed, Adina struggled with her rage. She tried to overcome her resentment, to think grandly, and made a valiant effort to stay serene. She had always known that life was a tragedy with joy as a mere flourish but unable to move her feet she began to sink into a kind of stiffness of the soul. After a time, she lost her will to survive and began to drink heavily because she said it killed the worms of despair. And she began to love her enemies as brutally as possible.

Yet life, the little delicacies and endeavors of ordinary life, went on in Letz. This is the way, after all, that people outlast their ruin. This is the story of the Jews and many others. And the sounds of chatter from somewhere and the smells of freshly baked bread and the giggle of girls in the street began to filter up to Adina in her room. And this was a lot like life being lived in spite of everything and it seeped into her almost against her will.

One day, her caretaker was bringing her some soup she knew that she would not eat and was astonished to find Adina dancing. There was no music, no sound at all, but Adina was hearing the tune in her own head. And she was dancing to it. Lying in bed, legs still as boards, unmoving from the waist down, yet dancing with only her arms and her shoulders and her head. Her delicate hands moved through the air with the lightness of clouds and the strength of an ocean and in their light but sensual movement, she seemed to express the entire history of Letz.

Soon people were coming to see her perform there in that room and she was giving lessons again and composers were again making music for her to dance to and this inspired other wounded artists to return to their passion. The one-armed painter thought to make a mural of the history of the town; the deafened musician had a symphony of hope in mind; the damaged poet saw something wondrous in a morning fog.

And Letz came alive again even though it was only for a short bright time.

Maybe it is true what they say...that blood is wiser than the mind and that veins know more than scholars. Because somewhere inside of her beyond the curtain of reason, Adina knew that she was a dancer and would always be. No matter what. Not in her body only, but in her essence, her being.

And as long as we are dancing we are not dead and every gesture brushes against the skin of immortality.

The Flirtation



When he was in his twenties, my Cousin Bernie fashioned himself quite the ladies man.

Knowing him later on in life after he had married my father's sister's daughter, I could easily see him in that way. Not that he was dapper or dashing, but quite the opposite. What I could

imagine was him trying, rather comically, to be something he was not. Like the time he took the course in gold prospecting at the local community college.

I was told that he was a great fan of art galleries not because he liked art; he had no feel for it whatsoever. He went because he liked the women there who liked the art. I imagine him all dressed up, shaved and shined, standing in the elevator and seeking out his reflection in the brass. He taps his fingers on the handrail in tempo as each floor glunks by. The doors open onto the fifth floor and Bernie – oh it was Bernard then, you can be certain – followed the track lights through the galleries.

On the far wall was a large, simple work...just four panels colored with an acrylic wash, one in leaf green, one in turquoise, one charcoal gray, one mustard. The coarse paper with the thick deckled edge gave the piece a sensuous skin and the large oak

shadowbox frame gave the whole thing weight. It was not meant to mean anything, at least nothing deep. It was all simply about the colors and who knows if he even got that from it. He really was not paying it much attention; more important to him was the woman standing in front of it.

She was slim and neat, with narrow hips and heels, and wide shoulders raised as though she was being tickled. Fire engine polish on the nails. Long black hair. She did not seem to notice him at all, not even notice him noticing her, which he was trying to do as visibly as possible. Instead she was wholly focused on the painting. Taking it in, studying it, perhaps even enjoying it.

Her lack of interest in him, not to mention her neat breasts, was irresistible. He stood closer, hoping to be detected, which was absurd, like yawning in a volcano. Never quite sure what to say to start these affairs, he struggled with a few come-ons. You had to be careful about that, he found, or risk insulting or insinuating or even incensing.

He was thinking about all that when she suddenly moved on. He followed her from panting to panting – sorry, you know what I mean – from painting to painting. The still life with all the angles; the portrait of the woman who looked like a moose; the dumb dog on the lawn in gaudy tones. He missed them all; what he wanted to see was himself as one of those compulsive gamblers. He admired the men who had tons of lovers and wanted to be admired in that way too, but somehow these moments kept slipping by. He tried to come across like Don Juan, the great romantic, who believed in oceanic, all-encompassing sexual love, but suspected that he was received more like Dr. William Acton, the 19th century author of *The Function & Disorders of the Reproductive Organs*, who thought that sex led to insanity.

Perhaps a little observation about her jacket – it was tailored to the waist and had a short rounded collar – and how nicely it fit her form? But in that moment when he might have stepped closer and said it, the woman was suddenly joined by a man who slipped his arm around her waist.

He was a blunt fellow, snub like a hedge, with a profile like the typeface on a restroom sign. His hair had been mowed rather than cut. No subtlety there, in other words, and he was wearing a goodfellas suit with pointy shoes. Bernie had not seen him coming but now he thought he knew him completely. He was the kind of guy's guy who can quip but not quote, ramrod but not caress, who feels guyish because he can intimidate waiters before they do him. The only culture he had was bacteria.

Ha...a good one!

But what was this plug doing with a woman like that?

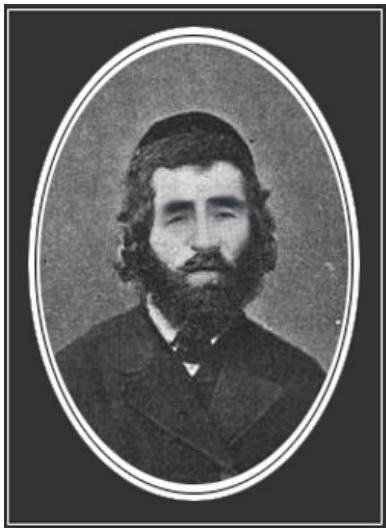
The affront took on epic proportions in his mind. He thought of all those great men whose greatness depended on the woman who loved them – Dostoyevski's Anna, Burton's Isabell, Dante's Beatrice – and was annoyed that this putsch of a man could be in their company. Then she kissed him and he pinched her chin. More insult. As they walked off to the elevator, Bernie watched the muscles of her calves rolling, her hair swaying. The guy put his hand on her ass and squeezed. She laughed!

Right there in the art gallery!

What could he have been thinking? Bernie thought. This was not the woman for him; she was some kind of arty tart. He looked around for a diversion but there was no one else there. He was alone with the paintings he could not get. And for the moment there was nothing to do or prove or make happen or try or doubt or question. It was a relief, like a headache lifting.

Just existing, more or less and now and then, somewhere in between here and there. Waiting for nothing and with nothing to strive for. Sometimes that was good enough.

With No Use for God



rabbi! I had been hoping for one in the family like I once did for a real toy in the CrackerJack box instead of those dumb decals.

So I decided to pay Saul a visit.

I envisioned him as an old scholarly type, crumbs in the beard and that sort of thing. But entering that brownstone in Brooklyn, I was surprised to find that Saul was about my age, tall and trim, more legal than academic. He was standing near the window in the living room with his eyes closed, rocking slightly, muttering under his breath. I had yet to encounter anyone in the family who was particularly religious but Saul was researching some old Talmudist, in which case praying by the window made some sense.

As for me, worry was the only form of prayer I understood; aggravation the only faith. Losing patience, I had to cough three times to snap him out of it.

“Sorry,” I said. “I didn’t realize you were praying.”

“God forbid,” he joked. “I was just wondering. Come in. I have some tea ready.”

As we sat down on the couches near the fireplace with its fake log, he explained his project to me. It was a biography – the definitive one he hoped – of this famous rabbi in Vilna from the 19th century to whom both of us could be traced.

“His name was Meyer Shapiro,” Saul said with a bit of opera, “but he was known as the Tipsch Gaon of Letz.”

“This him?” I asked pointing to the cameo on his mantle.

“Who knows. It’s someone.”

“Gaon. I’ve heard that word.”

“In ancient Hebrew it meant arrogance or pride. But later on it came to refer to a genius.”

“And tipsch?”

“A fool.”

“So he was a genius fool?”

“Yes. How cool is that? They called him that because he was a brilliant rabbi but he was also an atheist.”

I thought that was some kind of dental assistant, which made no sense at all, until Saul explained in that unctuous tone he adopted when he was explaining something, that atheism meant one who did not need God in order to be righteous or even spiritual.

“So he was an atheist,” I said proudly. “So am I.”

“No one in their right mind becomes an atheist. They have no holidays!”

“Ha.”

“No, no, no. Atheism is an ism. An ideological rejection of God. A simple switcheroo.”

“Of what with what?” I asked.

“Of one ism for another. You reject God or Deism because you think you have a better ism. Like Scientism or Marxism or Totalitarianism. Materialism.”

“But Rabbi Meyer...” I said with prunes for lips, “rejected it for a much better reason.”

“Bingo!” he said, missing my sarcasm like a dodged pie. “He did not reject the idea of God at all; he simply did not accept it. He had no use for it. He devoted himself to leading a spiritual life

without the big You-Know-Who in his way.”

“You’re losing me. You either believe on God or you don’t. Don’t you?”

“Rebbe Meyer had the – what...chutzpah? – to ask the question: Can we have a meaningful, compassionate, even spiritual life without having to resort to the concept of God? You can see how even posing God as a concept rather than a fact would get him in some hot water with the muckymucks.”

“He was in hot water?”

“They tried to boil him in it. But he was fearless. And his answer was...yes. In fact all too often – as the sad history of the planet proves – the notion of God seems to stand in the way of such a life.”

“But if he believed in adeism isn’t that just another ism?”

“Ah. I can see you have his questioning spirit within you. As do I. And the answer is...no. Adeism – as Meyer conceived it – is not an ideology. It is an attitude towards life, towards spirituality, towards living compassionately. Not by relying on God to tell us what to do but by being fully human.”

“But that’s just what atheists believe,” I said, speaking mostly for myself.

“Atheism rejects the spirit of God as well as the being. But to Meyer we need to love God without God, if you see what I mean. We need to understand that there is more to life than just atoms dancing. That’s my image, not his, by the way. He was ignorant of science. But he believed that there was more to life than just material existence. A spiritual component if you like. But without a man behind the curtain. A Prime Mover. A Holy Moley.”

Sitting there with a rather smug look, I had the feeling that Saul was a bit of a pedant. One of those professors who challenge you to think for yourself by telling you just what to think. On the other hand, what he was saying made sense. I had believed in not believing in God for a long time. Was that an isn’t or an ism or wasm...I had no idea. But it did not seem to be stopping me from living a decent life. Or trying to anyway. Common sense was better than burning bushes as far as I was concerned and there were

better commandments than the ones on tablets. Like Duke Ellington's Four Freedoms: freedom from hate, from self-pity, from the fear of doing something that would help someone else more than you, from the pride that makes you think you are better than anyone else.

Stuff like that.

I tried this out on Saul but he interrupted me quickly.

"Meyer," he went on, "asked the question: what does it mean to live the spiritual life? The answer? It simply means an awareness beyond one's own selfish needs. It means being open to moments of compassion, of wonder, of delight. He said God is nothing but a middleman and the Old Testament just a faulty contract. He was a real Tipsch Gaon, our Meyer. Here...take that picture for your album. Maybe it will inspire you."

"But you don't even know if it's him."

"How perfect then!"

Dr. Eisenbaum's Cabinet



I heard about the cabinet a few times when I was little, perhaps even read an article or two about it later on in life. My Aunt Bessie, who was more prone to dreams than her sisters, told me that her uncle claimed to have

seen it once in Vilna during the war.

It sounded fanciful to me which, as you can guess, made it a lot more believable when I was young. Now that I know better, I see it more as a legend than a thing. A story to tell, a myth to pass on. It was known formally as Dr. Eisenbaum's Cabinet of Jewish Curiosities. You see what I mean? Figment and fancy.

Apparently the Cabinet was rather ordinary, made of oak with brass knobs. But very well-crafted. And it was large, the size of a door or a breakfront, and that was unusual in Vilna because it must have been expensive too. Eisenbaum was a doctor of something or other but precisely what, no one could pin down. I figured an eye doctor because of the name but that was just the kid in me. He might have been a dentist for all I knew. A vet even.

The Cabinet had been on display in his home in Zalesa, a town outside Vilna, and by 1944 it had acquired quite a reputation. Any visitors who could afford to, could go there and see it and talk

about it, and carry tales of it around the country. "Have you seen Eisenbaum's Cabinet yet? Well you must. There is nothing like it. Not at all."

Naturally I assumed it contained such items as the heaviest matzoh ball, the blandest boiled chicken, a schmear of this, a schmitz of that. But that turned out to be wrong completely. It was no joke. Folks claimed to have had visions before it, to have been cured of diseases, to have seen the future or the past. To be healed of grief.

In fact, the stories were so astounding that people who had not seen it began to accuse Eisenbaum of a scam. Chicanery at the very least; outright fraud at most. Lawsuits were hinted; vandalism threatened. So the doctor decided to go public and take his cabinet on the road. In that way, everyone who could not get themselves to Zalesa would be able to see it and judge for themselves. He rigged up a horse cart and hired a driver to take the Cabinet to other villages and towns. Eventually he got to Vilna, which is where and when this legend intersects with the story of my family.

My aunt gave me a photo of an old cabinet and suggested, hinted really, that it might have been the very one in question. I doubt it now. What are the odds that she would happen to have such a thing? On the other hand, what are the odds that such a thing existed in any case, so maybe long odds cancel each other out and become a possibility. I wouldn't know; I was just a dumb kid and to be honest, did not grow up to become any genius either.

According to the story she told me, when her uncle saw the Cabinet arrive in town, he too was skeptical. We were a family of merchants and peddlers, not poets, and a cabinet of wonders was not on anyone's list of must-see things. No doubt he was more interested in the craftsmanship of the cabinet – the wood, the joints – than what was inside of it.

The Cabinet sat in the street for two days under the watchful eye of the driver so that by the time Eisenbaum himself arrived to open it, the curiosity had grown as though a new movie were about to run. Remember, this was during the war and Vilna was

under siege, rebels gathering in the forest, food rationed. And suddenly here was a man – a doctor no less! – opening the doors to a strange cabinet in the middle of the street.

There was no fanfare; Eisenbaum was no showman. He wore a wool suit and had round spectacles and looked distinctly uninteresting, like someone ahead of you on line whom you might have noticed but could not recall later. He simply grabbed two knobs and pulled the doors open.

There inside were no strange vials or mysterious gizmos. No occult remnants or magical talismans. No. The drawers and shelves of the cabinet were filled with ordinary objects, things you might pick up from the street and discard or not even notice you ever missed. Pocket items, daily debris...a cheap brooch, a broken stopwatch, a piece of string, a cracked leather handle from an old valise.

Is this what the big deal was all about? Was this the famous Cabinet they had all heard about? No wonder Eisenbaum was on the lam! But just when it seemed that he might close the doors and race out of town, he did the opposite. He invited everyone to come closer and take an item, if they wished, to hold it for a few moments. Just a loan, a few heartbeats to touch a thing and return it. What could be the harm in that?

The Vilnians obliged him more out of courtesy than any true curiosity. And that is when the Cabinet took on its true meaning. A small girl, seeing a limp rag doll battered and torn, picked it up and held it close for a moment, just a moment. But in that moment she suddenly decided, even if she did not know it then, to become a doctor herself and spend her life trying to heal. A young man near her spying a small comb with missing teeth took it in hand and without thinking, ran it through his hair. A silly thing to do but in that instant he decided to ask the girl for whom he pined, for her hand in marriage; he would not wait any longer. And a woman picked up a bootlace with mud on it mostly to see what it was; by the time she put it down the notion had already formed in her head to leave Vilna that evening. The Nazi occupation began the following morning.

You see?

The Cabinet was filled with ordinary items, not sacred or magical ones. But these items had been taken from the bodies of those who had died during a massacre near the Rudnicki forest. They had been removed so that the bodies could be buried. They were lost objects, forgotten things, leave-behinds, but they retained the dreams of their owners at that last moment: the girl holding her broken doll and wishing she had the time to fix it, the boy who fondled his comb and wished to see his true love for one last time, the woman who looked at her bootlace and yearned to run away.

And so on for that scratched key that would unlock the heart of the brutal landowner, the busted harmonica that would inspire songs of love, the handkerchief that would catch the sneeze and stop the cold from spreading.

The story is different now that I am older, no longer a child, and the unbelievable has become a source of hope for me. I have had my fill of the answers, the explanations, the convictions, the endless flood of actuality. I want so much to believe in a bunch of wonders, in the power of a small thing in this dither of a world.

At night I dream of objects that will transform me since I cannot seem to do this on my own and of a cabinet that is bigger on the inside than the universe without, and filled with commonplace wonders.

The Horse Who Spoke



When my grandfather, Nachum Shapiro, came to Manhattan in 1901, he left the rumors and echoes of Vilna far behind.

I can imagine him standing on the deck of that ship, the Kroonland, steaming towards Ellis Island and slowly morphing into what he would become in his new life in America.

Here he changed his name to Nathan, switched socialism for Judaism, and only spoke Yiddish when he was aggravated. Whether or not he still believed in angels or God or even mazel for that matter, I could not say. But what he did believe in, I would imagine, is horseshoes.

I say that because he was a blacksmith; he worked in a shop on 14th Street. It is hard to imagine a blacksmith pounding in downtown New York, but photos of that time show the street filled with carriages and horses and I can see how hard he must have worked just to keep pace. Like everyone in my family it seems, he was a romantic with a stubborn streak.

Horseshoes, of course, are symbols of good luck and I have heard that you have to hang them with the opening at the top or risk bringing the evil eye. Maybe he had one hanging rightly in

the shop and in that way carried on the tradition of paying attention to signs. For a long time I thought that this horseshoe was perhaps the secret gift my family treasured but there was none in the album nor even a photo of one.

Still, I always liked the idea that there was a blacksmith in the family because it connected us, in my adolescent mind, to the old West rather than to some dusty town on the border of Poland. Yet it was a fairly mundane job at the time, nothing very special or out of the ordinary.

That is, until the day that the horse spoke.

He was shoeing a horse for one of his rich patrons – maybe a chestnut with a long lovely mane – when suddenly the horse opened its mouth and spoke. She did not neigh or whinny or blibble her lips the way horses do, but actually came out with a precise sound. A word that Nachum heard clear as a bell.

It sounded exactly like “sheynah.”

Nachum ignored it at first but after a while the horse said it again.

Sheynah.

This was very odd. The word meant nothing to him but only because he was more interested in the worker’s manifesto than the Torah. But still, it was a word and not just a noise and so he called in Jacov who ran the shoe repair shop across the street.

At first he assumed that the horse would not do it again. Talking animals who refuse to speak to anyone else have a long tradition in Jewish humor. But to his surprise, and to Jacov’s as well, the horse repeated it.

Jacov, who still said prayers and went to temple, knew the word immediately and spelled it out for him.

“The word is shekhinah,” he enunciated. “But usually pronounced as ‘sheynah.’ It’s Hebrew for the presence of God.”

“The what?”

“It refers to the manifestation of God as it descends to dwell among humanity.”

Nachum was taken aback. This was a rich man’s horse and Nachum was inclined to regard it with the same disdain he held

for anyone from the controlling classes. But it was speaking a name of God.

What did it mean?

He looked at the horse, which looked back in that sideways way that horses do, which tell you nothing. And then the horse said it again.

Nachum visited a local rabbi even though he had no respect for the profession. But what else could he do? He had a miracle on his hands here. Or something.

He explained the situation to the rabbi who agreed to come to the stable. On the way the rabbi told him that there are many names of God used for all different purposes...some for rites, some in temple, some on the street. This one – this shekhinah – was not actually in the Bible. It was used to talk about God in the Tabernacle, the portable dwelling place for the divine presence from the time of the Exodus from Egypt. In other words, God living among the people.

Nachum, not so much believing as struggling, asked him what it meant? Was the horse a divine presence right there on 14th Street? Or was it signaling a presence yet to arrive? What was he supposed to do about this?

When they got to the stable, Nachum again thought that the horse would stonewall just to embarrass him. But no, the horse shook its head and spoke. Nachum looked at the rabbi, who looked back in that sideways way that rabbis do, which tell you nothing.

“Ah...this one’s caught something,” the rabbi said, examining the horse’s nose.

“You mean a divine blessing. Or an evil spirit maybe.”

“Sheynah!,” the horse said again.

“Gesundheit,” the rabbi said.

No horses spoke after that, at least not anything worth telling. And very quickly Nachum dropped any concerns about signs from God and went back to work at the stable. But I think that he went home thereafter and held Rose, my grandmother, very close in bed at night under the waning moon, just in case.

Momzer Boy



This tale is about Izzy the Momzer, who cheated at cards and with women and even once gave his own brother a stolen car without telling him. But keep in mind that the word momzer, which means bastard in Yiddish, is sometimes used as praise for someone who

can manipulate to his advantage. And if cousin Izzy had just been your average crook, the amazing thing that happened to him would probably not have taken place.

Luckily for him, he was also a master conniver.

True to his nature, Izzy at one point had gotten involved with the mob in Brooklyn. He became the middleman in some kind of credit card scam, I was told, but then tried to swindle the swindlers. Mobsters are not too fond of that kind of stuff so they put out a contract on him. When Izzy heard this he panicked and hired some local goon, a knuckle of a man everyone called Brick, to protect him. It was expensive. Brick did not care who he killed for as long as he got paid well...but what choice did Izzy have anyway?

On Flatbush Avenue one day Izzy saw this mob guy on the other side of the street and shuddered. The hood raised his hand and – stiff and quick – beckoned Izzy to come over. Since his protector was nowhere to be seen, a sudden terror shot through Izzy as he became convinced that this was not just some tough guy but Death itself come for him. Not just because of the credit scam but for his whole life of cunning escapades.

Thinking that his last moment was at hand, Izzy panicked and ran away. He raced down the street as fast as he could, ducked into alleyways, ran through some abandoned buildings, all the time waiting for the sound of the shot which never came.

He ran from house to house all through the night, clawing his way up drainpipes, racing across the roofs, until – dim and dazed by his own fear – he finally collapsed, exhausted, in the street the next morning at the exact same spot where he had seen Death the day before.

Wiping the tears from his eyes, he looked up to find the very same assassin standing above him, silhouetted in the early sun like a vulture waiting. The hood posed as though he had not budged an inch from his spot through all that time of Izzy's desperate scramble.

“Why'd you run yesterday?” the hood asked in a rumbling voice.

“I know who you are,” Izzy said. “I know you have orders.”

“Then why you don't come when I called you?”

“Because I knew you were going to kill me,” Izzy cried. “I knew it was my destiny to die yesterday at your hand.”

“Yeah? Well if it was your destiny, why'd you run?”

“I got scared. Who can accept their own destiny?”

“I don't know about that, but you got it wrong. I wasn't set to kill you yesterday. My orders is different. I just wanted to axe you a question.”

“A question? What question could you possibly have for me?” Izzy asked.

“I wanted to axe you what you were doing at this spot yesterday morning when I have strict orders to shoot you here today.”

At that the hood took out his gun and pointed it at Izzy lying at the curb. Somewhere deep in his psyche, Izzy knew that there was no use arguing with Death but a lifetime of bending the rules had become a habit too hard to break.

“Wait a minute,” Izzy said. “I was here yesterday because I knew you would shoot me then,” he explained with as much charm as he could muster from the gutter, “and I am only lying here now because you didn’t shoot me. It seems to me that you missed your chance.”

The hood, who was nowhere near as dumb as his job suggested and even had a year in law school, laughed at that one, mostly at the incongruity of Izzy about to be shot lying in the street and posing a hypothesis.

“But here is where your contention fails, counselor,” the hood said mockingly. “I did not miss my chance because yesterday you were wrong and today is today and here we are.”

Satisfied by his own logic, the hood took aim and the sound of a gunshot whacked through the cool morning air, setting off a few car alarms.

In the next moment, the hood collapsed where he had been standing. Izzy grabbed himself all over but did not find any holes. Then Brick, his protector, ran out from behind a car.

“Good thing I didn’t shoot him yesterday,” Brick said, helping Izzy to his feet. “C’mon, let’s get the hell outta here before the cops come.”

“You were here yesterday?” Izzy said. “You saw him call me from across the street? And you didn’t shoot him? Why?”

“Cause yesterday wasn’t the day to save your life, Iz.”

“Why not?”

“Cause obviously, today was, if you see what I mean. I guess even a rat-cheat like you can’t cheat your own destiny. Let’s go!”

A Buried Treasure



It is hard to say, even after careful research, which side of which family Cousin Meish was on since, quite frankly, no one really wanted to claim him. Not that he was a bad man and certainly not evil in any way; Meish was simply a shnook and more or less forgettable on that score.

A shnook, as you may know, is not a lot of things. Where a

shmuck is obnoxious, a shnook is merely pathetic. If a shmo is unlucky, a shnook is unfortunate in the dumbest sense. A shlemiel may be a loser but a shnook is too useless to lose anything...

Well, you get the idea.

Leave it to Yiddish, the very language of nuanced suffering, to make these distinctions.

With that in mind, it is not hard to imagine how at one point in his glumdom, unable to pay his debts, unwilling to work for his pay, uneasy looking for work, he did what any shnook in his situation would do...he became obsessed with the Legend of the Thieving Dybbuk.

This legend said that ages ago – perhaps even back in the 12th century – in the land just to the north of where Vilna now stood, a dybbuk, which is a kind of demon, had stolen a cartload of treasure from a caravan passing through on its way to the Kingdom of Polotsk. Why a demon, who only exists to aggravate everyone, would want such a treasure was anyone's guess...except for those cranks who pointed out that this was, after all, a Jewish demon. In any case, no one could say for sure precisely what this treasure was but only that there was a ton of it. According to the legend, just to be ornery, the demon buried each little piece of this treasure separately in the ground there, probably scattered across an acre of land. In that way, if anyone tricked him into giving it up, that person would have quite a task collecting on it.

It is one thing to be charmed by a story like that and quite another to take it seriously. But only a tried and true shnook like Cousin Meish would actually devote himself to it. And so, throughout the summer of 1942, a year before the invasion, he spent day after day sneaking into the forest and digging holes everywhere, trying to find it. Hundreds of holes.

The task naturally gave him plenty of time to think, if only that had been one of his talents. But instead of calculating the likelihood of finding the treasure or limning the difference between a legend and a lie, Meish spent his time wondering just what the treasure might be. Jewels maybe, or gold nuggets, or whatever kinds of coins they had back then, or maybe even something more astounding than that.

He kept digging.

One day in the forest, a woman from the village named Gebbel, happened to see him and wondered why a perfectly healthy man who could be gainfully employed was wasting his time digging holes in the forest floor. Meish, enough of a shnook to not come up with a good excuse, told her just what he was doing. Surprisingly, it turned out that Gebbel knew all about the legend and she scolded him for his ignorance. The treasure in question was not that kind of thing at all, she said. What do demons need

with gold or jewels anyway? No, the treasure the dybbuk had buried was something that would protect the people of Vilna. A magical weapon buried in pieces maybe, or maybe enough echoes and whispers to weave a cloak of invisibility. Something like that. Something for everyone, not just for one person's enrichment.

Keep digging, she urged him, because in her bones she knew that they would need something like this all too soon.

Meish would have done just that; shnooks are sadsacks at heart but they can be very stubborn about it. But the invasion interrupted his plan and soon there were German soldiers moving through the forest and coming like a storm towards Vilna. On a clear day in May as the Partisans took to the forest to fight back, Meish was already there digging yet another empty hole and finding nothing and so he got caught up in the wave as the Partisans moved in and waited for the soldiers to come.

Meish hid behind a tree; he had only his shovel in his hand; his heart was throbbing. From his position he could peer out and see many of the holes he had dug scattered throughout the forest and all the Partisans, his neighbors from Vilna, each one hiding behind a tree, waiting and waiting...

And he began to howl with laughter.

“Shut up, you fool, you’ll give us away,” said the miller’s daughter.

But he could not stop himself. It suddenly hit him what was happening and this struck even him deep into his sense of irony. The sounds of his laughter filled the forest.

“Tell that shnook to keep his trap shut!” shouted the lawyer who was now a guerrilla.

“Shoot him before they find us,” said the plumber but he did not mean it. In fact, it was infectious and he too began to laugh though he had absolutely no idea why.

Tension, stress, fatigue...you can decide the reason that the Partisans of Vilna who refused to succumb, who took up arms against the invaders, stood behind their trees that day and turned slaughter into laughter. They certainly had no idea why.

But Meish knew.

In fact, it hit him like a bolt the moment he saw that every one of them, including he himself, was hiding behind a tree in the forest. In that instant he understood that the legend was true. The dybbuk really had buried a secret protection scattered throughout the area. The problem was that he had been digging in exactly the wrong places. Namely, the empty spaces between the trees because in fact the secret weapon was the trees themselves. That is what the dybbuk had planted.

The first shot that day changed the mood of course...but it did not change the truth.

A Zillion Stars Like Souls



My mother was a teacher and believed in lessons. I remember once at a family picnic when she found a grasshopper and quickly scooped it up in her hands. “Come around, kids,” she said to us, “and take a look.” It was not enough to point it out, to simply notice it, you see? You had to look with focus, through her eyes – the eyes of discovery – or you would miss the lesson.

Sometime in the early 1960s, she told me, years after Vilna and the Letz ghetto where her father had been born were wiped from the face of the earth during the war, an amazing document emerged. One of the few official items that survived the attack and the burning, it was put on display at a museum in New York. This was a ledgerbook that turned out to be a census of the town taken just before the end. It was a list of all the inhabitants of that section of Vilna just before they escaped or came here to America or, most likely, were carted off to the camps. You know the camps I mean and they were not for summer fun. No need to list their gashing names here.

My mother got a copy of that list and thought, of course, to turn it into a classroom exercise. She had each kid in her 6th grade class take on one of those names and create a background story about the person...what they looked like, what they liked to

eat, what they did to make ends meet, and so on. This, of course, was ages before the web when you could just look it up; it was an exercise of the imagination to make history real, to bring the past up to now, to connect across the gaping generations.

When one of the students, on her own, folded a piece of paper into a star, my mother thought to include that in the plan. She knew the tale of the thousand origami cranes and how folding that many would make a person's wish come true. That was pure fancy. Here she told her students to each make a folded star for their subject, in order to commemorate the life that they were reconstructing. In other words, thirty stars tops.

But somehow in the sitting and the creasing and the folding and the showing, something new took hold. Something unexpected. The children were telling each other their stories, these fabricated lives based on a list of old names in some crumbling ledger. Then the stories began to intersect and interweave and the kids made more stars and more connections and soon they had hundreds of paper stars, not just for those few names they had selected but for many more names on the list, for the entire ghetto in fact.

And this continued and even, you might say, got a bit out of hand. Soon there were many hundreds of stars for the whole town and concocted stories to match. The butcher named Polius married the widow Shrebnetz and how they had a fight with the Finkleberg family over the plot of land near the river and then old Mordecai got involved and put his foot in his mouth as usual and they had to appeal to the council to which Alechim Pinkus, no friend of Polius, had just been elected...

You see?

It was the power of the story, certainly, taking over; but it was also the sitting together and the folding and the talking like some kind of ritual of unruly gossip. The pile of stars was building and building until there were – how many – thousands? And the lives of those who were lost sparked again even if only in the giddy imaginations of eleven-year olds in a classroom in Brooklyn, worlds away.

Yes and when there are millions of stars, the stories of everyone in the whole country would intersect, there would be no separation you see, and it was entirely possible that they would fight off the Nazis and not let the camps happen and Vilna would survive. And when there will be billions, all our tales might intersect and that would be the end – and good riddance to it – of our eternal cruelty to each other through the ages. And when there are zillions we would be so intertwined that we would see others as reflections of ourselves and refuse to let suffering determine our combined fate.

And then one day, when there will be more stars than souls in this jampacked universe, we might just see the glimmer of our humanity, the best in us, winking at the edge of time, the harmony of everything that beats from heart to star.

I don't know.

Maybe there was only just this one paper star in the album. But perhaps that is good enough. Perhaps that is all we need to start.

Are you ready?

Then please take out a piece of paper...

The Note



and, without nostalgia, have no problem fleeing places that have no future.

But Manhattan, which is more of a wish than an actual city in any case, was full of promise for both the pigeons and for Isaac Rabinowitz, my father's uncle.

In a way it was love at first sight. Stout-bodied with a short neck and a jerky gait, the pigeons he saw at the window of his apartment on Second Avenue seemed to mirror his own reflection in the pane itself. Isaac watched them intently for an entire season as they made their pairings, tended their nests together, fed their young.

He envied them their birdy love and wondered if he too would ever find a mate. The city was not like the village where things like marriages could be arranged. How could he ever find someone here in the busy streets with all that humming and thrumming

When my great-uncle saw his first pigeon, he knew that he had come to a land of promise. There were no pigeons in Vilna.

This was not due to rules of migration or habitat but simply because pigeons have a keen sense of anticipation. They are, after all, in it for the long haul

going on all the time?

And yet the pigeons did.

You may talk about doves all you want – the one Noah released after the flood, the one lauded in the Song of Songs, the ones sacrificed after Jesus' circumcision, the ones who helped Muhammad on the Hegira – but they are pigeons all. And Isaac saw in the group that he fed at his windowsill a certain fortitude that might yet rub off.

One of those birds in particular caught his eye. It was gray on gray but with a beautiful iridescent blue on its neck. In fact, this was no ordinary bird...it was *Columba livia*, a rock pigeon with a keen sense of place. A homing pigeon, in other words, who arrived at the same time each day with the same attitude of belonging. It was 1920 and by that time all the stories about the valorous pigeons of the Great War were well known. Like Cher Ami, for example, shot through the chest, who flew for 25 miles to headquarters and saved the lives of the American battalion trapped behind enemy lines near Belleau Wood.

Isaac read about that with sad delight and he thought then to use the bird for his own kind of salvation. And so he wrote a message in tiny script and taped it around the bird's leg. Who knows what he was thinking as the bird flew off. What was he expecting? Where could it possibly go since it had to, by nature, return to the exact same spot. But that is the nice thing about hope which does not just spring eternal but drowns all logic, and Isaac watched the bird fly off as though it was on a mission to save him from himself.

The bird rose high into the sky until the rooftops became jigsaws far below. It rose higher until the whole city was just a memory and then higher than that. It flew above the clouds and the earth dwindled. It flew too close to the sun. It flew into the slim air at the edge of the world and then, through the intricate infolding that is time, it flew through the walls of the continuum that trap us all.

When the bird finally returned it was indeed to the same sill at the same window in the same building on the same street in

the same city. It was a homing pigeon after all and very good at finding its way back. But things were different. It was now 1990, seventy years later, and Isaac and his yearning had passed into another history. The wooden table at the window had been replaced by a glass one, the china cup by a ceramic mug, the rose in the glass by a cactus in a pot.

Nabia Khalan, who knew nothing of the great heroic birds of World War I and saw these pigeons mostly as a nuisance, was having her breakfast. The homing bird chucked and hobbled the way pigeons do when they want something, but to no avail. It stepped and strutted but Nabia ignored it completely.

Then she noticed that there was something wrapped around the bird's leg and she tentatively reached out for it. To her shock, the bird did not fly off. Unknown to her, it was used to being handled and even extended its leg so that she could unwrap the paper that was taped around it.

Nabia spread the paper out and saw the message handwritten in a strange language she did not know. The message said: *Zukhn far libe.*

And there it might have ended in that great black hole of lost words except that it just so happened that Nabia too was searching for love at that time. And so, on a whim and a wing and with a wink, she wrote her own note on the back of the paper and wrapped it back around the bird's leg. When she watched the bird fly off that time, it was with no good riddance at all but instead a great sense of promise.

Relativity



Perle was *nutsy-fagen*, plain and simple. There was no doubt about that. Ranting, grumbling, or grousing to no one in particular, she was the one at the family gathering that you found excuses to slip away from as smoothly as possible. Every family has a nutball or two on the tree, Perle was one of ours.

She was notorious because she was not only odd but odd in the oddest way. She had a mastermind insanity, all worked out and pinpointed down to the tiniest crackpot detail. She read about science and followed the new theories and thought that every new twist in the tale pertained exactly to her. She made notes in some private code that explained nothing to anyone but herself. Some pages of hers ended up in the album and for a long time I tried to decode them in case they led to the treasure. But I gave up when I always found myself right back where I started. Perle was from beyond the rim, it seemed, a traveler in the continuum and light years older than anyone else.

And this in a neighborhood where if anyone had ever heard of the name Einstein, it referred to the furniture store owned by the guy with the boney daughter he failed to see why no one would marry. A very different kind of relativity.

At an outdoor restaurant one day, Perle cornered some patrons trying to take in the afternoon sunlight, and began to harangue them about the past, the future, the unimaginable distance from Flatbush to the end of time and all that.

They barely listened, like most folks, and just smiled and tried to shoo her away while they returned to their chatter about wine and why not.

But Perle, crazy as a loon, was undaunted. She paced and left, returned and left, and told them about her travels to the distant stars and what she found there. Knowing that they did not actually intend to ignore her, she dragged over a chair and explained how there were many many universes out there, some like this one and some terribly different. Tragic ones, hilarious ones, ones based on gluten and others on liquid light, ones in which gravity was replaced by hilarity, universes being born and dying like snorts in a bar. Most of them were beyond our abilities to dream.

But there was one, she said, that really made an impression on her. She paused to give her listeners time to beg her to continue but they never did. No one was interested but the ability to ignore little details like that is one of the benefits of losing your mind.

And so Perle went on to explain that this particular universe she had in mind was grand and vast, much larger than this one and filled to the brim with matter and dark energy and sparkling stars and atoms flibbering and all sorts of schmutz, both white and black. Spiral galaxies and nebulae, planets hot and cold, moons yearning, and dust, and water longing to be become vapor. The works, in other words. A very crowded place.

But there was no life there, she said. Not a whit of it, not a speck. No life at all. Complex, whirling, being, insistent, mangling...but not a single iota of life anywhere to be seen. At this, Perle stopped dead in her tracks and turned to the four people sitting at the table to whom she had been speaking whether they knew it or not. Her gaze finally caught their attention

“No life at all,” she repeated. “Well...what do you think?”

One of the women, just at that moment raising her glass, was a professor who was also the sister of one of my uncles who told

this story. No one knows what she taught but it was not physics. And definitely not psychology since she thought that perhaps here was a chance to get rid of this annoying woman once and for all.

“About what exactly?” she asked.

Perle, assuming she had missed the entire lecture, went through it all again about a rich, thick, stocked, grand, full universe...but with no life in it.

“Is that worthwhile?” she finally sputtered, fed up with the time it was taking to answer a simple question.

The professor, trying to be cool and collected and clever all at the same time, said somewhat snidely: “Worthwhile to whom?”

“Yes!” Perle replied. “Yes, yes. That is just what I thought too!”

And then she was gone in the time it took to notice a discarded paper bag lying much further down the street.

The Oldest Jew Still Dead



By the time I began this album, I already had more photos than I knew what to do with. Most of my relatives who were still living could not identify many of the people in them anyway. My mom's generation was either going or already gone and even my older cousins had lost the thread of those pictures.

But occasionally I would pull out a photo and show it to even a second or third cousin with some luck. That is precisely what happened when I casually presented cousin Loomis with a photo of an older woman in a coat and gloves standing rather bluntly on a street somewhere.

"Ah! I know this one," he said. "I have a copy of it too. My grandma – that would be your mom's cousin through marriage – told me who this was."

"No kidding?"

"Her name was Goldie Shapiro. She lived in Letz for her whole life. I think this was taken when she was around 60 years old. Still a young woman, so to speak. But then she went on to become famous."

“She did? For what?”

“She was the oldest Jew in the world.”

“How old was she?”

“She was 114.”

“She died when she was 114?”

“No, died when she was 128. She was just the oldest Jew at 114. Matter of fact, she is still the oldest Jew still dead, as far as I know.”

“I don’t know, that doesn’t sound right.”

“It’s true though.”

“First of all, wasn’t that Methuselah?” I suggested. “I thought he was the oldest Jew.”

“Biblical times were different,” Loomis said. “I once read an article that suggested an interesting theory about that.”

Of course it did. Jews questioned everything, had explanations for everything. We invented the whole idea of theories. Without us, things would just be what they were without question. Without us, life would be much simpler. But a lot less interesting.

“What theory” I asked.

“That the ages mentioned in the Old Testament are in tenths of years. In other words, they should all have decimal points. If you make that change, then the ages in the Bible all make sense. So Adam lived to be 93.0, not 930. Noah lived to be 95, not 950. And your Methuselah lived to be 96, not 969. Well news flash... Goldie Shapiro outlived them all!”

“Okay, let’s say you’re right. So what was her secret?”

“Yes, exactly! That’s what everyone wanted to know. What was the secret! Genetics? Too bad for you and me, if that’s true. She was an in-law. But then again, maybe it was something else. Food? Sex? The waters of Vilna?”

“Anybody know?”

“When she turned 100, they asked her the question. What is your secret, Goldie? She said the secret to living to a ripe old age was not dying ahead of time.”

“That’s an old joke,” I complained.

“Yes, but maybe our Goldie invented it!”

“Great.”

“There’s more. They asked her again when she reached the age of 114 and was at that moment, the oldest Jew. But she was pretty far gone by then and tended to slip in and out of focus. Lucid and present one moment and in the next, arguing in Yiddish with ghosts. What is the secret to living to such a ripe old age, they asked her. She was known to hate beets. Could that be it? She never smoked, she had sweet wine every night, she refused to wear a girdle. Sugar, no sugar? Goldie, what is the great secret? This went on for years. At 128, she finally answered them.”

“Okay! And the answer was...?”

“She opened her eyes wide and asked them a question. Am I still here? She seemed confused. And they said: Here? Yes, yes of course Goldie. You are still here. She drifted away for a moment, then came back and said: Why? Why am I still here? And to that they replied: we don’t know. That’s exactly what we are asking you. Why are you still here after all this time?”

“So what did she say?”

“It doesn’t matter really.”

“That’s the big secret? That it doesn’t matter? That life is meaningless? I could have told you that before you began this whole ridiculous tale.”

“No, I mean that there is no real answer to the question. It’s variable. It depends.”

“Depends on what?”

“It depends on when you ask it.”

“Nothing personal, Loomis, but I have no clue what you are talking about.”

“Look, if you ask it any time before your very last day, then the answer is that it is all about life choices. You try to make an effort to live long, which may or may not pan out. If you ask the question on the day of your death, then it is all about luck. Things had to work out; you had to be lucky, plain and simple, or you would not still be there. But if you ask the question after you are gone, then the answer is obviously...fate. It was whatever life had in store for you. That is the way it was. You see what I mean?”

“That’s an awful lot for an old dying woman to explain.”

“Oh she didn’t say any of that. That’s all me. Goldie just

answered with one word before she slipped away for good.”

“So she did answer the question! Why are you still here? And she says...”

“*Makhmes...*”

“And that would be Yiddish for...”

“Because.”

“Because,” I echoed.

“Because,” he repeated.

I thought about that for a while and decided that it was incredibly stupid, a bad punch line to a crummy joke. Then, after some moments, I thought it made sense as a kind of fateful summary. Finally, I came to the conclusion that it was a profound and wise response, the only one that made any sense in this impenetrable world.

“That’s brilliant,” I said.

“What is?”

“That theory of life, her conclusion. Why are any of us here.... just because.”

“Oh, I see what you mean. But that’s not what she meant.”

“It isn’t?”

“No. There was a pause after she said it. You know what I mean? Because...dot dot dot. As though she was starting to answer the question but she only got the first word out. She dropped dead before she could finish the rest of the sentence. Oh well, you know what *tingz zenen* means?”

“No.”

“*Tingz zenen*. It’s just the way things are.”

They Who Do Not Know



Someone saw him on the street and took his picture. I do not know why.

He was, and is, a complete stranger to me. Not a family member at all.

He does not stand out from the crowd, in fact he embodies it.

But not in a way that makes him exemplary either. He is just some guy walking by. A Perry maybe or, even better, a Jerry. I have no idea where he was going, where he went, or what happened before or after the photo. I imagine that he vanished into the street as quickly as he had emerged.

Gone just like that.

But I keep thinking about him.

Not what his story was, no challenge there. I could easily imagine him on the subway on his way home reading the paper, the financial section with the charts and numbers. I could see him stepping out into a slight drizzle, holding the paper over his head. Maybe he calls his wife to see if they needed wine for dinner. They don't; they still have the bottle from the birthday party. Over dinner he tries again to interest her in interest rates but it falls flat again. They watch something on TV that night, but neither of them can remember what it was the next day.

And so on.

No, the story was easy.

What I kept wondering was whether there was something else. Something – how can I put it? – too wonderful to be true. Like a Victorian photographer in the woods on just the right night, perhaps this photo caught something unexpected in the camera. Something fabulous like a sprite or an aura. I had seen those old photos, so carefully doctored to charm and amaze that people were too amazed and charmed to even question their lies. Ordinary sights of unordinary creatures. They were quite the rage in the early days of photography because maybe, just maybe, something untouchable had been snagged.

Had this snapshot accidentally caught something similar?

But how?

This was probably just some stranger who happened to walk by someone with a camera in hand. Testing the shutter maybe; an accident of film and fate. What could possibly be so special or wonderful about that?

In the evening, with the lights on low and the TV off and the refrigerator humming and the neighbors having a loud row, he walks gently into his daughter's room and closes the door behind him. She is still awake, as he knew she would be, waiting for him with eyes wide. He reaches into a drawer and what he takes out brings a smile to her face. His too. He sits down on the bed next to her and dries his lips.

Ah.

Here was an idea.

Perhaps this ordinary man, this very familiar but unknown man – this no one in particular man whose photo I happened to have in my album – perhaps he could be one of the *Lamed Vav*. One of the 36. It is not impossible.

I mean the Lamed Vav Tzaddikim, the concealed ones, the unannounced. One of the 36 special people who hold the world together and who haul it back from the brink of disaster.

Yes, that 36.

It is somewhere in the Talmud, I guess, or maybe only in the tall mud of old lore. In every generation, 36 righteous people

come to our aid. They do not know each other, they do not know who the others are, they do not even know they themselves are special in any way. They are the X-men without the egos or the outfits.

On the contrary, they embody the very idea of *anavah* or humility and even if they accidentally find out who they themselves are, they never proclaim it. They are special in the way that they are too humble to believe that they could possibly be special in any way.

And yet every so often, when the world needs them, they come forth and with the mystic powers they have not known they possess, they save it from utter calamity. Secretly, unwittingly, without fanfare or fans or fairs of any kind, no PR agent in sight, they do what they do – we never even know they did it! - then return to quiet anonymity.

There in the soft light, at the edge of the bed, he takes hold of the ocarina – of all things – and plays for his daughter. The girl's brain is hay-wired; she will never become the woman he envisioned. She struggles with everything, but she finds music soothing and so her father has taught himself to play this silly instrument. He is not good at it, he has no talent to speak of, he does not dream of being on TV. He works in cost accounting on the third floor and never takes a long lunch, but he will play for her – the sounds like whistling in a closet – because his daughter needs to hear it.

And this in its small way is heroism of the highest order.

Not the comic book kind that he used to read about but the kind that works in this tragicomic world. Because what brings the world back from the brink, the special power that holds back evil, is the tiniest act of selfless giving. In this way, we triumph bit by bit by bit.

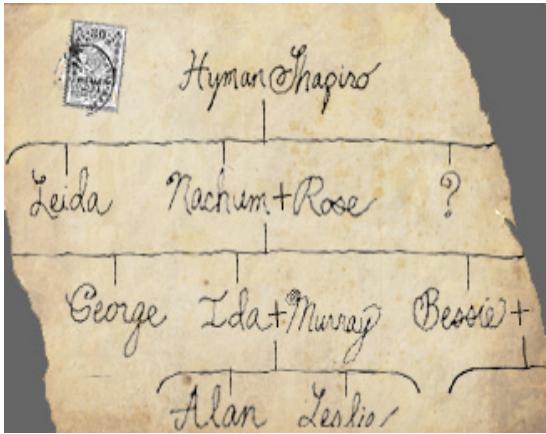
Secretly, unwittingly, without fanfare or fans or fairs of any kind, no PR agent in sight, he does what he does – no one else even knows he did it! - then returns to quiet anonymity.

But I have his photo.

Shhh...don't tell anyone.

PART TWO

The Tree



When you see it in its fullest form, there is a hint of inevitability to it. Each thing in its place and no other. Just like the quarks

of the cosmos that line up in just such a way. Or the Taoist idea of the Hun-tun, if I understand it right, that refers to Chaos not as disorder but as wholeness and oneness. The world as it is and therefore as it must be. Or maybe like that foolish notion one gets that all evolution simply had to come down to us simply because it did.

It is all false of course, musings of the methodical mind. A game for sorters and resorters. As any fool knows, things can work out any whichway and they usually do. But this family tree, as a diagram of what happened, gives you a very different sense. In a word, a sense of certainty. This is not exactly comforting, like a nice chair, but at least it is firm.

I mean, there is Hym Yuda who began it all and there is cousin Luvel who sang for his mother and over here my uncle who died of radio and then Rachel the Partisan of Vilna back there. All linked and lined up, everyone locked into their own and each other's destinies, pinned and tagged. Some kind of natural history display of the species homo sapiens, genus Shapiro.

Like bugs on a tray, they cannot move, cannot change places, nor ever recast their lot in life. Their positions are fixed, their relationships to each other pinned, not in Styrofoam but in the denser matrix of circumstance.

Seen this way, and in spite of the tales and the trials and the triumphs, it is amazing above all how fixed it all is. You can hear the echoes of the empty museum of time filling in the void. There are stories there and faces and ventures and snapshots, but no real lives. Not a single one. Nothing about breakfast on a Saturday morning waiting for the news or that kiss in the garden that meant so much or the dust that hid the lost watch. Not a single moment of the kind that spin and charm even the quarks themselves. Instead you get just the pictures and the narratives that attach to them, the jokes and jibes, the words after words and more words.

Have I turned my quest for an oytser into some kind of vast natural collection? And what do I hope to find in there with my magnifier and keyboard? What am I hoping to discover? A rare specimen? A gorgeous genetic monstrosity? A basic principle of change? Darwin found one in the beaks of finches; could I find a similar one in the lives of these specimens?

I do not know but still the hunt goes on. Something drives me. Maybe it is the force behind those individual lives or how one careens against another. Maybe all taken together, as one great diagram of this teensy corner of the universe, a pattern will emerge, a hidden code. The treasure I seek. Meanwhile, it occurs to me that there are still more photos in the album and episodes to tell and even some blank spaces in the tree and therefore that the work is yet to be done.

The work.

At the concentration camps there was a sign that read: *Arbeit macht frei*. Work makes you free. Is it too late – in history I mean – to hope that this might really mean something again? Something hopeful?

Numbers



idea what deutschmarks were worth back in the day or even here and now, but even a dime multiplied enough was a treasure worth finding.

It only took a little research to realize that in the hyperinflation before the war, this note would buy nothing more than a loaf of bread. In fact, it was so mundane that it was even below the interest of collectors of such ephemera. Believe me, I checked.

But I should have known...it looked cheap with its flat color ink on thin paper and printed only on one side. Not worth the printing it was papered on. So much for my oytser.

On the back someone had written six numbers. As fate would have it, that was the same number of numbers they used in the state lottery. I probably should not reproduce them here for danger of numbing someone else with my numbers. Needless to say, I could not get rid of the feeling that these six were the very treasure I had been searching for. The unlock of my trap and the gaping gateway to my future.

When I first saw this scrip of money, I knew I had found it. The treasure, that is.

Fifty million anything, I reasoned, had to be a lot of something. I had no

It came just in the nick too.

I knew by the time that I found those numbers that I would never be what I hoped. Never be rich or famous, never special or especially notable. I was an ordinary guy living the stable life, never winning big, never soaring, but having to settle for a series of tiny gains. A break on the price of oatmeal; a car collision narrowly missed. A compliment here or there. I was a mix of deep needs and shallow talents which means that I was a sad case but not a tragic one, and to no one on the face of the earth but myself.

Yet here were six numbers that could change all that. Magically delivered to me by heirmail. Here finally was my chance to buy that condo, hire that cook, shine those shoes and tell everyone everywhere to go fuck themselves because I was rich and did not have to listen or follow or yessir-nosir anymore.

Yes, here was my *beshert*, my fate, written by someone with a tiny hand on the back of an old piece of German currency. Perhaps even by an ancestor of mine looking out for me through the hand-me-downs of the generations.

In other words, not just mere luck but fate itself. The inevitable. What had to be. Like the joke that Hitler would always have to die on a Jewish holiday. Why? Because any day he died would have been a Jewish holiday.

And so, like a midwife to a misconception, I played those numbers in the lottery for months. Played and played them and never to any avail. I cannot say that I was surprised. Even going in, I knew this was pointless. Like banging a pan in a pandemonium; one more thump in a callithump. In other words, it was a tired cliché simply because it was a dream everyone dreamed but always woke up from empty-headed. After all, everyone wanted the same thing, the same triumph, the same freedom. It was all so familiar in a depressing sort of way.

That was when I recalled something my Aunt Essie once told me. That although *beshert* meant destiny in Yiddish, it was not always desirable. *Beshert* was not what you wanted to happen, it was what inevitably happened. In the way that Yiddish was a shorthand for both angels and worms, *beshert* was not necessarily

a good thing. Not a bad thing either. Maybe neither. Probably both.

My aunt was a gambler herself and had once won a thousand dollars in a craps game and got so excited that she crunched her teeth and cracked a crown, then had to fork the money over to a dentist who just so happened to be sitting across the table and had just lost the money to her.

Beshert.

And let us pass by delicately the tragic possibilities therein.

You never know when your triumph will be your undoing....or vice versa. You never know what to hope for. That was the lesson on that note. Have you ever heard the expression that you often cannot tell the difference between fate and the smell of a dead rat?

No? Well I haven't either But I often wonder why not.

The Visitation



It was not a visit but a visitation pure and simple. There is no other way to put it.

Perhaps I was half-dreaming. It was, after all, late in the afternoon and the apartment was hot. So in the way that a warm, lazy, idle mind can drift into whimsy when there

is nothing to punct it, I drifted. And that is when he appeared. The fact that he seemed as real to me as anyone at that moment is probably just an artifact of the unconscious. Like sleepwalking or even walksleeping.

And yet...

There he was – Hym Yuda of all people, my great-grandfather – sitting there on the cheap Ikea chair with that familiar face from the photo and that determined look in his eyes. Yet for some reason I was not creeped out by his sudden appearance. It seemed quite natural in fact. As though time had spindled itself and the past and the present had come into contact mobiusly, right there in my living room.

And why not? If time is going to contradict itself, it has to do it somewhere. And at some time for that matter.

At least, that was the way I rationalized the appearance of a

man who had been dead for a century sitting across from me in my apartment in New York one Sunday in August.

“How can you be here?” I asked him more out of idle curiosity than awe.

But he simply shrugged off the question with a flick of his head. It was a move my mother used to make to dismiss an idea. I think I do it too.

“What do you want from me?” I pleaded.

“I would like to know what you think you’re doing,” he said.

The fact that he spoke English – or really a kind of shtetl English – as opposed to Polish or Yiddish or Russian or whatever they spoke back in Vilna seemed trivial at that moment. I mean, after all, this ghost had just stepped right out of an old photo, so what was I going to do, give him an ESL test?

“Doing about what?” I asked.

“Why do you keep looking at that photograph of me. I never liked it.”

The notion that he could somehow see me back through the emulsion was nuts of course. But I decided to play along with him in the same way that psychos humor their own hallucinations. For risk of pissing them off, that is.

“Looking for answers, I guess.”

He shook his head wistfully.

He seemed to know just who I was too...his son Nachum’s daughter Ida’s kid. That is the way he said it, although I was in my fifties at the time and laughed. But he did not; after all, he was back from the you-know-what in some way and seeing things from a different angle.

“I think I’m trying to figure out who I am. Where I came from,” I added.

“Why? *Farvos arn?*”

Good question, I thought, and I did not have a ready answer. In fact, years in therapy had not made it any clearer to me. I was hoping to find something uplifting in my heritage, I suppose. Something to be buoyed by.

“I’m looking for the oytser,” I said plainly. “The treasure the angel gave you.”

“Feh!”

“It didn’t happen? I knew it!”

“It’s true whether it happened or not.”

Faster than you could build that thing at Cheops, I shot back:
“So now you’re a philosopher!”

“Don’t be a putz.”

“Okay fine. So then what is it?”

“Not what you think.”

That did not surprise me. I had spent my entire life crawling along the razor edge between delusion and disappointment. High expectations here and low truths over there. Striving and stumbling. It would be bipolar but I’m never in the mood. No ups and downs of emotions, just a creaky rollercoaster of wanting and waning. So the idea that this whole quest was bogus seemed perfectly apt. I did not tell him all of that, just thought it. But he still looked at me with those stern eyes and said:

“You’re a bit of a schnook, aren’t you.”

He lifted his index finger to make the point. That was surprising and he actually came more alive in that move. Not just a ghostly photo anymore but a real live person with a gesture and an attitude.

“This is what you came to tell me?” I asked, rather irritated.
“That you think I’m a schmuck?”

“Schnook,” he clarified. “Schmuck is a guy who steps out of the shower to take a pish. A shnook is someone who flushes the toilet, then steps right back into the shower. You see what I mean?”

“No,” I said defiantly.

“Figures,” he said.

“So is there a family treasure or not?”

“Is. But you have to get off your *tuchus* and find it. The deal I made relied on having a descendant smart enough to figure it out. Maybe not you.”

“Maybe not.”

“Schnook!”

“Again with this!”

“Go find it and use it. You think I have time for this nonsense?”

“No, not you,” I snapped. “You’re too busy posing like some rabbi inside an old photograph.”

I never got to actually say that last part to him. Because in a blink and a wink, the chair was empty again and I was alone again, wondering what to eat for dinner.

Schmoolie's Hammer



and the magician a bit of a fool, but that – as any chef will tell you – is what makes the hamin hum.

Hamin is a kind of stew.

But then again I don't really cook all that much.

In any case, at the end of his long and quite undistinguished career, Schmoolie the Conjurer returned to Vilna for one final show. It was late in the game both for him and for the town. Times were changing and without the local festival circuit, Schmoolie's meager talents had no place left to stink. Besides, he was getting to be too old to live the vagabond life and the city that had grown up after the war was decades beyond any delusions.

Yet he came and set up and performed his usual slight-of-hand tricks which had not gotten much better over the years. Still, the children came along with their parents who had been the children before, and they giggled and fidgeted and the adults came to watch over them and hear their laughter drown out the sounds of war.

Then Schmoolie with the low grand opera he had developed in lieu of charisma, took out a heavy sledgehammer and made a big deal about it...the size, the weight, the density of the wood. He

It is not every family that can count a count and a movie star and even a magician in their ancestry. True, the count was a no-count, the movie star a faded light,

called one of the strong young men up to the stage – which was still nothing but a table on a blanket on the grass – and told him to take the sledgehammer and hit him over the head with it as hard as he could.

The young man, an apprentice carpenter, was familiar with hammers and once he felt the heft of it, adamantly refused to do it. Schmoolie cajoled and pleaded but it did not work. The man weighed the hammer against the sight of this now frail older man and decided intelligently not to spend the rest of his life in prison for manslaughter.

But then Schmoolie winked at him as if to let him in on the trick and that tricked him. He felt that the old man either had something up his sleeve or a great deal of chutzpah and either one was convincing.

“Is this going to be okay?” the young man asked no one in particular.

“I am Schmoolie the Conjuror,” the magician announced, “what do you think?”

So with a little more coaxing, mostly from the kids in the crowd who still trusted adults, Schmoolie bent over before him and raised his arms out to his sides. Like someone preparing for the guillotine. Then he motioned to the young man who raised the sledgehammer over his head. He held it high for a few seconds but thought the better of it and paused. Then, noticing all the eyes on him, he thought the better of that too and brought the hammer crashing down on the magician’s head.

Schmoolie collapsed in a heap.

Everyone gasped.

The tinker turned blue; the teacher fainted. Some of the adults rushed in but no one could revive him. Medics were called and Schmoolie was taken to the hospital in the nearest city. Weeks passed and nothing worked. And there Schmoolie stayed in a coma for five long years.

One day, long after Letz and all its citizens were long gone, a nurse was adjusting his tubes and thought she saw a flutter in his

eyelid. She called another nurse over and, sure enough, both his eyes flicked under the closed lids. Other nurses and doctors came. It was a stunning moment. Could the long vigil finally be over? They all hovered over the bed, staring, waiting.

All at once, Schmoolie opened his eyes. He looked around at the group of people who were gathered around him staring and waiting. True to his nature, he threw up his hands and shouted:

”Ta-da!”

As I look at one of his calling cards, I often wonder just how much of the magic we all yearn for is nothing more than a touch of chutzpah.

Hands to Close My Eyes



I do not really need a photo at all to recall him.

I can easily close my eyes and imagine that familiar oval stain between his first and second fingers, for example. Pall Malls made that...a nicotine stain from a lifetime of holding a cigarette elegantly. Nicotine. I had not thought of that word in years.

But I have thought of his hands. His hands mattered to me.

At night when I was afraid to go to sleep, he would sit at the desk with the lamp on and write in a small notebook with his fountain pen. It was soothing to see him sitting there, his back to me, profile slightly revealed, silently in the dim cone of light, his hand moving slowly across the page, waiting for sleep to settle on me.

I never knew what he wrote down in that notebook. Years later my sister told me that he would copy passages out of books that he liked. Just copy them word for word. It seemed an odd thing to do but maybe it makes perfect sense. Why not write down what has already been written, if you like it? Better than creating new sentences you do not like. Tell me about it. Still, I always wondered what parts of which books he liked well enough to copy.

If I was still up when he was ready to leave, he would come over to the bed and put his hand on my forehead. A strong hand it was, but soft too. The skin thick and warm. Gently he would move his hand down over my eyes to close them and somehow that would work. The next thing I knew there were sounds of morning in the apartment and the sun was in the window.

I often imagine those hands even now when I struggle to sleep.

The notebook made sense for him because, as I recall, he was a neat man, an orderly man, a man of practices. I got that from him. I used to watch him get dressed in the morning like a ritual, always the same. The boxer shorts, the undershirt, then the socks and garters, then the shoes laced firmly with those hands. Then trousers and shirt, cufflinks and tie. Gold tie tack, the gold key chain attached to the belt loop, the gold lighter slipped into his pocket.

His hair by then was a straw-colored tint and slicked back with Bandoline. Bandoline, another relic from another time. It was the brand name of a jar of hair tonic with the consistency of gooey goo. He made a perfect part then combed the hair back and back until it was right. His hair was stiff to the touch from the gel but neat as a painting.

On the subway when I was really little, he would lift me up to the very top of one of the poles. I would hold him around the neck until I could touch the ceiling. Then I would let go of him, reach out and get a firm grip on the pole with my arms and legs. When I was ready he would let go and down I would slide like a fireman. Down to the bottom where he would gather me up, then lift me again. His arms were strong around me, his hands firm. They pressed in but did not hurt. He was a gentle man and only one time threatened to smack me. He never did actually and I knew he never would. But even the thought alone hurt because I knew he must have been really mad to even suggest it.

One time, on a family trip to the Adirondacks, he got his finger caught in the car door when someone slammed it. He actually

cried which was shocking to us all. And I cried too. Not just for him but because those hands mattered so much. Would this change things? Would they feel differently? Would there be a bump when he put me to sleep? He died soon after that, before I could notice a difference.

I look at my hands sometimes and wonder if they are like his. Not in the skin and bone but in the touch, the pressing and the letting go. The gentle firmness. Probably not. I suspect that these are just my hands and that they will simply have to do.

At the Drop of a Pigeon



“It is all a question of fate,” cousin Saul was saying.

We were back in his brownstone discussing the life and work of our ancestor Meyer Shapiro, the rabbi with no use for God. Saul had that annoying smirk on his face that reminded me that he was a retired

– no, emeritus! – professor who loved the deep decree.

“Yes, fate,” I said, yawning.

“Well think about it. In a world without God, as it was for our Meyer, it is up to us to decide our own fate. Not because we are told what to do but because we discover it for ourselves through our choices. He was an early existentialist, our Meyer.”

“He smoked French cigarettes?”

“He believed that life was about choices. And even that our emotions were free choices that we made.”

“Like choosing to make yourself miserable,” I suggested, relying on personal experience.

“Like choosing to feel anything at all. Choosing to feel. If our fate is in our own hands, then the world is our oyster...for good or for bad.”

“Oytser?” I jumped, mishearing. The word snapped me out of

my funk. “Did you just say oytsre?”

“What? Oytser means, what...a treasure? I guess you could say that too. To dismiss God, as our Meyer did, is to find the treasure of our own choices. I like that. You see how even slips of the tongue guide us in our journeys. Freud was right.”

Maybe; but the only journey I had in mind by then was a nice nappy-poo. The heat, the tea, the talk of fate...all too big for my britches and frankly exhausting. I was out there in Brooklyn again just to find more photos but Saul, of course, failed to pick up on this; things either had beardy meaning or meant nothing at all to him. I could easily imagine him back at NYU oozing his students into a snooze. I envied them.

“Rabbi Meyer actually performed an experiment once. In honor of one of his heroes...Galileo. It was a pigeon drop.”

“He read pigeon droppings?”

“Ha! I am so happy that humor has also been passed down through the generations. For me too. No. Meyer went to the tallest building in Vilna and dropped two pigeons from the roof. One was dead, the other alive.”

“Is this a joke?” I winced.

“Depends on whether you think it is funny or not.”

“Not so far.”

“Well what do you think happened? The dead one dropped like a stone. Pure fact, pure materiality, pure Newtonian physics. You could calculate where it would land.”

“Okay.”

“Ah...but the live pigeon took off into an unknown future. Pure possibility, pure choice. So from this we learn...”

“That live birds fly. Fascinating.”

“That life is not determined. Not by God and not by fate and not by mathematics. Living is full of possibility. This is a part of Meyer’s canon still to be explored.”

Saul raised his brows as a kind of invitation to discourse but he lowered them when he saw that I had made other plans...a very different course that passed through the portal of a languid yawn.

“My brother, your cousin Mike, was working on this. That’s his picture over there on a roof in Flatbush. Doesn’t look like a scholar but he was, although somewhat lazy about it.

I picked up the photo of a kind of geeky Popeye.

“And he was working on what?”

“This idea of a unfateful fate. The future in our hands. But sadly he never finished it. In fact, he died last year on March 4th... the very same day Meyer was born.”

“That’s a strange coincidence.”

“Coincidence is God’s way of remaining anonymous,” Saul toned.

“Is that Meyer?” I fluted.

“No, Einstein.”

“I thought you didn’t believe in God.”

“I am a student of Meyer Shapiro, the Tipsch Gaon of Letz. I am still learning. He started out as a believer. Then in the beginning of his work, he struggled with a hidden god, a silent god, a god of distant gestures. Later on he came to not rely on the concept at all...the adeist we are so intrigued by.”

“And your brother Mike?”

“I think he was starting to become an adeist himself. But we’ll never know.”

“What happened to him?”

“On a whim, he called me and suggested that we go out to Coney Island that day. Walk on the beach, talk. It was a lovely day. But on the way back we happened to be sitting next to a woman on the bus who told us that her son was in an accident and had to drop out of medical school which meant that he was living at home when the hurricane hit that year. The tree in front of the house was knocked down and destroyed his car.”

“I’m not exactly following...”

“Without the car he had to take the bus to work – this same bus we were on with his mother – when a man had a heart attack. Her son jumped into action and saved the man’s life, which convinced him to buy a new car and go back to medical school.”

“Did he?”

“No idea. By that time Mike and I realized that we had missed

our stop. So we got off and had to walk all the way back from Avenue M..."

"Sorry Saul but I'm still a little..."

"...which just so happened to put Mike and me in front of a building at just the moment that something fell from the roof, missed me, and slammed Mike on the head, knocking him into a hydrant and killing him instantly. A terrible shock as you can imagine."

"Holy cow!"

"More proof that it is all about choices."

"What fell and killed him?"

"The dead pigeon."

Finding a Song



My Uncle Manny insisted that the ukulele was invented by Jews in Eastern Europe.

I am sure the Hawaiians would be thrilled to hear it.

He said that they called it a *volfshreken*...something that would scare a wolf away. He had a nice

one too, inlaid with veneer and made by his own grandfather Velvel. I can just imagine him in the town square singing and playing some jig while a few kids bounce around. Manny winced because apparently I was missing the point.

It was a year, my uncle began, in which Velvel was sick and the wolf was, as they say, at the door. This was not death calling exactly – or maybe it was – but more likely the despair that can kill the spirit just as swiftly. The howling was driving everyone crazy, especially Velvel himself trying to find inner peace as he felt that some sort of end was near. It soon became clear that he needed something to mask the sound or he would lose his mind before his life. He tried towels around the head, potato plugs in the ears, stomping of the boots endlessly but nothing worked.

Velvel was a carpenter who had built many homes in the village but he was too weak or distracted to work, even though that may well have helped. Instead he gathered his tools around

him and some planks of poplar and bits of spruce, strings from an old piano, veneer from a broken table. With these in hand, Velvel began to construct.

His wife, Adir, was surprised that he even had the energy or will to do it; his son Hershe, wondered what he was up to but said nothing. Velvel was a stubborn man, a careful man, and all day long and well into the night – when sounds echo so chillingly – he kept at it.

He carved the body first, then bent the soaked wood that would form the sides over the fire. He cut the neck and carved grooves in it for the nails that would lay sideways across the surface as frets. Bridge, tuning pegs, piece by piece and one by one he made them all. He had never made, never even touched, an instrument before but there and then this did not seem to matter in the least, nor did it stop him. When he was ready to attach the strings, he could barely hear the sound they made for the howling of the wolf at the door.

The time was near, he knew, and he quickened his pace.

How did he know what he was doing? I asked my uncle. But he was so charmed when he heard this story that he never thought to question it. Somehow the idea that some sad sack sitting in a cottage in the middle of nowhere could make an instrument that might defeat that dismal shriek you hear in the dark struck him as not only plausible but sensible.

When he was done and the wolf had reached its moon-high pitch, Velvel took the uke in his hands and began to play and sing. Cautiously at first, then daringly, and soon confidently. As though he had played before in some other world. What did he play? I asked my uncle. What do you think? he asked me back. No doubt it was some old folk tune but I was hoping it might be Jailhouse Rock.

And there he sits in my daydream, with the wolf suddenly perturbed and annoyed, singing rock and roll on his hand-made ukulele which, after all, is nothing more than a license to be heard. In that heightened space, removed from the kind of time that fits

and stalls, he inhabits a rhythmic plane that can leave sorrow out of reach, beyond the echo of anguish.

Later on, my uncle gave me that very ukulele. I still have it. It is a gift beyond compare. Gifts are not called presents just by accident; they are about the promise of the present moment and that is no small thing to believe in. Music puts you there. Like love or compassion or laughter, music is something worth living for. You simply have to find the melodies that sound like life to you. We all have them and they make music a reason to go on, which is why we make it even in the least of places, even in the worst of times.

I cannot tell you whether Velvel's singing and playing sounded like crooning or hollering. No matter. I know it was his way of living again. I have tried it myself and it works even if only for the moment.

The song fills the air.

The wolf whimpers away.

Never



FPO.

I knew those initials somewhere in the part of the brain that tracks lost things. But I had to look up that it stood for the Fareinikte Partisaner Organizatie. Yes, these were the famous Partisans of Vilna that my aunt's great-aunt Rachel joined sometime after it was formed in 1942.

Their motto was "We will not allow them to take us like beasts to the slaughter."

I still shiver whenever I hear that phrase.

Shiver and see – in my eye's mind so to speak – my wiry ancestor stalking through the streets of the town, ready to scratch and claw her way, if need be, towards survival. They were saboteurs, these Partisans, fighters and scrappers, men and women who refused to give in. Not reasoners or accepters; no theorists of the human right of submission.

Oh no.

Into the woods with guns and sticks and hammers and the rage of those who have lost everything and therefore have everything left to fight for.

Sometime that year, the Gestapo caught and killed one of the

FPO leaders named Oskar Willenberg. He very well might have joined my family, if you get my meaning, but he died too soon and his death was a terrible blow to Rachel. Nonetheless the Nazis decided to make a big deal out of it and they organized a small group to take shovels and march into a nearby field to bury him. They picked only the women for this, figuring they would be less trouble.

Rachel, thin and young, was among them and on a gray day in November she was given a small spade and taken to a clearing where the women were instructed to dig. Who knows what went through her mind as she struggled to stick the spade into the hard ground? Visions of herself and Oskar sitting at that café in town and talking about Hermann Hesse maybe. Walks along the main street being seen by their neighbors. His breath in her ear. Or maybe something else.

At one point one of the soldiers came over and pushed against her elbow. He was just a kid himself and really trying to help her get some leverage but it was too late in history for that. Rachel took his push to mean that he was shoving her into the grave. She felt the forest closing in and something snapped. She hauled the spade around, smashing him in the face, and shouted “never!”

Never.

The soldier, stunned, looked up at her with a puzzle in his eyes and she thought the better of what she had done. But that thought did not take and with another move, she swung around again and cracked the spade into his skull. Two other soldiers nearby, suddenly jerked out of their daze, lunged at her but now she was swinging the tool like a dire pendulum, knocking down everyone in its path.

Soon swooshing shovels and shouts of “never” filled the air and resounded through the breeze and the Resistance was reborn in that moment.

This is the way she fought for the rest of the war, filled with *never* and a swinging spade...or at least this is the way that I have chosen to conjure her.

This *never* became a rallying cry and even an anthem. The first words of their song of resistance are: *Zog nit keynmol, az du geyst dem letstn veg.* Never say that you are walking your final road...

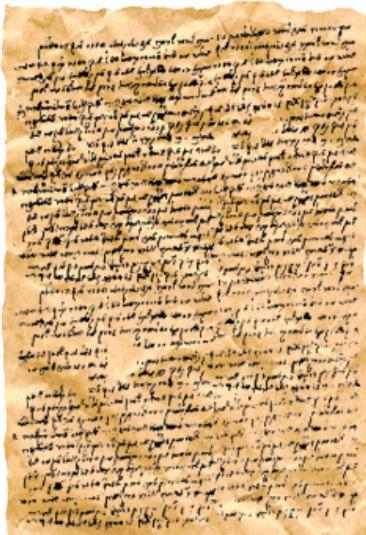
And then sometimes, late at night, lost in the dark of my own fears, hunted by regrets, hounded by failures, digging an unwanted grave myself, I imagine my glorious Rachel, the fighter, crouching behind a door, ready to pounce. Is this my oytser, my gift, this hidden courage I have yet to know? It could be. Stranger things and all. Perhaps it is there within me, a twist in the helix or some bubble in the junk DNA, a legacy handed down that makes my life, yes even that, stand for something in some way.

Truth, lies, science, myth. It is all the same...little moments in a tale told tellingly. Rachel being one that I can call on for courage. Unlike her, I do not speak Yiddish. Just a smattering of words here and there. Oh yes, but I know what *zog nit keynmol* means.

I know what it is to say *never*.

Even here in my cozy room with the heat from the radiator hissing, I shout it when the forest closes in.

The Grand Quiddition



rassing, not the tales of the wise jester one would pine for. And since she was not the only person on the tree to go ape – I had that uncle who died of radio – I began to wonder if this oytser, this heirloom I was searching for, might not turn out to be a dented neuron that led to madness.

Then I heard about The Grand Quiddition.

This was a book Perle was said to have been working on for her whole life starting out when she was a student reading in comparative religion and continuing onto the street begging for food and attention.

The Grand Quiddition was her attempt to work out the rules of logic and circumstance that would, on the most complete level – at what we would now call the supersubatomic level – explain what Aristotle referred to as the *to ti esti*. The “what it is.”

In other words, the meaning of life.

Meaning of life. Only a nut would even think there was one and Perle was as shelled and salted as they came.

Just another family myth no doubt, but it did explain this odd page I found in the album. It was from an old paper bag from that local deli – I could see the logo at the bottom – scribbled on in a tiny, tight hand. The hand of a lunatic, if you must know, intense and engraved into the paper with rage. I had to use a magnifier to read the words and a dictionary to transcribe them...part Yinglish, part Perleish.

Pure schizonotation of course, but the paper bag document was fascinating in its eccentricity. One section was a story that Pearl either heard about or concocted, it was heard to tell.

It told the tale of a group of men who lived together in the early 19th century somewhere in Poland. These were scholars who had cast aside their traditional roles in the community and the faith and all that, in search of something more important, more elemental.

The time they lived in was simpler than ours but even so it was far too complex for their tastes. The world had splintered into a riot of different religions and sects and movements each with its own symbol, truth, rules, practices. Not to mention a crank suspicion of all the others. This dispirited them deeply.

Was this the only hope for humanity? Was God nothing more than a cosmic mirror shattered into endless sharp reflections? Was there no truth but the whole truth and was that simply a flash in the pan of opinion?

The thought was unacceptable – no, painful – to them. The yearning that had called them to their studies in the first place still echoed and so they decided to embark on a grand project...to simplify what had become an impossible cacophony of voices. In other words, to find the basic truth of the human spirit.

You can see why their story appealed to cousin Perle.

They were not rabbis and certainly not monks, although the confusion is understandable; they were wellwishers, deep seekers, rooters after truths. And they were clever and had studied science

and the natural arts and they knew things about the world. So they devised a machine, a grand mechanism like a mashup between a difference engine and a brewery, made of rivets and counterweights and sluices and heating coils. This was well before computers mind you, back in the age of stunning clockworks and clever automata. Relying on their tools of steam and alchemy and brass and mechanics, they built this magnificent contraption – if only we still had the plans! – that would render the fat and reduce the fluids of overstuffed sentences and florid phrasing.

It was a machine of essences and simplicity that would, in the end, give us something we crave, or at least something they craved on our behalf...a certain certainty about life itself.

They worked for decades, these dreamful engineers, taking all the sacred texts of the world and compiling them and feeding them one by one into the engine.

All of them.

From the Torah and the Gospels to the Qu’ran and the Tao Te Ching. The Five Classics of Confucianism, the Havamal of Asatru, the Kitab-i-Aqdas of the Baha’i. Nothing was missed. All the Nikayas and the Sutras and the Gitas and Eddas and the Golden Tablets of Moroni, each one was carefully processed. The Book of Shadows just before the Book of the Dead. Even the Holy Piby – and who knows which translation – did not escape them. The more the better, gathered from every corner of the globe, all delicately served into the whirling, roiling engine and all pulverized into their quintessences.

This engine was not just a word mixer, mind you. Nor was it any kind of semantic chewer. It was more basic than that. It was a meme distiller, a nub engine, an upshot shooter. It took the complex ideas represented in all those texts in all those languages from all those realms and ages, and rendered them into their basic component, into the central idea that made each book resonate.

When the task was done, the output – and I know what you want to ask but sadly I cannot answer it because no one alive knows what form that output took – was gathered up and itself fed back into the machine.

You see what the plan was? To reduce all those sacred texts and then reduce the reduction. To come up with one single, singular, singing singularity. One concept. A cosmic crux. The nitty-gritty quiddity. A God thought, if you will.

You might imagine that when it was done, the world would end and a new one, the one we now inhabit so fitfully, would form. Or that the machine, on completing its task, would destroy itself rather than reveal what we cannot and should not know.

But according to Perle and her Grand Quiddition, they did in fact succeed. Leave it to a madwoman – who are all romantics after all – to believe that this could be done. The final sentence on that brown bag spelled out just what the engine produced after all that time: “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was...

Her sentence ended there in iron-clad irony.

But then I turned the page over and found one final word printed in Hebrew letters at the top of the other side. I had to look it up and it turned out to be the Yiddish word *dreck*.

Dreck as in garbage, excrement, nastywaste.

Coincidence, I presumed. Perle had trailed off with that teasy ellipsis but this symbol was just something printed on the bag to show its use at the deli. For trash as opposed to cookies or bread, in other words.

Coincidence. That was all.

Yes.

The Tear



The envelope I found was sealed and I was tempted to not open it.

Any sealed envelope, after all, contains a mystery and I like mysteries, sometimes more than explanations. On the other hand, I thought, perhaps the oyster was in there just waiting for me to claim it. A rich man only needs one fortune, at least according to some old saw I once heard.

So I carefully slit the edge and opened it up to find a single bill inside. It was a ten-dollar bill from the 1920s. I immediately went online to recalculate my net worth but found, sadly, that this kind of bill was quite common, not worth even a moment's fantasy. And it was not in very good shape, all wrinkly and with one corner torn.

I showed it at one point to my aunt just to amuse her but, to my surprise, she seemed to recognize it as belonging to my grandfather Nachum, her father.

“How do you know that?” I asked.

“See the torn edge? He did that to all his bills. Papa always tore the edges off the bills he kept in his wallet.”

Suddenly this silly bill, as a memento from my grandfather, took on some meaning if not value. Perhaps as a kind of legacy from a man with no castle to hand down.

“Why would he do that?” I asked. “Why tear the corners off his bills?”

“Superstition,” she said.

“It’s good luck?”

“*Kineahora*,” she explained.

I knew all about that. It was a Yiddish word made from the German for “no evil eye.” Saying it was supposed to ward off bad shit. But it was also an attitude about not bragging or boasting about yourself lest an envious person or even a dybbuk cast a spell on you.

“How did tearing the corner off of bills ward off evil?” I asked.

“Papa was always nervous about success. That it would be taken away from him. *Kineahora*, I should only be so lucky. *Kineahora*, my daughter is not that gorgeous, my business is not so wonderful, and so on. Your mother was like that too.”

“Tell me about it,” I said, meaning that she did not have to. Gloating was the original sin to her and, I am afraid, to me as well. “So he was defacing the currency to prove...what exactly?”

“That it was not important to him. That he wasn’t showing off when he paid for something.”

“Okay,” I said kindly, being quite used to eccentricity at this point in my exploration. “That’s pretty crazy.”

“That’s what I always thought. I used to say ‘Papa, it’s still the same bill, just with a corner torn off. What does it matter?’”

I nodded and put the bill back in the envelope. Without any extra value, I figured I would seal the envelope again and keep the secret. Not for me, obviously, but for the next schnook in line searching for treasures.

“Until that time that it did,” my aunt added.

“Huh?”

“Yes, it happened on the lower East Side. Papa was coming home from work and three crooks stopped him in the street and took his money. It was a dangerous neighborhood then. Papa told a cop on the beat but the policeman only laughed. He didn’t believe that a dumb immigrant would even have a ten-dollar bill.”

“I guess it was a lot of money then.”

“It was. And the three muggers did not even run off. They were sitting on a stoop down the block, knowing the cop would not believe him. Knowing he would never take the immigrant’s

word against theirs.”

“Ah! I see where this is going,” I said, retrieving the bill from the envelope.

“So Papa told the cop that the bill they stole from him had the corner torn off. An old Jewish custom, he said. So guess what?”

“The cop searched the crooks and Papa got his money back.”

“Exactly.”

I touched the tear on the corner with new respect for some old superstitions, at least where money was concerned.

“We told that story about how he outsmarted the crooks and how clever he was at dinner that night,” my aunt said, “but Papa just raised his hand to silence us.”

“No bragging?”

“Not that. He said: Kineahora, I’m not so clever. A really clever man would be tearing the corners off of twenties.”

Final Kaddish



Cousin Luvel, he of the great missed opportunity, was not especially religious simply because his mother wasn't. As everyone knows, a sense of the divine comes, like guilt, directly from your mom.

What sustained him instead was the hope that a lifetime of failure might also lead to enlightenment. In this Luvel had a deep faith. And so through all the unfinished poems and half-written treatises, he still managed to plug on. Perhaps today, he thought most days, some inspiration will come and linger. Perhaps today. This stubborn hope was also something he had inherited because his mother too thought this might happen.

But when she passed away, Luvel was stricken with grief and desperate for a way to both honor her memory and let go of her at the same time. No insight or idea seemed to help and so one night he decided to light a candle to say Kaddish. These rituals were alien to him but on one of the shelves he found an old book with the English transliteration, for he certainly had never memorized or said the prayer himself.

Standing solemnly before the flickering candlelight, he held his hands out above the flame the way he had seen his cousins

do sometimes and, struggling, he began to read the words of the prayer: “*Yitgadal v’ytakadash...*”

The flame flickered and Luvel thought that perhaps finally he was succeeding at something important and that the soul of his mother might move on in peace, if that was what it was all about.

“...*sh’mei raba b’alma...*”

“Stop! Enough already,” said a voice from behind.

Shaken, Luvel turned to see who the intruder was and gasped when he found that it was her of all people, standing sternly at the doorway. What kind of miracle was this? he thought. Or misfortune.

But the vision at the doorway merely flicked her fingers at him. This made him feel more stubborn, for who was this apparition to tell him what to do or have the nerve to stand between him and his love for his mother. And so he turned back to the candle, closed his eyes, and began again, thinking it was simply his nerves.

“Enough with the prayers,” she said in that voice that she sometimes used with him that was somewhere between a snap and a scold.

Moving away from the candle, he could now clearly see her standing right in front of him. Not translucent, not floating. Just his mom as real as ever.

“This is not happening,” he said to no one in particular.

“That’s what I’m saying,” she insisted.

“But why?” he asked as though it was the most logical thing in the world to have an argument with your dead mother over a candle. “I’m saying the Kaddish for you.”

“Driving me nuts is what you’re doing.”

“But this a blessing for the...well, you know.”

“What I know is that it is nothing but one big fat kiss-up to God. May his name be great, may his name be blessed, we exalt him and honor him and extol him. Please! I raised you to be a poet not a putz.”

“I haven’t written much lately.”

“So I hear.”

“I’ve lost my voice.”

“Then don’t waste time repeating this dreck over and over. It is a complete waste of language. Use your own words. I told you that since day one.”

“I just wanted to...I mean I thought you...that is...”

“You want to honor my memory, bubella?”

“Yes.”

“Fine, then write me an ode. Or a song even better. Make me something that never existed before in this world, just like I made you.”

“But what can I write that hasn’t already...”

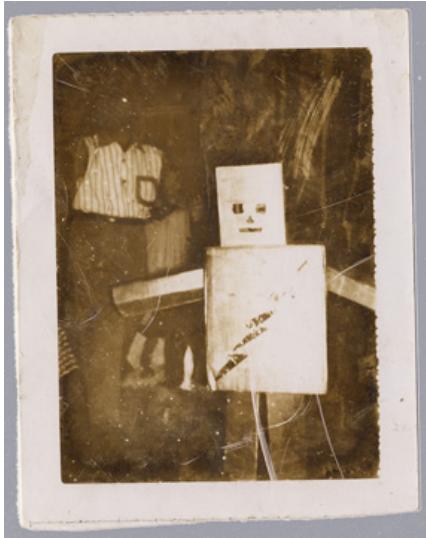
“You can sew your heart shut with other people’s words and it will never sing again. Now is not the time to recite. It is the time to pour forth.”

Sew your heart with words, he thought. That was a good phrase. Had he come up with that or had she? He closed his eyes for a moment to try to see the answer but there was none and when he opened them again, she was gone and only a faint echo of her lingered.

Luvel thought for a moment that he understood what she meant. He even had a poem forming in his mind about it. And more importantly, a sense of its entire arc, something waiting to be completed. He would get to it in a moment but, just to be thorough, he finished the Kaddish anyway.

But without the slightest sense of comfort.

My Life as a Robot



Strange to say, but I liked my time as a robot.

I felt odd of course and different but you would expect that, what with the cardboard and tape and wires and all.

But also there was a sense of distance, which was good.

My body was hidden, my emotions shielded. And my face nowhere to be looked at and read and questioned. I have spent my life knowing that I am being seen and often struggled to hide myself. But there and then, as a robot that is, the problem was solved. I could not be avoided yet I could not be detected. Like adolescent dreams of invisibility...it was ideal. Especially for that Halloween party in fourth grade because I knew that Maddy would be there.

I had the idea for it but my sister helped me make the costume out of boxes and silver paint and odds and ends. All this was not just some arts and crafts gambit because to transform yourself is to refuse to accept the life you have been handed. To reject your own limitations. And if you also happen to be Jewish, this particular transform has some echoes. The Jews, after all, invented robots.

Old traditions are filled with such stories, but the most famous

one involves Judah Loew ben Bezalel, the chief rabbi of Prague in the 16th century. The Jews of the ghetto were about to be killed – surprise! – and Rabbi Loew thought to protect them. He fashioned the Golem out of clay from the river – there were no transistors then – and he brought it to life through secret Hebrew incantations. The Golem would protect the people but of course things went awry and as the Golem grew, it grew violent. It began to not simply defend but to kill gentiles and then Jews too.

The Emperor vowed to stop the persecutions if Loew would destroy the Golem. But the Rabbi could not do it and instead found a trickier solution which is to say a rabbinical one. He rubbed out the first letter of the word “emet” (which means truth) from the creature’s forehead leaving the Hebrew word “met” or dead. Then he stored the Golem’s body in the attic of the synagogue, where it could be restored to life again if needed.

When I saw Maddy there, she was dressed, of course, as a princess. She had a gauzy skirt and a tiara and was spinning in place, her ponytail flying. I had been sitting behind her all year and longed to do something with her although I had no idea what. At the very least, I could say to her that I liked her, the way she looked with those bucky teeth and brown eyes. Or maybe just the way she grinned all the time which was exotic to me.

But then, it would be me saying all that and that was just the problem. If she laughed at me or made fun of me, it would be me again standing there uncovered. So naturally I said nothing. In fact I barely looked at her, just in case.

But as a robot...ah!

I walked over to her stiffly – I had no choice you see – and stood near her awkwardly. I could not dance poorly or say something stupidly or fumble dumbly. I could not falter or come across in any way other than the one way. For I was a robot and a robot simply is. All the troubles of being a boy with her vanished in that moment. I did not have to want or wonder, will or wont. I simply stood there in my robotic way and touched her with my boxy arm. I said nothing, needed nothing.

Perhaps she did not even know it was me there inside or

maybe she did. Either way, I stood next to her for a few minutes as she danced and grinned at me and it was perfect until my robot arm fell off and someone accidentally kicked it away.

I have read that some people think the Golem was not the first robot at all, but in fact the very first zombie and the godfather to all the lumbering goons that followed. But I disagree. To me then and now, it is quite clear what the difference is...zombies do not feel anything and robots do.

The Golem, with his righteous rage at those callous people who hold themselves back, too precious to reach out or to sympathize, too self-inflated to care, and me with my distant love, so safe, so certain.

Zombies loom; robots feel.

Yes, we definitely do.

Schnips



I never thought much about my Cousin Stan. Not much of him either. Pleasant guy, I guess, father to that plump girl in the taffeta dress and all. I only knew one thing about him and that was that he was an executive at a big retail

chain whose founder was a famous anti-semitic. Stan was Jewish, which made his career there ironic if not actually iconic. But they would not have known that because his last name was Ellis, taken by his parents when they came over because they thought that someone named Ellis Island had founded their new country.

In fact, I only saw him at weddings until that one time, at his house for some holiday or other, he took me aside and said he wanted to show me his collection. I tried to get out of it because Stan was a notorious schnippet. Don't bother looking that up; I am sure it is a family word. It means someone obsessed with details, tiny parts and pieces, all the little schnips of life. Someone who turns their pickiness into your agony. A hoarder of things or facts. I therefore assumed that he wanted to show me his stack of yarmulkes from a life of Bar Mitzvahs or a deck of cocktail napkins from the happy hours of a lifetime. But no. This was something, he promised, that would interest me as a writer.

Okay, I thought, how bad could it be? So I followed him down into the basement which was finished with cheap laminate and smelled like bleach. There he turned on the light to reveal shelves and shelves of leatherette covered books. Hundreds of them, with numbers on the spines, lining all the walls. As though an encyclopedia had infested the basement like mold.

I assumed that they were his collection from the Book of the Month club or perhaps the collected works of the Bard in all the Romance languages. No again. This was Stan's own personal archive; his collected papers so to speak. What he had done was take every single piece of paper that passed through his hands throughout his working life – every scrip and every scrap – and had them bound into volumes by year. Everything. I know because I actually looked through the books...out of politeness at first, then curiosity, and finally some kind of morbid awe.

There on the custom-made shelves, neatly preserved, was each and every memo, teletype, note, jotting, idea, agenda, letter, flowchart, and fax that he read or wrote as a Vice President for Personnel for the East Coast from 1942 through to 1985. Here, for example, was a memo to Charles F. Ferguson, Esq. written on November 19, 1967 noting that the document "in question" was being hand-delivered to his offices having been notarized as "previously indicated."

Schnip schnip.

Deadly stuff as you can imagine but I did notice one thing. Many of the letters he had written were to people he wanted to hire but could not get approval for from his bosses. "Mr. Pincus, in spite of my recommendation...;" "Miss Steinberg, disregarding my suggestions, this company has decided not to...;" "Dear Mr. Roth, I regret to inform you that even though I have tried to..."

He must have cut quite the figure over there in personnel as perhaps the worse hirer ever; the company never seemed to take his advice. Embarrassing I thought, yet Stan stood over me as I perused these and I was sure that I could detect some pride in his silence, as though the trifles of a life – even the foibles for that matter – could be amassed and bound and somehow amount to

something. So I perused, yawned, tried to be polite, and got back into the light of day as soon as possible.

And there it would have ended as a simple play on the humdrum ephemera of modern life. But it did not because in fact this was the opening of a three-act melodrama. The second act came ten years later when Stan passed on to the great personnel office above the clouds and I got a call from his daughter who had shed the weight and the taffeta and who informed me thinly that she had called the Smithsonian Museum to see if they wanted the collection. I laughed but they did not. The museum decided to take the whole shebang for their brand new American Business archive. Here after all was an entire library of documents capturing the day-to-day workings of that greatest of American inventions...the corporation.

But the best was yet to come.

The final act, ten years after that, took place when a lawsuit was filed against the company for its history of anti-semitic practices. You can guess what happened. Cousin Stan's archives became a key player in court. Remember those notes to all the people the company would not let him hire? The names of the unwanted he had so carefully documented: Pincus, Steinberg, Roth, Epstein, Markowitz, and all the rest. Taken singly, a sad note here or there. But all together...a symphony of proof that the company had refused to hire Jews for 40 years.

At the awards ceremony – there was none actually but should have been – I would have proposed a toast to my august Cousin Stan Ellis, who had somehow managed to schnip himself right into history.

As a Matter of Faith



Letz, before the war, was a town of believers.

Not necessarily the faithful, mind you, but simply those with a passion for hope.

Perhaps it was the forest with its ancient truths or the nearby mountains that had seen and heard it all before.

The warm summer wind was kind to a kind of trust. Sunsets were beautiful in those days and maybe that was part of it too.

In any case and whatever the reason, before it was all shattered, you could walk through Letz and sense and feel and smell the faith there, faith always looking for a purpose.

Like Lemml the thief, who only stole moments that no one else wanted anymore, but turned himself in one day and demanded to be jailed because he said he had faith in justice itself. Or Marta who loved Mogan but married the baker's son instead because she truly believed that Mogan would be happier with a fatter wife on whose pillowly breasts he could rest his head at the end of the day. There was also in Letz a man who never spoke because he did not want his optimism to leach out through words.

There was not much talk of God then, despite what you may have heard. There were some, naturally, who thought about God

and believed and prayed. These folks had, after all, many names for God – Elohim, Elohei, Eloheynu, Adonai, Shaddai, Ehyeh, Tzevaot, Yawweh, HaShem – and so, as the linguists tell us, it must have mattered to them in some way. But there was just not much chatter about this. It was not a topic of discussion. Maybe belief like that is best expressed obliquely, through a crack in the façade so to speak, the way you would glance sideways at the sun so as not to burn your eyes.

Take the story about a cousin named Mishkin, for instance.

As I have heard it, he was not religious at all but instead a practical man who bought and sold housewares and kept neat records. But he was also Jewish of course, which meant that somewhere hidden the back of his orderly brain there lingered a romantic question about the meaning of life. About goodness. Faith even.

One day Mushkin heard a rumor spreading through town that Rabbi Canowitz was coming to visit. The Rabbi of Vilna coming into Letz...what an event! Mushkin did not believe in the rabbi any more than he believed in the ghosts that supposedly haunted the Rudniki forest. But then again, there was always the chance, he thought, that he did not know everything there was to know. Besides, Mushkin had a wife and two small children, and his hopes for them occasionally swamped his logic.

So he paid attention to the rumors about how the rabbi would arrive on a specific date but quietly and without fanfare. No entourage. No shouts and cheers. He would simply come and visit a family – one family in the entire town – to bless them for the coming year.

Letz was not a rich neighborhood, never was, and a blessing by the famous Rabbi of Vilna was surely a gateway to notoriety if not even prosperity. There were stories about other families in previous years that came into great wealth or arranged desirable marriages after just such a visit. It was all quite extraordinary and thrilling...and rather astounding considering that the Rabbi had died in his sleep 350 years earlier.

But no matter.

Total belief in a lie is pretty much as truthful as belief in a fact, he figured. So with all that in mind, Mishkin the unbeliever came up with a plan.

He would find out which family the rabbi was going to visit and bring him one of his wife's famous babkas. No one could resist that and surely having tasted this deep sweetness, the rabbi would bless him whether Mishkin believed in him or not.

So Mishkin spent some time, and not an insubstantial amount if you must know, asking around and gossiping and trying to uncover which family the rabbi would visit.

Eventually the facts revealed themselves...it was to be the Blumbaums. Blumbaum, that *schnorer!* Why on earth would he waste his time on that bum with the talky wife and the dim son? It seemed a waste of good will and yet Mishkin accepted it and arranged to appear at the Blumbaum door that evening with his babka in hand, having rushed out of the house without a word to his wife about his plans.

"Mishkin?" Blumbaum said blankly, opening the door. "What a surprise."

"Oh yes, well I happened to be passing by and saw the light on. And I just so happened to be bringing home this babka but then I thought, well, would this not be a fine gift for my friend Blumbaum and any guests he might have this evening."

"A fine gift indeed," Blumbaum said, taking the babka.

"A taste of sweetness in this bitter world," Mishkin said, poking his head into the room.

"Yes, well, a fine gift," Blumbaum said, pushing Mishkin's head back out. "Shouldn't you be getting home?"

"No rush surely."

"Listen to this man," Blumbaum said to no one in particular. "He is in no rush to get home and greet the Rabbi of Vilna. A bit of chutzpah there, no?"

"What? Me? Home? Rabbi?"

"That's the word."

Mishkin could barely keep his balance as he raced back home, trying to run and catch his breath, neatened his hair and beard, and

rehearse his words all at the same time. But when he arrived, his wife was standing alone at the door.

“Can you believe it?” she said sadly. “The one night you choose to go wandering in the woods with my babka and the Grand Rebbe of Vilna decides to pay a visit.”

“Him? Here? Now?”

“He left, of course.”

“Left?”

“Of course. You were gone and there was nothing to serve. The babka is gone missing. So what do you think? He headed off in the direction of the Blumbaums.”

That was the moment that Mishkin, with all his order and logic, became a believer. Not in the almighty or in the great beyond or anything like that. Just in the likelihood that one's own assumptions have consequences and so one had to be careful about what one thought.

Beauty Like a Book



My mom was very beautiful, everyone said so.

They said she looked like that movie star whose name I can never seem to remember.

She was smart too but beauty for women is better than brains they say, because most men can see better than they can think.

I looked like her when I was young but boys are not supposed to be beautiful. It does nothing for you but make you a target. Yet I quietly liked the idea that I resembled her, even if only as an echo. Now of course, I look like someone's uncle you maybe met before at some party but are too polite to say that you do not remember. Or not. Any resemblance to my mom now is purely coincidental.

But this photo brings it all back.

It is odd to admit, but I really only saw her as beautiful in her photos and only after she was gone. In life, my life, she was just my mom and I could not see her any other way. Not as a young woman, for example, to whom others might be attracted. Not as a beauty to whom a guy might write an ode or have a go. Not as a woman looking at herself in the mirror and trying to see what

others saw in there.

Her face was just the face of my mom, no one else. Yet I knew her face very well. Not through beauty but another kind of prism... the tugging need to know what she felt about me. I needed to know that in order to know how to feel about myself, so I became an expert in it. I learned to read her expressions like a scholar. I became a master of the subtle shift in her eyes that meant disapproval, the curl in the brow that meant disappointment, the watery eye that meant hurt, the tightness in the lip that meant worry.

She must have known her looks mattered but I doubt that she knew her look mattered so much to me.

There was a lot to read in her face because she was a woman who felt. She had been through things, things that I could only imagine or never could. Her first husband had died in a freak accident and she was left to worry about my sister on her own. She lost her second husband, my father, too soon too. Life had bruised her as it does everyone sooner or later but this had made her terribly sensitive, raw to hurt. Or maybe she was always that way, as I was.

She did not talk about how she felt much but instead she wore it on her face. That face with the right proportions, the good color, the luscious skin. Yet posing in photos with her perfected smile, no one would guess how supple it was, how delicate. How fragile. How full of.

At her kitchen table that time, after I moved out and started my own life, I said something about being on my own and not having to care about what she thought about me anymore. I meant it as a gesture of triumph but she took it as a slap. She turned away and suddenly her skin seemed to sag and her temple rippled and her mouth went thin. She was staring out the window and using that to hide her face. I knew I had hurt her and that hurt me and round and round it went – but silently as a whirlwind in a cave – until the light ebbed and the shadows took over and time moved on and it was too late to take anything back.

Now I want to reach into that photo and say to her that she is

beautiful because I never said it when I might have because I had other things on my mind. I want to say that I am sorry if there was an ache in her face that I caused because I was simply trying to grow up. In other words, I want her face to be hers to own and not mine to study. I want to forgive her for things she had no reason to regret.

I want.

And in that wanting I realize that these photos are not just clues to a treasure, if one even exists. They are inklings from a past that cannot be addressed or relived or maybe even absorbed. They are the remnants of moments that can only be seen through the mirror of desire, which is unforgiving.

This one is a picture of my mom in an instant of her life.

She was not there for me to decipher; no one in these photos were.

They lived in their time and what else is there to say?

The Impossible Macht



After a while, I began to think of the photographs in my album in a genetical sort of way.

As though each scrip, whether it was cracked and yellowed or shiny and Polaroid, bore a single twist in the code that I shared with my ancestors. Here perhaps was a guaninic snap of Hym Yuda's stubbornness, there a cytosinic shot of Meyer Shapiro's faithless faith, and so on through a helix that was at once elegant and brute and inexorable.

I imagined forces in my own being – at the molecular level mind you – shaped and shaded by survival down through the long story of evolution from sponge to ape to man.

So naturally when I heard that there was a strongman on the family tree, I beamed. A strongman! Surely those abilities – to lift horses over your head, to pull trains with your teeth – would be lying dormant in me. Yes me with my dental implants, achy shoulder, and arthritic fist.

His name was Eyal Shapiro but he was known, if at all, by his vaudeville name The Impossible Macht. He was a small squat

fellow from the photos, sturdy but not sinewy, and not at all the steroid musclemen of my time. But he was strong and that was what I wanted to be and so I adopted him...size and shape and all.

If the idea of a Jewish strongman sounds wrong then you simply do not know your history for in this Eyal was following in a great and grand tradition: Zishe Breitbart climbing a ladder with a baby elephant in hand and holding a locomotive wheel by rope in his mouth with three men dangling from it; Siegmund Klein balancing twelve hefty girls on his broad shoulders. Or Frans Bienkowski ripping apart coins with his fingers; Eugen Sandow toying with barbells no one else could even budge off the floor. Not to mention Joseph Greenstein, the Mighty Atom, driving a nail through a board with his bare hands, then pulling it out with his teeth. Alexander Zass, the Amazing Samson – from Vilna no less! – bending steel bars five men could barely lift.

And for that matter Superman leaping from tall buildings with a single bound, Spider-man and the Batman, Captain America, the Hulk, the Spirit, the X-Men, Magneto, the Thing, the Fantastic Four... all of them mighty because they overcame all odds and Jewish because if your parents were, so were you.

The Impossible Macht may have been small, but he had hands like mountains, the palms wide as rivers, the fingers thick as trees. The word *macht* was strength; not to be confused with a *makher* which meant a big shot or fixer. Eyal was not that at all; he simply had amazing power in his hands. He could poke a hole through a piece of wood with his index finger, crush a thick glass bottle between his thumb and pointer, do push-ups on a single pinky. I took all this to mean that I too could break through barriers, get a grip on my slippy life, raise myself up on the thinnest of hopes, if only I could somehow reach inside and access my own napping DNA.

I recalled reading that the Mighty Atom used to take on whole beerhalls of Nazis, sending them flying to the hospitals and that was stirring of course. So when I heard that The Impossible Macht had had one such encounter I was anxious to find out about it, to

have that kind of story in my head and body.

But it turned out that the incident took place long after Vilna and vaudeville were both nothing more than pictures in a musty box. It was in Brooklyn in the 1970s when Macht was already an old man, but sturdy and with hands still like rocks. He was giving a lecture on the righteous life; like the biblical Samson he was a kind of nazirite; he did not drink, he grew his hair, he took ritual baths. He told people how to stay healthy by avoiding sin.

The audience was filled with sleepy seniors mostly and some fidgety teens who had to do a school report but then a handful of punks found their way in. They stood at the back of the hall filled with disgust at what they saw as an old Jew telling people how to live. They were not Neo-Nazis exactly; they had not thought through their own hate that clearly. Nor white supremacists or even skinheads. They were wannabees looking for ways to prove themselves in a bitter world.

When Macht was done and walked to the door, they stopped and then surrounded him. They heard he was a strongman once – that was what drew their interest in the first place – but so were they. Tough, hard, harsh; they wore black leather jackets and shit-kicker boots and no little old man was going to get past them.

As they blocked his path, Macht tried to avoid them. He even smiled as if to say “excuse me” though the words never came out. The gang leader, whose name was Richie but who was known on the street as Slice, stood directly in front of him. He was a big kid, over six feet tall, with a thick head and a nasty smile. Macht tried to sidestep but the kid blocked him again. This dance went on for a few minutes, Slice increasingly annoyed that the little man before him displayed not one iota of fear.

Then slowly, almost as a kind of symbolic gesture, Macht raised his hand and extended his index finger as though pointing out that the kid’s heart, just on the other side of some bone and tissue, was in jeopardy. Slice, not realizing that the finger poised like that was a lethal weapon, grabbed it with his fist and started to twist pain into it.

That did not work. He could not budge the finger. He laughed

to his friends, then tightened his grip and bent it upwards to force Macht into some kind of submission. No use. It was like trying to dent a lead pipe and it seemed glued in space.

After a few more futile tries he let it go. Macht gingerly moved his hand forward and placed the tip of the finger against the kid's chest. He tapped it once gently, although that tap must certainly have resonated inside, the way a plank of wood might have felt just before being pierced. Slice looked down to see that the button on his shirt was open. Was the old man threatening him or just pointing that out? Something about that finger convinced him not to decide and he quietly stepped aside to let the old man walk away.

They say that later on, when asked about it, The Impossible Macht said this: a strong man is not strong because he is strong; he is strong because he is not weak in those moments when weakness would have mattered.

Kinder Action



have some snippets and this was one of them.

It took some digging but I eventually found out that this snapshot of a hand led to a body which led to a cousin which led to her father Baruch Shapiro which, in turn, led to a memoir that he wrote. I never found the whole book but my cousin did

I lived in Vilna on Subocz Street.

That was my street, my home. It was a nice place to grow up. Butcher, blacksmith, grocer. You know, an ordinary place. But during the war, it became a detention camp for the German SS. A place to collect people before sending them to labor camps, right there in Vilna! Not so much a home anymore then.

But it was different from the ones you have heard about, the famous ones. This one was run by a commanding officer named Karl Plagge. He was not a bad man, not an evil man really. He was a chess player like myself. He played the piano quite well. He was educated as an architect. A humane man. In fact, he was even sympathetic to our situation.

When he learned of the final liquidation of the Vilna Ghetto, he moved hundreds of us, workers and our families, to a temporary camp on the outskirts of town. There were old shacks there

once built for day laborers, musty old cabins, but it was there we would wait for the army to sort us out. Conditions there were not good for certain, but nothing like what we all know so well elsewhere.

There he gave us work certificates to prove that we were skilled and needed for the war effort. He brought in extra food for us and our families. He protected us from the rest of the soldiers. He looked the other way when we smuggled in warm clothing, medical supplies, firewood. He issued orders to his men that we were civilians who were to be treated with respect.

Can you imagine this? This Nazi, this officer, this German major, who refused to become an animal. They should make a movie about him.

But even he could not stop the SS.

Sometime in 1944, in March I think, Plagge heard that the army was coming in to round up the children and take them away to who knows where, or perhaps to Ponary to be shot, or to one of the extermination camps. This was called in German the Kinder Aktion, you know, an action against the children. I think that in English this makes the word “kinder” quite ironic, no?

We were always working on some project or other, so it came as no surprise when Plagge gave us instructions for making a bunch of new cabins all the way down at the far end of the compound. Except that as we started working on them, it was clear that something was a bit off. The cabins were identical to the existing ones but half size, barely large enough to crawl into. Someone showed Plagge the plans and insisted that he had written down the wrong measurements. One meter must have meant two, and so on. But he insisted that the size was correct and that we keep working...and fast.

Weeks later, a unit from the Wehrmacht arrived with trucks. As a soldier showed Plagge his orders to take the children, Plagge got word out to us to gather all the kids and instruct them to stand around the new tiny buildings and also for the rest of us to idle around the other ones. We did what he said, although no one had any idea why.

I had a good spot that day and was quite close to them as Major Plagge argued with the soldier. I did not have great German, but I knew enough to understand what the problem was. Plagge was telling him that the children were all gone, already taken by another division. He waived his hands through the camp and even pointed to the new buildings all the way down at the far end of the lane. Everywhere the soldier looked were people idling but no children in sight.

He ordered his men to search a few of the nearer cabins but since no one was inside, they quickly gave up and moved out.

This is the way you, my dear, survived if you recall. It was through a trick of the eye that we might call false perspective. You know, the fact that things further away from us seem smaller. It took an architect like Plagge to realize that children standing near a too-small building would look like adults from a distance.

I know that at his trial he refused to exonerate himself, in spite of much testimony in his favor. I know that he blamed himself for not having done enough. I read that he thought of himself as Dr. Rieux, you know, the character in the novel *The Plague* by Albert Camus, hopelessly fighting impending death. What I can say however is...not quite so hopelessly in my case. And yours.

His name appears on the plaque somewhere. Not the one at the Yad Vashem Holocaust Memorial but somewhere else. I went there and touched his name. And the names of the others who refused to give in but who are also long forgotten.

But not forgotten by us. No, not by us.

Count



really be sure this was true.

I had no photo, no evidence of any kind, but I took the notion with me like a clue and went to visit my Uncle Lou at his apartment overlooking the ocean in Long Beach. Lou was my father's younger brother but I had not stayed in touch with him much, though he wanted me to. He had not been around when I was a kid and later on I never thought there was enough of my old man in him to make him interesting. But I was curious enough about this one story to contact him again.

After lunch, after the usual jokes about old Jews and sex, after that endless story about the woman who was dictating her memoirs to him because even at his age he still had a steady hand, after the deluge and the Ice Age and the return of life on earth, I finally got to ask him the question I came for.

“Yes!” he said triumphantly.

Lou was thin, almost frail, and had a neck like a turtle. Yet

somewhat the very idea of this made him seem plumper, bolder, less reptilian altogether.

“He was a Rabinowitz?” I asked, referring to the family name before it was changed.

That was a flub on my part at which he scowled, as he always did. Shook his head as usual. Then he corrected me with great puffery as he did every single time I said the name that way.

“Rabin-OH-vitch!” he insisted.

“I know,” I said and repeated it properly as a penance.

“It’s Russian. It became Rabinowitz when the family got kicked out and wound up in Poland.”

I suppose Lou thought that Rabinovich sounded more regal than Rabinowitz. But, of course, the name simply meant “son of the rabbi.” Everybody and his brother was a rabbi back in old Russia and they all had sons.

But no matter. Lou, who was almost ninety at this point, was not about to switch peeves.

“Count Rabinovitch,” he announced just as the kettle began to whistle.

That sounded wrong to me...like King Joey. Later on I did some research and found that the equivalent in old Russia was called a *graf*...like a Burggraf with a chilly castle, or a Vizegraf with a temporary title, or maybe even a Landgraf with acres of orchards. After the Partitions of Poland in the 18th century, the word for someone with some royalty in their line shifted to the German-derived title *hrabia*.

But none of that rang true either. Count worked best for me, even if it turned out to be completely fictional.

“Did our family own land?” I asked Lou even though I knew the answer already.

“No. We come from peasant stock. The land owned us.”

He was standing in the kitchen pouring tea and from that angle he did look a bit like my father. Not as handsome of course, not as appealing. Yet I could see something familiar, like a visual echo, in his profile and the cut of his ear. It was that kind of hint at a man I barely knew, I realized then, that also brought me out there

that afternoon.

“So what made him a Count?” I asked.

“He had to account. He was an accountant after all!”

That did ring true...as exactly the kind of cornball joke my father would also have made. Lou looked at me for a moment to make sure I got it and in that glance I saw my Pop waiting for me to snicker.

“Heh,” I concluded, knowing that he would keep repeating it until I did.

“So what do you want?” Lou asked, sitting down with the tea tray.

Some sense of the past, of my history, of how the world – combustible and cringing but with an odd will to go on – led from precosmic goop up through the jolly molecules and then to spunky sponges and on to the dinosaurs with their lust for life and the first humans scrambling for warmth, all the way up and up to me sitting there wondering how to answer that question, I thought.

But Lou could not wait that long for an answer.

“Sugar or Splenda?”

“Oh. Sugar,” I said and took two packets of Splenda. “What was his actual name?”

And here he raised himself up and boldly faced the harsh winter light, which was tough because it was July and the apartment was stifling.

“Count Leonid Ostropova Rabinovich!” he pronounced.

“Count Leo?” I said.

“Leo, Lou. I was named for him.”

“You don’t happen to have a picture of him by any chance? I’m collecting.”

“No. But I have something much better!”

Lou disappeared into the bedroom long enough for me to archive his entire apartment: the large couch with the worn fabric on the arm, my teacup with a floral design and a chip at the rim, the Rembrandt self-portrait cut from a book but mounted neatly in a frame from Ikea, the dust on the desk, the streaky window on the other side of which the ocean seemed fast asleep under the yawning sun.

Lou came back and handed me a small piece of paper.

“What is it?”

“It’s a coat of arms. The Crest of Count Leonid Ostropova Rabinovich!”

“A crest? I didn’t know Jews even had them,” I said, inspecting it dubiously.

“We barely had coats, let alone the arms to go with them.”

“Heh.”

“But this is real. I almost lost it when I moved here. That would have been a tragedy. It’s a good thing the worst moment in life only happens once!”

“This is just a copy from a book,” I said, skating my fingers over the smooth surface.

“Of course. I think the actual one may be in some museum in Europe. You should go there and find it.

“So this is our family coat of arms?”

“It was the Count’s coat of arms when he was given the title. Awarded to him by the Tsar after he fought – with great courage I’m sure – against the Lithuanian Revolt of 1863.”

“Why great courage?”

“Why else Count him? They could have just let him keep his sword. No, I’m sure he won his title honorably.”

“But you said we were kicked out of Russia.”

“It turned out he was on the wrong side in the long run, but what can you do?”

“And I can keep this?”

“Keep it. I have enough coats. But if you find out anything more about him, you have to promise to tell me. I might decide to write my own memoir some day.”

Leaving kicked off the same ritual as arriving...more jokes about old Jews and sex, the same story about the woman who was dictating her memoirs to him because even at his age he still had a steady hand, then the deluge, the Ice Age, modern times...and finally the door.

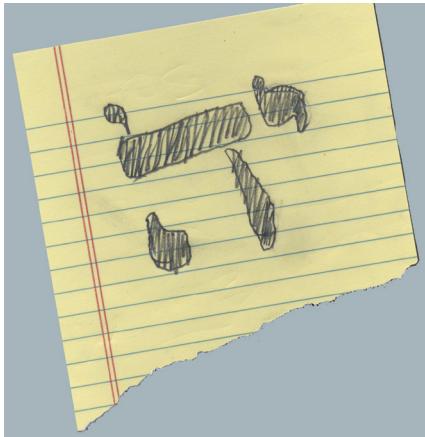
Studying the crest in the elevator, I was filled with doubt about what he said about the Count, the war, and above all that coat of

arms. I was convinced that looking it up online, I would find multiple versions of it as some kind of copyright free, Russian-looking clip art. But I said nothing then, did nothing later, solved nothing in the end.

There in that small apartment by the sea, with the paint peeling and the light fading and the dust settling, it seemed important to Lou that it be true and that I think so too. That I could understand. It is no small thing to have a Count to count on, some royalty in the very common blood we shared.

Outside, the ocean seemed to wake up and wave again and I waved back.

The Word from the Bowl



Like me, Ari seemed to be collecting family stories too. Maybe he was searching for an oytser as well. But if he was, it was lofty, some kind of high-falutin treasure, not the fat pot of gold of my quest.

I was at his apartment to see if he had any other family photos that might contain secrets but I must have caught him on a bad day because he seemed distracted. He kept staring out the window, thinking thoughts that drifted like smoke into the afternoon haze. I was going to thank him for nothing and leave when he suddenly perked up and snapped his fingers.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to remember,” he said. “The Word in the Bowl!”

“Which word in what bowl?”

“Exactly! You couldn’t be more right about that.”

“Great,” I said although I had no idea what either of us were talking about. “Is it a book? A memoir or something?”

“No, this was an actual experience. It happened to our cousin Bobbie. You know her, right? Bessie’s niece’s daughter. Or something like that.”

Ari began searching through the leaves of a thick album he kept of mementos like his own bar mitzvah invitation with silvery letters, a locket of his wife’s auburn hair, an award with a crest

from someone for something.

“The word in the bowl,” he murmured. “She saw it one day.”

“In a soup bowl?”

“Not that kind of bowl, if you get my drift.”

“Which drift?”

“Like most people she sometimes checked the...you know...”

Ari looked up from the album and tilted his head towards the seat of his pants.

“Oh. You mean she looked in *the* bowl.”

“Yes and what she saw there astonished her.”

“I’ve had corn nibblets. I guess I’m a nervous chewer,” I said, giggling like a ninny.

“Not what was in them but the shapes themselves.”

“Yeck.”

“The pieces seemed to float together in a way that clearly, in her mind at least, formed a familiar word.”

“And she told you about this?”

“Well, you know Bobbie.”

“I’m starting to form a picture.”

“At first she just dismissed it as, you know, a coincidence. But it happened for several days in a row. It seemed ridiculous of course. But by the fifth day, the evidence was clear and unmistakable. It meant something. Ah, here it is,” he said, taking a small scrap of paper from the album and handing it to me.

I cannot tell how relieved I was to find that this was not a photograph but a drawing. Ari studied me as I studied it, with a look of anticipation on his face. I did not want to disappoint him but since I had no idea what the shapes were supposed to be, he might just as well have been showing a Monet to a mule. And my expression said as much.

“Sorry,” I apologized, “my own messages are always crap.”

“Don’t you see?” he said, stabbing the paper. “This is a digrammaton, a two-letter word for the name of God. It is called *yah*, as in Yahweh or the word halleluyah. You can find it in the Tanakh, the canon of the Hebrew bible. Very mystical stuff.”

Ari lightly traced the letters with his finger.

“Okay,” I said in the singsong equivalent of tiptoeing back-

wards out of a psycho ward.

“So you see, she had quite a problem to deal with. This is not an everyday event. She was frightened, trembling before, well... who knows what? She tried to deal with it in the most reasonable way possible...”

“How about by not giving a sh...”

“No! The word kept appearing. She couldn’t ignore it. That’s when she asked me for my advice.”

“Why did she ask you?”

“Well, who would one consult about something like this? A gastroenterologist? They would only want to poke something up there to see what was what. And suppose they found a couple of polyps...how would that help?”

“A nutritionist maybe,” I offered brightly. “Maybe cut out the gluten. No more buttered scrolls!”

Stupid joke but the whole thing was getting to me. And Ari, an otherwise sensible man, seemed to have taken a tumble down the old sane drain with this.

“So what did we do?” Ari asked no one in particular. “We sought out a philosopher. A philosopher, yes. A smart guy I knew named Professor David Saunders who taught philosophy at Columbia. This after all was a philosophical question.”

“Obviously.”

“A question of ontology, perhaps, or epistemology. What does one do with such a message? What is the right course of action? What is the universe trying to say to us? Who are we?”

Ari’s voice trailed off with that last question as his eyes slowly slipped towards the scene outside the window again. A long time passed during which I fell asleep and dreamed of being on a ship steaming across the cold Atlantic. It was September, I recall, and the elderly woman in the deck chair next to me was asking me where the lavatory was when suddenly...

“Well!” Ari said, jolting both of us out of our reveries. “Where was I?”

“Mid-Atlantic” I muttered.

“Oh yes, philosophy. We both went to see him. I knew him from my own days at Columbia. Did you know that I was a pro-

fessor there myself?”

“I’m starting to feel for your students.”

“Nice of you to say. In any case, he was a polymath before every jackass online was. He listened carefully and like a good phenomenologist, he accepted it at face value. He asked some questions, had her repeat a few key points, furrowed those fury brows of his, tapped his fingers, thought deeply. Great, right? Like an existential detective working the clues to a cosmic mystery.”

“Colonic mystery,” I corrected.

“So how do we understand this, he asked. David went through the possibilities with us. The semiotics of visual signs; Platonic questions of pure form; quantum action at a distance. Heidegger, Thomas Aquinas, you name it.”

“God’s little poopy joke,” I suggested.

“No. One thing was clear. He did not think that this was a message from God, but rather the other way around.”

“Sorry?”

“It was all within her, so to speak. Something that Bobbie needed to see and therefore saw.”

“Needed to see? But why? For what purpose?”

“To have the world matter.”

“A secret message in her, you know, makes the world matter?”

“An unexpected word appears that transcends the ordinary. No matter how or where. A meaning that elevates. A reason to wonder what there is. We all need that. Otherwise life, as someone said, is just one damn thing after another. You see?”

“Sort of. Guess so. Not really.”

“It is a reason to ponder mystery and thence to feel alive.”

“Thence?”

“Listen, if I were you,” Ari said with great weight, “I would start checking the bowl for it. I know I am. If I find anything, I’ll be in touch.”

I did not shake his hand as usual when I left, but instead gave him a thumbs-up from a short healthy distance.

Oh yes and...FYI? Nothing so far.

Mossie the Bear



Some time before the final evacuation, the commandant of the Letz ghetto set up a curfew. It was a simple rule...no Jews out on the streets after sundown or they would be shot. The army had lost its faith in fines and reprimands, so to enforce the new penalty they set up snipers on the roofs. To help their aim, not to mention their recognition, all Jews had to wear a luminescent star on the backs of their coats so that they could be seen in the dark.

Helping to institute the new rules, much too enthusiastically it was felt, was a magistrate named Gozlin. I don't know if that was his real name, but probably not because the word *gozlin* in Yiddish means swindler. And this is precisely what Gozlin was. He had been nothing more than a minor corrupt official in town before the war but since everyone above him had been shot, this treacherous little man was elevated to run the ghetto.

It was at this point that Gozlin really began to live up to his name. He cheated his neighbors of their possessions, stole property left and right, and diverted bread and supplies that he then sold

back to the starving families. He himself handed out the coats with the stars on the back. In other words, as the saying went, he spit on the Mitzvot, the laws and commandments that were handed down through the Torah.

Clearly something had to be done about him, so when my distant cousin, the innkeeper everyone called Mossie the Bear, said he had a way to solve their problem, the others helped in any way they could. They sent a message to Gozlin to come to the inn early in the morning to discuss some business and they let it be known that a bribe was in the offing. Naturally, Gozlin showed up promptly and was met with a great hug from Mossie, who was called The Bear by virtue of this.

Mossie, it is said, sat the magistrate down at a table and began to pour wine and ply him with what little food there was, and tell foolish gossip about everyone in town until Gozlin was dizzy and exhausted. Then, as it grew later and later in the day, in hushed tones Mossie began to ravel a knot of intrigue. He arranged for Gozlin to receive outrageous kickbacks, funnel even more food into his secret trove, have a tryst with one of the lovely girls in the town, and even be informed of the next meeting of the resistance fighters. And all this for just a few more scraps on the table for Mossie and his family.

“Greedy Jews,” Gozlin laughed out loud while shaking his head. But he was smiling too and agreed to the proposal.

As he started to leave, Mossie called Gozlin his great friend and helped him on with a coat and gave him another huge hug. Then with tears in his eyes he ushered the magistrate out the door. Assuming he had made a clever deal for himself, and planning to turn Mossie in the moment he made use of his information, Gozlin stepped out into the twilit streets of Letz.

I think you can guess what happened. I did when I heard this story. Gozlin was immediately shot down by the snipers.

So consumed by his greed and so busy scheming, he had completely forgotten about the curfew. And of course he was also too distracted to notice that Mossie had switched coats on him and he

walked out wearing the star on his back.

No one, of course, condoned the plot. But no one was especially upset about it either. There was a war on after all and Letz was one of its battlefields. And also Mossie the Bear felt that there was an important lesson to be learned in it, which he would repeat to all who would listen. One passed down through my family all the way to me.

“A good Jew observes the Mitzvot,” he concluded, “but a smart Jew watches his back.”

Passage



Leida was my grandfather's sister.

She came to America at the turn of the century but soon died of typhoid fever at thirty. Her life before the trip over here was unknown and she had hardly any left once she arrived. But on the ship, during the passage, there was this one thing.

As I heard the story, she found herself crammed into one of the cargo holds of the Batavia along with a lot of other European refugees. There was a small round window across from where she was sitting but a persistent fog had turned it into a misty mirror for days. There was therefore nothing to see out there, and nothing to do in there, and so Leida, like the others, just sat and waited.

A young teenage girl was lying on her side nearby. Leida looked at her carefully and noted the brown scarf that covered her head and how the round glasses veiled her pale eyes. Her coat was worn and covered a long thick skirt that fell like a curtain over her thin legs. Her shoes were muddy and her only other possessions were in a bag at her side. The girl had not moved for a long time and only stared off into space. Leida asked the girl her name, her

family name, her town but got nothing back.

More hours passed and the nothing never changed; the mist in the window barely shifted. It was limbo there, a kind of purgatory if you believed in such a thing. The girl seemed to Leida to be slipping away, her will dissipating into the endless nowhere of the journey.

And so she decided to entertain herself, at the very least, and the girl too perhaps, by telling a story about something that happened before she left Vilna.

“You see,” Leida began, “it all came about because if this man. Schal was his name. Broynem Schal, yes.”

Was the girl listening? Did she even understand Yiddish? It was hard to tell, but Leida continued anyway.

“A big handsome fellow he was but his parents were poor and therefore he had nothing to offer when he fell in love with this girl from the city. Her name was Kaylekhdi. A fancy name for a simple girl so we can just call her Kayla. That’s right, Kayla Brillin. Do you know the Brillin family?”

The girl blinked once, which was either an answer or a twitch; either way Leida took heart and pressed on.

“The Brillins were well off, the father sold furs in Europe after all, and they had a nice house and a garden and all that. You can imagine what happened when young Schal came to call. The father pretty much threw him out of the house. ‘What you can offer my daughter’ he shouted but it was really an answer not a question.”

The girl seemed to curl her brow slightly at that point, as though she had an opinion that her body was too weak to express. Leida went on.

“But the two of them were in love anyway, so what did they do? They found a local magistrate who would marry them without the father’s permission. This is the old country, of course, so I think you can guess how Kayla’s father reacted to that!”

For the first time, the girl’s eyes met Leida’s. She said nothing but she said it so clearly that Leida knew the story was working.

“The father howled and raged and ranted but he could do

nothing to undo the marriage. So finally he offered the boy a large sum of money to get the marriage annulled. The father was desperate, Schal was insulted, Kayla was distraught. So what did they do?"

The girl made some kind of sound at that point and maybe even turned her head and Leida jumped on the gesture.

"That's right...they went to see Rabbi Mantel! Groys Mantel...he's pretty well-known, have you heard of him?"

"No," the girl said in a voice like a swirl of wind on the sea.

"Well Mantel listens to the whole story, rubs his beard, stares at the ceiling. He can see they are in love but he also can see that the father is looking out for his daughter. What to do? He takes forever to decide and then finally does."

"Here is the solution," he says to the father. "You pay the boy a very generous sum of money to annul the marriage, he accepts your offer, and that will end this foolishness."

The father liked this immensely, the boy not so much. But the rabbi went on.

"But now when this young man comes to call, as I'm sure he will because he is obviously as stubborn as the sun, you must accept him because he is no longer a man of no means. He has money now and something to offer besides his love. In which case, there is no good reason for you to stand in the way of their marriage!"

The boy liked this immensely; the father not so much.

"Come to think of it," Rabbi Mantel added, "why go through all this mishegoss? Since they are married already, why not just give them the money and wish them well!"

The girl smiled at that and Leida knew that the plan had worked. She had brought her back, if not from the dead, then at least from a limbo that was just as bad.

Of course it was all baloney.

There was no boy or girl or rabbi. Leida concocted the whole thing. The story was something she heard once in town, and the names were simply made up, based on what the girl was wearing head to toe. Broynem schal...a brown scarf. Kaylekhdiq Briln...

round glasses. And Groys Mantl...Yiddish for great coat. Had she needed to go on, a certain Volen Reckell (the wool jacket) would have made an appearance and perhaps a man named Zach (that bag she had next to her). But none of that was needed because just then the fog lifted a bit and a skyline came into view and the girl was alert enough to admire it.

But now I wonder.

What if the family treasure, this oytsr I was so obsessed with, was not a thing at all? Not in the thingy sense anyway. Not a hidden diamond or a deed to some forgotten real estate. What if it was something smaller than that. Much much smaller. Like an inherited web of interlacing neurons somewhere in the fictive part of the brainworks.

In other words, what if the treasure was not property at all but simply a propensity?

And not just for the irritable bowel syndrome, thank you very much, but for this lust for tales, for this understanding that it is stories, not hope or faith, but stories pure and simple that keep us alive.

PART THREE

The Invention



card; it shows a sprawling town in the 16th century with sinuous streets and secrets hidden in the byways.

The Jews had been there for 200 years but they could not own buildings because – heaven forbid – they should have something for themselves. By the time of this map, they were allowed to inhabit some of the wider streets but the windows of their apartments could not face the street. And by 1900 the Jews were almost half of the town's population but they still could not vote or hold public office.

This, with its endless pogroms and purges, is the city of my ancestors. Yet it was full of promise as well as distrust; a bustling marketplace and a cultural center too. Art, music, literature. There was the Yiddish Institute of Higher Learning and the Strashum Library with the world's largest collection of Yiddish-language books, more Talmudic scholars than could dance on the head of a pin, and of course Elijah ben Solomon Zalman, The Gaon or Genius of Vilna.

Not to mention the earth-shaking invention that was also created there.

So here is Vilna, the fabled city, the tragic city, the city of fond despair.

Not a family photo this but an ancient map reproduced on a post-

I heard somewhere that my distant ancestor, Hym Yuda's great-something, had settled in Vilna because the bread there was crumbly and sour. Mendel Shapiro was a baker from nearby Kaunas where he had a small shop. But when he heard some travelers complain about the bread in Vilna – where no one seemed to have the time to be careful about the process – he saw an even bigger opportunity. And he was right. Soon after arriving, his fat little mounds of soft and tasty bread became well known around the town.

In fact people came from all over just to sample them. His secret ingredient, or so he told himself, was not the molasses you would expect but something much more canny. He baked his breads while humming a song of his love for the woman who would become his wife.

Sounds hokey now, I know. Yet standing there at the back of the shop in his apron by the open fire, I can easily imagine him pounding and rolling and humming and thinking of Leva, the butcher's daughter, whose face was radiant like the moon and just as round.

Yes, easily imagine.

With deft hands, he dusts the wooden board, then mixes the flour, the salt, the water, the yeast. He kneads the ingredients into a dough: shadows from the sunlight outside find their way in and settle onto him. He shapes the dough into strips then curls them around into circles that will expand to make the chubby round loaves. A horse whinnies outside; it may rain. When he has made two dozen or so, he leaves them for a half a day in the warm shop to let them rise, then takes a prepared batch and puts them one by one into the boiling water. This is where his competitors, and there are many in the town, believe that he adds barley malt or maybe even sugar, but Mendel insists that the humming is the only extra ingredient. Finally, he bakes them into the chewy, shiny, fat, fist-sized mounds. And already just after dawn there is a line of customers forming.

Mendel is doing well but he is not a rich man by any means, only in his hopes and this is the problem. He wants to propose to

Leva but that would mean giving her a gift in addition to a payment to her father. He cannot afford the jewelry that his neighbors suggest. Then one day it occurs to him that the gift is right there in hand and has been all along. With a slight arch of the wrist and a twist of the hand, he forms his gift and when it is done, he puts it in a small bag and takes it to her.

No doubt there are many women who would be insulted by this silly engagement gift from a lowly baker, but Leva is not one of them. She laughs and slips her hand through the hole in the ring of dough. A bracelet made of bread, she thinks, now this is an ardent suitor who will never take her for granted.

When some of the other daughters in town – not the fancy ones of course but the ones with good heads on their shoulders – hear about this, they are charmed by the idea too and soon Mendel has a thriving business making doughy bracelets, of all things.

In time he became so skillful with his extra little arch and twist that these breads with holes in the middle soon took over the business and people were coming from miles around to sample them. In time the dough expanded and the hole shrank but the idea was still there.

And so when a new customer who was not a bride-to-be at all but one of the traveling merchants from Krakow came in and wondered about this strange new item, Mendel had his answer.

“It’s a beygl,” Mendel said, thinking fast and using the Yiddish word for ring.

“But there is a hole in the middle of my bread,” the merchant complained.

“Yes there is,” Mendel said proudly. “Think of someone you love when you see it. That’s what I did and as you can see, I have thrived because of it.”

Okay.

I honestly do not know what to make of the idea that my own ancestor Mendel Shapiro invented the bagel. More family lore, more concoction. Romantic babble perhaps, but no matter. As all lovers well know: the truth is in the heart, not the fact.

Come to think of it, a decent baker knows this too.

Ghosts Near an Open Window



I was losing oomph.
Not writing, not seeking,
just staring out the window
again, that cruel window,

the open one, staring down and down all the way down to the street below.

How many times had I stood there before, waiting for something to happen? For sanity to return, for courage to well up, for a sign from the universe one way or another. But in the end it was always just me leaning out, never too far, never beyond a civilized counterbalance.

I had the album, I was collecting the stories, putting them into written words...but all for what? I seemed to be simply making a pile of things, a huge stack actually, and for no good reason.

Then I felt pulled.

Pulled back into the room as though a ghostly hand had yanked me. Not gently either but harshly, the way one would pull back a bad dog. When I turned around, the sensation made sudden sense. It was Hym Yuda standing before me. I had only ever seen him sitting and was surprised to find that he was shorter than I was, sturdier, more solid in some way in spite of his spectral nature.

Hym Yuda had a stern look in the one photo I had of him. And it was on that photo that I based his entire persona. After all, he lived and died generations before me; I had no idea who he really was or even *if* he really was. So my concoction fit the image I had

of a man for whom self-doubt was probably just a rumor.

“Are you like some kind of guardian angel?” I asked.

“Pah! My entire life I worked for my family. Angels, all they do is sit around and make deals.”

“So a ghost then.”

I meant it sarcastically but he suddenly straightened up and smoothed his hair.

“Fine,” I said, “but I still don’t understand what it is that you...”

“Keep looking.”

The twist of my lip must have told him what I could not say out loud...that I was starting to question the entire quest. Doubt the effort. Doubt everything in fact.

“*Andere essen yenem, szí eszt sich,*” he intoned.

“What is that? Some kind of prayer?”

“A saying. It means: some eat at others, she eats at herself. They said that about my mother. You’re like her in some ways. She was never good enough for herself and took it out on everyone else.”

“Forget the wisdoms. I’m at the end of something here.”

“*Narishkeit!* Nonsense. What is it with you and this ‘me me me’ all the time?”

“Me?”

“Listen, you don’t push on for yourself. You do it for your family.”

“It’s different now. Not the same as living in a village.”

“No? Then what about the rest of us?”

“Rest of who?”

“Us,” he said firmly.

He was pointing behind him, towards the wall. There was nothing on that wall but I soon began to see it not as blank but empty. I mean, more like a canvas than a vacancy, something yet to be filled. Like the screen before the movie starts.

And then very slowly, like a thought forming, that wall began to fill with ghosts. They were vague at first, ghostly. But they started to form themselves into all those photos on the family album. All those lives that led down to me here now. That uncle

throwing dice in the alleyway in Brooklyn; that cousin singing in the forest outside Vilna; the girl who carried secret notes into the ghetto. Slowly I could feel the weight of evolution, the burden of descent. All those folks who had to be born and grow and live long enough to make babies, all the way down the line until me.

Then it hit me that it would be an insult to their struggles to indulge in my own. I know that this was what Hym Yuda had in mind because after a long pause he said to me:

“Egypt, Babylon, Rome, Russia, Germany. Through it all we survived. No, through it all we rose up. We fought, tooth and nail, every step of the way. The droughts, the plagues, the pogroms. And all for what? For you to be miserable on a bad day and decide to give up? What is that in light of what we all went through?”

“Yes, but sometimes...”

“Sometimes nothing. *Oyb men vil fargesn di tsores, farvandlen arum.*”

“Very nice.”

“If you want to forget your troubles, turn around.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a smart boy when you’re not being a selfish putz, figure it out.”

I closed the window that day and went back to work because what he said – or maybe it was just what I thought – stayed with me. I could feel the pressure of all those ghosts right behind me, not pushing me exactly but just living out their lives in the past with no idea about me or my sufferings. No idea at all.

And yet there I was, like it or not, the next in line and who was I to complain about it?

A Scrap of Sturmer



I really had no idea what to make of this scrap of scrungy paper. Was it part of a will or a won't... or just what was it?

I thought at first that it was one of those bits of newspaper someone used to stuff in a picture frame, with no more meaning than any other random scrap for some dumb use. But I was wrong about that.

With some research I found out that it was the masthead of a newspaper from Germany back in the 1930s. It was called *Der Stürmer*. The word meant “stormer” in German. But in Yiddish, which makes its own rules of innuendo, it was worse than that...it meant “attacker.”

The paper was part of the whole Nazi propaganda machine and how a fleck of it ended up in my family album is anyone’s guess. Perhaps it found its way to Vilna in the van of a traveling salesman; or perhaps one of my ancestors visited Berlin at some point, though I cannot imagine why. In any case, there it was in the album, lying rather casually among the photos, as though it meant something, represented something, contained something.

A clue to my family treasure perhaps? Maybe it led to an advertisement with numbers that were a secret code to gold sitting in the vault of some German bank.

Sure.

But all I had was the scrap, nothing more than a rather nasty reminder of a past that was so brutal to so many families. After all, this was pure anti-Semitism in the form of a decaying snippet.

It even looked coarse and crude with that heavy blackletter type, the blunt design, the underline that said “German Weekly Newspaper in the Fight for Truth.” Truth, perhaps the least trustworthy word in any language. Do they say in Yiddish that we should never trust the ones who bear the truth? No, I don’t think so. But they should.

For a while I searched for preserved copies of the whole edition but I never found any. Yet even here at my computer in Manhattan by the river, I can imagine *Der Stürmer* as a fusty tabloid filled with big-nosed caricatures and wild tales of Jewish cabals. I read that it was published by one Julius Streicher, who was accused of being a liar, a coward, of having unsavory friends, and of mistreating his wife and of flirting with women. In other words, the perfect bearer of the Truth. Up until the Second World War, he ran articles demanding the annihilation and extermination of the Jews. He almost got his wish too.

I showed this scrap to my Aunt Bessie once and she, naturally, told me a story about it. She said that it probably came from her great aunt Rachel. Rachel who dreamed of high society but joined the Partisans to fight the Nazis like a tiger in the streets of Vilna. But before the war, Rachel was quite the charmer, a schmoozer who could chat her way out of anything. One time Rachel in her new heels and trim jacket, was sitting at a café in Vilna reading *Der Stürmer* of all things. One of the women in the village saw this and came over, rather disgusted with her.

“How can you read this dreck?” she demanded.

“What’s the matter with you,” shouted another.

The two women caused such a commotion that soon Rachel was surrounded by people insisting on an explanation. How dare she even bring – let alone read – this vicious screed and to the Letz ghetto of all places. The situation quickly got very heated. Rachel sat there for quite a while, trying to figure a way out. Then, sensing that a riot might soon be on her hands, she put the paper down and said calmly:

“Listen my friends, all I hear about in the news is the how we Jews are hated and about all the people who want to eliminate us

and how powerless we are to do anything about it. But when I sit down of a fine afternoon here in the plaza and read this copy of *Der Stürmer*, what do I discover? That the Jews are in control of all the banks, that we have taken over all the arts, and that if we are not stopped we might very possibly take over the world. What power! I feel so much better about myself after that. Don't you?"

And I guess she smiled that winning smile and sometime later, the café became the center of the resistance. But I know what you are thinking. Was it true? Did it really happen? I cannot say since I have stopped asking myself that question. And started instead wondering whether life on earth is anything more than the energy in spinning stories held together by the stern pull of gravity.

What Happened on That Train



When I knew him he was just my uncle. Uncle Manny.

Manny who worked on the New York Times weather map and made those dopey movies of us kids climbing out of the cardboard box. My mother's sister's husband. My cousin's father. It never hit me that he was a guy who had a life before the family, outside of his uncleness so to speak; a man in

his own right with a past of exploits.

This is why that photo of him as a young man, much younger in it than I was looking at it, seemed warped and wrong. Here was Manny full of youth and yip, shooting craps on the street, with his whole future ahead of him, no trace of the family in sight, nor the illness or the pension or the long goodbye.

Then I remembered that story he told about the train. Maybe he was trying then to break through, to tell us about that life he had, the one in the photo, the one before he became the uncle that we all needed him to be. Back when he was the Manny at the core of his own adventure.

It was a Hanukkah dinner I think but I cannot say for sure. Those family dinners tend to merge in my mind into one big gab-feast, the table crowded with dishes, the food pouring in from the kitchen in waves, the jokey chatter, and Uncle Jerome behaving himself at least for the time being.

Afterwards, we were sitting in the living room, waiting for the table to be cleared and then filled with dessert and coffee. Someone said something about the army and that triggered Manny. He turned to my aunt as if to ask permission and she said, with some resignation, "Go ahead, tell them about the train thing."

What train thing?

"It was 1940," he said. "I know because it was my 20th birthday and the last thing I wanted to do was get on that train."

"He just got his notice," my aunt Elsie added.

Manny, a natural chatter who could read an audience like a third-grade teacher, turned to us kids to explain: "My draft notice. To join the army. They sent you a letter."

"He had three days to pack and report, can you imagine?"

"I went down to Grand Central Station with my friend Oscar,"
Manny went on.

"I remember Oscar," my Aunt Bessie said popping out of the kitchen. "He was a good-looking guy."

"Let him tell the story," my uncle Sid said.

"We were taking the train down to Georgia," Manny continued. He had a soft voice but he used it for effect; we had to shut up to hear him. "That's where the boot camp was."

"A boot camp?" my cousin asked.

"It's where they train you for the army," he said. "It was in Georgia, a two day train ride. Very boring. But then this amazing thing happened on the way."

"Amazing?" Elsie said. "Unbelievable is what it was."

So? Tell it already! What happened?

"You never heard this?" Elsie asked my mom, who was placing a cake like a spare tire on the table. "I told you this. It's unbelievable."

"Told, didn't tell. Who cares? I never heard it," Uncle Sid said gruffly.

“I told you,” my aunt insisted.

“She probably told everyone,” Manny said quietly. “I mean...it is pretty amazing.”

“Unbelievable,” my aunt summed.

“Are you going to tell us what happened or not?” my other cousin asked, eyeing the cookie tray like a sugar spy.

“We were on the train,” Manny said. “A whole bunch of us. I’d never been outside of New York. No one had. City kids. We were sitting there watching the countryside go by...”

“Okay!” my mother said, charging into the room. “So who wants coffee and who want tea?”

A census was taken, numbers calculated, negotiations made, a final analysis. A brief argument about decaf. Soda for the kids? Yes, but which kind? The moon rose and fell. Galaxies collapsed.

“Are you going to finish this story?” my cousin finally asked.

“Finish already,” Elsie said. “You’re not going to believe what happened to him.”

“Where was I?” Manny said.

On the train to Georgia!

“That’s right. Well, there we were on the way to boot camp and suddenly the train stops. Right in the middle of nowhere.”

“Middle of where?”

Nowhere!

“I mean we had no idea where we were. Then the conductor comes along and...”

“Okay everybody,” my aunt Bessie said triumphantly, “time for dessert!”

The kids made a beeline; the adults a more orderly scramble. In an instant we were back at the table crowded with dishes again, the food pouring in from the kitchen in waves, the jokey chatter all over again, and Uncle Jerome starting to lose it and putting the napkin on his head.

Pass this, pass that. Anyone want more milk? Is there any saccharine? Jerome, stop with the antics already! And we were back into the whole family dinner combustion with barely a flick-

er that anything had gone before.

Including the train, of course. We never got back to that. And so if Manny had a life, or even one single adventure, before the family, it never lasted through that dinner. Or probably any other.

What happened on that train.

I see now that I neglected to put a question mark – which I have come to think of as the signature punctuation of life – in the title of this tale.

I guess I should add it here?

All Baseball



I have dozens of photos of him. The one where he is holding me up to the light like a bottle of fine wine, the one in which he is posing like an actor

in his straw hat, and that one that shows him walking down the boardwalk in a very white suit arm-in-arm with someone who is clearly not my mom.

I always wonder just who he was as I look at those photos and, by some odd inference, who I am. After all, he passed away long before I could get to know him as a man but I keep trying, probing with hopeful eyes, and hoping maybe to pull him back out of the lost past. But it only works in pieces; what I have so far is just a pile of scraps that may mean something yet.

And then there is this one. It is older than the others and therefore holds more mystery, yet is also seems so familiar to me. It is yellowed like his index finger was from nicotine, cracked like the grooves in his combed hair, and thin as my memories of him.

He is nothing but a boy in there, a youngster, maybe 14 years old. That would make it 1916; summer no doubt. He is wearing a baseball uniform and posing with three of his teammates. It is an antique uniform with knickers and high socks and odd round caps from a bygone era of pure baseball, Sunday ball, dusty ball. The

boys are leaning casually against a wooden fence under the glare of a high sun. The logo on their uniforms reads MAS; this was the insignia of the Murray All-Stars. The team was named for my Dad because he was their pitcher. It was the age of the pitcher, the so-called “Dead-ball era,” when runs were rare and the man on the mound was the star.

I needed a magnifier just to get in there and find him second to the right. It is a pose that I would never associate with him, so loose and limber. He had thickened by the time I knew him and always wore trousers and a key chain. Yet in there he is decades younger than the man I barely knew and up close like that I could just about make out that familiar smile and the grin of the eyes. My Dad as a boy. It is a haunting photo in the way that photos are; it freezes one instant from the stampede of life in a frame that you can hold but never quite grasp.

But what was I looking for in there? Comfort, clues, a conclusion? Or perhaps a connection to a man who slipped through my grip. Maybe I was holding onto this photo too tightly for my own good but what I found as I looked was that age had folded back on itself in that timeless space between snapshots. The present and past were twisted into an endless knot. There in the emulsion, he is only slightly older than I was when he died and with his whole life before him. I am only slightly older now than he was when he died and wonder how much life I have left.

Knots only tighten as you pull on them.

I knew very little about him really. I never quite understood what his job was in the yarn industry or what he found so tasty about crackers and milk. But I did know that he loved baseball. He taught me how to throw and catch in that sandlot behind the Brooklyn Museum. How to kneel for a grounder. He showed me how to oil my glove and how to stick it under the mattress with the ball still in it to create a good pocket. He showed me his fadeaway pitch, the one he modeled after Christy Mathewson. He took me to minor league games; he called the games on TV.

My father was a formal man, a neat man, a father in a time

before they were allowed to be just guys and I think now that baseball was his way of loving me. I cannot recall us talking or hanging out or even spending much time together in another way.

Yet I know that baseball meant more to him than to me; I was just a dumb kid and it was just a dumb game to me. Tennis, soccer, sports that rushed and snapped, that was what I liked. Baseball was too slow, too orderly. There was too much time to think in it and I was too young to know how valuable that kind of time was. Or that the time I had with him would not last.

I remember that last time that he wanted to have a catch and I had something more important to do. Something quicker no doubt. For a long time I dreamed of taking that moment back.

Deep down I know that we live our lives in the moments lived, not by the ones pressed and preserved. Not in the aching and not even in the regrets that photographs are so clever at calling up. When I put the magnifier down and step back from the image, the knot falls away and I can see it for what it is. It is a moment in there, just a moment. His moment. I can see it in his face in that photo, enjoying that instant in the sunlight.

Before the game, before the first pitch, at that sublime pause of anticipation. He loved baseball, my Dad did, and there he is all baseball and how utterly wide the universe must have been then and there.

It was on my last birthday that I officially outlasted my father. But as I look at this photo of him in his moment, I realize that I have not outlived him.

The Punch Line



“So one day Josef Mengele goes to take a piss, looks down, and realizes that he is circumcised...”

It was an unusual setup for my cousin Seymour, lord of cornball humor. Or worse, the jokes about old people and sex.

Or the potty gags he collected

and insisted on sending via email. When you get a bladder infection, urine trouble. That kind of thing. But he had invited me over to see a photo that he thought I might be interested in, given my obsession with family snapshots. So I went and tried to smile rather than wince my way through his stale routine.

Then a phone call stopped him from getting to the punch line of the joke and by the time he returned to the living room, he had forgotten what he was saying, so he took out the photograph and showed it to me. Here was a snapshot of a very compact lady in a patterned dress that touched the ground. She was on the street in Vilna and holding a handbag. She seemed to have a knowing smile on her face and a rather proud stance as she stopped for the camera. Yet she cut an odd figure in there, so small in the doorway, her head a bit large, her arms so short. Even so, her whole demeanor was that of a celebrity, a queen of the ghetto street.

“This is an Ovitz,” Seymour said with pride. “I don’t know

which one. This photo is one of my prized possessions.”

“Is she related?”

“No. But she visited Vilna once and my grandfather took this snapshot with his old Rolex.”

“Was she a...um...”

“She was a *badchen*.”

“Oh, you mean a...”

“A *badchen*,” Seymour repeated impatiently. “Where is your history?

“I left it back there with Biology,” I explained.

“A *badchen* is a jester, a kind of smart Jewish stand-up comic. They do shtick at weddings.”

“You mean they clown around, like a court jester?” I asked examining the photo. The idea did not seem to fit her at all.

“No, that’s a *letz*.”

“*Letz*? Our people come from *Letz*.”

“Don’t remind me,” he said, doing Groucho Marx with his eyebrows and an air cigar. “A *badchen* doesn’t do stupid. Verbal humor. Intelligent.”

“Like Woody Allen before the movies,” I offered.

“Her father was Shimson Ovitz, a great entertainer from the 19th century. He was my grandfather’s teacher.”

“Your grandfather was one of these...bad...”

“Yes. You can see where my own heightened sense of humor comes from.”

Latrines, I thought, but said nothing.

“Shimson Ovitz was famous but even more so because of his children. They were performers in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s and she was one of them. Singing, dancing, playing instruments. They were called the Lilliput Troupe.”

“Were they all...”

“Little people, yes. Most of them. And they were very close. They played together, lived together. This bond almost destroyed them but it eventually saved their lives.”

As he said this, he put the photo down in such a delicate and melancholy way that I hesitated to ask what he meant. But I did anyway. His answer was something I was not expecting on that

afternoon on that scratchy couch in Sunnyside, Queens.

“It was all because of the man who became fascinated with them.”

“A manager who stole all their money?”

“A doctor obsessed with genetics. Dr. Joseph Mengele.”

That name again, like nails on the blackest blackboard. I may have lost some history along the way but I knew who he was all right. Mengele...the Angel of Death at Auschwitz.

“You see, when the entire troupe was taken to the camp, Mengele picked them out. He was obsessed with heredity, twins, anomalies. He thought of himself as some sort of scientist studying genetics. He was nothing of the sort, of course. But here were unique test subjects for him. He set them all aside in special living quarters with better food.”

“Why?”

“To study them. To do experiments on them. Hideous experiments. But he also saved them. He kept them alive for this purpose and they stayed together their whole time there...”

Perhaps Seymour continued on with this point, or maybe he dropped it then and there. I do not know, cannot remember, did not hear him in any case. A listener must learn selective deafness as a form of protection. I learned it then. I did not want Dr. Mengele and his evil in my head. Not then, not ever. So when I opened my ears again, the war was over and the Red Army had liberated the camp.

“You see? They all survived,” he was saying. “All of them. They stayed together and gave each other life and hope. They endured as a family.”

Seymour had lost his own daughter years before in a boating accident. His wife more recently. He was alone now and I could hear in his voice that the word family was difficult for him to say. It lingered like a single note plunked on a broken piano.

“What is it to survive?” he asked. “How do we do it? Must we do something, think a thing, make a decision to?”

I had no answer of course, but I knew he was not asking me in any case. God maybe, who never explains. Or the universe, which refuses to reply. Or perhaps only that chilly part of the

psyche that knows there are no good answers to the big questions.

“So what happened to them after that?” I asked, trying to move on.

But I had to ask this twice because Seymour’s mood had shifted from light to dark like the waning day outside and it was dimming his thoughts.

“After the war?” he finally said. “They toured for a while, I think, then ran a movie theater. The point is that they survived and in surviving, they won. Not because they were heroic but because they lived to tell. They stuck together and lived. There is a lesson there.”

Quickly night settled like a cloak, heavy and rough. But I still had one question left. I knew the timing was wrong, but still...

“So what is the punch line?” I asked.

“The punch line?”

“To the joke.”

“What joke?”

“One day Josef Mengele goes to take a piss, looks down, and realizes that he is circumcized...” I quoted.

Seymour looked at me through crushingly soft eyes.

“That *is* the punch line.”

Tale of A Flute



The most unexpected item in the album was probably this one; a photograph of a

flute. Why a flute, you may ask yourself. So did I.

I was still looking for hidden meanings in the photos, secret truths of my ancestry that might explain the me that I was so determined to avoid becoming. But the flute was puzzling. I was not aware that anyone in the family played one. Yet there it was like a clue to a mystery yet to be posed.

Under a magnifier I could see that the flute was in terrible condition. The surface was tarnished and pitted, the valves were broken, there was rust and grunge all over it. Frankly, it looked like someone had yanked it out of a mammoth's ass and took a picture of it. But why?

I asked around but no one seemed to recognize it or connect it to anyone else. I checked online but found nothing much of interest. Not in value, nor in history. Then I happened to show it to my cousin Marlene who either knew or made up all sorts of stories about the family all the time. She claimed to recognize it immediately.

“Yes, that is one of our cousin’s flutes. No doubt about it.”

“A relative of ours?”

“Back in Letz during the war.”

“I thought Letz was destroyed in the war.”

“It was but not Cousin Gefilt’s flute I guess. At least it lasted long enough for someone to photograph.”

“Gefilte? Like the fish?”

“Don’t be funny. His name was Yezzik Gefilt but he was known by his last name as a musician. I heard that he had this one flute made for him. The only one in the world.”

“The only Gefilte Flute in the world,” I mused.

But it only amused me.

“Ge-FILT,” Marilyn snapped. “It’s means stuffed. Maybe his grandfather was a sausage maker.”

That was great news. We had musicians and sausage makers in the family. I thought it was all peddlers back to ancient Vilna before the flood.

“Do you want to know the story of this flute or not?” Marlene asked.

Like most retired people, like most people actually, she was too caught up in her own narrative to dwell on my wisecracks.

“It was in 1943, as I heard it, or maybe 1944,” she explained. “Gefilt fell in love with a young girl from Vilna. I believe her name was Lisette. She was French but her family had moved there. Bad timing of course.”

“Why bad?”

“Because the Germans invaded around that time. Gefilt had composed a song for her, a beautiful haunting melody to match her lovely sad eyes...”

She drifted off, imagining, I guess, that tragic gaze.

“Marlene?” I said after a respectful pause.

“But he could not find an instrument perfect enough on which to play it. So he designed his own flute and had it constructed at a nearby foundry that normally made plumbing pipes. He claimed that his design had secrets known only to him, secrets that altered the sound in mysterious ways. Who knows if that was true? But suppose it was. Imagine those lucky enough to hear him trying it out, neighbors on the third floor maybe. The tones, so lingering, so light, drifting weightlessly in the air. See what I mean?”

“Guess so.”

“I heard that Lisette herself was so overwhelmed when he

played it for her that she agreed on the spot to marry him, despite her father's objections. But when the war came, many of the young men in Letz fled to join the Partisans. You know about them right?"

"The Partisans of Vilna."

"Right! They hid in the Rudniki forest and carried out sabotage against the Germans. But Gefilt refused to do that. He was a, what would you call it..."

"A coward," I said.

"A lover not a fighter," she corrected. "Lisette insisted that he only agree to do reconnaissance missions. One day sitting in a café with only a photograph of Lisette with her gush of golden hair and his precious flute to keep him company, the first German advance unit moved into town. A Nazi officer stomped into the café. He barely needed any excuse to shoot someone on sight, especially a young Jew taking notes."

"I see where this is going."

"But then he noticed a silver tube sticking out from under Gefilt's coat, pointing right at him. I guess he decided to let the next officer take charge of the situation and maybe get shot because he walked out as dramatically as he had entered."

"Gefilt had a gun?"

"No, it was the flute. The officer had mistaken it for the barrel of a rifle. It saved his life but sadly not Lisette's by the time the occupation ended."

I looked back at the photograph with different eyes. I realized then that every single thing that is, has a story to be told. Tiny or huge, operatic or gentle, it did not matter. A crappy old flute, for example, that once held a great passion and a great bit of luck, both good and bad. It was perfect. Maybe too perfect.

"Is that all true?" I asked my cousin through a dubious squint.

"What the hell does that have to do with it?" she shot back.

"Good point."

"Just imagine Gefilt not knowing what just happened and then sitting in the street that night playing his song, the sound filling the spaces between the trees and rising up through the air and into the

partly open windows of the nearby buildings. Lovely, no?"

It was.

And now the photograph was no longer that of a grungy old flute, it was a whole new scrap filled with promise. And in a similar way, I was no longer the me that I had been when I first found it.

Atomic Headaches



Ira was about as normal as they come. As ordinary as a pencil, even one that needs sharpening.

I knew little about him because, no doubt, there was nothing much to know. No high drama, no low motives, nothing in the middle either. He married cousin Syd because she got pregnant.

His pants always seemed to be about two inches too short. He had a puffy face. He worked at an insurance company doing whatever it was that insurance workers there did.

Yet that was exactly where his story went oddball because Ira just so happened to work for a company that just so happened to have its offices at 270 Broadway in New York. No doubt that address has little meaning today and indeed the building itself, still standing, has no sign on it to remind anyone of what it was or what happened there. It is as anonymous as Ira himself and just as vague in the memory.

Dutifully and without any hint of the desperation of the company man, Ira went to work every day there on the 17th floor, filed his papers, typed his memos, borrowed the key to the men's

room down the hall, ate his lunch at his desk. Blah, blah, blah. Then on the evening of August 13 in 1942, at 4:30 pm precisely, he got the first of the migraine headaches.

These were massive ones. Not just throbbing but a clockwork wrenching accompanied by a profound sense of doom. He tried to drone his way through them but to no avail. A series of doctors gave him aspirin and muscle relaxants and other meds but none of them worked because the pounding, in actuality, had nothing to do with blood or muscle. The headaches were pressure fronts – like those from a coming storm – that preceded the onset of the future. It was a unique kind of sensitivity to subsequence...like a psychic allergy to what happens next.

Not that Ira himself would have known this as he sharpened his pencil and tried to get back to the comfort of his ledger.

Yet the headaches continued. Not all the time and not everywhere, but only at work and only at certain times of the day, though those times varied. A wrench at the water cooler, a twist at the file cabinet, a boom at the phone. Ira kept trying to find solutions but all those doctors and shrinks and chiropractors were all looking in the wrong place. They were searching for answers inside the body or within the brain. What they should have been investigating was the 18th floor, just above his office at the insurance company.

There the clever investigator would have uncovered the offices for the North Atlantic division of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. And now the reason that mundane address matters becomes clear because it was there, on the very first day of the headaches, that Colonel Leslie Groves created the so-called Manhattan Engineer District, or MED. Maybe you have heard of this by its more common name...the Manhattan Project. The strategic plans for building the very first atom bomb – what they referred to in code as the “gadget” – were hatched right there in that office.

It was this warp in the continuum that was causing Ira his headaches.

I know what you are thinking but the connection is not as far-fetched as it seems. Perhaps Ira could hear their alarming

discussions as a faint echo through one of the old gas grates. Or maybe he picked up the stern glances of the men in the elevator on the way up. Or felt the vibrations of their feet as they moved around overhead as a kind of prelude to mayhem. Or maybe the pressure of working on a project so terrible and so urgent became a kind of shock wave that hit him in the worry center of the brain even Ira did not know that he had.

Maybe there was no connection at all, just a coincidence of time and place if you believe in that kind of thing.

Still, it is odd that the headaches stopped completely – in a flash so to speak – at 05:29am on July 16, 1945. That was the moment that the so-called gadget exploded at Alamogordo Army Airfield in New Mexico. It was the moment that all the planning and calculating came to fruition and the work was done. It was the moment we reached into the core of nature and began futzing around with essences, both atomic and ethic. From that point on, no more Manhattan Project and the headaches were gone, just like that.

Small price to pay when you think of it.

After all, what is a mere headache in light of the birth of the atomic age and the death of life without annihilation?

Picnic in Ponary



My cousin May married into the family.

But her people were from the Vilnius area too. Or Trakai or Ukmerge or someplace nearby, it did not matter. The whole region was a map of the heartbreak that was Jews living in Eastern Europe in

that time, that place. If you came from there, you knew what was what. And even though May was born in Brooklyn, her roots back in Vilna had some kind of hold over her.

That must be the reason that, long after the war, sometime in the 1970s even, May decided to return to the area near the Letz ghetto as a kind of pilgrimage. She was not particularly nostalgic, not religious at all, and had hardly any sense of history, destiny, or any other mystery that might compel such a journey. Plus, her husband was gone by that time and her daughter had a family in Seattle and it seemed that no one else was interested in going. It was all too long ago, they said, too forgotten and too sad.

So she went alone.

Vilna was a city again by that time and for a few days she wandered the shops and streets, uninspired and doubting the whole venture. But then a casual remark by someone at the desk of her

hotel sent her on a trip outside the city to visit a local monument. May bought a cheese sandwich in a paper bag at the local store and took a bus to Ponary.

The woman in the hotel must have assumed that everyone knew the name; it was famous after all. Ponary was an old oil storage facility that was taken over by the Nazis during World War II. Ever efficient, they decided to take advantage of the large pits that were dug for the oil, to dispose of the bodies of those they meant to exterminate. Something like one hundred thousand people, many of them Polish Jews, were executed there, shot mostly, then dumped into the pit. But as Soviet troops advanced in 1943, the Nazis tried to hide the crime. They brought in inmates from the nearby concentration camp to form *Leichenkommando*...corpse units. Their job was to dig up bodies, pile them on wood and burn them. The ashes were ground up, mixed with sand, and buried again.

I guess there is no such thing as being buried too well and people say that the ground there is still hot when the air is cool.

This was the Ponary to which May, who knew about none of this, casually took the bus, sandwich in hand.

When she arrived, May walked over to one of the smaller monuments. She stood in front of it for a while but, not understanding Hebrew, could not read the plaque on it. Nearby was a low circular retaining wall around a flat plot of ground. It was empty inside, there were no other visitors that day, and May thought to go in there and have her sandwich. She opened the gate and walked inside. There was nothing much there, just some grass, and the stone wall all around, and the trees beyond the wall, and the sky beyond them, and the sun. It was a burial pit, one of those flat places in which the unthinkable becomes humdrum, but she did not realize this.

Having had only a muffin for breakfast, May began to open the bag but suddenly, for no clear reason at all, she felt uneasy there. As though the wall was heavier than it seemed or maybe the ground flatter. Or the sky darker. Something convinced her that

this was not the place for her picnic and she walked quickly to the exit to leave.

She put her hand on the gate but it would not open.

She tugged at it, pulled, examined the clasp, all to no avail. She put both hands on the metal and yanked, dropping the bag on the ground. The sandwich fell out and instantly was covered in dirt and ants...the cheese now grungy and spoiled. May pulled the gate again but it still would not let her out.

The gate was only a few feet tall, she could have climbed over it in her younger days. The spaces between the bars were wide, could have slipped through in thinner times. But there and then, in that spot where so many were lost, she felt trapped and could not breathe. Heart attack, she thought, or something much worse. She grabbed her chest and looked up, the way many others must have done, clinging to the sky in the end.

She began to sob.

“Rudys,” said a voice.

“What?” she gasped.

“Rust,” the voice said, translating.

She took the first of several new breaths and realized that this was one of the groundsmen standing on the other side of the gate. Nice older Lithuanian fellow with overalls and a jaunty hat. He pulled the gate open with a stiff jerk and motioned for her to leave.

“Stuck, yes yes. But open,” he said and he kindly held it wide for her.

May stepped out, dropped her hand from her neck, and walked back to the bus.

The sandwich remained.

She could not look back.

The Mirror's Back



Once cars put an end to the need for a neighborhood blacksmith, my grandfather Nathan began a new business. He opened a second-hand store. It was all before

me, but I heard how all kinds of stuff ended up there – stuff he picked and stuff he traded – an old this, a new that. My mom always said she loved going there to see what other people had thrown out that other people might still want.

One of the items, so I heard, was an enormous hall mirror with an ornate frame that he got when Kaplowitz went bankrupt during the recession and had to sell his household goods. Kaplowitz had been well off and the mirror must have been a prize possession only he could have afforded. It was the mirror of a rich man and that alone made it worth something to my grandfather.

As my mother described it, it was a huge thing, full length, and weighed a ton with that carved frame. But by this time the wood was chipped and cracked and even separated at the corners. No longer the grand mirror of its heyday. Nonetheless, Nathan set the mirror in a prominent spot, the only empty spot in the store at that point, which was against the front wall, blocking the window that faced the street.

What he did not realize at first, not really being a mirrorman but just a junk dealer, was that the mirror had no backing; there

was nothing to protect the reverse side and because of that that the reflective material could easily scratch off.

Still, the mirror was his prized possession because it put him in touch with someone like Kaplowitz, so maybe he hoped that the image it once held would rub off on him in some way. What else could account for the fact that each morning he stood before it and examined himself, hoping maybe to see a wealthier reflection. And if not – had he measured up, made enough of himself, in other words – was he at least worthy of that image in the mirror?

Like everyone in my family, it seems, my grandfather had a bit of a knack for self-obsession.

Of course, he was also not a stupid man and knew that mirrors were lies...flat while the world is fat, minimizing and thinning, and showing this way while life went that. But no matter. The image in there was so vivid that Nathan, just like anyone who stood before it, was captivated by what he saw.

In fact everyone who walked into the shop noticed it, my mom said, and stopped in front of it, admired themselves for a moment. But no one could afford it and Nathan refused to lower the price because he himself had paid so much.

And then there was this other problem: slowly, day by day and in his idle moments, Nathan was meticulously scraping off the reflective material on the back. Each time she went to the store, my mom said, more of the mirroring was missing. A section here, a patch there, and soon more was missing than present. Strange thing to do but he did it.

At some point a few months later, when he stood before it by the morning light, Nathan's own reflection was a jigsaw intermixed with anyone outside trying to look in the window from the other side. It had become a kind of funhouse mirror that melded you with a stranger peering in.

Eventually he scraped it clean and the mirror, this magnificent item that once only reflected a rich man and all his possessions, was nothing more than a piece of glass with a too nice frame.

“You see what the *tachlis* was?” my mom asked me. “You

know, the upshot?"

"Yes," I intoned, stroking a beard I never bothered to grow. "Before, he could only see himself and his own needs...to be rich or classy or clever. Now, he could not see himself at all but only his neighbors and their lives out there on the street. He learned to care about others."

My mom stared at me for a long time, then yanked on the imaginary beard to snap me out of it.

"No," she snapped. "He thought the backing was silver. So he spent all that time collecting the scrapings and hoping he would make a fortune selling the silver. But in fact, it was just a crummy mirror...aluminum or something. There was no silver."

"Oh."

"Kaplowitz wasn't rich because he bought expensive things; he was rich because he was a cheap son of a bitch. He hoarded his money. Remember that."

I try to whenever I look in the mirror. But actually all that I get back is me looking back at me with that same dim expression. I guess that not all reflections can teach us something.

What's Funny



Here at last is an iconic photo.

Every family has one. This particular one happens to be of my cousin Ronny as a baby, hanging on a towel rack, with a too-small fedora. Priceless.

It reminds me of the fact that I know one word of Spanish and that word is *primavera*. I know it because of the image I have in

my head of my father, rather formal in his trousers and white shirt, prancing around my room like a ninny singing “La Prima-VERA, La Prima-VERA!” He was trying to give me a mnemonic to help me remember the Spanish word for springtime for a test in fifth grade. Hey Pop, wherever you are...it worked.

Pop. That's what I called him, no idea why. To me he was never Papa, or Daddy, or Father. He was Pop, Pop, Pop. His canned reply: why is Number One Son making sounds like motorboat? It was just a bit from an old Charlie Chan movie but I respected him for knowing that that kind of thing was comic genius to an eight-year-old.

If you decide to be Jewish, if you are smart about it, it is for three reasons: for Yiddish which is luscious; for the holiday dinners which are scrumptious; and for the humor which is delicious.

Most people misunderstand this and think that humor means jokes. Jewish humor has jokes sure; a couple driving along a country road had an argument and weren't speaking. They passed a barnyard full of mules, goats and pigs. The wife snidely asked, "Relatives of yours?" "Yep," the husband snapped, "in-laws!"

Ba-dum.

But as every good comedian knows – and every good Jew is a comedian if not the reverse – jokes are limited. The meat of the matter is shtick. Bits, gags, snarky jabs. Shtick usually refers to a comic routine or comedy persona, but it really means a kind of off-center attitude about the world. And to me it means above all acting the solemn putz.

Like my heroes growing up, who were not in the comics, they *were* the comics. But only of a certain ilk and that meant that they first of all had to look serious. A tie, a hat, a white shirt. No clown boots or funny pants. In other words, people like my father who looked like they worked in offices yet were willing to let life derange them. Ernie Kovaks, Steve Allen, Sid Caesar, Imogene Coca. Victor Borge.

Shtick humor is actually spiritual in its nature but this has nothing to do with religion. The Old Testament, after all, is not all that hardyharhar and I personally would not know Rabbi Hillel from a hillbilly. Instead, this is silliness as a blessing; prayer as a good guffaw. That freeing place in which you take nothing seriously and an eye-rolling, startled, and exasperated sense of surprise is your only defense against the cold hard world. This is humor that jibs and jabs and is pure attitude as a centering device, a gyre of bemused aggravation. Comforting too...like always knowing where you are in relation to Zabar's.

Shtick is about the marrow of life...about irony, twists of fate, come-uppance, the joy in exasperation. That is why there are so many words in Yiddish for the universe of victims...shnook, shlemiel, shlemazel, and so on. Say them out loud; the shlurpy sound is a mantra to the insanity at the core of existence. Real true shtick relies on a finely-honed expertise in tsouris and sourness; it is a way of being deadly serious without crying.

As universal as survival and deep as the psyche, shtick and shtick alone is the reason comedians tend to actually be Jewish and not Catholic or Mormon, say. Well, those guys did have Pope Hilarius and an angel named Moroni anyway.

Therefore it makes perfect sense to me to have a photo in the album of my cousin Ronny as a baby, hanging on a towel rack with a very serious but way too-small hat on his head. His father, my Uncle Manny, probably set it up and I am sure my Pop had something to do with it too. Because they knew that hanging a kid on a towel rack in a bathroom was funny. But, much more importantly, that fedoras were actually hysterical. And that too-small ones were a gut-busting laugh-riot.

Don't ask why...they just are.

Shtick is funny because, to the right turn of mind, it just is.

Battle Dog



Nice pup, is all I thought when I came across this photo.

After all, it was just a dog like any other. How many millions of them are there anyway? And here was yet one more dog in the world and therefore nothing special.

But of course, you could say that about a person too and you would be wrong. Just as wrong as you would be – as I was – in thinking that the dog in this old photo was ordinary.

His name was Max.

Maybe Maxmillian or Maximus, but probably just Max. Plain and simple. An essential Jewish name, like that guy behind the counter at the deli perhaps or your uncle who was a salesman.

But this Max was a Golden Retriever, from the picture of him. Descendent of a wolf, like every dog, and maybe you could see that in his shape and face. More than, say, a bulldog or a dachshund. Those wolfish eyes, the wolfy head, his wolflike haunch.

Yes but there the connection ended because, as my cousin explained, there was no wolf in him at all, at least not in any way that mattered. No predator or pack hunter. No moon bayer. Max, by all accounts, was a gentle dog, a sweet-natured dog. He loved to be petted. If you stood next to him, they said, he would drop his

big head in your dangling hand. His muzzle was as soft as velvet and warm.

My cousin knew all this because she heard this story about him and his owner, a distant relative named Basha who lived in a small house on the outskirts of Vilna, near the forest. Yes, that forest where the Partisans fought the Nazis. That one.

Max, she said they said, once escaped from Basha's house and disappeared for an entire afternoon. When he returned, he seemed to have a broad toothless smile. This turned out to be a sesame bagel firmly wedged in his mouth, a bagel that he nabbed from a local bakery. Some wolf.

Basha, she said, had the dog since he was a tiny pup who could fit into his coat pocket. He carried him there during the cold winter and popped him out to the amusement of the neighbor's children. Soon enough, Max grew into that big friendly dog who licked the hands of strangers and plopped down on the ground at the merest hint of a linger.

No doubt you know that the Romans set ravenous Great Danes on their battlefield enemies, and that Chows guarded the emperors of China, and that German Shepherds became cops and guards. But the idea of all that was ludicrous to Basha who knew very well that in a battle, Max would be utterly useless. Attacked he would roll over; confronted he would drop his head in the enemy hand. Overcoming your foes with affection was certainly not in the war dog book.

But then again, we must be reminded, that the full history of dogs, like all of our histories, is yet to be fully written.

A new chapter began when a group of German soldiers marched across the field heading towards Basha's house. He had heard the rumors that they were rounding up the Jews who lived on the farms around Vilna and he opened the door slightly to see how close they were. That was just enough for Max, sensing some new people to befriend, to slip out the door and run directly towards the soldiers.

Basha did not call out to him for fear of alerting the soldiers, so he quickly closed the door and cursed himself. What to do? But in that instant he also knew that there was no choice. These few seconds were his last chance to save himself and, in spite of his sorrow, he slipped out of the house through a rear window and ran towards the forest.

All that long way across the field and over the stream and into the woods, Basha expected shouts and shots but none of that happened. You see, the soldiers were really just boys in uniforms and boys love dogs. Their grim determination melted when they saw this dog run to them. They put their rifles down and reached out to him. Max dropped his soft head into their hands, licked their fingers, plopped down and rolled over. It was a gift to these boys who, for a few moments, were not soldiers anymore but simply youngsters again, playing with a dog in a field on a sunny day.

And all the while, as if he knew just what he was doing, Max kept their attention as Basha met a small group of Partisans who were hiding in the forest. They welcomed him and could not understand the tears that streamed down his face. Soon they reached a place in the forest where the trees spread out in a ring around an open glade, that grim and hopeful place where the battle would truly begin.

When the officer leading the group of soldiers arrived, he came upon an unusual scene....his men, rifles and helmets strewn around, all playing with a dog. He berated them for this nonsense. Did they forget what they were doing? What they were there for? He took out his pistol and aimed it at the dog perhaps only to stop the foolish distraction, or perhaps it occurred to him that by family and place this was a Jewish dog and had to be eliminated.

Basha hiding with the others behind the trees at the clearing, heard a shot ring out and his heart broke. It broke there and then.

“Bastards!” he shouted. “*Gai in drerde!*”

But the others hushed him and raised their rifles and waited.

Soon enough they heard the sounds of leaves crushing and branches snapping. Something grim coming their way. They held their breaths; they watched and prayed.

But it was Max who burst through the underbrush, his fat tongue wagging. He ran to Basha as though he had simply been retrieving for a game of catch. Basha hugged and kissed him and rubbed his belly and cried and felt him all over. There were no wounds anywhere.

Then he realized, they all did, that the shot had not been aimed at the dog in any case. The officer was smarter than that. He shot into the ground to scare the dog off and force him to run, knowing he would chase after and find his master.

It was a trap.

“I am so sorry,” Basha whispered to one of the Partisans standing at the next tree.

But this young woman who showed no fear in her face at all only replied “Good dog!”

Soon enough Basha understood what she meant. The soldiers were following Max, tracking him, and that led them right into the ambush. The trap was itself a trap.

I would love to report that no one died that day. Not one proud Partisan, nor Basha clutching his beloved dog, nor Max who loved everyone. Not even a single young German soldier.

But I don’t know. The story ends there and it is up to us to imagine how it all turned out.

But I do know that there is no statue for this dog, no bronze plaque, no medallion with his likeness on it. Only this old photo. But in a way that is enough and maybe even more than enough since it was not great courage or astounding bravery or sheer brute force that made him a hero. It was just his sweet nature.

And so we do not need another memorial to remind us of him. A fading photo in an old album will do just fine.

A Swell Head



Wabi-sabi. No, not her. That is just a photo of my mom when she was about thirty.

Wabi-sabi is the Japanese term that comes to mind when I see the picture. It refers to the inclination – or perhaps it is more a skill – to focus on the beauty in imperfection. The crack that crackles with

life, the rot that resonates through change, the oops that whoop. It is the hunch that truth is in the flaw not in the ideal and it is an important part of the Japanese aesthetic. Or so I have read.

I think of it when I see this photo not due to any flaw in it or in her, but simply because she herself was devoted to this idea even if she never heard the term. In fact, my mom was a genius at finding flaws. The missed grade, the overlooked smudge, the dashed hope. I believe that she may have been a founding member of the Anti-Swellhead movement in parenting. Their credo: the kid is not that gorgeous, not that smart, lucky to just get by so never suggest anything different because – God forbid! – you should give him a swelled head.

I always heard this as *swell* head but obviously that was not right.

I think now that this kind of loving sniping was meant

to protect me from disappointment because she knew that most things never pan out. I suspect that she was not being critical as much as careful. She knew how easily the world could damage and how disappointment can bludgeon. As a teacher, she also knew about the three most destructive elements in the universe... dark matter, plutonium, and getting too big for your own britches.

This of course is a tradition in Jewish upbringing. It was her version of *kineahora*, a plea meant to protect you from the evil eye. You say it to balance out even a hint of bragging lest the powers of the universe – or your enemies – turn against you for your pride. Jews do not generally believe in astrology but they check their *kineahora*-scopes daily.

All this I learned quickly and memorized those three magic little words that have become so important in my life...not good enough. And in the way that a shout becomes an echo even more vibrant, my mother's criticism became a lingering hum in my head, background noise to a life of striving but never taking any satisfaction from it.

Don't get me wrong, I know that she also loved and admired and tried to encourage me. Ironing pleats, studying music and karate, learning how to learn, rewiring lamps, loving discovery, sewing a hem, even writing...I could not have done any of those without her support early on. I can still often sense her warm thick hand on my back, right in the middle on the spine, midway between a push and a pat, urging me on. But as I took the first step I could also sense her, like a heat wave, behind me worrying,

In retrospect and hindsight and retrosight and all that, I can also see how her cautious nature resulted in my hilariously cranky need for her approval, which was impossible to obtain. Another piece of wabi-sabi I have carried with me, although I still cannot see the beauty in it. And that of course is my story in a nut's hell...I mean a nutshell.

Goethe said that as soon as you trust yourself, you will know how to live. Good for Goethe; I'm still waiting for that. But I do know, as everyone does, that the secret to happiness is not getting

what you want, it is wanting what you've got. Give up the quest for success and the need for approval and just do your little do's.... that's the ticket and it is plain as day.

But here is the question: is it possible to have the same insight over and over and never gain anything from it?

Obviously it is.

In fact there is some beauty in that little crack.

Sammeln die Juden



You have to get a kick out of the Nazis.

Well maybe kick is not the right word. You have to admire a group of people whose hatred was so complete that it not only defied

logic but also deified it at the same time. Perhaps what I mean is that in the absence of humanity, the cold calculus of brutality becomes a passion of its own, an austere lust.

Or not.

All I know is that swirly thoughts of both the dreadful and the dopey both came to mind when I came across this odd little twidbit in the album. It was a small coin, of all things. Not a coin exactly, but a token made of wood and imprinted with the cartoon face of a wretched fellow. It took some time but I eventually found out just what it was. The face was supposed to be a caricature of a Jew and the token was from a board game popular in Germany before the war. The game was called Sammeln die Juden. Find the Jew.

I never could find anything else out about the game but I can easily imagine the board and dice and tokens like this one along with others of upstanding citizens and playing pieces like little swirls of colored custard. A swastika somewhere of course, and maybe a whole city laid out on the board. A Candyland for haters.

And I imagine that this was no Glass Bead Game with its vast

and mysterious synthesis of all arts and sciences. Nor in any way like chess with its endless rich variations or even checkers with its amusing leaps and jumps. No, this was the game of life reduced to the most routine, ordinary callousness. A slow game, a quiet game, of methodical moves and small advances. Dumb fun like the games we play now on our smart phones.

I can even imagine a relative of mine – let us call her Doria for the moment – sitting at a kitchen table in an apartment in Vilna playing this game. Why, you ask indignantly? Not because she believes in it but because she does not. Because it is ridiculous and ludicrous and any other “ous” you can think of. The game is the horror all around her reduced to its greatest inanity. Monstrous evil arriving as a joke, a giggle in the middle of a nightmare. In other words, comic relief.

In the movie version, she would be playing this game with a German officer who has become attracted to her. Let us call him Andra. It is the only way for them to spend secret time together, there in her kitchen, and both of them see how bizarre it is. But it is a game and they are young and dice are tossed like flirtations, and they laugh. In two days, the rest of his unit will arrive and there will be no more games. They know this and still move their pieces around the board like a coy dance.

Think of it like that knight playing chess with the devil on the beach in that movie. You know the one. But here the knight is day and the devil is just an enlisted fellow and the beach is apartment #13 on Knorder Street in Vilna, Poland.

“And what will happen when we have played this through?” she asks, and his jaunty answer is: “When I win you mean.”

“What if I win?” she says.

“You cannot win, you can only play longer. Or no longer.”

But that is all movie motif or maybe even cliché. It is a day-dream she is having to pass the time while waiting. There is no knight, no soldier, no shy glances between moves. Doria sits alone at the table watching the sky, inhaling the odor of lemons, intaking the sounds of tanks rumbling towards the outskirts. On the street below her window she notices a blonde girl on a bicycle, a woman

carrying bread in a brown canvas bag, an older man bending to pick up his hat, a rat nonchalantly sniffing at the curb. She plays the game by herself, tossing and counting, and moving the tokens around, anticipating the next move, waiting for the game to end, waiting for that singular instant in which the inevitable becomes commonplace.

The Book of Myron



I always heard that Myron, my cousin twice-removed, was the writer in the family.

Tall, glasses, he looked the part. But who knows what anyone meant by that. Families fudge words for their own reasons. Maybe he was a Sunday scribbler or a neat notator or a

private poet. Or just one of those people who obsessively write Letters to the Editor and will not let you forget it.

But at his funeral, his sister said something about his opus, his masterwork, the great sum of his writing life. Later at the house with the sculpted bushes in front and the bathroom with the oak soap, I told his wife Estelle that I never knew that Myron had anything published. He never did, she said. So what was this opus business all about?

She took me into his study on the first floor beyond the fake orchid. It was a small room with a desk and some paperback books on the shelves. A lamp. It was a place to make phone calls perhaps but I could not imagine a great work emerging from it.

Estelle took out an enormous looseleaf book with a five-inch spine and packed with pages. She sat me down and set it before me on the desk, looked at me with white gloves in her eyes, then

left the room and closed the door which suddenly sounded like a vault. I felt as though a shaft of light suddenly lit the dust and a chilly echo filled the void.

There I was and there it was...the book! I too had hoped to create something majestic and memorable but so far had just written a bunch of stuff. Had cousin Myron actually done it? Slowly, with reverence, with doubt, I opened to the first page: The Work by Myron Saperstein. And there on those pages, in a teensy neatsy little hand, was his output as a writer for 50 years. Pages and pages of it but only tidbits and tibbits. The whole book was a vast curiosity cabinet of fragments and phrases, snippets and crumbs. But nothing matched, amounted to, or came to anything. Nothing complete or even coherent. Notes, rhymes, weird words, the literary caboodle reduced to an endless list of bibbly scribbles:

Currents of Robert Fludd. Unfunny as a joke in Hungarian. Hasidism has it ism. Psychopathia Eitheroria. Tetrarchs on the March. Cervantes at 52. Twizzlewicks. The Baal Shem bon mots. Today or tomorrow I will die or not. File taxes by 4-12. Wrong Sandwich karma. Which-everwayahoo. Hyman Buster meets Dick Willing....

Line after line on page after page, and on both sides of every page, of the kind of stuff no one but a compulsive lettergather would keep:

I am what am or am I? The blinketyblink of an uppity eye.
484. The world is the whirled amen. Get laundry. Shit or get off the pot, or not. Pompous Pilate. The Gripes of Roth. Cunning Stunts. Etcetera etcetera etcetera...

Did the others back in the living room noshing on the nuts and the fruitcake, who called Myron the family writer, know that this was his output? A dither of nothing but blithers and blabs (another entry in the book actually). Like Picasso's cleaning rag or Bach's bag of unused notes, except that those guys also made certified masterpieces.

A Magic Shadow-show. Man's Fate or Man's Fat? A Guide to Pluck. Blue small ball! Poortraits of the rich, all very unseeworthy. Leibnots, Kant, and Wontgenstein, Nothing is lost. I will be with you for all evers. Eat me baby. The Somnambula. Man is meat that worries...

I tried to laugh but it came out as a snort. But then I started thinking...surely a writer was someone who wrote, who put words down. What difference did it make what form they took or even what became of them? Just like anyone, Cousin Myron was swindled into this mad swill, got a whiff of hisself, watched life piss by, and would one day become a phantom in his own phantastory (all from the book although not in one place). And he left some words behind. Wasn't that good enough?

Writing was a struggle to be heard, a war on silence, a battle for expression. It was cruel and grueling. The moment I put The Work down, already I was mired in regret, doubt, secret yearnings, cringing fears. It reminded me of something Simone de Beauvoir said about going to the Bibliotheque Nationale and how pleasant and restful it was to fill one's eyes with words that already existed, instead of having to wrest sentences from the void.

And here was Myron having resolved the problem for himself. Just the words, the nuggets, no need to make them into anything!

I was inspired and vowed at that moment to cut myself loose from the weeds of my own needs. I could just make notes, in other words, without hopes (yup, the book). I could venture to be a small writer, inches shorter than planned. Even microscopic. I could become a Myronist myself.

It didn't take, of course.

Here I am still trying to put it all together, make my statement, bend the words to suit me, tell a tale, even maybe make a name for myself. They simply – and I have absolutely no idea who *they* might be – will not let me stop, any more than they will let me write "blue small ball."

An Iron Door in Bright Sunlight



I never met her, of course.

Never even heard her name until I saw the photo, this woman posing for her own bright future, the one that one knows nothing about but yet assumes is out there somewhere if one is young enough.

Rebekka was her name, Rebekka Steinberg, daughter

of a cousin of mine so removed there is no trace of him left.

She is old in the photo, crushingly old for that time and place. Perhaps in her early twenties. This is nothing now, but in Vilna in 1943 it was too many years in which to see things too clearly. And then there is that locket she is wearing in the photograph, a small silver heart. That is in the album too, now tarnished, dented, rusted with time.

What can all that mean?

Somehow, despite this photo not because of it, I can easily see her in my eye's mind, so clearly standing there before that brick building with the thick iron door. It is a sunny day and the light makes the door seem lighter than it is, the brick less imposing. She is standing in line with all the other women, girls and ladies alike, waiting to go through.

You know the door I mean.

And I wonder...did she have hopes at that moment, did she know what was on the other side? Did she still have a future in mind? Or any thought that the locket would somehow survive her? No answer there.

Yet there she stands for me, wearing a dress from her older sister, one with a flowery print that looked so new once, now faded and ragged from the long trip on the train. The woman ahead of her moves forward and so Rebekka too takes a step. She is thinking about that boy she had in mind during the bread run.

On Tuesdays, because that was the day the baker finished his first batch of bread, she would arrive in her floral dress and with that piece of red silk tying her hair into a tail, looking so pert and perfect that no one would doubt her or stop her. Into her violin case they would slip the loaves of bread. It was traditional bread, Jewish bread, but baked in the French way, long and thin, for a better fit. There was an idea at one point of baking the bread in the exact shape of a violin but that seemed somehow too comical to work out.

When the case was filled and the moment was right – when the traffic in the street picked up because of the trucks – she began her journey to the other side of the town. She walked slowly but with determination, just another young woman going to a music lesson. She did not, of course, play the violin at all; she had been planning to study physics at the university before the gate was put up. But this was life as unusual in a world deformed and in this one so bent and tarnished, she was going into the ghetto for her music lesson.

As she approached the gate, she could feel the look of the German guards on her and she may have brightened her step for them or perhaps even glanced at them casually. They knew her, of course, from all the Tuesdays before and never stopped her, but as she got closer and closer to the gate, she could feel her fear rising.

That is when the boy appeared, just on the other side. He was tall and lean and so handsome. Like a movie actor with his brown hair and deep dark eyes. He stood there, leaning against a

wall, hands in pockets, squinting in the sun. This image calmed her and her steps which had slowed up to this point, now picked up pace. She took the chain holding the locket, which had been hidden under her dress, and moved it on top of the fabric so that it was visible, glinting in the sun. This was a sign to him, a signal of yearning or perhaps just a silly flirtation, yet it gave her momentum and amused the guards enough to look away.

Just before crossing the threshold, as if to help her, the boy on the other side took one hand out of his pocket and held it palm up in front. A gesture to come through or at least to not stop.

She stepped through that Tuesday, just like the others, not knowing that the gate would close behind her and never open again, not knowing that this was the last bread run, not seeing the storm coming, the sealing off of the ghetto. Not guessing at the train ride, and the line to the iron door in the sun, that moment so clearly in my mind now.

His name had been Josef at first, then Elias for a while. And for a long time his hair was blond and he was older than her and he wore fancy shoes. But on that day, the last day, the last time she would show the locket and see him again, his name had become John. Or was it Jacob? No matter, he was just a figment in any case, something she made up to help her get through.

And what was the point of all that now if there was nowhere to go? If this, this one particular door she was standing before – it might have been a window or a cliff or even an oncoming trolley – meant the end of it. What was the point of all those bread runs or even everything up until right now?

These are the thoughts she had standing there before the iron door as I see it. Until the woman right in front of her, the one with the round glasses, took another step forward. And then the sun blinked and the wind brushed her hair from her face and she seemed to know then, in a flash, what she had never before known, even at the university.

About bread, about boys, about futures, about even the shape of space and time. It all really did fold back on itself but not

around the gravitational singularity as she was taught. No, it was the force of memory that pulled it around, each memory like a quantum magnet, pulling and tugging until the past was the moment and the moment was all there was. Memory pulled it all together, even if it was all made up.

These were troubling thoughts, too grand for that instant, but no matter. There had been bread to deliver and secret messages from the Resistance inside of it, and that was all that mattered that day, she decided. Each instant its own explanation. And then the woman in front of her took another step forward towards the iron door and Rebekka Steinberg did too.

I am sorry that I did not know you Rebekka. Could not have been your John or Jacob. Sad that you were so young then, and even sadder that you had to face that door and ask those questions.

Do I have the right to think for you, even in light of how many many doorways we have stood before, not going through?

Not now, not yet.

I was told she did not survive but the photo did, her locket did.

It is not enough but it will have to be in any case.

Fishel the Juggler



This photo of some random street in Letz just before the war might have been forgettable except for one thing. There was a poster on the wall that seemed to resonate.

Fishel the Juggler, it said. I recalled that name but only vaguely, the way you might dredge up the taste of a good kugel briefly and dimly. Perhaps it was a name I had heard before or maybe just a common slam of syllables.

I had to use a magnifier to see the name clearly on the poster and while inspecting it I noticed that it showed the juggler holding a single ball only. One ball only. That was odd. What kind of juggler juggled with a single ball?

Well, a Jewish juggler, no doubt. One whose life's work was not just defying gravity but also jiggling irony. The precise kind of performer you might find in my family, to be frank, and although I have no proof that this daring fellow was related to anyone, I like to think so.

I did ask around but no one that I talked to knew anything about it nor had ever heard that name. So I decided to do some research. The library itself was useless on this matter but luckily there was a famous magic archive right here in the city and I went there to track this Fishel down.

There was nothing about him at all but it turned out that juggling with one ball was a hallowed tradition in Europe, especially in the Jewish towns. *Eyn pilke*, it was called, and that phrase came to mean narrowing down to the basics. The nitty-gritty, the nub.

Yet the precise physics and wonder of juggling with a single ball was never explained and I would have ended my quest right there, having no particular passion for juggling or for flying balls. But fate stepped in when I noticed an ad for a performance in New York by a juggler called Majesto. His claim to fame? Not spinning plates, not tossing Frisbees, not keeping orbs in dizzying suspension. No. Just *eyn pilke*...a single ball.

Obviously, I had to go.

The theater was tiny, a small stage and only about twenty seats. Probably similar in scale to where Fishel himself would have performed in the town of Vilna. When I walked into the theater, all was dark. There was a black curtain on the stage but nothing else. No props, no stool, no sign, no chest of magic. Someone behind the scenes was playing a small accordion, a sad slow clowny tune. There were a handful of other people in the folding chairs; I took my seat gloomily at the front.

Nothing happened for a really long time and it was black as night. I was about to stumble my way out when slowly a sole halo of light created a bright spot in the center of the curtain. There it illuminated a single ball that bounced the light back with a faint glow. The ball seemed to be suspended in mid air, motionless. Except for a teensy wiggle every now and then, it hung there in the blackness, unmoving, inscrutable.

It was pretty in a way, floating there so still and stuck, and it made me think of the Earth suspended in the void of space. Was that the whole idea here? A nice effect but hardly worth a poster and a ticket.

But then the beam of light began to slowly widen and soon you could see that the stage was not actually empty. There was a black curtain all right but there was a figure of a man too. He was wearing all black as well, completely covered from head to toe...hands, eyes, body. That is why I could not see him at first.

But now, with the light expanded, I could see just what was really happening.

The man in black was actually holding the ball in front of himself and keeping it suspended in that one spot. But he was not just holding it, he was moving and turning and twisting, performing a complex dance of motion and movement. Yet however he moved the ball did not. It ran along his arm, rolled across his shoulders, slid up the side of his neck, across his head, down the other side. He slithered and slithered, his arms weaving in and out like snakes. He raised his knee and moved the ball onto it, then the other and switched the ball over, then rolled it down his calf and onto his lifted foot, then back to the hand and all the while the ball never budged from that one spot in space.

Imagine a marble tracing a convoluted path around some fantastic object but the pathway it takes makes it seem that the marble is motionless. That was the act. No tosses, no catches, no impossible speed. Just a ball unmoving as he moved.

Perhaps that is just what the earth is, motionless in the narrow view but in fact riding the cycles and epicycles of some vast immense comic architecture that endlessly churns and turns. Perhaps that is what we are in our stationary lives whether back in Vilna just as the world began to degrade or here in New York waiting for who knows what to come next.

When he was done, he delicately placed the ball on the stage without making a sound, and retreated behind the curtain. There was no applause but rather a kind of communal sigh. The way one would react to having been given an insight rather than a simple performance.

I went home that night and reminded the woman of my dreams that I loved her. Not sure why it suddenly mattered, but it did. I think about this every time I come across this photo and about trying to live a life of simple intensity. Holding something in place while all around it moves and churns.

It can be done. I think.

Sewerside



When I was young, I heard that my cousin Lennie was committed to the sewerside.

Loved working there maybe or was forced to, I figured. Like Ed Norton on *The Honeymooners*. That is really all I ever knew about him. Much later I found out that I had misunderstood and that what

he had done was take his own life.

In most religions, killing yourself breaks a whole bunch of rules; I wouldn't know about all that. But I do know that no one in the family seemed to understand it. A great mystery, no one could get the how and why someone would do such a thing.

But I did, even then.

At that age I had not read Dylan Thomas but I agreed with him anyway: that it might be nice to be dead for a change.

I have lived with murmurs of sewerside for a long time, have often thought of it; even found myself trapped in that familiar corner, staring at that window in my bedroom like an escape hatch or the front of that screaming subway train as a ride out of the unworkable here and now.

I would love to say that I never did it due to a profound reverence for life deeper than my deepest despair but that would be a lie. More likely I never did it thanks to the same thing that had me

staring down the building or the train in the first place...a paralyzing fear of the future.

You could call this depression I suppose, but in a Jewish family this is like saying you have a liver. In fact, for me, it was more melodramatic than that. Any little thing could trigger it. Like backing up into that stupid car and thinking that my drive was gone forever. Or reading those vile, horrible things J said about me and wondering if she knew me better than I did. A stormy glance, a stinging jab, a rotten letter, anything and sometimes nothing much at all.

I presume it has something to do with an innate talent for misery; the sense that good things are fragile but that bad ones are everlasting...and that anything you have is one more thing that can be taken away from you. An insufferable sense, to be precise, of suffering as some kind of flair. It is crazy to think so but then it seems that anyone who thinks about suicide enough comes to the conclusion that it is worth thinking about. Sophocles thought it balanced sin; Aeschulus said that it led to wisdom. For Camus it clarified our choices. And then there was Siddharta for whom it was the nub of life itself.

Nub. That's a good word.

Yet in all this time, I have never quite been sure if this was desperation or just poetic overindulgence on my part. Like a dream of tuberculosis those artists must have had back then. In a way, I began to think that this was all some kind of literary hoax I was pulling on myself, this swooning after nothing as a kind of mad madness madly maddened. You see what I mean? An excuse to use words as flails.

To wit: one time after backing away from the window, I wrote down that professors have studies; artists have studios; businessmen have offices. Thieves have cells and judges have chambers. But suicides have the sky. What kind of desperado writes all that down? And in any case, rewriting it now, I do not even know what it means. Sometimes I could feel myself trying to be nutsy enough to take the next step, but always pulling back more as a retreat from hyperbole than anything else.

That same night – according to my notes – I made a list of things to eat: crow, my hat, shit, my words. But I went to bed hungry anyway.

Hah.

I read somewhere that there were four main types of suicide: Escapist, to avoid grief; Aggressive, to make others guilty; Obligate, to go beyond dumb life; and Lucid, to solve a problem. To which list I might add Comical – as a punch line to an exhausting joke – but this may only be funny to me and perhaps not even to me either.

No clue what all this has to do with Lennie. His photo is more of a ledge than a doorway. I do not know what Cousin Lennie was going through just before he took the plunge. Maybe nothing like any of this. Maybe he was jilted or juiced or just a schmuck who bungled a fake attempt. I have no idea.

Not anything like me, of course, who has taken the time to really think the whole thing through.

The Schmerz Talmud



Professor Kamholtz was not a relative of mine at all although he sounded like one. That familiar cadence and phrasing placed him

somewhere in the diaspora between old Russia and new New York. Naturally, I felt at ease with him quickly and therefore easily persuaded by his thesis. This was no small matter since what he was telling me was utterly outrageous. Yet I found myself following the illogic like a shrink in an asylum, which is to say wary but intrigued.

I discovered him through a cousin who knew that I was working on a family history and that the history began in Vilna. He read that the Professor's work connected to that mythic town, as did mine even if only in a fictional way. So he sent me the article and I wrote the email that I knew he would never reply to. After all, I was just a writer and he was a great scholar of one of the most astounding written works ever created. Why would he possibly be interested in setting up a meeting with me?

Except that he was, and he did.

As luck would have it, Professor Kamholtz also lived on the Upper West Side, so it was a quick trek to his apartment overlooking Riverside Park and the Hudson River. It was furnished as I expected....like an Old World study filled with tchotchkies from

his travels and dusty old leather-bound books and etchings of the lost cities of Europe.

Kamholtz himself was less creaky, a short trim fellow with a shock of dark brown hair who seemed much younger than his work would suggest. I would not have been shocked to find out that his name was Jeremy and that he played racquetball, but I did not ask.

“A fella adventura!” he said, coming in handshake first.

“Um....I’m just a writer,” I demurred.

“Just? We’re all writers in the ongoing saga. Ain’t we?”

“We is,” I said, snared in his twisty syntax.

“But this is not all about us, is it,” he went on. “Something bigger. As in...much bigger.”

As he said this, he made an incongruously grand gesture over towards a table in the corner of the large room. It was piled with papers that also spilled onto the floor and buried the computer.

“My octidian task.”

I could see that he was waiting for a reaction to that odd word but all I could muster was a weak: “Heh.”

“Octidian,” he repeated. “You know...the eighth day. From the myth? No?”

“Sorry.”

“God finished on the sixth day, rested on the seventh, and then, being Jewish, on the eighth day, he reconsidered and decided to start all over again. And again and again. Octidian....a task that never ends. See?”

“Ah,” I exclaimed and then added – hah! – with a bit more punct.

But by then, Kamholtz was sitting in an office chair at that table and staring somewhat haplessly at all the paper before, around, and below him. Behind him on the wall there was an old painting in a fancy frame, quite small, of students studying.

“Flea market,” he said. “You like it? Take it. It’s not helping me anymore.”

“I read in the article that this all has something to do with the Talmud. Digitizing it?”

That word seemed to yank Kamholtz out of his doldrums.

“Yeah! You could say that, all righty. Not just the Talmud but the grandest Talmud ever compiled. The Schmerz Talmud!”

“Oh yes, that was in the article too. About Rabbi Schmerz of Vilna.”

“Sit, sit,” he snipped, and I moved a tower of papers from a nearby chair onto the floor and sat down.

The tower collapsed but he did not seem to mind.

“What do you know about the Talmud itself,” he asked me wearily, as though a zillion previous visitors had sat in that same stiff chair with the exact same dolt face.

He did not even wait for my doltish reply.

“Not much, right? It’s a word people know. A book of laws, they’ve heard. Something Orthodox Jews study instead of watching TV. But the Talmud goes way beyond that. See, Jews don’t idolize images like some other folks. They idolize words. The word of God is the icon in the Jewish mind. Every Jew is a scholar of the word, whether they know it or not. You’re Jewish, right?”

“Sort of a Zennish Jew.”

“Hmm?”

“As in Zen Judaism.”

“You’re a writer though and that says it all. The Talmud is the word of the world. The Babylonian Talmud had almost 6,000 pages. But most of them are not just about laws and rules. They are *aggadah*....a magical rabbinical mode of thought combining myth, theology, memory, poetry, superstition. A single page of the Talmud is like a labyrinthine mandala of commentary on existence itself.”

“Wowie,” I said, proving once and for all that I was no scholar.

“You got that right. Nahmanides back in the 13th century said that anyone who studies the Talmud knows that there are no final proofs in the arguments of its interpreters. It is not about learning the truth, not about memorizing laws. It is about doing the work of thinking. Thinking about the world, about life.”

I must admit that I was impressed. I too always thought the Talmud was a book of laws that Orthodox Jews studied instead of watching TV. I even thought that I might pick up a copy and

thumb through it but Kamholtz read my mind on that one.

“Thumb through it? We are talking about commentaries on commentaries, a density engine for doubt and difficulty. Some issues resolved, some awaiting newer interpretations, some hanging on until Elijah comes to explain it all. You can spend your whole life studying it and never even crack the surface. And now we have this!”

He swung his open hand around the room like the general of a vast army acknowledging the troops.

“You mean your Schmerz Talmud,” I suggested.

“Not mine, pal. Oh boy. This is way bigger than anyone or anything.”

“A different translation?”

“A different scale of magnitude. Rebb Schmerz spent his entire life starting at the age of six until he died at ninety-three searching for the lost commentaries. All the parts and pieces of Talmudic writing that did not end up in the modern version. And he found hundreds of thousands and maybe even more than that. Commentaries and notes and footnotes and addenda and alterations and questions by forgotten scholars or concerned laymen or even women! Can you imagine?”

“Not exactly.”

“Damn right not! No one can. We are talking here about taking the existing Talmud, which is itself denser and more intricate than understanding itself, and expanding, exploding, refiguring, revisiting, and revising it on a massive scale. With words like fractals, sentences like helixes, paragraphs like tessellates. All written in smoke on an endless sky.”

He looked for a moment like he might collapse under the weight of all that, but Kamholtz was only catching his breath.

“This is not a guide to law or practice or to social life or even religious thought. This is an infinite inquiry into being that no one can possibly understand or even pin down. Understand?”

“Well...”

“What we have here is the word rebus of everything there is *plus* all commentary and re-commentary about it up to the nth level *plus* everything that could or would or could not or was not

part of that. It's like a philosophical blockchain retaining every thought about itself but also retaining every rejected opinion, discarded view, false proof, discredited idea. I mean the entire work of every single philosopher in history would be a subnote to a subnote to a subnote to a..."

"Professor?" I said while also stamping my foot, since getting his attention back required a bold move.

"Yeah!" he said, snapping his head. "Some people are calling it the Epikorona Talmud, the idiots."

"What a dumb thing to say," I quipped.

I had no idea what he was talking about but it suddenly occurred to me that the shrink in the asylum that I had become also had a duty to stop the patient from leaping off the cliff. And Kamholtz, in my lay view, was teetering dangerously there.

"Epikorona means a non-believer. An atheist. In other words, they're saying that the Schmerz Talmud is so complex and so difficult to grasp that it offers absolutely no insight into God at all and that you might just as well be an atheist by the time you're done. Which you can't be. Done, that is. This is not a work that will be made obsolete even by the conclusion of the universe in a reverse Big Bang."

"Do you have any tea?" I proposed instead of simply calling the whitecoats.

"No," he shot back. "No time for that."

"And this is it?" I asked looking at all the papers on the table, on the chairs, on the floor and, as I suddenly saw, in the hallway and even into other rooms in the apartment. "This is all the Shmerz?"

"Oh no no no," he protested. "You could never even fit one zillionth of it in here."

"But this is a classic pre-war six!" I insisted. "You could fit everyone I've ever known in here."

"There's a chance," Kamholtz said, pulling closer and speaking very quietly like a deep secret, "that the Schmerz is bigger than the universe itself."

"I see. So these pages here..."

"Just a very small portion of the list of tractates in the book.

Like a Table of Contents. Tiny tiny part of one anyway.”

I picked up one of the pages and noticed that it was not actually filled with text as I presumed. It was a page with eight columns, each column filled with Hebrew letters in a typeface so small that they looked like bed bugs arranged for a microscopic but infinite museum exhibit. The page was a list with perhaps a thousand entries and it was only one of countless pages piled and scattered throughout the apartment. As I squinted at the entries in this one column on this one page, the scale and scope of the project was starting to dawn on me.

“And you are trying to digitize all this? I mean...how long will that take?”

“Oh yeah! You hit the nail. Estimates range from several hundred thousand years to well beyond the lifespan of the cosmos. Several octidians, I imagine.”

“Okaydee!”

“And that’s just for the index!”

I got up gingerly and with as much kindness as I could muster.

“Well, I’d better leave you to it then,” I fluted.

I backed out of the room slowly and psychiatrically, watching him staring at all that paper, feeling sad and relieved. But I noticed that over the next few days the urge to work faded for me. No ideas came, no stories emerged, no frantic need to get the snippets down before they floated away. Perhaps I had myself become a Schmerzian, thinking that as incomprehensible as the world was, thinking and writing about it was even worse. The cosmos was expanding all right, but the physicists were wrong. It was due to notions not mass. There were already too many ideas out there for anyone’s mental health. Why would I add to that? And knowing too that it would all end in a big fat octidian anyway...so what was the point?

There was none and I vowed right then not to add even one more story to the album, not one more syllable to the world.

Not one word.

Not even this one.

The Blintz



“He never gave his work a title, but once I publish it, I think I shall call it The Blitz.”

Saul loved the grand gesture – an old photo of him in uplight seemed just right – and therefore his use of the word “shall” only irritated me, not him.

“The Blintz?” I said, mishearing on purpose.

“Blitz. It means the light.”

“Oh. But people will think it’s about bombing raids.”

“Pish!” he said, quoting no bard. “The only people who will think that are the ones who think the book *Hitler Leads* is about the tango. Idiots, in other words.”

I was back in cousin Saul’s study in the brownstone in Brooklyn. We were again talking about our distant relative Meyer, the Tipsch Gaon of Letz, the rabbi with no use for God. Why I had returned there, I could not say exactly. I was not interested in religious issues in any way. And Saul, full of his own emeritus and all, could be insufferably pretentious. Still...

“So the blitz in question,” I said, picking up the thread, “is the understanding that...”

“All of life is united. And here of course he was following in the tradition of Heraclitus.”

“The famous fool of Schnippistock!” I nodded, unknowingly and kiddingly.

“No, the 6th century Greek. He too denied God. But he did believe in a living cosmos in which everything – you, me, the sun, that speck of schmutz – is connected in a roiling stew.”

“They had roiling stews back then?”

“My metaphor, not his. Yet Meyer built on this. He said, in a typically Jewish fashion, that nothing is permanent, not even the cosmos, so why make such a big deal? Nothing is perfect, not even perfection itself, so what are we so upset about? Nothing is complete, not even time, so why get all *meshugge*? ”

“In other words...chill.”

“I would say: accept the world as it is and don’t look for answers anywhere else. Especially not...” and here Saul raised his eyes and index finger heavenwards. “This is what he called the Aynfal, the truth.”

“So again, no use for God,” I summed.

“People use the idea of God for their own purposes. That is what he had no use for. But if we substitute the word universe or cosmos or maybe even what-there-is, then he had no problem. In other words, he had no use for God the vengeful or the forgiving, the wish granter or the tormentor, the all-knowing or the all-consuming. But instead, some understanding of existence as a symphony in which we all play...soft or loud, solo or in concert, now or later, buzzy bee and humming human. And the music resonates everywhere and we call it by many names.”

“That’s actually rather lovely.”

“He said that the world owes us nothing. All we can do is do what we can with what we have got. Expect nothing, rejoice in rejoicing.”

“But there is so much suffering in the world,” I protested.

“The blessing from the universe is not to not suffer. It is to see the suffering as a gift. An oytsfer, to use your word.”

“A gift?”

“Yes, the gift of life which is about suffering.”

“That is some swell gift.”

“I know. On the other hand, there isn’t any other so we might as well accept this one.”

This is just what put me off about philosophy, if that is what we were discussing, or matters of life and fate and all that. You whirled around in words and concepts and ended with nothing but vertigo, never clarity. Or some bumper sticker for an upshot.

“We’re going round and around here,” I finally said.

“Well, it is all cycles, isn’t it? Uni, bi, tri, you name it. Cycles of madness and complacency. Cycles on epicycles. Kondratieff’s economic cycles, Vico’s historical ones, Spengler’s cycles of civilization, Erickson’s growth cycles, the Hindu cycles of 4 billion year kalpas...”

The kind reader will here take a long pause for a full-course dinner to denote the passage of an eternity as Professor Saul completed his list of examples.

“...menstrual, farm, business, and on and on.”

I was dozing at that point and dreaming of cycles and cycles and more words and ideas and explanations. But I was fed up with all of that. Quite frankly, drowning in it. I needed to believe in something – why else did I keep coming back? – but just not think about it or talk. I needed a sense of meaning and it occurred to me in my reverie that this is what I was searching for. This is the reason I had returned, the reason for all the stories. There may not be a God, I thought, but there had to be something more than just atoms smashing. But this idea of a unified universe did not seem to answer the question either.

Yet in another way I knew just what he meant.

I had lost my Mom that month. After all those years this woman whom I could never quite please, whose bright psyche had penetrated mine, whose worried voice I could still hear in my head, was gone. I was grieved and liberated but I had no idea how to place her death – or anyone’s for that matter – in some kind of context because I had none. I had faith in nothing, believed in nothing, and in the end had no way to absorb her life into mine.

Perhaps I was there to discuss that, although it never came up. Rabbi Meyer's adeism was not atheism, Saul insisted; there was still a spirituality to be grasped in the midst of his denial. But all that seemed well beyond my reach.

Yet even then, as I slowly awoke with Saul tapping on my knee, I could see a hint of something, a cycle forming: that arc of grief from the dyingness and the hollow time, to the tearing of the heart and the confrontation with fate, waves of doubt and rhythms of sorrow. And then, sometime later, signs and signals of a new possibility, gentler thoughts, that lingering stillness and inevitably and eventually...a return to the tiniest glimmer of life.

Not just now as I was mourning, but always, the constant choice of renewal. That was the way it worked – caught up in the spinning world – with its cycles of loss and gain, doubt and hope, fear and grit. Maybe that was what Meyer was writing about all those decades ago, what Saul was nattering about now. The way we go on no matter what. The constant turning upwards in spite of ourselves. Hope itself. You did not need *you-know-who* to believe in that.

“Do you see what I mean?” Saul asked but I had no idea what he was referring to.

“So the book is your explanation of what Meyer believed?” I asked as I got up to leave.

“It started that way,” he said, walking me to the door. “But it has seduced me. I think now that I am an adeist too, believing in the harmony of everything that beats...quark, heart, star. The meaning is what we find in each moment in which we wonder. I’ll get you a copy of it when I’m done.”

“The Blintz,” I said as a final joke.

“That’s it,” he said, mishearing on purpose.

The Angel Abramowitz



To tell the truth, I was getting damn sick of having ghosts in the apartment, if you must know.

I did not believe in them, did not invite them, and found the whole idea of them vaguely annoying. Dead is dead I say and that is the end of it.

But no. Nothing is ever that simple.

And now here was a new one, a strange little fellow in antique shoes, an old suit from an undertaker's yard sale, and a silly hat like a hut resting on his head.

"Now what," I said.

Not to him but to the powers that be, who are notoriously silent on such issues.

"You are Alan, son of Ida, daughter of Nachum, son of Hyman, are you not?" he said.

He had an accent that placed him somewhere east of the jewline that ran through old Europe.

"Well, I guess so...if you want to put it that way. And who exactly are you?"

"I am the Angel Abramowitz," he said with some puffery.

I snawfed...it was a kind of cross between a snort and guffaw which I wound up having to clean up. But he did not seem to think that was funny.

“Your name is Angel Abramowitz?” I said, wiping my nose.

“No.”

“Oh I see,” I said with mockery jacked up to full volume, “then you are actually an...”

“Precisely,” he said.

“I see. And how exactly did you become that?” I asked, challenging him to explain himself.

“Same way you become anything. Practice.”

“Very funny.”

“I’m glad you think so. It’s taken me forever.”

“So you’re a kind of stand-up angel,” I said, mouth round.

“I knew your great-grandfather. Hym Yuda.”

I closed my mouth.

“We were, shall I say, acquaintances back in the old country.”

“You’re not suggesting that you are the so-called angel he met on the road,” I said, wincing at the thought.

“The very same,” he said with a slight bow. “And not so-called.”

“Okay fine,” I said because why the hell not?

I had written about him, talked about him, accepted the fable of him. I just never thought it was all in any way – what is the word I am looking for – true.

“But you see, here is the problem,” I explained. “I don’t believe in angels or any of this mumbo.”

“And yet you search for my little gift.”

“Oh that. Just a game, you might say. A pastime.”

“*Narishkeit!* Baloney! You are obsessed with it.”

“Well, I have been trying to find it, if you must know.”

“Putz.”

“What is your problem?”

“Find it? You are it.”

“I what?”

“Not you yourself exactly, of course. You strike me as a bit of a schlub.”

“I’m not following you here.”

“See what I mean?”

“Look, you can insult me all you want but...”

“You’re not searching for the oytser; you’re creating it. That’s the whole idea.”

“Of what?”

“Of my gift to your great grandfather who charmed me on the road that day. The oytser for his family...that is what you are.”

“What am I?”

“You are their songster.”

“Their whatster?”

The Angel Abramowitz shook his head the way you would at a goat who was not getting your joke. I quietly bleated.

“The oytser is the words, these very tales that you have been telling. This is the treasure that I gave to your great-grandfather Hym Yuda on the road that day. That someone would come along who might keep alive the spirit of all those who have passed and those who will. This life that is so precious, so painful, so lovely, so tiresome. They have been waiting – to the extent that souls can wait, that is – for you to come along and sing their songs.”

“Their songs?” I said dimly.

“Their stories, your stories. The tales of mazel and so on. This is the oytser. I don’t know much about those who have passed but I would imagine they are quite thrilled – if that is the right word – that you have done this. I mean that I would be.”

“But I’m pretty sure that I have made some of these stories up,” I confessed.

“So, *nu?* The important thing about stories is not whether they are true or not but whether they lead you to a truth. Stories, like echoes, do not have to have mass...they simply have to resonate.”

“You’ve read the stories?”

“Of course not. I don’t have time for that kind of *schtus*. I simply dropped by to say that our business is concluded. The deal between Hyman Shapiro of Vilna and the Angel Abramowitz is done. *Fartik!*”

And here in a grand gesture that was rather out of whack with his plain demeanor, he swiped his palms as if to flick the commit-

ment once and for all from his dusty hands.

“You mean there is nothing more for me to write?”

“Write, don’t write. What is it to me? I’m an angel not a literary agent.”

“And that’s it? All this – the photos and the visits and the notes and the searching – all just comes down to these stories? There must be more to it than that.”

“Oh really. Well then perhaps you would like to make a deal. That, after all, is what your great-grandfather did to secure his oytsr. Perhaps we can make a new deal.”

I thought about that for a moment. Hym Yuda’s deal, apparently, was what had driven me through the family album to create the tales of mazel. Perhaps I too should pass something on to someone else down the road.

“What would I have to do?”

“Make me laugh,” he said because of course angels, as you can imagine, do not have all that much to laugh about.

“Like a joke?”

“Heard them all by now. Try something else. Delight me. Remind me about what it is like to be alive. And if you do, we can discuss a new oytsr.”

I thought for a moment.

“Okay...well then. Let’s start at the beginning with the story about Hym Yuda and the angel he met on the road outside of Vilna. I heard it was a warm November day after an early snow...”

About the Author



Alan Robbins is an award-winning writer, graphic artist, and educator.

He was the Janet Estabrook Rogers Professor of Visual and Performing Arts at Kean University in New Jersey and the founding director there of The Design Center, which won many awards for innovation,

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His card, board, and computer games – including 25 mystery jigsaw puzzles – have fans worldwide and his cartoons, illustrations, and graphics have appeared in many publications. His channel on YouTube has over 9 million viewers.

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