HEAVEN SEED (MEZUZAHS ALL THE WAY DOWN):

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By

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O Elohai, Name of names, please bless my parents, for I was a terror.

This time, we're at Temple Beit Israel on Friday night. Picture me, an eight year old Sammy Klein with my dusty brown curls and leg bouncing up and down on the wooden pew like a piston. Mom to my left, dad to my right, and Aviv to his right. It's a packed house, and my family has been chosen, I don't remember why, to light the candles. I have it in my head that I'll be the one to do it, though we can be reasonably sure that it was not my parents who put this idea into my head.

The rabbi calls us up. We walk through the isle, passing all the congregants—the Bay Area techies and their kids, the old Berkeley flower children looking on fondly at my sister and I's youth. I hold my mother's hand, Aviv holds my father's. We ascend the carpeted steps to the bimah. And the rabbi is saying something, and he's handing my mother the matchbox, and she takes out a stick and loads it between her thumb and forefinger.

And this is totally, completely wrong, because I'm supposed to be lighting the match. But I give her the benefit of the doubt; maybe she just forgot about our arrangement, so I tug on the draping arm of her dark blue dress and make a face at her that says, *What the fuck do you think you're doing!* She shoots me a frown, quick enough so that the congregation will hopefully miss the drama unfolding between us. She strikes the match against the box. With this, I am utterly jilted by my own mother. And for that matter, by the rest of my family, and by the two hundred so-called Jews who stand by and do nothing.

A convulsive sob escapes from my chest, and the sound of my distress echoes through the

synagogue's holy, Friday night silence, careening against the arched walls and flying overhead the congregants, now collectively holding their breath. I cannot let this stand, my family's betrayal, the mutiny of these supposed Jews in the face of such injustice, so I take off running down the center aisle, leaving a trail of sobs suspended in the air behind me.

I push open the tall wooden doors of the sanctuary and run to the coat closet. Ideally, I would be able to hide between the dark folds of pea coats and big faux-fur jackets, but springtime in California offers me just a few musty sweaters and a mothball scented corduroy vest. But it's far better than being back in there, with all the people who don't care about me, who want to hurt me.

One guilty memory leads to another. I've spent a lot of time, years of my life, rerunning through the proverbial synagogue isle, whipping myself millions of times for each instance I made life miserable for my family. These caverns of memory are so far away from anything good; from anywhere the light can touch.

I'm sorry. Maybe I'm worrying you? Please, don't be. Sammy Klein ends up doing pretty well, as of now. I do get sad sometimes, and don't we all, but overall—there's so much more to say, and we'll get there. To keep you paying attention, I'll give you some spoilers about my life, in no particular order:

I fall in love; I'm committed to the psych ward; I sit alone at the lunch table; I get caught smoking weed in seventh grade; I fall in love again; the doctor gives me Concerta, then Ritalin Adderall, Vyvanse, Tenex, Prozac, Effexor, Seroquel, Lamictal, Dexedrine, and Wellbutrin; I climb mountains, traverse rivers, and sit on park benches; I hold up my new driver's license for a picture; my father stands behind me in the mirror before my bar mitzvah, teaching me how to shave my peach fuzz; I grow more peach fuzz; I grow a beard; I renounce Judaism, I want to

have a nose job; I see snow for the first time; I write a poem to my sister for her birthday; I pick up a nasty nicotine habit.

Are you still worried? I hope not, because I can't assure you with stories of myself any further. None of it makes any sense unless we go back, this time in order: before my grandma presents me with a blanket, a gift for my coming into the world; before my mother and father do things in a tiny apartment in Tel Aviv, things that children haven't learned about; before my parents have even learned about these things. Before my parents, before their parents, before theirs, and theirs, and theirs—Stop!

This is good. This is where we start: in a shtetl in Russia, called Anapol, where the first snow of the year is beginning to fall onto a field of tall grass, and a forty year old Solomon Klein holds his cap over his chest, standing alone over the grave of the great Rabbi Dov Ber of Mezeritch, and softly weeping.

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Dov Ber ben Avraham of Mizrach, the *Maggid*, was a disciple of the legendary Rabbi Israel Baal Shem Tov, founder of Hasidic Judaism. Baal Shem Tov chose Dov Ber as a successor. Now, anyone who studied under Baal Shem Tov was a legend. Besht, as he is known acronymically, traveled all through Eastern Europe, gaining renown for his mystic teachings and psychic abilities. So, to be not only a disciple of, but the successor to Besht—now this was something to be.

It is said of Dov Ber that as a five-year-old, his home, a tiny, ramshackle hovel, caught fire. Dov Ber hears his mother weeping and asks her why she's so unhappy, to which she replies that their family tree has been lost—a tree which connects their lineage all the way back to King David through Rabbi Yonahan, the famous second century sandal maker and Master of the

Talmud. And what does young Dov Ber say? Already beginning to take the form of *Maggid* at the ripe age of five, he says, get this: “And what does that matter! I shall get you a new family tree which begins with me!” Jewish boys, take note—this is the single most comforting thing that has ever been said by a Jewish boy to his mother in all of history. With this declaration, Dov Ber went forth to become the *Maggid*. And now, Solomon Klein stands over the grave of the *Maggid* asking for the strength to grow roots himself.

Solomon was the first and last child of his parents—who like Dov Ber, were extremely poor, but unlike them, did not survive the fire that burned down their home. Like Dov Ber, Solomon was also five at the time, but by the time little Sol got back to the house—called away from the river where he was with some other boys, trying to throw pebbles from the bank into a hole in the ice—and made it back to where his wooden shack on the outskirts of the shtetl, past even the horse cobbler's shop, there was nothing left but flames and the charred remains of whatever they had not already consumed. Sol was silent as he stood on the dirt road outside the heap of half burned planks and ash and embers flying in the dry winter wind. Unlike Dov Ber, he had no Jewly wisdom to proffer; he simply stood with his mouth agape. In a moment, he was wrapped up from behind by the arms of his father's brother, Tieve, and taken into the care of his family.

Uncle Tieve and aunt Shaina were much of what Solomon’s parents were not, in all the bad ways. Tieve was stone faced and passive; his nuclear family was not as poor as Sol’s—God keep watch over their souls—but this was a low standard to compete with. Tieve operated the button making shop, past the town square and tucked behind the *shul*, and the business sustained them enough. But maybe owing to Tieve’s devotion to the Talmud, or maybe because Sheena remained a beautiful woman well into her forties, Solomon came into a house with five other

children—four girls and one boy.

In order from oldest to youngest (Remember carefully, reader): Zelda fifteen with the bright red hair of mysterious origin, who played the violin magnificently and was entirely aware of the good genes she had inherited from her mother, who Solomon would have thoughts about at night on his straw mattress, thought which he was entirely not supposed to be having but his cousin (Though, being cousins at that time and place was not an entirely unovercomable obstacle to love—second cousins would have been better—but remember, there simply weren't a lot of other Jews around, and the Tribe needed to go on.)

Maya, thirteen, was shy and quiet, gifted with the Tieve's nose, strong and prominent, even for the shtetl, and who at the time of Solomon's arrival was developing an affinity for interpreting Talmudic texts, secretly fostered by her father. When Mayta married a young Rabbi not so long after, she would help him prepare his sermons in secret, sometimes writing them completely. The husband did possess some skill as an orator, just enough to bring her brilliant writing to life (though it didn't take much), and he became a regional star. But when Mayta died of tuberculosis at thirty and subsequently forced him to attempt to write his own sermons, they were no longer the same; people attributed the loss of touch to grief.

Miriam twelve, who was also blessed with her mother's looks, but unlike Zelda (fifteen) possessed no smooth ability to capitalize on them. What she did have was middle child syndrome, as well as bodily ticks, awkward and embarrassing to the family; she would blink heavily and punctuate silences with shrill groans. To no one's recollection did made eye contact with a single soul—except for Solomon, who grew to be her best and only friend for a time. Needless to say, Shaina made her feel painfully aware that she was, at best, a nuisance to her family, and at worst, a shame, by reserving the third person for mention of her third daughter

while at the dinner table. Tieve, in his role as patriarch, said nothing—maybe packing his long, sloped pipe or stroking his beard, eyes shut, breathing noisily through the long tunnel of his nose. (It wasn't his fault! I have personal experience with big noses, and from the get go there is a good chance that air will not circulate properly, having to travel all that way.)

Goldie, nine, was also unspared from ridicule. She adopted her mother's slight nose, but mostly what she retained from her parents was largely from her father. Her shoulders were wide set, her fingers thick and blocky. To top off the struggles which she incurred by her masculine looks, at the time she began puberty, she got, in addition to breasts so large that they caused her chronic back pain, a formidable black shading of peach fuzz above her lip. The girls at school ridiculed her mercilessly. Though when it came to Goldie, at least, Shaina would not tolerate it. Though not usually prone to platitudes, Shaina told her fourth daughter (nine) that everyone was born differently, but equally in the eyes of God. Goldie would be far more useful to any suitor, Shaina said; what good were slender hips and small hands? Like the other daughters, Goldie would indeed find a husband, but it was not men she was truly interested in—a fact which became apparent to her during her first mikvah where under the glow of the full moon shimmering against the river, she found herself completely devoid of the gravity she was meant to be feeling at the occasion of entering Jewish womanhood. Instead, her attention was directed to Rivka Gopnik, the cobbler’s daughter, whose pale skin lit up under the moon, illuminating certain curves around the waist and beneath the shoulders. Despite her best efforts, the feminine body remained always more appealing to Goldie than the awkward angularities of men, the lumpiness, and beast-like hair. When first encountering the penis on the night of her wedding, she found it somewhere between comical and repulsive. Perhaps because of the cruelty of the girls of Anapol, and not aided by her sisters, Goldie grew up without the safe company of other

women. And also because, ideally (allow me to indulge here), she would have preferred to be with someone identical to her mother, she became a mama's girl through and through. Shaina not only tolerated her youngest daughter's attachment to her but took her closer than any other living soul. Shaina would say that it wasn't favoritism—more that she disliked humans as a rule rather than that she loved her children equally—but that it was Goldie's attentiveness and willingness to do all manner of chores. Goldie (nine) had no special affinity for milking cows, sweeping floors, shoveling hay, or repairing roofs, but chores were the easy way—and maybe the only way —for her to be close to her mother, so she capitalized.

They appear in my long, V shaped face; in the freckles which constellate my pale, white skin; in the tight curls of my brown hair, which looks as though it has been dusted by gray ash—and which is now regretfully beginning to recede too early; in my metabolism which keeps me lean and strapped with (and I'd like to think tastefully) defined muscles, which make people ask if I go to the gym, which I do not. A metabolism that will someday sputter out—and then I will have to go to the gym if I don't want to also inherit the tummy of my forefathers. And the nose. (I promise I'll try to keep the nose talk to a minimum, but it's difficult. Money talk and big noses, we already get enough recognition on those accounts.)

These are the coming together of myriad traits of those before me, having taken place on a seismic scale composed of innumerable collisions, mutations, betrayals, and forgivings of a tribe whose observable history, as I am told, spans millennia. It links me to mystic kings, magical scholars, and masters of craft. Contained in my walnut eyes is the effect of everything they have

ever been.

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The numbers are in, and they aren't looking good for the USA. As it turns out, there have been more than ten million children in God's Great Land who have ever been diagnosed with the condition. Of them, two-point-five million are between the ages of six and eleven. If you or a loved one have any of these symptoms, you may have ADHD and may be eligible for a diagnosis:

Short attention span, especially for non preferred tasks

Hyperactivity

Verbal, physical or emotional impulsivity, which may manifest in recklessness, fidgeting, or restlessness

Disorganization and difficulty prioritizing tasks

Poor time management and time blindness.

Does any of this sound like you? Don't panic, there are options for clinical treatment. If you have health insurance, there are options, clinically. These likely include some form of stimulant. You've heard of Ritalin?—maybe Concerta? Surely, you've heard of Adderall, the pills that college kids sell to other college kids and crush up into powder on dorm room dressers and snort so that they can stay up for forty-eight hours straight. Sometimes, you even combine them with cheap liquor before going to a frat party, before returning home to rearrange your sock drawer until the sun comes up, and you're so tired your eyes feel like they're being excavated from your head with an ice cream scooper, but even after laying in bed for an hour your heart is

still topping out over one-hundred beats per minute, so you get up and go to the dining hall to get coffee—if you have money on your meal plan—but because food sounds like the least appealing thing that could happen to your body, and it's Sunday morning and there is class so very early tomorrow and so much work to do, and you think, *Oh God, oh fuck, what have I done*, as you put your head down on the round plastic table and forget your plight against the cool plastic, but somehow you always pull it off. There you are in class the next morning, with just enough work done to get you one grade lower than you would like.

Unless, of course, you don't show up to class on Monday, or even worse, stop going to class altogether because you can't get out of bed and the blinds have been shut for three days, and you told you roommate, *It's just a really bad stomach bug*, but the roommate is starting to doubt that, so they wait another day before calling the Student Health Center—even though the Student Health Center is underfunded and totally inept, but what else is there to do?—and eventually two nice campus safety officers come to your door and get you, one way or another, into the ambulance outside waiting in the cul de sac in front of the dorm where every year freshmen and parents unload their things into big, yellow canvas carts, but now an ambulance is there instead, and it's right outside the dorm, so as you're walking to the ambulance and shielding yourself from the scathing, brunch-time sun, other kids appear from behind their windows screens and stop walking to wherever they were going and murmur to each other in clusters, and you get into the ambulance and the paramedics shut the door and drive you to the hospital, and you've been transferred to the psych ward and your parents are there, and they're saying, *Why don't you come back home for a bit*? and at home you see a good therapist who helps you figure it out and a good psychiatrist who puts you on the right cocktail of medications, and hopefully you go back to school next semester, but maybe you don't and that's okay—you'll just take the time you need to

get back on your feet, eat some good, home cooked food and cuddle with the golden retriever you've missed so much since coming to college. Things work themselves out for you.

Unless, of course, this is not what happens. Maybe none of that happens because even though home is a good place to go in a time like this, you're on the student insurance plan and it only covers you in state, but you come from far away and your parents are trying as hard as they can to find a job with good health benefits so they can put you on their plan because you're still under twenty-five, but the economy is in a slump, and most places are only hiring people with bachelor's degrees, so it's between meds and a therapist, or the comfort of your childhood room with the teddy bear you left at home because you thought you were ready to part with it because college is for grownups, and it's weird for grownups to have teddy bears, but now you're leaning against the dull blue wall in the hall of the psych ward you're talking into the landline attached by a squiggly cord that an old guy tried to strangle himself with this morning, and the hospital people really didn't see that coming?—they don't even let anyone have shoe laces for fuck's sake—and your parents are on the other side of the phone and they want to come out and see you with every fiber of their being but because money is tight and they can't take off work and they've come disturbingly close to running out of diapers for your little sister, there's no way they come out right now and your parents say, *Stay or take a greyhound home, whatever you think is best*, but grownups are supposed to be the ones who know what's best, and you thump your head against the wall, once and very lightly, but a nurse happens to be walking by just then, and she definitely saw you do it, and now you're going to be in here longer for sure, and you definitely don't feel like a grown up, and for the love of god, you just want your teddy bear. You just want your teddy bear.

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In retrospect, the signs were all there from an early age, assuming I'm not just casting my memories into a mold in the shape of my narrative—which, I suppose, is exactly what I'm doing. That's really all we ever do with our memories, isn't it? I have my own thoughts on everything, but for the moment I'll suspend certainty in my beliefs and give you what I remember.

Our big unit of the year was the clock, and my sweet old dinosaur of a kindergarten teacher, Mary, was tasked with teaching us to decipher its nebulous code of lines—which, pointing to certain places, somehow had to do with the time of day. While the other kids drilled this new information on paper timefaces, deciding where this or that line goes and would it then be sunny or would the moon be out, my mind wandered to other places. Such as, why was the moon shaped differently on certain days, and was it really made out of cheese? If it was parmesan cheese, I would very much have liked to make a visit there. Or why, when the sun was in different places in the sky, did the shadows on the ground sometimes get very short and fat but other times long and stringy?—like the black spaghetti with octopus ink that I so impressed my parents by eating at the fancy Italian restaurant on Solano Street. And now that I was thinking about it, did the girl at the restaurant with pink hair like Pepto Bismol and metal piercings in her eyebrow have parents with pink hair too? And why was Pepto bismol pink in the first place? Did they make it from some pink berry, or did they put paint in there? And would that really be okay to swallow?

“Sammy,” Mary has her hand, with its loose skin like an overripe apple, on my shoulder. She’s looking at me from way up high where grownups’ heads live, and she sees my clock exercise paper folded up like an accordion and my number two pencil on the ground. “Why haven’t you done your clock exercise? It’s already lunchtime.”

The part about the clock exercise doesn’t much interest me, but the mention of lunchtime catches my attention because I have a Gogurt and a surprise message from my mother packed in my Spider Man lunchbox. Mary sighs.

In the end, I learned to read the clock just fine, although I had some trouble with the concept of am and pm. Unfortunately, the unit on calendars went over my head completely while I was off to much more interesting places in my mind; I still have no idea how many days are in most of the months, and my knowledge of their order after July is not good.

As kind as she was (though I thought she was devilish as a kindergartener) there was one thing Mary would not abide—this was whistling. Unfortunately for her, and probably everyone in my life, I was a whistler, to put it lightly. I didn't do it to annoy her; I just had no idea when it was happening, so how could I control it? she wouldn't let slip the whistling as she did the chewing pencils and stuffing paper in backpacks (I still do both).

“Sammy,” she would say in her version of stern, frowning at me through her rectangle glasses as thick as bomb proof glass. “No whistling inside. It's not polite.”

I took these admonishments hard, because she never picked on any of the other kids, so why me? I would put my head down to my collarbone and sulk until I forgot about it five minutes later and begin whistling again. But part of me didn't forget. These were the foundations of the thick walls which came to form the boundaries of my identity, barriers which marked what I was and was not, what I could and could not become.

As bad as calendars and clocks were, they were nothing compared to math, a spectre which dogged me all the way until college. Every single type of math has been torture, except for maybe geometry; the shapes laid out in front of me like that made it sensible enough—so geometry gets a pass.

But some kids are good at math, and some are ridiculously good. For example, in first grade, when the troubles began, there was a ghoulishly pale Russian boy in my class named Sasha Yurchenko, with straight brown hair that always hung over his eyes and a chronic habit of wiping his nose and slicking the mucus into his hair like pomade. While the rest of us were entrenched in questions of eating and buying apples and how many would you now have, Sasha sat hunched over a desk, tearing through pre algebra in his own corner of the classroom, removed from the rest of us lest our stupidity rub off on him.

The one time I slept over at Sasha's house marked my earliest recollection of feeling distinctly awkward. The weird Russian stew with its weird meat served on the dinner table covered in white doilies, the plastic coverings on all the furniture, gave me the impression of being in a decrepit old age home, or a doctor’s office. The house was filled with all manner of wooden jigsaw puzzles which asked you to rearrange a chaotic cluster of cubes attached by elastic bands into symmetric polygons, or clinking metal jigsaws which in order to complete required you to twist apart a tangle of chains and bars from each other.

These sorts of tasks gave me a headache. If I was to keep at them long, I would be overcome an increasingly familiar rage; It would rise like embers given fuel combusting into flames which lapped at my hands and toes, building up to singe my temple and causing my body to tighten and contract with hot blinding clots if fire in my blood, which I would released through screams or out of hands through small objects thrown at full speed—a friend's remote control helicopter, a pen against a computer monitor. In short, I stayed away from the puzzles at the Yurchenko household.

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Now you know the Klein sisters, mother, and father. The only one left to cover is the son.

The boy in question is Anshel, eight. And what to say about him? To begin with, he was striking upon first glance—that is to say, his looks commanded attention. Allow me to direct you to the eyes: they began at the inner Iris in a light green, the shade of the first sprouting grass of spring, and move by the outer half to a dark chestnut. The contrast is so striking that it gives the impression of two pairs of eyes combined in one. The skin is light, like sunshine filtered through cloud cover, and so smooth you know it just by looking. The nose begins with a bridge, unobtrusive but defined, and descends in a perfect line to a chiseled jaw, splitting his face into an exact symmetry. Put together, Anshel looks like a cherubim who might appear on Jacob's ladder.

But beyond the looks, Ansel was no angel. A troublemaker through and through, he was fond of starting fires. The way the flames swayed side to side, almost mischievously, entranced him. He set fire to all kinds of flammable things, sneaking out after dark to light stacks of wood his father had split against the ancient stump in the field, stacking logs perpendicularly like the walls of a cabin until they reached his chin, then he would a light match under the dry grass beneath and laugh as the flame soared to great heights, sending sparks whizzing high into the night. Thinking there was a wildfire, the men of the shtetl would jump out of bed and arrive with wagonfulls of water pails from the river to douse it. By then, Anshel would already have tiptoed back into his bed, smiling under his blanket.

Sometimes, he would sneak out under the glow of the moon, pad his way down to the river, and crouch behind a tree on the bank to get a look at the naked women purifying themselves during the mikvah and unknowingly, being dirtied by his stare. On one such occasion, while squatting in the thicket of a low tree, he tumbled into the river, alerting the women to his presence. He had almost gotten away without being seen, but Rebecca Taub caught a pair of eyes in the moonlight for just an instant, and who else could those eyes belong to but

the Klein boy. That night, when Anshel arrived home, drenched and freezing, in his frazzled state he made the dire mistake of stashing his wet clothes not deep enough in a pile of hay behind the shack. His mother found them the next morning after hearing from the other wives about her son's exploits, which Anshel then denied. But he could not possibly maintain his innocence after the emergence of such damning evidence. For all her faults as a mother, Shaina at least refrained from hitting her children most of the time; the sheer fire of her gaze was more than sufficient to make her children cower and go mute. But after the mikvah incident, his mother did not spare him. By the wrath of a stick collected from the pasture behind the house, it took the better part of a week before he could sit for dinner without shifting and grimacing in his chair.

At a loss for direction over how to deal with her son, Shaina took him to see the rabbi, who suggested that he be set to work in the field for double the amount of time that he had been previously, and put up to new chores around the house. Shaina dutifully attempted to follow the rabbi's advice, knowing just where it would end but not wanting to discard his wisdom. Of course, after six consecutive weeks of coming across Anshel sleeping in the field, or trying to hypnotize the chickens in the barn, or finding the floor of the shack somehow dirtier than before he'd swept it, Shaina threw up her hands and gave up. He was a boy after all, and it was only possible to control a boy so much. Besides, Shaina had plenty of girls who could be of far more use to her around the house.

So, Anshel returned to his idling existence. Years later, unexpected by anyone’s predictions, he would become a hero to the shtetl, risking his own life to save those that could be saved when the pogroms came to Anapol, the inevitable fate from which no shtetl was spared. But again, a story for later. So amidst all this chaos in the Klein household, the hair pulling, the sounds of livestock, the mischief, and furls of pipe smoke, where does little Solomon fit in?

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There was the whistling and the math troubles. By second grade, the disease had spread through my whole body, manifesting in the form of the fidget—the ceaseless electric vibrations of my body, which like the whistling were both totally uncontrollable by my higher faculties and a menace to those around me. At restaurants, tables would quake as though the San Andreas fault line had finally sent the Big One upon California. A hand would come down on my knee to stop its pogo bouncing; the food nearly slid off the table. But the fidgets didn't stop with the family, nor were they cordoned off to the legs. They infected everything with vigor, and the second grade classroom was no exception.

We'd moved midway through the year, leaving behind Berkeley's shady lemon tree and quiet grass corner to the street; the street blocks dotted with houses each boasting their own flair —weathered stone walls or brown shingled spires, angular minimalist abodes of commuting techies, stucco cottages with mosaic step stones, untamed plants and fairy tale pinwheels cluttering old hippies' front yards. We packed up into our faded blue minivan with the heavy sliding doors and embarked on a new adventure: the first excursion into home ownership.

Thirty minutes away without traffic, across the Bay Bridge under endless construction, was Foster City. When I think of Foster City, I think of the color salmon. As if by city ordinance, the whole municipality was coated, albeit in varying hues, of salmon. Rows upon rows of houses branched off of suburban main streets, built as if from the same edition of a mid-budget home and garden magazine from the eighties. Like a sad Vegas replica of Venice, a web of canals split up the city and pooled together in a central, man-made lagoon with water tinted green by some foul algae.

There, we moved into our very own slice of stucco salmon, complete with the requisite

nauseating opaque glass, gold lined front door and gray wall to wall carpeting inside. My parents did a good job at concealing their spirit of disappointed compromise with the place—it was the only thing on the market in their price range. Though little could have dampened the enthusiasm with which I first ran through the new home, scoping out every nook and hidey-hole I could make use of. My new room was to the left at the top of the stairs, on the opposite end of the hall from my parents' master—and it was ginormous. My sister took the would-be-office with the glass sliding door to the backyard, an escape route which would prove useful to her in just a few years when she began sneaking out.

Social as ever, my new school delighted me. On the first day, Aviv and I rode to school with my mother in the minivan—Aviv in the front seat because of seniority—and for the first time we drove through the sprawl. We passed by dirt lots with lonely Jamba Juices conjoined to Boston Markets. Foster City was a sort of overdeveloped, inbred product of gentrification with no immediately appropriated culture stolen to build it. Instead of San Francisco's trendy coffee shops and consignment stores, with their concrete walls to the busy streets painted with huge murals of Indigenous men with feather headdresses gazing off proudly or little black girls with dreadlocks releasing doves into the air, Foster City had salmon Jamba Juices.

There were no Walmarts, God forbid, but there were Domino's and McDonald's, quarantined to undeveloped spaces where the people of Foster City could not readily see them without seeking them out—tucked safely away from the main street with its white owned sushi shops and bowling alleys serving flatbread pizza. We drove past all this and arrived at the school's parking lot, where a line of similar minivans were unloading young, white Jewish scholars to spend their first foggy day back from winter break at Jonie Katz Jewish Day School.

I needed no prompting from my mother to get out of the car, and was waving goodbye

from behind before she could even say anything to me. My sister, being who she was, was in the unfortunate throes of middle school and so stayed back for some words of assurance from my mother and a kiss on the forehead from across the center console. Our respective landings into the new school followed a similar pattern: me rushing ahead, mouth open wide for speaking, and appetite for new friends unfillable; Aviv slow and cautious.

She'd left behind more than I had. She'd had old friendships at our old school, tied together by countless field trips, upward movement in the social hierarchy, mean teachers, burgeoning crushes on snot nosed boys, the end of playdates and the ushering in hangouts, where parents were neither present nor wanted; hurtful gossip and clique formation; and makeups next to the basketball blacktop. All of this was encapsulated in her friendship with Hannah Liebowitz who, together with Aviv, formed a formidable bloc of popularity. If Hannah's blondeness wasn't enough to boost her to aristocratic status, her self assuredness around anyone, peer or authority, and her take no prisoners attitude when it came to verbal scraps secured it. Aviv was perpetually shy in those elementary years, but in the company of Hannah, she forgot that she didn't like talking. And when Aviv's quietude surfaced, she would whisper in Hannah's ear what she couldn't say to anyone else, and Hannah would spit it out, loud and bulletproof. When Aviv couldn't bring herself to talk, Hannah would do the talking for her.

But with the move to Salmon City, Aviv lost her lifeline. She could still phone a friend on her brand new slide phone, but in the times when the other middle school girls were cruel to her, and they often were, making comments about her Caterpillar eyebrows and her inability to talk, my poor sister was all alone, crying in a bathroom stall, or quietly wiping back tears in the back of the classroom. At least at home there were my parents, God bless them, whom she confided in only more deeply as the years went by, and the cruelties got crueler.

But for young Sammy Klein and his new second grade, none of this was a concern. Day one was a buzz, flitting around between all the new kids on the astroturf field, which quickly began to fill my pockets, socks, and scalp with thousands of tiny rubber chunks meant to dry out the turf after damp Bay Area spurts of rain. In class, my teacher, Mrs Abandan, whose last name I made fun of by adding rhyming syllables to the end, quickly got a sense that I would be trouble. With no regard for first impressions, I immediately skipped the formality of hand raising. On the first day, Abandan gave me some leniency; by the second, she held me to the same standards as everyone else. I couldn't help it! I had a deep and immediate urge for connection with my peers, and the feedback I got from their affirmative giggling when I talked out of turn was a quick fix. But Ms. Abandan had no intention of letting it slide. As far as second grade teachers go, she was severe, and at that point in my life, I was not accustomed to being treated severely.

She was foreign to me in that sense, but also in another. I had not yet spent a lot of time with any other ethnic group than milky white ashkenazim like myself. Ms. Abandan, with her olive, Sephardic skin, jet black curls, and nose like a Christian, which went in-to-out rather than out-to-in, was alien to me. And as such were her customs and rules. One of these was a “three strike rule” where three call outs without the customary hand raising and approval before recess would result in revocation of outside time. Throughout that second grade, I spent many a recess inside, eating my yogurt or orange at my desk, usually in the silent company of Ms. Abandan, the sound of her red pen working away at little stacks of classroom exercises scoring my perfect view of the field, where other kids were flying about, free as doves flying off Noah's Ark.

At the end of that decisive second grade year, where all the problems that had begun to look increasingly concerning—the resistance to authority, the impulsivity, the mood swings—had been verified as symptomatic of something more insidious than a passing phase, the free

California summer now stretched before me. I had been anxiously waiting for this particular summer because as an eight year old, I was now eligible to go to Jewish sleepaway camp at Camp Miwok, five hours away, in Yosemite National Park.

Racial genocide, ruthless imperialism, and summer camp are undoubtedly core aspects of the American identity. Now was my chance to participate in the latter. The summer camp is an especially sacred institution to young American Jews, as they offer a rare chance for the modern Jew living outside of Israel, or Williamsburg, to be a majority population. They also present an excellent opportunity to ensure the safe continuation of the Chosen People, at least at a Reform camp like Miwok, where budding expressions of physical desire were checked, but by no means discouraged. Kissing and "hugging" between campers was totally kosher, though anything beyond was strictly off limits; and few other campers took advantage of this allowance as much as I did.

Aviv had gone to Miwok for two summers, after her third and fourth grade, and stayed there for three weeks apiece. But each summer, she came down with near debilitating cases of homesickness that lasted until her return. During those summers, with my parents being unexcused from their workplaces for summer break and my sister off in the trees, I spent the bulk of my time at day camp, of which I was never particularly fond. They often took place at elementary schools, which in summertime seemed to me sorts of awkward skeletons. On the whole, these day camps had the effect of making me feel like I was on a perpetual recess, which quickly lost its luster without classroom time to make it precious. I have never been a fan of cold lunch, and the encroachment of the school routine into summer was unwelcome.

Paradoxically, as a result of my many behavioral "quirks," shall we call them, what I needed as a kid was more adult attention, but the more I got it, the more I resented those giving it

to me. With Aviv gone, I would return home after day camp with my mother, or some other kid's minivan equipped parent, and have dinner, just the three of us. Here again, I feel myself beginning to whip myself for being an insolent, disrespectful child. And most of all, for hurting my parents, God bless them, through so many little abrasions at so many family dinners, beachside vacations, and bring your kid to work days. But I'll set aside my inner turmoil, once again for your sake. I'd like you to appreciate the extent of my self restraint here. I'm doing this for you.

Where was I? The hot family dinners, minus Aviv, she and I wishing we could trade places. My mother would cook something with vegetables and meat and open the sliding door to the backyard so that the air could circulate through the screen. She would be on the phone with someone while cooking, and I would come running in with something to say. I'll give myself the benefit of the doubt and say it was a trait with potential, like curiosity—so maybe in this case, I had something to ask her about an especially colorful leaf from the backyard. When she ignored me because she had the landline pressed against her shoulder and both hands working the stove, I would tug at her clothing. "Ima! Ima! Ima!"

"Samuel! I'm on the phone, don't nudge."

Naturally, I would take this hard and sulk away, taking slow steps up the stairs in order to make sure she saw that she had caused me harm. But my attention span wasn't solid enough to remember by dinner, although with each passing month, my memory allowed me to hold on to these things for longer, to weaponize them into projectile guilt that I could shoot off at whomever cared about me enough for it to stick. But then, I was still forgetful enough to be onto something else by the time my mother called up the stairs that it was time for dinner, just in time for my father's Buick to pull up in the driveway.

My father walks through the door and I run to give him a hug, the rough fabric of his suit rubbing against my cheek. He wraps his arms around me and bends down to kiss the top of my head. Then, he meets my mother at the counter for a brief kiss. I had set the table, putting down the thick plastic placemats on the dining table, then the plates, and then the silverware, fork and knife on the wrong sides because of my left handedness. These were some of the relatively few chores asked of me, setting the table and doing the dishes and sweeping the floor after dinner, but because Aviv was absent, probably off having some kind of fun, the full weight of these duties fell upon me, so I would put up even more of a fight than usual.

“How was work?” my mother asks, carrying steaming plates of chicken stir fry to the table.

“Fine,” my father says. I don't know if she got more out of him when I wasn't in the room, but in my presence, it was always the same: fine, and a shrug.

Now we sit down and eat. The conversation quickly turns to me, the friends I'd made or the counselors who particularly annoyed me during a game of flag football. But my mother says something wrong, something of such small consequence. She's tripped a landmine—I'm disturbed. I'm angry. It's almost always at her. She takes it, she's an easy target. The dinner is ruined. My father is fiddling his stir fry with his fork and looking at my mother, who just doesn't know what to do with her eight year old boy. A child who, in this very moment, is gaining power —the power of telekinesis, of emotekensis, the ability to change the season in a room at will from mid-summer in California to January in Boston; the power to make another person feel what he wants them to. But I was a good kid. I should remember that.

Needless to say, I was overjoyed the coming summer when instead of going off to spend the day making vinegar and baking soda volcanoes with pimply high school counselors, I was in

a parking lot in San Francisco, standing and at the foot of a coach bus, bags beside me on the ground, containing warm clothes, bathing suit, bug spray, headlamp, book, chessboard, and rain poncho, and not yet any medications. All of my possessions are Sharpied on a piece of tape labeled with my full name. They're loaded into the belly.

My mother and sister are there with me. Aviv would be sitting this one out to stay in the warm company of my parents and more stimulating daily activities at science camp. I'm sure they were both relieved to entrust my care into the hands of unsuspecting counselors. My mother, if it had been another kid, might have been worried about all the normal things: making friends, disliking the dining hall food, home sickness. But she had no reason to be with me. I would be fine—I would thrive. I hug my sister, short and obligatorily, and then my mother who kisses the top of my head. Just a year before, when my sister had talked about being grossed out by kissing her parents on the lips, I had told my mother that I would always let her. But now, not only am I

anti-familial-mouth-kissing, I'm already pulling away towards the open door of the bus with its little staircase leading up to where most of the kids are already sitting; barely before she can finish giving me the quickly diminishing amount of physical affection I will permit her to.

I step onto the bus. Excited reunions are taking place in the back, where the more senior campers sit. All manner of introductory behavior between us little ones is progressing at lightspeed, defining the paths camp would present over the coming years. For me, it is the beginning of a serious, eight summer long fling.

"Bye! Love you!" I wave from the top step.

"Be safe! Have fun!" my mother calls back. "Love you!" Next to her, Aviv is already reveling in the joy of a month with our parents all to herself.

Then, I'm on the bus, scouting for a cool looking kid with an open seat next to them. The last few kids trickle in after triple checks of bags and teary goodbyes. I sit down next to a skinny kid in a tank top with red hair like a clown nose. The doors close, and I have been sealed into the vessel transporting me to an alternate universe where many more layers will be added onto my identity.

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For the first seven days after his parents death, all throughout the shiva, Solomon remained completely mute. If there had been mirrors in his aunt and uncle's shack, they would have been covered. The family sat on hobbled chairs which rocked side to side against the uneven wood floor planks whenever someone new came to pay respects to the Kleins, to bring them black bread or, on two occasions, chopped chicken liver. All this, the rocking, the crowdedness of the shack, the almost constant dimness inside, gave Solomon the impression of being in the belly of a ship during a nighttime storm. At least from how it was described to him by his father, who had once worked in a port city as a trader.

Not so many years later, Solomon would find himself in the belly of a real ship, not in a storm on an alien sea, but fleeing one at home, and he would think back to those seven days amidst the chaos of mourning. Solomon developed a kind of seasickness. It started in his belly, a feeling of pushing out on all sides by some thin membrane, leaving his stomach feeling huge and hollow. Then, it came up through his throat like the cold feeling that coats the esophagus that one gets after not eating for too long. Finally, it arrived to his forehead, carrying his heartbeat up through his face and nearly bursting out the skin at his temple.

He spent seven days with his head throbbing, dizzy, his brain no longer sending signals to his stomach to tell it to be hungry, and was silent. Shaina practically preyed the boy's mouth

open after the third day just to get a piece of bread down his throat. As people from the shtetl, the cobbler, the owner of the tannery, the five boys of the modest Yeshiva, the rabbi, milled in and out, Solomon kept his head bowed down, his eyes often shut or looking blankly at his legs dangling off the chair, not long enough to reach the floor, and silent. Sometimes the vision of the fire replayed in his mind: the planks collapsing in on each other, flames flickering against the grass, a glimpse of his father's tallis, crispy and blackened, two vague forms charred and scaly. But most of the time, his mind wandered back to memories before that, better memories. It was an odd sensation, having seen with his own eyes that his Ima and Aba were gone, but also knowing that any day he would be back with them. Surely, it would only be another day at most. It would only be a day before he would be back safely within the arms of his parents.

But the days came and went, and there was no mention of them. Once, he overheard Shaina with the rabbi, at the counter discussing getting him new clothes and bedding from others in the shtetl who could pool together to get him new things. Solomon looked up from his chair.

"I don't need new things. I'm going back to live with Ima and Aba," he said.

Shaina, and the rabbi looked at the boy for a moment, and then at each other. After that, no more adult matters surrounding Solomon were discussed in the house, and Solomon didn't speak again for another seven months.

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Things happened quickly after the bus door shut. A blonde counselor with an English accent took the microphone at the front of the bus and stood up to tell us that the drive would be five hours long, that we would stop for lunch at around halfway, and please not to get up while the bus was moving except to use the bathroom in the back, which smelled like a mix of indoor swimming pool and full trash bag. Then, the bus started moving.

It turned out the ginger boy next to me was named Evan. He was also eight, from Oakland, and had a terrible peanut allergy. He had to carry an epi-pen on a necklace which he had only ever had to use once, when he confused peanuts for almonds in a pad tie that his friend Phong's mom had made for dinner while at a sleepover.

In the corner of my window, San Francisco sped quickly out of view, the Pyramid Building's point replaced with gray office buildings, then houses packed tightly together, then freeway flanked by big empty dirt lots, then a power plant, then fields growing unidentifiable crops, more fields, and then pine trees. When we passed through Truckee, the trees became so thick on either side of the winding two lane road that I couldn't see more than thirty feet into the forest before the view filled up with so many trunks and branches and green needles that it was just a rolling canvass of green lumps.

Finally, we turned off the road and drove over a cattle guard onto a dirt road that cut straight through the trees. The windows became tan and gritty with dust kicked up by the wheels of the bus. Eventually, we came into a valley surrounded by pine trees on either side below granite that sloped into cliffs which stretched for what seemed to me like a football field up into the light blue sky. Tucked in the base of the valley was a field of tall grass, a big circular lake, and a large log building.

The bus passed through another gate and made its way down the road. After we filed off, things became excited and quick. The counselors lined up in two columns beginning at the door of the bus and chanted a song: "We welcome you to Miwok, we're mighty glad you're here (yip-yip-yip), we send the ground reverberating with a mighty cheer."

The smiling faces of grownups, just in the narrow window of age that adolescents still idolize, passed above in walls on either side of me. For the boys, the big muscles spilling out of

tank tops, the shadings of facial hair on square jawlines, the sometimes thick beards of liberal arts students playing Mountain Man for the summer, commanded reverence as a default.

Camp Miwok was a product of San Francisco flower children of the sixties and retained a strong air of their free spiritedness. I was naive to what counselors did on their days off, but much later I would come to learn that orgies and drugs were not uncommon. Then, however, they were still only beautiful giants that glimmered in the sun, saying impossibly witty things to each other in a language I could only hope to intuit through the similar roots of the one I spoke. For some of the campers with incipient notions of possible deviance—girls who didn't feel like girls, boys who didn't feel like boys, girls and boys who didn't feel like girls or boys, kids who found their eyes drawn to the long smooth legs and breasts of their bunk mates during shower parties, or the firm chiseled muscles and husky voices of the boys in their bunk during pool time, it felt like it might be okay when they looked longingly at the sphere of the grown ups looming above them, and felt like maybe one day they might be like them themselves. In the meantime, we were content with trying to emulate them. We tried on their big, free smiles for size; we walked across the grass with their carefree rhythm. And young Sammy was feeling like his deviance might be okay too. But there were lots of things I didn't notice. For one, the smooth cup-like divots in the boulders protruding from the grass, where Miwok women ground acorns to be later strained and baked. There was much more that I missed.

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You have to understand, even after the Russian pogroms, successfully surviving the boat across the Atlantic and making it through immigration at Ellis Island had been a miracle for Solomon Klein. At every step of the journey from the shtetl, he was certain that he had encountered the upper register of population density that was possible. But neither the steam

train from Rivne to Warsaw, nor the one from Warsaw all the way to Gdansk had in retrospect been crowded. Not even the boardwalk in Gdansk, teeming with passengers and their luggage, hawkers pushing all sorts of things for their departure upon the Baltic Sea and then out across the Atlantic, and ticket officers walking up and down the gangways of the countless looming ships, which lined the port. None of it had been crowded. Certainly, he had seen more people on this singular journey from Rivne then he had over the course of his entire twenty-five years of life, but the boat—the boat had been crowded. At first, it had been thrilling for him. The sheer amount of new novelties–the bumping up against the ankles and shoulders of women as he pushed his way through limbs on the ship's deck to get a look at Poland disappearing behind him into the sea. There was no one at the dock to see him off. They were all in Rivne.

Solomon found his thoughts drifting out over the blue, imagining the easy money he would find in New York. He would live modestly, he promised himself, at least by American standards. Work would not be an issue. He'd be able to eat three meals a day—nothing extravagant by American standards, but maybe even fish for dinner during the week and meat for every single shabbos. And with the rest of the money, he'd bring his family over too.

The novelty of the ship dissipated within the first two days after he gave up on trying to classify the smells below deck as those of adventure. In truth, they were the smells of piss and shit, of the traces of livestock and manure and all the trades still clinging on to the third class passengers who were leaving them behind. They were aware of the smells, though none that they emanated from themselves. Everyone blamed someone else—the Russian blamed the Polish, the Polish blamed the Lithuanians, and the Lithuanians blamed the Russians and the Polish. But all of them undoubtedly blamed the Jews for the worst of it. The smells of the boat seemed to condense completely into what little food was served to Solomon and his fellow third class

passengers: one hunk of cheese, more mold than dairy, and a half link of gray meat. Solomon pretended it was beef and hoped that God would lose sight of him in the crowd. He prayed to be spared from the many illnesses circulating below deck, which had by the third week, taken the lives of three elderly people.

It was six weeks before Solomon saw land again, and no sooner had he stepped foot upon it than he was back on a ferry. Now, for the final leg to Ellis Island. And at Ellis Island, there were again crowds. He had been warned about the perils of this place by his third cousin on his father's side Ira, who had arrived in New York five years earlier. He had written to Solomon about how he would have to wait in line to be registered between metal bars like animal pens, how men in military uniforms would put a stethoscope to his chest and peel his eyelids back with a little metal rod. If they marked your clothing with a chalk “H,” that was to signify heart problems. With an “L” for lameness, and an “X” for feeble mindedness.

All of this correspondence had been read to him by the rabbi, of course, as Solomon could not read. What use would it do him to read in selling tobacco? On the boat, he had met a wiry yeshiva student his age named Moishe, who had drilled the English alphabet with him every day. Now Solomon could vaguely recognize the characters on the piece of paper he handed to the immigration officer with an apricot moustache. Solomon Klein, male, twenty-five years old, tobacco seller. He could make the sounds off the page well enough, but they signified nothing to him. Fortunately, Ira had been right about the ease with which Solomon would endure the whole affair at Ellis Island. The large clock on the wall at the end of the hall, which housed the hundreds of fresh arrivals in their pens, indicated to Solomon that it had taken him three hours from start to finish, before he was split out into the New World with nothing but his brown

Canvas suitcase in his hand.

He changed the money he still had left from the voyage. If this was the New World, then the coins in his hands must have been relics. The teller at the Ellis Island money exchange handed him five cents and directed him to board yet another ferry. The last one. This time, just across the water to Battery Park. Ira had written to Solomon, the rabbi had informed him, that he would be waiting for him there in Battery Park, and he included in the letter as well a description of himself. Solomon might otherwise not have been able to pick his third cousin out amid the throngs of people waiting at the dock for passengers to unload from the ferry. But as Ira told it, he would be easy to pick out. He said that he was just over two meters tall and would be wearing a white bowling cap. He had also sent a pocket size photograph with Solomon kept in his coat.

Solomon crossed the gangway to the dock and scanned the many heads of the people dressed for the early summer. He almost forgot what he was supposed to be doing. There was neither excitement nor fear in Solomon at the scene before him, it was simply too overwhelming to do anything but stupefy him into submission. The buildings were endless gray and tan concrete and steel Goliaths, practically stacked on top of each other into the distance as far as he could see. Along the dirt streets, horses and wagons drew women in broad hats; street vendors sold all manner of goods and filled the space between them. And in every spot of street and sidewalk, between every stall, were people. And now, stepping onto the dock, Solomon became one of them. Already, familiar faces from the boat were greeting aunts and uncles in long embraces; fathers and business partners and representatives from immigrants sponsor societies with firm handshakes. The next ferry from the island would be arriving before too long, and the crowd would refill itself over the brim. New York, even before he saw the Lower East Side, appeared to Solomon to be spilling out over itself. Solomon's eyes were wide, and for a moment,

the urge to sneak back onto the next ferry and stow his way back to Europe, to the Old World, came over him. It had just been the regular world not two months before.

Damn the Russians, damn the Tsar, and damn the pogroms. Solomon was beginning to think that he had made a mistake. The Jews were strong, after all. Who was stronger than the Jews? Who else had escaped the shackles of slavery only to wander in the desert for forty years and defeat a nation who was occupying the land promised to them?

Here, reader, my thoughts refuse to stay separated between the year 1901 and the year now. Let me tell you upfront: I'm not going to tell you what year that is. Maybe you'll infer it anyway from the information I'll include about my life as it's gone on, but I'll put up a fight. I refuse to be voiced by my generation as it breaths. Maybe you like jazz, maybe you like disco (hint: neither play on the radio at this particular moment in time), and maybe you like all the music that comes on with the changing of the guard. In which case, lucky me. But maybe you think it's all noise—that your parents listened to noise, that the kids listen to noise—in which case, I risk writing noise. That's a chance I can't take.

All of this is to say that Solomon, in deciding whether to crawl all the way back home, found himself fortified by the tale of the Israelites' successful conquest over the Canaanites. I cannot help but think that this is where it started—the idea of the justness of occupation after conquest. Maybe if the land had been unoccupied in the first place we wouldn't have had an example to follow more than 3000 years later, but well—this only works if we trust each other, right? You trust that this isn't just static, I trust that you'll get that these things are on my mind as I write to you. You're smart, whatever that means.

Where were we? Oh yes, Solomon stands on the edge of the grass at Battery Park, thinking of the Jews. As he pulled the photograph of his cousin from his breast pocket, what did

Solomon's eyes see? Promise. The top hat above Ira's skinny face smelled of sweet excess, and how much money could he fit into all the pockets of the fine tailored suit jacket he had on? His face looked like opportunity, his beard finely shaped at the cheek, a glint of smile at the right of his mouth. Ira had, after all, paid for the lion's share of Solomon's journey by wiring money all the way across the Atlantic to the Western Union office in Kiev. So, Ira had disposable income, a concept somewhat unfamiliar to Solomon. In his letter, Ira had said that he worked, like droves of Jews in the Lower East Side at the time, in the garment industry. Doing exactly what? He didn't write. But if it was for fear of Solomon's being scared off by a description of hard work, Ira had no need to be concerned. The concept of working long hours wasn't really a concept to which Solomon had yet been introduced. What else would he be doing except working or tending to the home?—except on shabbos, of course.

Solomon looked up from the photograph, forgetting about slavery in Egypt and wandering in the desert, and scanned the crowd before him once more. Then, he saw him. It could only be him—behind the crowd, leaning against a tree and smoking a cigarette; tall and in a white bowling hat as promised. It was Ira Klein himself.

All of a sudden, Solomon felt like a relic, in his black wool gabardine and leather shoes scuffed a thousand times over, so much that they were gray. This together with his plaid, tattered newsboy cap, and he was altogether unsuited for the New York heat. He looked like he had just ventured into the town square from his shack outside the shtetl as he walked over to meet Ira, who didn't seem to be looking particularly hard for his cousin. Solomon took off his cap and held it by his side. He only hoped that Ira's Yiddish was as good as it was in the letter he'd said, because otherwise he would be *fakakta* in this Goliath of a city.

"Ira?" Solomon said, to which Ira returned coolly turned from the skyline he had been

studying and let his half finished cigarette fall to the grass. He reached out his hand, poking out of a white linen suit jacket that seemed to be a challenge to the very sun itself. In fact, his whole being seemed to produce solar radiation. His white leather shoes were polished so finely that if Solomon looked down at them, which at present, was where he was inclined to look, he could see in them reflected his unfortunate, dirty face.

Solomon took his hand and shook it like the mayor of a small town might the hand of an important dignitary, condescending him by passing through. Ira withdrew his hand and reparted his dark black hair in the middle, slicked with heavy pomade, shiny as the gates of a Christian heaven. He seemed to be eyeing Solomon, making some sort of determinations. He looked like a man who made quick work of decisions—a man with the authority to make important judgments.

"You must be *mid vi a hundt*," Ira said.

So his yiddish was good, if not a bit Polish, though his voice was not particularly pleasant to listen to. It was a high tenor, shrill and prone to rising at the end of phrases, as if all his momentum was concerned with upward motion, rising from up his planky trunk and continuing up the lower half of his face, skinny as a vampire, and then bursting out in high pitched syllables into the sky. As for the upper half of his face, it seems to be at odds with itself, fighting a sort of culture war. That is to say, he had the hook nose of an Ashkenazi, and the lake blue eyes of an Anglo-Saxon. Wherever he got the eyes, they were certainly not from any Klein that Solomon had known.

On that day, in June of 1901, Solomon didn't yet know what those eyes would come to do—the fear they would inspire at union meetings and on sidewalks, in back alleys and in newspapers. In fact, Ira didn't yet know either, though he had an inkling that it was possible. His watery or icy blue eyes, depending on how unfortunate of a position you happened to find

yourself in, were set on making it become true. Solomon also did not yet know that Ira could be exceptionally kind, as well as cruel—and to Solomon, he was kind. Ira was not erratic; in fact, he was fairly predictable. You began, regardless of whatever reputation preceded you, on equally good footing with him. This was something Ira prided himself on—his ability to judge character from a neutral base point. From there, you might become friendly with him and earn a sort of relational credit, or you might incur the inverse and fall into debt. One common way for this to occur was to fall into literal debt.

For now, as far as Solomon was concerned, his cousin was in the garment industry and doing well enough to offer him a room in his home, so what was Solomon to be but grateful.

“Is everything okay?” Ira turned to look where Solomon was looking, which was nowhere in particular, except the city itself, frothing with life.

“Yes. Everything's fine. I'll just need some time to get used to this place.”

Ira smiled and looked out in silence with Solomon for a moment. “You might never get used to it,” he said. “Five years and I have yet to.” He patted Solomon on the shoulder. “Come on, let's get you fed, bathed, and then to my wonderful Miriam in time for dinner. And in that order.”

From Battery Park, they walked to the edge of the Lower East Side, but not yet to its heart. Even from five blocks away, the smells of fish drifted up from Hester street, from where Solomon could detect the vibrations of humanity at critical mass. But at present, they had pulled off the dirt road and descended a narrow half flight of stairs to a steel door just underground. Overhead, at the top of the stairwell, dust kicked up by the hooves and wheels, carts and carriages, swirled into the muggy New York summer time.

Ira rapped a pattern on the door with his knuckles. A moment later, a little tab of metal

slid open at eye level to reveal a pair of squinting brown eyes.

"*Shprikvhort*," said the deep voice to whom they belonged.

"Come now, Moishe," Ira said, taking off his hat. "It's me."

The window quickly slid shut. Then, the door swung inwards to reveal a startlingly large man—a bear of a man. Solomon reflexively stepped back against the stairwell.

"Sorry Ira," the man said, rubbing his bald head in embarrassment. "You know how crazy it's getting with the *simchas* knocking down doors all the time now."

Solomon remained stuck on the sheer size of this behemoth. His head nearly grazed the ceiling of the long concrete hall behind him, and it was a tall ceiling. He was a full two heads taller even than Ira, and probably almost as wide as if the cousins stood side by side. Solomon began to wonder if it was in fact him who did not speak Yiddish—the way he had used the word *simcha* made no sense to him.

"I know," Ira said, reaching up to pat him on the shoulder. "A badge means nothing these days." Ira turned to Solomon, and found him, suitcase in hand, mouth slightly agape and staring at the man. He chuckled, and said to Solomon, "This is Moishe, Moyz, as everyone calls him. Moyz, this is my cousin, Solomon, fresh off the boat from Anapol. You can shake his hand, he won't crush you."

Solomon shook the man's hand.

"Anapol," he said, "now where's that near?" He led them down the subterranean hallway, lit by a single light bulb dangling from the ceiling.

The sight of a light bulb used so liberally in such an unceremonious place as this hole in the ground—now this was certainly new to Solomon, who was accustomed to seeing them only in important municipal buildings.

"It's near Rivne," Solomon said. When they reached the end of the hall, it opened up into a large cavernous room made from oak paneling and lit by several large, glass skylights above them at ground level.

Again, Solomon had little to draw from in the way of comparisons to places from back home, but this place looked, if anything, like a chamber in the parliamentary office in Rivne.

"I have a cousin in Rivne," Moyz said, looking back down the hall anxiously. "Right, well, gentlemen, I should get back to the door. It was a pleasure to make your acquaintance Mr…?"

"Klein," Solomon said.

Moyz's laugh boomed across the hall. "Another Klein in the Lower East Side? God help us!" He walked back to resume his perch on a stool by the door, leaving Ira and Solomon the sole occupants of this strange foyer.

To the right was a closed door, elegantly paneled like the rest of the room. To the left, a steel door like the one they had entered through from the street.

"This way," Ira said, leading Solomon through the metal door and into a room covered by white porcelain tile. "*Oof* Sol, and no sooner we got to the bath house. You smell like immigrant."

Solomon was, firstly, thrilled to have been nicknamed by this man who was somehow his cousin; and secondly, discreetly trying to smell himself for any whiffs of immigrant, whatever immigrant smelled like. He failed to detect it on himself, and this worried him, because if he was missing something as basic as a smell, what else could he be missing too?

"Not to worry," Ira said. "It'll come right off. Same thing happened to me."

It was difficult for Solomon to imagine Ira ever having been in his position or any

position less than pristine and in control. But if he said so.

“Leave your things on the racks here. I'll go and run the bath.”

Solomon did as he was told, first setting his suitcase down on the tiled bench jutting from the wall. He kept forgetting he had it. Then, he removed his gabardine. He could hear the fabric cracking faintly as he wriggled it off his arms. He hadn't taken it off, it was possible, since having left Gdansk seven weeks ago. When he took off his shirt, he started to get an idea of the smell Ira had been referencing; and when he took off his trousers, he understood.

Ira appeared in the open entrance way through which he had just disappeared. “The water’s running,” he said. “Lucky you that it's the middle of the day, and so hot. You'll have the tub all to yourself.” He coughed dramatically and waved the air under his nose. “Or maybe lucky them.”

Solomon hadn’t quite registered until now that he was to bathe in warm water. Every moment in the New World unfolded more extravagance than Solomon had even been able to conceive. When he thought of life in America, he pictured it in broad strokes; in concepts—money, opportunity sustenance. But he had never imagined the elevation of the mundane, not like this. If something as simple as bathing could be thrust into luxury like this, what else could be?

“There should be an extra pair of trousers and a shirt somewhere. If not, I'll have Moyz go to the tailor down the street and pick you up a pair,” Ira said, as Solomon took off his underpants outside of the tub.

Really, it was more like a small pool dug into the ground, covered in white tiling like the rest of the room.

“What's wrong with my clothes?” Solomon asked, dipping his toe into the water.

As soon as he did. He understood what was wrong with his clothes. The water was, it was—Solomon didn't have words to describe it at the moment. But he had feelings. It felt like all the warmth of every good fire he had ever sat by at the hearth after a long day. It felt like his mother's embrace, like the sun poking out after a long winter. It felt like all the deepest, most wonderful God given moments that life had so far offered him, but this one had conjured up at the turning of a spigot, by the apparently mortal fingers of his very own cousin.

Here was a man who could bring down the heavens with his hands. And how was Solomon to wear the dirty, rancid clothes of a peasant before him? Ira didn't answer the question.

"I'll be back," he said.

Alone, Solomon could relax a bit. He lost himself in the water, which quickly turned from milky white—because at that time, there was little in the way of city infrastructure to filter out metals and other minerals—to a muddy brown. His mind wandered back to the forests of Anapol, the leafy blanketing of leaves, the thin, barren trees in the late fall. He soaked for a long time, drifting away from the viscous heat outside and the salty smell of fish, from the dust kicked up on the road that made his lungs become chapped.

It was quiet there in the tub, and he forgot for a time that he was no longer a person who had no knowledge of the world. Knowledge in the shtetl did not mean mastery of life—that was reserved for God alone—it meant that there was ease in the flow of things. That when life was good to him, he understood the worth and weight of what fortune had been bestowed upon him, how much to savor and capitalize upon it, how to conserve it and later use it to his advantage. But here in the Lower East Side, in New York City, USA, he was without context; cut loose from references to his own lived experience. How was he to judge good from bad, easy from difficult? He didn't know even what this place he found himself in was. He hadn't stopped to

consider the fact that there was a large man guarding the door, that there was no one else occupying this extravagant facility; there were certainly enough people outside who would be willing to take a warm bath in private quiet. For the first time, Solomon began to wonder just what kind of work his cousin was engaged in. All these things he would have noticed and inspected at any time previous in his life, but through a combination of fear that his good luck—if what he had thus far experienced was indeed good luck or just normal in America—would run out if he looked at things too hard, and also because learning the customs of New York, of this New World, was like learning a language, one in which he was presently completely unable to speak. What conjugations tied to the ends of words, and whom did they reference? In fact, Ira had not yet made reference to any other people but the Jews of the Lower East Side. Where were the words for the others?

When the water began to cool, Solomon realized that his eyes had been closed. And for however long, Ira had not yet returned. But there was now a towel laid beside the tub which had not been there before. He got out and dried himself. Again, all the time, every minute, the veneer of shock was beginning to wear off and give way to questions: who put the towel there? Where did it come from? Did it not belong to someone? And who had taken such pains to make it so clean?

Solomon wrapped the towel around his waist. Underground, it was tolerably cool shielded from the heat. The heat that would come to take on many meanings for many summers to come—loss, budding love, a desire for escape. But for now, as Solomon entered back into the tiled antichamber and found, as promised, a set of clothes folded for him on the bench, his old clothes nowhere to be found, it was cool. More questions. New York City continued to unfold for him every minute.

For now, however, the main question on his mind concerned finding Ira, and then finding food, and then a flat surface to lie down on and sleep—in that order. Concerningly, however, Solomon did not find his cousin neither in the wood paneled room, nor in the hallway to the street. The grotto's only occupant, it seemed, was Moyz, who remained perched on his stool and reading a copy of the day's issue of Der Amerikaner.

Solomon would not have taken Moyz as a literate man in the old country. It had never been particularly important for Solomon, at least, to learn. He was not a yeshiva student, nor did the tobacco trade require any special attention to letters. Numbers were concerned—weights prices stock and times were units Solomon could easily interpret. And he was, though he didn't know it yet, a God born wizard with them. But letters he had no knowledge of, outside of what the boy on the boat had taught him of the alphabet, and even that, he had half forgotten. If this man could read, whose apparent occupation was to sit and guard a door—from who or what, Solomon had no clue—then what sort of work was Solomon qualified to do?

Solomon was disturbed at not finding Ira, the soul connection he had in earnest yet made on this entire continent. He cleared his throat.

"Mr. Moyz?" Solomon said.

Moyz looked up from his newspaper, which looked like a pocket square in his massive hands. Upon seeing it was Solomon, he emitted another booming laugh.

"Mr. Moyz! Ha! I must say I've never heard that one before. Please, just Moyz."

"Right. Ah, Moyz, do you know where Ira is?"

Moyz stood up from his stool and stretched his back.

"My apologies, I should have told you already. He told me to tell you he would meet you at Melamed's. That'd be on Delancey and Sixth avenue, not more than six blocks south of here.

He should be waiting for you there."

Solomon's heart sank in his chest. He was apparently being told to venture out into the city alone. "How do I get there?"

•

It's hard to know when to stop going back. I think of Dov Ber when I think of my movement back in time. The family tree never ends; there's always an impetus for the creation of another being. And since at the end of the day, we're really only ever talking about me here. I suppose I want to get it right. And since talking about me requires me to talk about the people who made me, who were the loci of collisions between circumstance and time, I feel I need to map out every one.

If the canvas is time and the brush is circumstance, then the loci that are my ancestors would each be a dot of paint; and if I could just plot them all and draw the lines between them, you would get a picture of me. For analogy's sake, it would be somewhere between pointillism and connect the dots. Not high art, but recognizable as me. But like Dov Ber, access to the entirety of these points has been lost—maybe destroyed, maybe just unmaintained.

I understand that my point of view, my certainty with conditioning through circumstance (+ time = person), this very heavy humancentric explanation for one's coming to be, has not always been so popular. Don't get me wrong, I don't subscribe to it because I think it's correct somehow in a primordial way. In fact, I don't really care about Truth a whole lot to begin with. But maybe I'm fooling myself. But maybe not.

I subscribe to the idea of me as a product of the people before me (time + circumstance) for the preservation of my own sanity. And this functions in two ways, which I will now explain for your benefit, reader.

1) I'm fucked up in the brain. And so has my family been. Thank you for the knowledge. neuroscience, you gave me my happy pills. (Side note, a friend asked me the other day what time period I wish I had been born in, to which I replied, now, because they have the best meds.) But I have to essentially forget about the predispositions I came out of the box with, and leave it to the psychiatrists. Because as soon as I give my neurological inheritance too much weight, there goes my agency over my own getting out of bed and such. No one is dumb enough to argue for freewill anymore. If, reader, you're feeling attacked by that, you should consider growing up. But I have to forget about the Truth, and just fucking live my life, because what else is there to do? Otherwise, how would I figure out how I tick, and why?
2) I find it enjoyable to tear my family apart, apparently, in pursuit of understanding myself. I suppose this is because I'm just someone who can live with putting up their entire family as collateral.

But I feel sometimes like Dov Ber's mother, unsure of where the new family tree begins. Because who knows, maybe I could trace it all the way back to King Solomon. The *Maggid* was from my town. It's a tempting thought, but Dov Ber had the courage, and maybe just enough heathenism inside him, to restart the family tree, beginning with himself. Why not with his mother? You'd think he'd be so kind as to allow her into the picture. But Dov Ber said, "Starting with me!" That is to say, he would be his own nutrients, his own soil, for a family tree. He would perform magic, creating something out of nothing, sprouting a tree with no seed to begin with. So is that an act of God, stealing a seed from the One upstairs, or wherever the fuck? Why not

just say you lost the tree, that you misplaced it, or that it was burned in a fire or destroyed in a pogrom? But Dov Ber had to play God and restart the whole thing.

I find myself unable to do that, or at least unwilling to try. I know the roots are there. I'll never be able to dig them up, but they are there, one strand in the infinite web of time. The roots are there. I'll never be able to dig them up, but I can put my shovel into the ground and dig pretty deep. If I don't, if I was to pull a Dov Ber and attempt to steal a seed from heaven, it would be my ruin. Whatever strands of time are spindled together in whatever specific place of circumstance that together, equals me, would fray and disintegrate into nothing. I am certain that I would fail to restart my family tree.

Maybe Dov Ber succeeded, but he also had magical powers. So, in lieu of a reset button, in the absence of heaven's seed, what can I do, but start as far back as I can? Before Solomon, there were many more before. We once lived on the continent of Africa, and before then, we were neanderthals, monkeys, huge reptiles, fish and single cells. And before that, we were stars, supernovas and black holes. Before that, we were gas, and before that, God created the heavens and the earth. See how much I've missed? How many missing links? It's all I can do not to

Solomon in New York.

As Solomon would later come to find out as fact, but upon emerging onto Delancey Street suspected was the case, the Lower East Side laid claim to two superlatives in the year 1901. It held, first, the largest single population of Jews of anywhere in the world, and second, was the most humanly dense, most crowded neighborhood, period. This is not an exaggeration. This was over 700 people living per acre. And though it would not have astounded Solomon to learn that his suspicions were on both accounts correct, it astounded him to see with his own eyes that it was possible in the first place.

See Solomon Klein, making his way up the roaring river that was Delancey Street in 1901. When he had first walked from Battery Park to the bathhouse, he had been too exhausted and also too focused on Ira to notice much of what was going on around him. But now, alone and utterly terrified, he saw it all. For one, most everything seemed to be written in Yiddish: the signs on the dirty white awnings advertising tailor's shops, tanneries, and banks; the painted wooden signs nailed to humble stalls lining the edges of the street and to the even humbler pushcarts being wheeled by young teenagers. They wore tattered shirts, unbuttoned scandalously far down their chests in the heat and knickerbockers pulled up obscenely high on their legs—inside their carts, mounds of fruits and vegetables, mostly, and occasionally fish, meat, and poultry. Notably, there was no pork to be found anywhere. There was a reason the largest market in the Lower East Side was called *Chazzer*, Pig Town to the goyim. You could find just about everything from a wagon but a pig, they said.

To be clear, this little show on Delancey Street, which so overwhelmed Solomon Klein on his first day in the New World, was not one of the largest markets. If it had been Hester Street, or even Ludlow, poor Solomon really might have stowed away on a ship back to Europe and gone home. But in the most crowded neighborhood in the world, it was all the same. Solomon made his way north. Most of the people he could easily identify as Jews; it was Friday, and they needed to procure everything before the Sabbath. Some of the Jews he could recognize by dress—Chasidim in long black gabardines, long black beards, and round black hats. All this with no regard for the sweltering heat. There was no way, Solomon thought, as he passed by a group of them talking on the sidewalk, smoking their pipes and grandly waving their arms in argument, that God intended the Jew to be so damn hot. As if forty years in the desert already hadn't been enough. But some things must be passed down.

In some places, the river of bodies pooled together so heavily that passage further up the street seemed impossible. It was not in Solomon's nature to push, to step on toes in any way. But for a few nightmarish blocks through Delancey Street, he had no choice but to shove anonymous shoulders, torsos, and legs aside. No one seemed to notice—they were all doing the same.

After a few more blocks, Solomon lost count of how many he had already traversed, not being able to see above the rocking waves of heads. At some point, the crowd finally became sparser, and he was able to see again the stores at the bases of the endless buildings flanking him on either side. Moyz had instructed him to walk straight from Delancey for six blocks, until he came to the intersection with Ridge street where on the far corner to his right would be a restaurant with a blue awning and large glass windows to the street. On the awning would be written “Melamed” in Yiddish, of course, and he was to tell the man at the counter that he was the cousin of Ira Klein.

Solomon had registered all of this; though the first problem was that he had no clue if he had passed Ridge street already. He had trudged through the crowd for probably an hour and had no desire of entering back into it. At several points during his journey, he had been sure he was going to be trampled. The second problem with Moyz’s instructions was, of course, that Solomon could not read; and, at least at this intersection, there was no blue awning. There was, however, a purple awning above a restaurant on the corner. Ira had said something about Moyz being colorblind, and the place otherwise matched his descriptions. The word on the awning looked to be about the length of the last name “Melamed.”

Solomon entered through the door propped open by a wooden wedge to allow even some modest circulation through the restaurant. Inside, a few groups of Jewish men sat at tables, eating potato knishes, filleted white fish, and chopped liver. The salt of it brought Solomon's attention

back to his stomach, which at present, had gone without a proper meal in almost seven weeks. The pain was immense. It no longer resembled any hunger Solomon had yet in his life; it barely felt connected to food anymore. It was like that someone had punched through his abdomen with their fist and was in the process of fiddling around with his intestines.

He approached the counter, doing his best to hide the pain, though the sight before him didn't help. In the glass display case, rugelach was lined next to rugelach. The doughy swirls of sugary tan and brown beckoned to the deepest reaches of his soul. Solomon could not at the moment recall wanting anything in his life so much as this rugelach sitting behind glass at waist level.

"Can I help you?" said a gruff smoker's voice, not very kindly, from above the counter.

Solomon pulled his gaze away from the case and met eyes with the source of the question. He beheld a startlingly short man, maybe fifty years old, wider from shoulder to shoulder than tall, his inky eyebrows as thick as a caterpillar's, and the bones underneath them ending a quarter inch over his eyes, shading them like a canopy. Hair erupted violently from near every part of his body that Solomon could see at the moment, his chest hair connecting up into a day-old beard. Notably, it was missing from his scalp, atop which sat a hairline in complete recession, emerging only in two horizontal bands of ink just above his ears on either side. Presently, his huge, bushy arms were crossed across his apron, and Solomon registered that he did not look particularly happy to see him. His frown, Solomon was willing to guess, even in the New World, was hostile.

Solomon cleared his throat, gaze drifting towards the formidable row of butcher knives hanging from the wall behind him, trying not to picture them being wielded by those behemoth arms. "Ah, sir, I'm the cousin of Ira Klein."

Immediately, the man's face melted into a grin, exposing a row of yellow teeth close to indistinguishable from the gold fillings occasionally appearing between them.

“You're the cousin!” he said, reaching across the counter to shake Solomon's hand. “And a cousin of Ira’s is a cousin of mine. I don’t think that’s the saying, but anyhow, it’s good to meet you.” His grip was as firm as his arms suggested, and Solomon's hand, upon being released, felt crumpled like a wad of paper.

“I’m Isaac Melamed. Everyone calls me The Knish; I don’t mind either one.” He waved his arm around the room theatrically. “And here is my restaurant. Anyhow, you must be wanting to see Ira.” The Knish turned around to a closed door behind the counter. “He's in the back with some business partners—doesn’t want to be disturbed at the moment, I’m sure. But he'll be done soon.”

Solomon's stomach growled audibly, even over the clattering of silverware and arguing between the men at their tables.

“Fresh off the boat, huh?” The Knish said, reaching down and sliding the glass case open. “You know there's a reason they call me The Knish.”

He took out a knish almost double the size of his hand and wrapped it in newspaper from a stack on the butcher's block behind the counter, then held it out to Solomon.

“I don't have any money,” Solomon said, looking at the ground.

He laughed. “It's my pleasure. For your first day in America.”

Solomon looked up at the knish in the hand of The Knish. “Thank you,” he said.

“Don’t look so glum. I'm your friend.”

Solomon took it from his hand. This was good news, having a friend in America.

“Come,” said The Knish, gesturing to the door. “I was just going out for a smoke. Grab

those two chairs from the corner, will you? It's too hot to be inside."

Solomon dutifully grabbed the two mismatched wooden chairs from against the wall and followed Isaac out to the sidewalk. He set them down beside the window, bracing his hand over his eyes against the sun.

"Sit, sit," The Knish said, sitting down himself and producing a leather tobacco pouch from his trouser pocket.

He opened it up, and immediately the smell drifted over to Solomon. He had worked with tobacco for half his life and saw no issue calling himself an expert in the plant. He could recognize the type, origin, and method of curing just by smell. But what he smelled now coming out of The Knish's pouch was altogether different than anything he had yet encountered. It was earthy, like the sap of a tree, but without the tinge of bitterness that accompanied similar blends he had dealt with. In the middle, it was soft as a pillow, and drizzled above it all was the distinct scent of honey. The Knish took a pinch between his butcher's fingers and sprinkled it onto a paper from his pouch.

"What is this tobacco?" Solomon asked. "I've worked with tobacco for fifteen years and I have no clue what this is."

"Ah," The Knish said, rolling the cigarette up and licking it closed into a perfect cylinder in one continuous motion. "*Virginia* tobacco." He tapped the base of the newly formed cigarette against his palm. "Only grown in the state of Virginia, USA. What the Indians used to smoke."

"Before what?" Solomon asked, tentatively unbuttoning the top button of his shirt, assuming it would be permissible based on the state of the men's shirts around him.

"What do you mean, before what?" He sat back in his chair and exhaled a stream of smoke.

"You said the Indians smoked it. What happened? They don't smoke it anymore?"

The Knish thought for a moment, large gears turning behind his forehead. "Well, I suppose the ones that are still alive still smoke it."

"Alive? What happened to them?"

"White people is what happened to them. Why you think there are all these wops and micks in New York? You think the Indians just said, 'Here, please, take our land'?"

Solomon had no idea what those words meant, though he had the sense they were not kind. He hadn't considered this before. It made sense, of course, though it briefly troubled him to think that he might himself be committing a pogrom by coming to America.

"And the *shvartsem,* the *neggers*—Solomon, who you think did all the work for the white people?"

At that moment, Ira stormed out the front door, dragging behind him a small, bony Ashkenazi by the collar of his shirt, and threw him onto the street.

"Don't you play silly with me, *fakakta*!" Ira barked at him. He pointed in the direction of the road. "You go see Mordechai right now, and you tell him you were mistaken, that you misheard. I don't care what you say, as long as I have my one-thousand units personally delivered by tomorrow, you good for nothing *schnorrer*! Fucking pisshead!" Ira spat on the sidewalk.

He had switched to English at the end, saying something that, again, Solomon could not understand, but again, did not sound kind.

The wiry man got to his feet, brushing off the dust from his black trousers.

"Listen, Ira, I didn't mean to insult you—"

"I don't care what the fuck you meant!" Ira stepped towards the man, at which he

stumbled backwards to put more distance between them. “Tomorrow. Or you can explain this to Meyer himself. Does that sound good for you? Tomorrow, Yentl. Tomorrow.”

The man turned around and scuttled down the street. When Ira turned and noticed Solomon sitting at the table, knish frozen somewhere in motion between his hands and mouth, for a moment, there was a lingering trace of something terrifying in Ira’s eyes. For half a second, Solomon saw in him something completely different than the kind, welcoming man who had accompanied him from the dock. He looked instead like a beast, like an animal hunting for dinner. Solomon was horrified; his muscles felt stuck. He stopped breathing for a moment, as if worried that the very sounds of his body might cause Ira to direct his rage at him.

But then, Ira seemed to recognize his cousin again, and his face softened into an apology.

“I’m sorry for that,” he said to Solomon, smoothing out his open suit jacket. “Just a little business dispute.” He pointed to the knish in Solomon’s hand. “I see you’ve tried The Knish’s famous knish. Something else, no? He uses a secret ingredient in the dough. Knish, will you tell my cousin what?”

The Knish smiled and shook his head. “Can’t do it.”

Ira walked over to him and rubbed his shoulder playfully. “Not even for our new friend from the Old World?”

“Can’t do it. A secret’s a secret.”

“Well, I can respect that,” Ira said, removing a silver pocket watch from inside his jacket. Upon seeing the time, he looked up at Solomon in despair. “*Oy*, Sol, this is not good. We’re going to be late for dinner. Miriam’s going to have my head on a pike.” He replaced the watch into his jacket and shrugged at Solomon. “What can I do? She’s like Ivan the Terrible, but she makes the best chopped liver on this whole damn continent.”

"She's going to be upset with me?" Solomon asked, looking to the ground.

"No, no, no," Ira said, lifting Solomon's chin with a finger. "It's me she's going to be upset with. She'll be delighted to see you. But let's not test her anymore. Come."

It was only a few blocks to Ira's tenement, but they had left late enough that the sun was already sinking in the west, bathing the city in warm colors.

"Listen, Sol," Ira said, as they walked in the middle of the road, which was now almost empty.

Solomon could see families through the windows of passing buildings, engaged in preparations for the Shabbos—children carrying plates and silverware to tables, women finishing their cooking, men sitting in chairs and arguing with their hands—and it almost felt, just a bit, like home. Wherever it was Friday evening, in any corner of the world, Jews were making Shabbos.

"Hey, Sol," Ira said, stopping in front of another dirty stone building that receded back into the block. He clasped his hands together in prayer and looked intently at Solomon. "Listen, please don't mention where we went today. Not the bathhouse and not Melamed's. If Miriam asks, you tell her we went to the public bath on Delancey and then to Beit Shalom to introduce you to Rabbi Shechter. Got it?"

Solomon didn't like to lie. He wasn't good at keeping secrets; his upper lip quivered whenever he tried. But he didn't want to disappoint Ira, and he was now feeling somewhat terrified at the prospect of what might happen to him if he did.

"I understand."

Ira smiled. "Good boy," he said, patting him twice on the cheek. He took a deep breath and again smoothed out his jacket. "Let's have Shabbos, shall we?"

Ira led him through the splintering wood front door to the stairwell. On each side of the tan plaster walls, browned by dirt and tobacco smoke, were thin wooden doors. Through them, Solomon could hear an impossible number of voices, all speaking Yiddish. He could hear three generations, at least, coming from behind every single door they passed as they ascended up the creaky stairwell, which bowed under every footstep. When they arrived at the fourth floor, Ira stopped in front of the door on the right. On the frame hung a beautiful gold mezuzah—Solomon was sure it must have been gold—with engraved swirls and rippling patterns carved into it.

Ira proudly caught Solomon staring at it. “It’s beautiful, no? I got it for Miriam for her birthday. Solid gold,” he said, putting his fingers to it and then kissing them. With the other hand, he opened the door.

Gabriel Goes to Israel

Gabriel had tried going to college, he really had. But after one semester, he was still doing it as much for his parents as he told them he would be. Every minute he spent in a huge lecture hall listening to a professor talk about Tolstoy or Chekhov, his mind was on something else, somewhere else. It wasn’t that he didn’t like learning, or even learning about Russian Literature in specific—he liked both. But it felt deeply and urgently unimportant. The last straw came the night when he tried pot for the first time with his roommate, Jared, and girlfriend, Elise, for whom Gabriel did not particularly care.

Elise had been adopted as a baby from Cambodia by a family in Oakland and was, as a result, involved in the Students Against Genocide, a club at Berkeley. Gabriel was not a fan of the SAG. One would think that this would be exactly the organization to champion the right of the Jewish people to establish a safe homeland for themselves. Instead, they seemed to have forgotten entirely about the holocaust, because they regularly protested the Israeli government

along with a slew of other governments in places like Africa and South America which, as far as Gabriel was concerned, had nothing to do with Israel. They called the Jewish State an *occupation*, an *act of colonialism*; they called it *apartheid* for fuck's sake. This, to Gabriel, was insane. Colonization was what the Europeans did to the Native-Americans, killing hundreds of thousands of people. Apartheid was what was happening in South Africa, where Black people were denied entrance by law into restaurants and pools and hotels. Even America, Gabriel had conceded since coming to Berkeley, was in essence an uncodified apartheid state, not so different from South Africa.

But Israel? Gabriel just couldn't see it. First of all, where else were the Jews supposed to go? Those that hadn't been shot, gassed, burned, or starved to death had had to go somewhere. And besides, how could it be an *act of colonialism* if the land had been theirs in the first place? Colonizing meant stealing land that was not one's to steal, correct? Then how the fuck did that have anything to do with what the Jews had done with Israel? The land had been theirs. If anything, they were the ones who had been colonized. It wasn't even a religious thing—Gabriel was no Talmud thumper. This was archaeology. Real, actual history. Recorded expulsion. Was there a statute of limitations on how long a people had to have been successfully expelled for them not to be allowed back? Fifty years? Seventy? One hundred? Two hundred? Whose place was it to decide when it wasn't theirs anymore, when they were no longer home comers, but *colonizers*? The SAG? Gabriel didn't think so.

Elise, in truth, wasn't particularly smart. Mostly, she was just loud. Gabriel had known all of this, though it wasn't in his nature to confront her as someone whom he didn't know well. He thought lowly of Elise whenever she spoke, and of Jared for being such an opinionless, sex-hungry pushover. But when, on the day of Halloween, Jared had burst into the dorm room with

Elise in tow, both already day-drunk, and disturbed Gabriel who had been sitting peacefully and reading with his Thursday afternoon freedom, it had been the end.

"Hey Gabe," Jared had said, taking off his loose, sweaty tank top in order to change into a Hawaiian shirt for Tiki Throwdown at Kappa Sigma. Gabriel didn't respond. "Hello, McFly?"

"Hi, Jared," Gabriel said.

"You want some of this doobie?" Jared took a joint from his dresser and waved it around in Gabriel's face.

"Nah, he doesn't want it," Elise said, flopping down onto Jared's disgusting beanbag, which had somehow already come to smell like a mixture of flat beer and spoiled milk in only three months of use.

For whatever reason, Gabriel felt like proving them wrong. It wasn't that he wanted to impress them, he just wanted to show them that they weren't special.

"I'll take a toke," Gabriel said, sitting up on the side of his bed.

"Oh shit, really?" Jared asked, pulling a purple Hawaiian shirt layered with green flowers over his head. "You sure?" He picked up a plastic lei from his desk and donned it around his neck.

"I said I wanted to, didn't I?"

"Alright, dude, no need to unchill," Jared said, picking up the joint and putting it in his mouth. "Babe," he said to Elise, pointing to the linoleum floor next to the beanbag. "You grab that Zippo?"

As Elise grabbed Jared's Zippo with a bald eagle mid-wing-flap set against the backdrop of a waving American flag, Gabriel realized he hated these people. Furthermore, he realized that he hated the institution of undergraduacy in this country. If he had been born in Israel, he would,

right now, be doing something truly important; he would've been fighting to protect his country from existential threats—not like the American military, fighting proxy wars over oil interests. Other Jewish boys, young men, Gabriel's exact age, were at this moment driving tanks across deserts or manning radio stations or conducting top-secret reconnaissance.

And what was Gabriel doing? Hitting a poorly rolled joint which he had just been passed and coughing his guts out. A real revolutionary. All these self-righteous college kids spent their time doing was parading around fashionable picket signs and doing psychedelics and designer drugs and playing self-discovery. And now, uncomfortably stoned, Gabriel could see through it all. These kids were doing nothing. They were living exactly the hollow, meaningless lives that Gabriel had explained to his parents he wanted to avoid by enlisting in the IDF. How had they even talked him out of it?

Eventually, Gabriel fell into a brick-heavy, dreamless sleep. When he woke up, his head felt foggy, and the sun was already high in the sky, casting steep, dusty beams of light onto Jared and Elise spooning each other in Jared's bed. Gabriel pushed himself up to sit, thought about it for a moment, and decided to go to the Israeli consulate in the city and apply to make Amidah as a lone soldier.

Last night, Elise had droned on about genocides around the world, all of it as the result of *whitey*. It wasn't that Gabriel couldn't see her point—it made enough sense. The western European countries had, in effect, colonized the world, and as a result set up systems that benefited them disproportionately, almost singularly. They occasionally threw bones to minorities in order to give the impression of progress. But then, Gabriel stopped following Elise's argument. She believed that capitalism was inherently designed to uphold this system and that as long as it prevailed, the White Man would retain his power.

As Gabriel laid back on his pillow, tongue starting to feel heavy and large in his mouth, fingers feeling either too close together or too stretched apart, he saw the entire system unfold before him. Vast American assembly lines producing cutting edge medications, mosquito nets, and Malarone to be shipped to Africa; TV's to be put in American homes at prices that would allow most families to see the news. Was it fucked up in some ways? Was Reagan a fuck? Yes, and yes. But how was Brezhnev doing with the Soviet Union? How had the USSR turned out for all its communism? If it hadn't been for American production power, the Jews would have been annihilated in the Holocaust, and Nazis would be ruling the world.

As Gabriel rode the BART to Chinatown, he pressed his head against the window, all scratched up with graffiti etched with rocks and nails. He felt angry, replaying the scene with Elise from last night and going through all the things he could have said to her. Better that he hadn't; he would be gone soon anyways, off doing exactly what the SAG claimed to be fighting for: preventing genocide.

It wasn't in Gabriel's nature to hold a grudge for very long. At the end of the day, he understood that Elise and Jared had just been doing what they thought had been right, what they believed was going to make them happy and fulfilled. For Elise, that was engaging in the activism that she thought was going to make the world a better place; and like for Gabriel, it was a personal pursuit. Elise didn't know any of her biological family from Cambodia, but she had said before that she felt a sense of connection to them. Gabriel could sympathize with this; Cambodia had just come to the end of their own genocide. For Jared—Jared was attempting to make himself happy and fulfilled by getting sloshed off of pitcher-margaritas with other white boys at frat houses and generally being a pushover to Elise. They weren't bad people, but that didn't mean Gabriel had to be friends with them or give their opinions any particular weight

beyond making a show of listening respectfully.

When the train stopped in Chinatown, Gabriel walked up the subway stairs to the crowded street above. The remnants of Lunar New Year spread out before him: red paper lanterns strung across apartment balconies, crisscrossing above the street; bits of red confetti tumbling and flipping over themselves along the pavement. Gabriel thought of the times when his dad would take a cab with him here from USF after he finished teaching for the day, and they would get dim sum the two of them. Jumbo shrimp and steamed buns filled with sweet red bean paste spinning between them on a lazy Susan.

As he walked to the consulate, he thought now of Israeli mothers whose children had never come home from the bus like they were supposed to; he imagined Kibbutzim on fire, the elderly being shot by terrorists. There was nothing to be done—Gabriel had to go. He had to be of some use, somewhere in the world. His people had survived for millennia, and by some chance, some line of mothers and fathers had managed not to die of cancer or get murdered or crushed by a tree before passing their seed along, to eventually make Gabriel.

Now, after thousands of years, the people to whom he owed his life finally had a land of their own. And not more than thirty years later, its existence was in jeopardy. What choice did he have but to do his part? No more of this American college bullshit, no more of these kids sitting around, wasting their time doing drugs and getting alcohol poisoning. If that was what floated their boat, good on them, and Gabriel wished them well. But there was more out there for him, and he was lucky enough to know exactly what it was.

As Gabriel reached the gilded doors of the consulate, a cold gust of wind blew down the street, passing right through his sweater and proudly rustling the Israeli flag hanging above the double doors. He shivered, and all at once, he saw his life in Israel. He saw himself in a brown

IDF uniform fitting his muscles, newly developed from basic training; he saw himself firing an AK-47 at a practice range, progressively honing his aim until he was as good as he was at darts; he saw himself tanning on a beach in Tel Aviv on the weekend, playing volleyball with beautiful Israeli girls in bikinis. It was all so clear. He just had to go upstairs and sign the papers.

Solomon at Ira's

The scene that greeted Solomon behind the door to Ira's tenement was utter chaos. Solomon counted three young children running across the wooden floor; two men engaged in a shouting match, one of whom presently spilled the ash in his pipe onto the floor in the middle of gesticulating; a third man asleep in his chair at the table, who looked so skeletally old that he could have been dead; and through an open doorway in the back, three women working frantically in the kitchen.

"Good," Ira whispered into Solomon's ear. "They're not sitting down yet." He looked over at his cousin and saw the same stupefied look that had been making appearances all day. Ira tussled Solomon's curls and shook his cousin's head around lightly. "Relax, Sol, we're in my home now. Let's get you introduced to everyone." Then, he once again whispered into Solomon's ear. "And remember, we went to the public bathhouse and then to see Rabbi Shechter. Got it?"

Solomon nodded. Ira smiled widely and gestured to Solomon to follow him into the dining room. Then, he stomped his foot dramatically and pointed his arms at Gabriel, like a ringleader presenting an exotic animal to a crowd.

"Everyone, this is Solomon Klein, of Anapol, Russia."

Everyone abruptly ceased doing whatever they had been doing. The children halted their game of tag, the men stopped yelling, and turned to stare at Solomon. After a moment, the three

women emerged from the kitchen. The old man, however, continued sleeping in his chair, toothless mouth open to the ceiling. Solomon was really starting to think that he might be dead.

One of the young women stepped forward. She was beautiful, her black hair tied up in a bun over her pale skin. Her face was full at the cheeks, punctuated below the eyes with high cheekbones. She, like the other two women, was wearing a white lace dress for the Shabbos.

"Good to finally meet you," she said. "I'm Miriam."

"This is the one I've told you so many good things about," Ira said, as he walked around the room and attempted to take her by the waist and kiss her.

She pushed him away at the chest, looking annoyed. "You were supposed to be here an hour ago. Your cousin is going to think we have no order in this house, and what were you doing, anyway?"

Ira looked embarrassed. "Miriam, how about we introduce our family member to the rest of the people here?"

"How about we sit down for the Shabbos and eat?" Miriam snapped. "The sun is practically down already. Solomon, you must be famished."

Ira threw his hands up. "You're the boss. Solomon? You want to eat?"

Solomon swallowed and leaned against the doorway for support. "Whatever is most convenient for you."

Gabriel in Berkeley

Gabriel entered into the marble lobby of the consulate, where a massive security guard in a black suit stood with his arms crossed over his crotch, holding a metal detecting wand in his hand. He was bald and very Ashkenazi and terrifying.

He stepped forward between Gabriel and the elevator door. "What business you have

here today?" he said in a thick Israeli accent.

"I, uh, I want to make Amidah and join the army," Gabriel said, feeling like, based on the size of this man, the army was no place for a toothpick like himself.

But the man's face softened into a smile. "Good boy. But I need to make this metal detector on you before you can go in." He gestured to Gabriel's chest. "Hold your arms out by the sides."

Gabriel did as instructed. When the detector detected nothing, the man pointed him to the elevator and said to go to the third floor. Gabriel entered the elevator—more marble, more gilded handles. He pressed the button, and as it carried him up, he began to feel his blood run faster, like he was on his way to do something illegal. He dreaded the prospect of telling his parents, but it was already done. There was no way he was going to walk out of this office without having enlisted.

On the third floor, Gabriel had to speak to an elderly Ashkenazi woman sitting at a desk behind a thick wall of glass. She lowered her cat eye reading glasses to the bridge of her nose when she asked Gabriel for a letter of recommendation from his rabbi, which he did not have, and then for his passport, which he also did not have. She looked suspicious of him, and Gabriel understood why. Every day, Israel was coming under attack from people who wished to harm Jewish people. There were so many people out there with so much hate in their hearts who couldn't accept that the Jews had finally established a home for themselves. Why were people so territorial about land in the first place? Admittedly, Gabriel hadn't studied Islam—though he was beginning to think it might be a good idea—but sharing stuff and welcoming people must have a tenet somewhere in there, right? His Afghani friend from chem, Fayez, had told him something about how in Islamic history, the Prophet Mohammed's lineage traced back to one of Abraham's

sons or brothers or someone. So how different could the Arabs be from the Jews in the first place?

The woman at the desk handed Gabriel a packet of forms to fill out, including a list of required materials, one of which was his passport, which Gabriel knew for a fact was in the safe in his parents' closet. The pinch was coming earlier than he would have liked. Ideally, he would have already signed something intractable. But Gabriel needed that passport; and he also needed a written recommendation from Rabbi Tannenbaum. The passport, he would need to go through his parents for, short of learning to crack a fireproof safe. The rabbi would also tell his parents, that gossipy fuck. Gabriel felt bad for thinking it, but it annoyed him how the people at Beit Am shared everything with each other. The potluck of life—if someone became incontinent, it was as shareable a thing as potato salad; someone's kid dropped out of college? It spread like shmear. He needed the passport and Rabbi Tannenbaum, and there was no way to get either without involving his parents.

Gabriel picked up a mooncake from a Chinese bakery. Then, at the threshold of the turnstiles in the BART station, he decided to take the train straight home. As he sat in the hard plastic seat among all the people commuting home from work, the thoughts of being yelled at in a language he barely knew by menacing Israeli officers, or the unimaginable hardships of basic training, or crouching behind some wall under gunfire—it all seemed so much easier than telling his parents. He could see his dad's head in his hands, his mom crying onto his dad's shoulder after asking Gabriel again and again not to do it. It would be hard, it would be painful, excruciating even, and Gabriel wasn't looking forward to it. But he was resolved: he needed the passport, Tannenbaum, and then to defend his people from any and all harm—in that order.

Solomon at Ira's

The introductions, in the end, waited until after they began eating. This was fine with Solomon, because the knish had only done so much for him, and his ability to remember names or to properly socialize was near nonexistent. Saliva practically spilled out of his mouth upon smelling the challah. To his vague shame, Solomon found himself completely unable to focus on the prayers over the candles. When the kaddish came around, Solomon felt drunk after his one sip of wine. The blessing over the challah grabbed his attention, though again, with some shame, he found himself unsatisfied and even angry with his one meager piece of bread. His head continued to spin with wine until the women carried dinner from the kitchen. Miriam spooned chopped liver, fried whitefish, and bread onto Solomon's plate. He was completely certain that this was the hardest moment of his entire life, to wait for the others to be served before he could begin eating. He clenched his fists against his thighs under the rickety table.

Finally, Miriam served herself and sat down. "Please eat," she said to Solomon.

He felt his senses rush back to him as he did. He tried to retain at least some civility in his eating, but for the moment, he didn't much care. Almost as if without his participation in the act, Solomon found his plate completely empty. Miriam appeared behind him and refilled it. He managed a brief thank you before clearing it again.

When he finished his second plate, Solomon sat back in his chair with his hands on his stomach, as if he possessed no manners at all. He would recover his impression on these people soon, he told himself, but for now his stomach was beginning to emit shooting pains. Then, he looked up across the table and forgot all about them. It was a woman. Somehow, he hadn't really taken her in before, but now he had to pry his eyes away from her with some effort. She must have been Miriam's younger sister, and not much younger than Solomon. She had Miriam's hair color, but hers was much bigger, exploding out in curls. She also had Miriam's fair skin, but hers

was constellated below the eyes and around the cheeks with freckles. Her dress allowed nothing further down than the bottom of her neck, elegant as a swan. This was the point where Solomon had to look away. He decided that staring at his lap didn't look good for him either, so he settled on checking on what Ira was doing at the head of the table. He found Ira looking at him with a teasing smile. He winked at Solomon, at which point Solomon gave in and returned his eyes to his lap.

"Sol," Ira said, "let me introduce you to the rest of the lovely people at the table. To my left is my wonderful, gorgeous wife, Miriam, who I am very sorry to for having arrived late. And to her left is Miriam's younger sister, Leah Janowitz, also very gorgeous, as you can see, and still looking for a husband by the way."

"Ira!" Leah said, shooting him a glance before looking away towards the door. Somewhere while her head turned from one end of the room to the other, Solomon thought he caught a blush in her cheeks.

"Alright, alright," Ira said, still smiling. "I'm just trying to help, you know."

Leah made another face at Ira. "Excuse my brother-in-law," she said, in Solomon's direction but not quite at him. "Sometimes Ira can be very annoying."

Ira shrugged. "I say what I see, and I see that you're smitten with my cousin."

"Ira, leave her alone," Miriam said, lightly hitting him on the shoulder but, against her best efforts, also smiling in amusement.

"I'm done, I'm done," he said, throwing his hands up. Then, he set them back down on the table and leaned towards Leah. "But one last thing, my dear: I think he's smitten with you too."

Leah groaned and put her face in her hands; Solomon returned his eyes to the safety of

his lap.

"Next to Leah is my zeyde, Yonatan," Ira gestured to the toothless old man who had previously been sleeping.

At present, he was eating soup, his shaky hand lifting some sort of broth to his mouth. He seemed to vaguely register that someone had said his name, because he turned towards Ira's direction and emitted a quiet grunt before returning to his soup.

"And to his left, at the head, is Benjamin, the patriarch of the wonderful Halevi family, with whom we share this very, very small tenement."

Benjamin, who looked to be maybe sixty, had a gaunt face and large blue eyes. He wiped the edges of his mouth with a napkin and reached across the table to shake Solomon's hand.

"A pleasure," he said, with the raspy growl of a smoker's struggling lungs. "I'm told you've come from Anapol. I'm from Lutsk, myself."

Solomon nodded. "Not so far away."

Benjamin shook his head. "It is now. But well, what's to be done." He pointed at the younger man to his left, maybe thirty years old. "Here's my son, Abraham."

Abraham looked exactly like his father, skeletally gaunt and with blue eyes, just without the wrinkles and droopy skin. He shook Solomon's hand. "Good to meet you," he said, his voice startlingly deep for his meager frame; maybe what his father's had been like before all the tobacco. Abraham returned to his food.

Benjamin rapped on the table in front of his son. "Hello? Is that all you have to say to our new friend?"

Abraham looked up from his plate irritably. "I introduced myself. What else do you want?"

Benjamin sighed. “I apologize for my son,” he said. “Next to you is Abraham’s wonderful wife and my daughter-in-law, Sarah.”

“Hello,” Sarah said quietly. “How do you do?”

“I’m well,” Solomon said. “And you?”

“Fine, thank you.”

Sarah was skinny like her husband, small in the hands, and thin in the wrists and neck. She had wrinkles which radiated out from her eyes towards her ears, like a child’s drawing of the rays of the sun; they made her look sad. Her whole body looked like sadness—her head craned forward as if waiting for the deathblow from an executioner. Solomon found himself feeling sorry for her, though he didn’t know exactly why.

“Sweet girl,” Benjamin said to Sarah. “You’re lucky to have her, you know,” he said, wagging his finger at Abraham, who grunted in response without looking up from his plate.

“He’s right, you gloomy *kadokhes*,” Ira said from across the table.

“What do you have to be so morose about all the time, hm?” Miriam said.

Abraham looked up and passed his glare over everyone at the table. “Will you leave me alone? What did I do to any of you!”

Benjamin sighed again. “And over there,” he pointed to a small crate on the floor behind Solomon, at which sat three boys, completely identical in appearance to one another. “These are my grandsons, the triplets. On the left is Herschel, then Springer, and then Eliyahu.”

Solomon could not find any distinguishing features between the three of them. They all had the same apricot hair, each with his payot curling down to his earlobes. They each waved to Solomon identically when Benjamin had pointed to them and then resumed eating at their makeshift table.

When everyone finished eating, the women cleared the plates to bring down to the square courtyard which opened up in the center of the tenement, where they would wash the cookware in wooden buckets. Ira led Solomon into one of the two rooms adjoined to the dining room, where there were four metal cots crammed against the plaster walls.

Ira pointed to the one below the modest window to the courtyard. It was made up with a pillow and wool blanket atop a thin cotton mattress. Ira informed him that this one was Solomon's, and that he and Miriam would now be sharing the cot across the room. Zaydi slept in the one at the foot of Solomon's, and Leah in the one at the opposite corner. The thought of sleeping in the same room as Leah sent butterflies through Solomon's stomach.

Apparently, Ira noticed. He winked at Solomon and bumped up against his shoulder. "Don't get any ideas," he said.

Gabriel in Berkeley

Gabriel got off the BART and walked home—his parents' home. Everything that he passed seemed like a monument to his life spent here: Mexican restaurants on street corners, certain chain link fences that he had driven past on the way to school every day with his mother; cracks in the sidewalk that wedged the pavement up at angles. As he passed each one, it felt like crossing many small but decisive Rubicon's. It was like Gabriel was already shedding his skin, his boyishness, and readying himself to become a man. No more lecture halls, no more stoned philosophical discussions, no more coming home to his parents on weekends. Onwards to a tougher version of himself. Onwards to the rest of his life. He felt momentarily resentful to his parents for raising him in such a soft, meaningless culture. But at least whatever they, or the circumstances that had made him who he was, had resulted in giving him a strong enough sense of moral duty to know what he had to do, and to do it. And knowing all of this, as he arrived at

the door of his—his parents' house—this part was not at all easier.

Gabriel took a deep breath. Only his dad's Saturn was in the driveway. His mom was probably taking a walk with friends; the day had turned out so nice. Gabriel walked up the steps to the stoop and tried the front door. It had always struck him as vaguely medieval, with its dark wood frame arching at the top, and its spiraling metal knocker. It was unlocked. His dad didn't teach on Thursdays—he would probably be reading something or grading papers in the leather La-Z-Boy in the living room. He liked that spot because it had the best natural light of anywhere in the house, and through the window out the top of the hill on which the house sat, you could see the San Francisco skyline poking out above the fog.

He pushed open the door as quietly as he could and slid through it, half opened, before closing it with both palms. The soft click of the lock echoed through the hallway entrance. The thought came over Gabriel that maybe, if he went through the motions quietly enough, somehow no one would have to speak during the entire process. This notion immediately dissipated when his dad called over from the living room.

"Rachel?" he said, from around the corner.

Gabriel sighed. "It's me, dad," he said, walking into the living room.

Alan lowered his reading glasses down his nose in surprise. "Gabe! I thought you had class."

"I do," he said, sitting down in the middle of the ancient, stitched couch. He rubbed his hands together on his lap.

The clock above the couch ticked. Alan sat his stack of essays down on the stand next to the La-Z-Boy in full recline and clicked his pen shut.

"So, what's up?" he said. "Everything okay? You have a look on your face."

Gabriel took a breath and puffed his cheeks out for a moment before letting it out. He went to speak, but only the putter of a word's beginning made it out of his mouth. He reclasped his hands on his lap.

"Gabe, what's going on?"

Gabriel looked up to see that his dad was squinting his eyebrows in concern.

"I—have something to tell you." He kneaded and reordered the words in his head, trying to find a combination that sounded right. None came to mind.

"I can see that," Alan said.

"That makes sense. So, the thing—the thing is that…" Again, the ticking of the clock.

"Gabe, what?"

"I decided to make Amidah and join the IDF. I went to the consulate today, but I need my passport. And a letter of recommendation from Rabbi Tannenbaum, and I knew he would tell you, so I wanted to tell you first. And I need the passport from the safe."

Alan closed his eyes. There was no emotion on his face that Gabriel could recognize. Without opening them, he said, "You're sure this is what you want?"

"One-hundred percent."

"You've really, really thought it over? Everything that it means to do this?"

"Yes."

Alan opened his eyes. They were glazed over with a film of tears. He looked at Gabriel for a moment, and Gabriel looked at him. Alan knew his son—it was clear to him when he had resolved himself to something irreversibly, and it was like that now.

"You're going to be the one to tell your mother. God knows I'm not doing it."

Gabriel looked down again and sighed again. "I know," he said.

On cue, the sound of the front door opening echoed from the hallway.

"Alan?" Rachel called. "Are we eating in tonight? Because if we are, we're going to need to—" She stopped at the arched threshold to the living room and took in all the concern in the room. Her husband with his eyes squeezed shut, Gabriel looking pained. "What's going on?" she said slowly.

"Hi mom," Gabriel said. "I came here to tell you guys that I decided to…" He rubbed his palms against his forehead. "I decided to join the IDF. I already went to the consulate—it's for real this time."

Rachel sat down on the ottoman in the middle of the room. Her face went blank for a moment.

"Gabe, you don't need to do this," she said, her voice monotone, devoid of life, hopeless. "There are other ways to—"

"Mom." Gabriel reached out and put his hand on her limp shoulder. "I'm doing it. There's nothing you can do that'll make me decide any different. I need my passport from the safe."

Rachel was silent for a moment. Then, she let out a noise, something so deep and primal and heartbreaking that it resembled nothing Gabriel had ever heard come out of his mother before—or, in fact, from anyone. She began to sob, lifting her head to the ceiling and releasing long, screaming cries. It was as if her very heart was flooding out of her throat, spilling down from her eyes. Alan got up from his chair and knelt next to her on the rug, holding her by the shoulders and resting his forehead on her cheek.

For a moment, Gabriel hated himself. He saw no remedy for this but to get up and leave, so he did. He shut the door behind him and proceeded to walk down the hill to his old elementary

school. He couldn't think of anything except this line he'd read for class from a short story by Chekhov about a guy in a river, on vacation with his friends:

> "He kept on swimming and diving. 'By God,' he kept exclaiming, 'Lord have mercy on me!' 'You've had enough!' Burkin shouted to him."

Gabriel sat on a bench across the street from the school, watching the kids who hadn't yet been picked up by their parents climb the monkey bars and play four-square. He saw himself playing on that same playground and running into his parents' arms when they appeared out of the parking lot. He remembered how on Fridays the Sikh man named Singh parked his white ice cream truck on the street in front of the school. How Gabriel's parents would give him a quarter, and he would reach up to the window, and Singh would give him a watermelon popsicle, already knowing what he wanted because he got the same thing every Friday.

He knew that what he was doing was right, but it was so goddamn painful. He loved his parents, he wanted to make them happy. But there was an end. He saw now that his entire life up to this point had been one linear, connected strand of events, of experiences that led to one another and had felt, at the time, like big changes, significant stretches of growth. But now, Gabriel understood that it had all been small, that it had all been for this.

He loved his parents, he wanted to make them happy. They needed to understand that everything they'd taught him, had done for him, it had all been for this. They needed to see that in fact, this decision was a mark that they'd been successful in instilling the moral values in him that they had intended to. They wanted the Jewish people to have a home, didn't they?

But it always has to be someone else's kid putting their life on the line. He understood, he sympathized, but the actual chances of anything bad happening to him were so slim. If they looked at the stats, it wasn't that bad at all. It wasn't like being sent into Normandy, or Khe Sanh.

And Gabriel also knew that just like there was nothing they could say to change his mind, there was nothing he could say to change theirs. It wasn't just that there was a chance he might be in harm's way, it was that he was going to be on the other side of the world. The thought wasn't easy on Gabriel either. But he was going to be in the company of a much larger family that would take care of him; he would be among an entire tribe. He hoped that his parents would see this on some level, at some point. They needed to, or it was just going to be more painful for everyone. There was nothing he could do about it anymore. He'd said what he'd had to say, and it was on them now to deal with it.

He got up from the bench and walked back to his parents' house. He had to get that passport. Gabriel steeled himself as he walked back into the house. He couldn't afford to get stuck in any more emotional whirlpools. He walked through the hall, past the door to his parents' bedroom, which was unusually closed. He could hear his mother crying from within, and his strength failed him. He walked instead to the end of the hall and into the kitchen, taking a seat on one of the wicker barstools at the counter. Resting on it was his passport.

He didn't stop to reflect on the situation; there was no time if he wanted to catch Tannenbaum before the consulate closed for the day. Gabriel flipped through his parents' rolodex on the counter by the fruit basket until he found the number for the front desk at Beit Am. He grabbed the telephone from the wall and punched in the number as fast as he could. The woman on the answering machine informed him that the temple closed at five from Mondays through Thursdays. He looked at his watch—he'd missed it by ten minutes. If his old bike was still in the garage, he could make it to the synagogue in another ten, and maybe Tannenbaum would still be in his office.

Gabriel grabbed the forms from the stand by the front door and ran downstairs to the

garage. His bike was still there, poking out from behind a pile of boxes next to Alan's golfclubs. Gabriel had gotten a new bike midway through high school and taken it to Berkeley with him. This one hadn't been touched in well over two years. He pulled the open the garage door and rolled the bike out, its wheels squeaking with every turn. The chain was rusted to shit, but it'd get him to Tannenbaum, and he'd never have to use it again.

The sun was beginning to set by the time he got moving. This time, Gabriel allowed himself no openings for sentimentality to seep in as he rode through Berkeley. Now, he was focused.

He pulled up to the temple parking lot so quickly that he almost crashed into the curb before the rusty breaks kicked in. He checked his watch again: five-twenty, just over two hours until the consulate closed. The lights in the sanctuary were off, but Tannenbaum's office was in the back. Gabriel sprinted around the side of the building, past the woodchipped playground, and saw light poking out through the drawn blinds of the rabbi's office.

Gabriel tried the back door next to the office but found it locked. He walked up to Tannenbaum's window and knocked against the glass, hard enough to rustle the blinds inside. It wasn't ideal, but he would do what he had to do. Gabriel waited for a moment with his hands on his knees, out of breath; he'd need to get in better shape before basic training started.

A hand pulled open the blinds down across the middle of the window, and Rabbi Tannenbaum's eyes poked out from behind. Gabriel waved at him. Tannenbaum looked confused for a moment, then disappeared again before emerging out the back door.

"Gabe? What are you doing here?"

"Hi, rabbi," he said, clutching the forms in his hand. "I have something I need to talk to you about. It's urgent. Do you have a second?"

The rabbi looked concerned. “Of course. Everything okay?”

“Yes, yes, everything’s fine,” Gabriel said.

They entered through the dark hallway and walked down into Tannenbaum’s office.

The rabbi sat down behind his desk lined with encased baseballs signed by various Giants players next to framed pictures of his family. “So, what’s up?”

Gabriel set the forms on the desk and took a deep breath, not yet having recovered from the effort to get here. “I’m going to make Amidah and join the IDF, and I need a letter of recommendation from you before the Israeli consulate closes at seven-thirty.”

The rabbi took it in for a moment. “You already talked to—”

“I just talked to them. They know.”

“And they’re okay with it?”

Gabriel shrugged. “They gave me my passport from the safe.”

Tannenbaum looked at him intently. “You’ve really thought this through, Gabriel?”

“Yes.”

“And you need this letter tonight? Why?”

Gabriel didn’t have time for this. “I just do.” This sounded ruder than he had intended. “I can’t put this off any longer,” he added. “Will you please do this for me?”

Solomon in New York

Solomon had fallen into a deep sleep the moment he’d laid down, dreaming of the forests surrounding Anapol and wedding nights and drowning on the boat from Poland.

When he awoke. The sun was already flooding through the window, and the rest of the cots were empty and made. The temperature in the tenement was near unbearable; the heat made it hard for Solomon to think. For a moment, he had to trudge slowly backwards in time in order

to place himself in the cot. He wiped his brow dripping with sweat. Now he realized everything was wet, soaked by his body. His head pounded. He needed water.

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Solomon and Ira walked the several blocks back to Melamed's.

Along the way, Ira said, "Sol, I told you I'm in the garment industry. You remember?"

Solomon nodded.

"You seem like a discrete man, Sol. Are you a discrete man? Can I trust you to keep information private like you did from Miriam yesterday?"

Solomon didn't like where this was going. He was prepared to put yesterday's events at Melamed's to rest; in truth, he didn't want to know. But here was Ira, welcoming him into his home. What choice did he have but to go along?

Saure," Solomon said. "I don't see why not."

"Good. Because you should know the truth about what it is I do for a living." Two uniformed police officers passed by them, giving them looks. Ira remained silent until they had walked out of earshot. "Alright. The truth is Sol—what I do isn't always completely legal. Technically speaking."

Sol looked up at him. "Go on," he said.

Ira looked pleased. "In short, I'm employed by a Jewish organization working for the improvement of the quality of life for the Jewish people of New York City. Now," Ira said, looking behind him and then back at Solomon, "we do indeed have our hand in the garment industry. In fact, my boss is a silent partner in one of the largest gloves and handbag operations in the whole city. But as far as my job is concerned in that area, I deal primarily with the unions at this company and at several others. Sometimes the workers make—" Ira searched for the

words, "—unreasonable demands, about all sorts of crazy things; wages, safety conditions, you name it. They are, in fact, taken very good care of. But these union people are never satisfied, and sometimes they strike. In that case, someone like me is called upon to make sure that these people don't feel, let's say, entitled to their ridiculous demands and that the work keeps running smoothly! I'm what you might call—an aggressive negotiator. You understand what I'm saying?"

Solomon frowned. "I'm not sure."

"You're cute," Ira said, slapping him on the back.

He stopped them in front of a goy fruit vendor on the sidewalk and handed the boy a coin, bending down to pick up two red apples. He handed one to Solomon and they kept walking. Ira took a bite and said through a chew, "What I mean is …" Ira turned and smiled at Solomon.

"What?" Solomon asked, accidentally launching a bit of half chewed apple onto Ira's billowing linen shirt. Solomon turned red in the face. "Sorry," he said.

"Not to worry," Ira said, flicking it onto the ground. "You know what? I don't need to bore you anymore with this talk about my work."

"No, Ira. What? You can tell me."

Ira mulled it over in his head. "You want to make money, Sol?"

"Of course."

"Want to make a lot of money?"

"Yes, why not?"

"Good. Then you'll find out what it is I do soon enough. For now, let's just have something to eat. The Knish will make us something good."

"The Knish, he's a Jew, no?"

"Yes, why not?"

"He's running his store on the Shabbos?"

Ira smiled, taking a last bite of his apple and throwing the core down the street much farther than Solomon would have expected Ira to be capable of with his lanky arms. "It's different here than in the shtetl, Sol. We're Jews of course, baruch hashem, but we're American Jews. The way we live life, its …" Ira searched for the words with his hands. "Sometimes, you need to bend the rules a bit so that you can afford yourself the resources to be a good Jew. And to be good to other Jews. You understand?"

Solomon wasn't sure that he did, but he nodded confidently anyway. He'd already disappointed his cousin once with his naivety.

Ira seemed to see through it, because he continued on.

"For instance, you haven't seen it yet, but the shul on Delancey street—the one I told you to tell Miriam we went to—it's beautiful. You could almost start sacrificing in there again."

Solomon nodded gamely.

"And it took serious money to build that thing. What I'm saying is, you can't take off one day of work every week and expect to make a name for the Jews in this country." They arrived at the corner of Melamed's. "Maybe when Miriam gives me a son, he won't have to do the kinds of things I do."

For a moment, Ira's gaze drifted off somewhere far away and took on a glint of sadness that Solomon had yet to see from him. It almost made Solomon uncomfortable, seeing such a man looking so lost. But just as soon as the look came, it vanished, replaced by the same foxlike smile that usually attended Ira's face.

"My son will be a doctor. A lawyer maybe. And he'll be able to do it because of me and

people like me," he said, gesturing to the several men standing around the counter at the otherwise empty restaurant.

Ira and Solomon entered through the door, propped open into the summer. Moyz and The Knish were there, as well as another two men, facing towards the counter, backs to the cousins. One of them wore a beautiful blue suit and a straw boating hat with a gold ribbon around the base. Around the back of his neck was gold chain two fingers thick. On his waist, a watch unlike any Solomon had ever seen.

Solomon looked over at Ira, who seemed to be frozen, staring at the man. This must have been what it looked like for Ira to be scared.

But in a moment, he regained his composure and recovered a smile. "Meyer is that you?" he said to the gold clad man.

The man turned around to face them, He was much older than Solomon had expected—you could see the creases around his eyes and at the brow, but he glowed with the energy of a younger man. His mustache was a glaring white, thick and sloping all the way down to the ends of his chin.

Upon seeing Ira, he smiled, revealing a row of perfect, equally white teeth.

"Ira. Good to see you. Good Shabbos."

"Good Shabbos to you. I wasn't expecting to see you here."

Meyer frowned slightly and cocked his head. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

Ira answered him a beat late, as if translating what had just been said to him. He looked over at Solomon like he had forgotten he was there. "Oh yes, of course. This is my cousin, Solomon Klein. He just arrived here yesterday from Anapol, Russia. Solomon, this is Meyer

Wolff."

"Your cousin!" Meyer said. "Well, that's quite something." He approached Solomon and stuck out his hand, which Solomon now noticed was dripping at the fingers with all sorts of bright metals. "It's good to meet you."

"Likewise," Solomon said. He could feel an aura of power emanating from this man; as if he was somehow a head taller than he appeared.

"Well," Meyer said gingerly, "it was actually you, Ira, that I came here to see."

"Oh yes?" Ira said tentatively.

"Yes. I just wanted to discuss the situation with our friend and the implications that it might have for you if it continues on to …" Meyer stopped, smiled warmly, and patted Ira on the shoulder. "How rude of me to talk business while your cousin is here on his first day in America."

"Oh, I don't mind, Mr.—" Solomon started.

Meyer dismissed him with a wave of the hand. "I have to get going anyways. Solomon, was it? Well, you just remind your cousin about our meeting," he said, winking at Ira. "And if you're looking to make a bit of extra money, just let Ira here know, and he'll make sure you're taken care of. Won't you?" Meyer turned to the men at the counter. "Moyz, Isaac, good Shabbos."

"Good Shabbos," they replied in unison.

"Levi," Meyer said to the third man, who was about Solomon's age, with thick black hair slicked and parted at the middle, and lean, chiseled muscles strapping his body. "Come along."

Levi grabbed his suit jacket from the back of a highchair at the counter and turned to follow Meyer out the door. As he did, Solomon caught the flash of a revolver tucked into a

holster at his waist. He followed Meyer out into the street without making eye contact with either cousin on his way out. His expression was blank and stony; it was easy for Solomon to see this man using the revolver.

No one said anything until Meyer and Levi were well out of earshot. Then, Ira slammed his fist against the wooden doorframe at the entrance.

"Fuck!" he yelled.

"Hey!" The Knish said, holding his arms out in despair. "That's my door you're berating!"

Ira closed his eyes. For a moment, his whole body trembled with anger; it practically radiated off him like waves in the horizon on a hot day.

Moyz approached him cautiously from the counter. "Ira, take it easy."

Ira's eyes snapped open. "Do you realize how fucked I am? Meyer came all the way here on the Shabbos to see *me*?" He shook his head, trying to regain some composure, and took a deep breath. "Okay," he said, putting his hands together. "Moyz, Knish, what did he say to you?"

The two looked at each other and then to Ira.

"He didn't say anything," Moyz said.

It continued to startle Solomon, listening to Moyz speak—the profound innocence in his voice carried in such deep bass from the body of a giant.

"What the fuck do you mean he didn't say anything? I clearly remember seeing him in the middle of a conversation with the two of you."

Moyz shrugged and looked to The Knish for assistance.

"He was here for maybe two minutes before you came," he said, throwing his hands up. "What do you want me to say? He asked about my family, he asked for the secret ingredient in

my day—like everyone—and then you two walked through the door. That's it, Ira. Now calm down. I can't have you breaking my restaurant."

Ira took one of the dining chairs stacked upside down against the wall and turned it over, setting it against the ground. He collapsed into it and put his head in his hands. "This is not good. Not good.

"What happened" Solomon asked tentatively, following suit and placing a chair on the floor.

Ira peeked out at Solomon between his fingers over his eyes. He looked at him for a moment, trying to divine something from his cousin. "Nothing," he finally said. "Don't worry about it."

"Ira, it's like you said. I'm a discrete man."

Moyz and The Knish looked on silently from the counter.

"There's no one here to vouch for me, but if people from home were around, I swear they would. If they were here, I mean."

Ira looked up at his cousin again and studied his face, seeming to weight what Solomon had just said. After a moment, he sighed and said, "Alright Sol, I believe you. In a few words, I'm in danger. For me to explain to you any more than that would require me to tell you thinks that would effectively make you an accomplice. You know what that means?"

Solomon wanted to know, but unfortunately did not; he figured honesty would be the best course of action here with Ira. He didn't know exactly what the stakes were, but it was apparent they were high.

Ira looked to the men at the counter. They looked at each other, Solomon looked at all three of them. The Knish shrugged to Ira, Moyz did the same. Again, Ira stared at Solomon,

trying to judge, it was apparent now, his trustworthiness and capability. Solomon stared back at Ira; he already trusted his cousin with his life. Anything Ira could tell him would be for good reason.

"Alright Solomon," Ira said. "An accomplice is someone who knows about a crime. Or aids it to be committed. That means that if someone like me, for instance," Ira pointed at himself, "was to tell someone like you," he pointed at Solomon, "about something I did that was not legal, the police would have a reason to arrest and charge you with being an accomplice to that crime. You follow me?"

Solomon nodded.

"And the answer to your question about what just happened with Meyer, it would be making you an accomplice. Now, I would never normally let someone who I don't intimately know in on this information, but," Ira reached over and patted Solomon's knees, "you're my blood. Listen, if anything should ever happen with the police, may they be cursed, they might threaten you with arrest, with prison, and tell you that you need to cooperate with them in order to avoid it. But this organization to which I belong—we have many friends. Some of these friends are very good lawyers, some are police, some of them are judges, and some are politicians. And because we have this friendly relationship with them, they do a very good job of making sure that little problems go away. You still understand?"

Solomon understood.

Gabriel Goes to Israel

Gabriel made it to the Bart station with an hour to go. Cutting it close, but still doable. Back on the train, he began to feel a momentum within himself moving parallel to the train, rocking around turns, speeding up noisily, slowing down to halts. The people around him had no

idea that they were witnessing a momentous occasion taking place before their eyes. Two disheveled homeless guys in duct taped puffys with tangled beards sat in the double seats opposite him, talking about making the cutoff for a breakfast tomorrow at the VA. A mother sat with her son leaning against her shoulder, reading to him in Spanish from a picture book. Gabriel caught fragments of it, leftover from high school Spanish. Something about a frog … speaking to someone … something, something, protection. If Gabriel could get a good grasp on Hebrew, Arabic would only be a step away; and if he learned Arabic, they would immediately recruit him to the intelligence.

Gabriel found himself smiling as the train grounds to a halt midway through a tunnel between stations. He looked around. People were groaning or waking up from naps to look out the window. A woman's voice came over the speaker in a low husk, announcing that the train ahead of them was having mechanical issues and that they would be stuck here until the maintenance crew showed up to fix it. She would update them with any further information. Then, the speaker went silent, with no apology for the delay.

Gabriel's chest sank into his stomach. He checked his watch: thirty minutes. If the train wasn't moving again in the next few minutes, he would have no shot and would be forced either to return to his dorm or to his parents' house.

Sammy Comes Home from School

I came home from school for the first time with my eyes wide open. Everything was bathed in new light. Houseplants were no longer houseplants, trinkets brought home from vacation no longer trinkets, greetings from my parents at the airport no longer greetings. They were at their base, still these things—in the language I'd picked up from Plato in Intro to European Philosophy, they were still *things in themselves*. Their Platonic forms remained intact

—but they had been stripped of the relationship I had once had to them, and that was one of power over me. Everything at home had once branched off of my parents at the root and had thus held authority over me. They were in my world as mediated by my parents, the authority. But now, I had gone out and seen that the world would conform to me on my own terms, without the structure of my parents. It was all very coherent, and I was ready to show them.

The ride from the airport was a pleasure. It was a joy to show them in everything that I was no longer theirs. I felt their excitement cute. They had the wrong kid in the back of their Lexus, driving out of Boston on the Pike.

The Prudential faded from view out the back window.

"So, how is everything?" Ima asks me.

"Flight was okay?" Aba says.

"It was fine. Just a flight."

Ima turns on the classical station from the passenger seat. "How is it to be back?"

"Fine. It's good to see you guys again." Even my kindness is a show of how much I am no longer theirs. This is the kindness of an adults who has seen the world and understands that every human is a subjective consciousness, capable of being hurt, striving for fulfilment, and deserving of respect. I will outclass them in their own goodness; I will lead them by example to adopt a correct, modern, updated moral structure.

"Good to see you too!" Ima says, smiling at me through the rearview mirror.

Something about the maternality of it makes me squirm; there's a pull there which I feel obliged to resist. *We like hot tubs because we want to get back into the womb*.

"There's Snickers and Dr. Pepper waiting for you at home," Aba says.

"Thank you. That's very kind." I haven't had either since going to school, but I'm here to

humor them.

Even now, I'm aware in a fractured sort of way of the immaturity of it all, and it only sends me one level deeper into removal. But catching glimpse of my own capacity for introspection makes me certain that I really have changed. It's not 'college knowledge.' And maybe some of it is, but the very fact that I'm aware that it might be means that I'm no ordinary freshman.

Aviv's home from New York for the week, her first days off since starting her new job. When I open the door, she comes in from the living room, looking startlingly basic in her athleisure. She like she does exactly what she does for a living. And you know what, I think, good for her. It's not what I would choose, and in fact, I'm against it; but if that's what she thinks will make her happy … you know, good for her.

We hug. I make sure that it's unusually tight; she needs to know that she's dealing with an empathetic adult.

Solomon in New York

The sun warmed Solomon's back as he walked down the street with Ira. In truth, he didn't much want to be walking or doing anything which required physical strain. His skin felt papery and thin to the touch, and he was only losing more water through sweat, which at the moment was leaving a wet, dotted trail behind them in the dusty road. But Ira had to move, it seemed, always. He was always reaching to move to the next thing. His mind was constantly focused on the. Next thing to come, traveling down the forks in the road which chance and circumstance might send him along in the coming moment. Solomon could see the process manifesting in his cousin's body. Ira's fingers often tapped against his thighs or any available surface, as if counting something out. Sometimes Solomon would catch him spelling out words

in the air with his finger. In conversation, Ira was a good listener, but something in his eyes betrayed that his thoughts were at the same time elsewhere, as if working through some piece of arithmetic.

"Here's the deal, Sol," Ira said, tapping a pebble down the street with the point of his leather shoe. "This man, Meyer Wolff, he's the head of the organization of which I'm a part." Ira's eyes flitted side to side for not even a blink, and then he said to Solomon, "We're called The Black Hand, by the way."

They came upon a wooden bench on the edge of the sidewalk and sat down beside each other. Ira unbuttoned another button on his shirt, which now exposed a strip of his torso nearly down to the top of his navel.

"This thing that had Meyer so upset—you wouldn't know he was upset just by seeing him there in Melamed's, but the fact that he came to see me personally on the Shabbos means he is upset—it has to do with the man you saw me get rough with the other day, Yentl. More or less —" Ira tipped his head from side to side in thought, "—Yentl's job is to keep the men who sew trousers in his factory, well, sewing trousers. And it's my job to make sure that Yentl is making sure that the workers are doing their jobs. When they're not—if they go on some ridiculous strike over who knows what, as they have been this week—Yentl calls me to make it go away. Usually, it's no problem. But there's this new schmuck union boss, Aaron Benioff," Ira spit on the ground in his name. "This guy is a nothing. Thinks he's a big deal, that he's the 'champion of the people.' Silly things like that. He's like a ram at the head—doesn't give in, doesn't negotiate, doesn't reason. This Benioff is tough; I'll give him that, but as a result of this self-righteous cunt, we've lost thousands of dollars' worth of product."

"How much is thousands of dollars?" Solomon asked.

Ira smiled. “Let’s see,” he said, doing the calculations in his head. “Probably three-thousand dollars, last time I checked, must be something like seven-thousand rubles, I believe.”

Solomon’s lips parted slightly as he mouthed the figure to himself. “Seven-thousand? You make seven-thousand rubles in one week?”

Ira laughed. “Wouldn’t that be nice. No, that’s what the factory makes. That money gets split up lots of different ways, but Meyer sees the most of it out of anyone. Then, he controls maybe fifteen other factories of equivalent size, and on top of that, numerous other very profitable enterprises. You should see that man’s house, Sol. I went inside once, and—”

“But how much do you yourself earn in a week?” Sol cut in, to Ira’s passing annoyance.

“It depends a bit on how well the people under me do, but I’d say, on average—forty dollars a week.”

“You’re joking,” Solomon said. “Ninety rubles in a week? Every week?”

Ira smiled again. “It’s the truth. But unless I fix this thing with Benioff—” he let out a puff of air from his cheeks, “—I won’t be making a single ruble or dollar anymore.”

“How’s that?”

“Well,” Ira said, “if I don’t fix this Benioff thing within a few days …” He sighed and slapped his knees. “Meyer’s probably going to break my arms and legs.”

The breeze filled the silence between them for a moment, and Solomon finally understood what this was. “I see,” he finally said. “So, what are you going to do about it?”

“I’m going to have to make Benioff change his mind one way or another. But I’ll tell you one thing,” Ira said, sticking his arms out in front of him as if asking for alms and shaking his head. “I like my arms and legs just how they are, and no one will be touching them unless I say so.”

"You can't do something to intimidate this Benioff?" Solomon asked, feeling acutely aware of the fragility of the bones in his own limbs, and shivered.

"Good boy," Ira said, smiling. "Now you're thinking. But beyond the fact that Benioff is a stubborn piece of shit, he's got a squad of factory goons protecting him now against exactly this. We run the factory, no doubt, and we owe this man nothing—but if we go and really mess up the 'champion of the people,' I worry that there will just be more support for people like him."

Solomon thought for a moment—and then had an idea.

Gabriel Comes Home

The train stayed put for thirty (continuity) agonizing minutes, during which time the momentum that had been propelling Gabriel dwindled down to faint embers and sputtered dead. Tiredness replaced what had been a buzzing all throughout his body. When the BART finally did begin to move again with a series of clunks and grumbles, Gabriel hardly noticed a thing. He felt unable to expend energy to convert impulses of emotion into thought, his brain warm and sticky.

When the train arrived and left the stop that Gabriel could have returned to his dorm room from, he felt as if he had no control over the body he seemed to inhabit—as if moving at the whims of larger forces in a dreamscape. Still without much of his own volition involved, he got off on the stop to his parents' house. Muscle memory built up from a lifetime worth of getting off at this stop carried him up the subway stairs, out through the turnstile, and into the evening. He followed his footsteps back home. They glowed against the pavement amidst the setting darkness; there were imprints from the soles of his shoes of all sizes, from the tiniest Velcro to the high school Converse, and they led him as if by dotted marks on a treasure map all the way home.

When Gabriel opened the front door, it was Shabbat (time continuity). It must have been, because the sweet smell of his mother's challah drifted to the front door all the way from the alcove off the kitchen. His mother's singing voice carried bright and clear, though tired in a way that it wasn't usually. She was blessing the candles, Alan's low voice humming quietly across the house beneath hers.

Gabriel smiled for a moment; he always forgot how sound traveled in the house. They must have heard so much of the things he had intended to keep private over the years. But the situation dawned on him again, and the smile faded. He didn't know what to do. Technically, Israel was still an option. But as strongly as it had felt right just an hour ago, it felt now like he had missed his chance/. There was something enveloping him in the air of the house, something that made him feel so much like the child of his parents that he understood, with equal parts relief and dismay, that he would never do it. Someone else's kid would wear brown and die in the desert for his country. Gabriel would have to be thankful to someone else for their bravery; he would feel reverence for the boys in the grassy graveyards with stars above their names, rather than understanding what it had been like for them to die like they had. He would only be able to guess, no closer to being one of them than a child playing with little plastic soldiers, little plastic tanks, little plastic parachute men.

Gabriel, my father, could and would say that it was the train that made him not do it; that when he came back into his parents' home, his home, and saw his mother's puffy red eyes waving Sabbath light into her cupped hands and she saw that he hadn't, wouldn't do it, her face gave way to such profound, soul-scraping relief that Gabriel knew he couldn't do it now or ever. He knew he had to stay as a son.

This is what he says, and I don't blame him, because I don't think he knows it's a lie. The

truth is that it was in him all along—or rather, it wasn't in him. Same thing. I saw this having jettisoned al the judgement and sonly bias I reasonably can. The consensus was that he was a good kid, my dad, for sticking around his parents; but that was just a fortunate result. He didn't stay in Berkeley for the next three and a half years because of them. He did it because he was scared. I don't mean scared in a masculine sort of chickened-out way—I imagine he could've taken the yelling and gunfire as well as anyone else. He was scared of giving himself up completely, and this is a deeply American sort of fear. American because it's a fear of giving up your personal identity, of accepting your role as a part that when functioning correctly, works smoothly, quietly, knowingly at the mercy of the greater machine in which it is housed. The American thing is to have an identity—to be yourself so certainly that you can forget from moment to moment of the holes in that question, of identity, of being yourself.

If you'll excuse the philosophizing for a minute: to do this deeply American thing of striving to be yourself, there are things you simply cannot afford to think through. Like that if it is possible to be yourself—to become yourself—in the first place, then who were you before? And if you change from whatever you were being into a different being who is now being yourself instead of what you were being before, who did you leave behind? What skin did you shed? I think that's a part of why American vets struggle with PTSD when they reassimilate into civilian life here. The army is so unamerican in that way, that you learn to strive for selflessness.

Gabriel stayed behind because he had just enough American sentiment of himself as special and unique; as being able to stand up high and do great, memorable things. He had just enough America in him. And the reason he won't admit that this is why he stayed back is because that America within him was not a Jewish-America—it was simply the hotdog eating, fourth of July flag waving, imperialist-number-oneness of American America. If he did or does

ever admit this, it would mean that part of him—a big part, the Jewish part—would split open and reveal that this core chunk of him had been hollow the whole time.

Because if he was too American to be Jewish enough to leave, what was he? And the kicker: what then did it even mean to be Jewish here in the first place? He never asked. Still doesn't. I found out that this was the case when I tried to ask him myself. Roundabout, pointed as my way of asking was, it was clear to me that he would always refuse to answer. But on some level—albeit very different levels, he and I both know the answer.

It doesn't mean a lot. Mezuzahs all the way down.

Sammy Comes Home from School

There are many things that happened between my parents and I—which happened to my parents at my hands—things that caused them pain and which I still regret or have worked through regretting. Don't worry. I know you already know this.

But there are also things, a much smaller set, which even with a healthy stretch of hindsight behind me now, that I can't bring myself to regret. Even though I did cause them pain. That is to say, there I things which I stand by having done, believe it or not.

When I came home from school that first time, there were lots of things that didn't need to happen. I didn't need to distill all of college into myself and aim it at my parents—but I did, and we've laughed about it since.

The conversation with them about Israel though—that needed to happen. Just the way it did, just when it did. It broke something between us three, and for reasons you can imagine, especially between my father and me. This conversation is not something we laugh about now; it's not a conversation we've referenced since, and Israel as a question, as anything but a

statement, has never resurfaced.

It went like this:

We got home from the airport and our Labrador, Golda, peed on my shoes she was so excited. My parents smiled on at all of this, only beginning to catch a whiff of something sour in the air, only beginning to have an inkling that there was something old and rotten underneath my sweetness.

I lugged my suitcase up the stairs and round the corner to my room, where I found the door open, carpet wide and fresh, bed made tight across the mattress, Mohammed Ali poster still hanging on the wall, soccer and basketball trophies unmoved from their resting place on the bookshelf. Nothing had changed since seventh grade. It was like stepping into an old house turned museum, where nothing moves in the hope that the place will be like it was.

On the bed, as promised, the Snickers and can of Dr. Pepper. I put my suitcase on the rug and sat down on the edge of the bed, running my palms against the cotton comforter, and tried to fight back the sink of memories that was this room. There was something about the weight of the air, being at home, somewhere between tight and suffocating. I felt on that bed my new adult skin peeling off; shedding in brittle flakes onto the carpet as I became a boy again in his parents' home.

The more it shed, the less I was aware that it was happening, and the more certain I became of my immediate maturity. Maybe that was what put me in the state to have the conversation that night, being a boy without knowing it, charging into debate with the words of a grownup, unabashed as a child.

Put this way, it doesn't sound like it would have helped any sort of productivity—and I said this was a productive conversation. But maybe sometimes illuminating, uncovering has

nothing to do with producing anything. Sometimes in the absence of productivity, raw understanding comes to be. Too much of this has to be unhealthy, I'm sure. But just once, in one conversation never returned to again, never dug up from the mud, I tore off my father's veneer of adulthood; I set him out to bleed. It was as if I burst and abscess and observed his yellow, rotten insides drain from him. The pus is still gone, even if I never dressed his wound myself. I think he slapped on a dirty bandage on that hole I left in him that night.

Look at me—telling you all about how I'm going to tell you about something and just getting set back in my own thoughts. I hope you're not annoyed; stop listening if you are, I suppose. Actually, this is my show, so maybe fuck off.

But I'll get on with it.

At dinner time, it was Shabbat—as always. My mother, like the mothers before her, had kneaded the challah dough the night before. It had risen in the fridge, puffing out by the morning time against the plastic wrap covering the bowl. Then, she kneaded it again and tore it into three equal parts and rolled each one into a snake of dough. She squished the three ends together at the bottom. Finally, she crossed strand over strand again and again until she had made a woven loaf of tan dough; challah, a gift for her family on shabbat.

When I sat down for dinner at the round table we used when it was just us, my mother removed it from the oven just on cue, light brown and just crisp on top, sure to be pillowy soft inside. My thoughts were more with the smell and its effect on my stomach than the person who had made it with so much love.

On the other side of the kitchen counter, she draped a challah cloth—which I had crudely embroidered many years before—over the bread and brought it to the table on the silver shabbat platter that we had always had, since the beginning. It had been gifted to my parents for their

wedding, and it was surely strong enough to carry any burdensome weight of family that might be placed upon it.

The first stake I drove into them that night: when they said the prayers—you know how that go already—my voice was absent. It was a chorus of two, thin and waning. I didn't make eye contact with them at all. Not for the candles, not for the wine, and not for the bread. There was no reason.

What was Gabriel's shabbat like, that night he came home from the consulate in defeat? Maybe he had the feeling of coming closer to his parents; maybe he pulled away from them in resentment. I can't say. But on my shabbat of great return, I was pulling away from my parents at light speed.

They had the grace not to say anything about the prayers, and we got on to dinner painlessly enough, or at least without acknowledging it. Dinner itself presented the issue that it necessitated talking; no veil of tradition to help obscure the noises in our respective heads from one another.

Some of it is blacked out from my memory, the more painful words struck from the record like violations in procedure. But the core of it stuck with me.

Solomon on Shabbat

Ira and Solomon, even with their Jewish-American freedom, still could not stay away indefinitely from the duties of the sabbath. More specifically, Ira was once again at risk of being crucified by Miriam.

Solomon wondered just how much she knew about her husband's true occupation. Miriam, it was already apparent to Solomon, was neither dull nor naïve, and he couldn't imagine how she would not have been able to intuit that there was something else going on in Ira's life

that didn't involve mid-level managerial work in the very general "garment industry."

How much Miriam was in on it, Solomon would never know. So far, he understood little about how her union with Ira functioned. Ira hadn't let Solomon see any indications of its structure, aside from the occasional grumbling about his wife. Solomon would never discuss any matters surrounding the Black Hand with Miriam. But there would be more than one instance that, through a certain look from her or a convenient absence when involved characters popped up around the house or, only once, a comment made to Solomon that couldn't possible have meant anything else but that Miriam was aware.

Ira was charming and certainly very quick when it came to dealing with people, but maybe due to the speed at which his mind flitted from thing to thing, and maybe because of his lack of preoccupation with any form of solid long-term planning, and most due to a mixture of both, Solomon eventually came to suspect that his cousin's meteoric rise through the New York underworld must have occurred with Miriam's help. If there was anyone around Ira that could have helped him to develop a long-game strategy and to make it play out—it would have been Miriam.

Solomon would never find out that his suspicions were in fact correct. Miriam truly was the brains behind Ira's plots and plans; he was just there to bring them to fruition. If Miriam had been a man, she would have done much more than her husband had ever dreamed. Truly, she would have grabbed New York in her hand and slung it over her shoulder on the way to the White House. And then she would have bullied the British out of Palestine by 1910 and saved the Jews from their impending doom.

Decades later, when the radios were silent and the newspapers blank, and whisperings from Poland and Germany arrived on the back of desperate relatives and acquaintances from the

old country—Miriam thought that if God had made her just a little differently in the womb, she could have prevented it all. She would lie awake at night against the backdrop of Ira's industrial snoring, and she would oscillate between terrible rage at her creator for making her unjustly, and guilt at herself for being unable to overcome any barriers in her way.

But at Ira's apartment, on Solomon's second night in New York, he knew none of this. He emerged from the stairwell for dinner once again, this time feeling a swirling mixture of thrill at having been brought into Ira's world and terror at the nature of it which had now been laid bare before him.

Upon entering the apartment for the second time, Solomon found it much more tranquil than the night previous. A day of sabbath rest had calmed everyone's spirits. The triplets sat around their crate-table playing cards; Benjamin and Abraham sat at the dining table, looking through the set of photographs that they had gone to get taken a few weeks before, both of them marveling at their fine quality while sending puffs of smoke untwisting into the air from their pipes; the three women sat at chairs in the kitchen, their voices traveling to the front door, and chatted about someone's mistress, having already prepared tonight's meal the night before. The only one Solomon couldn't spot was the very old man. Immediately his mind jumped to the thought that he might have died—but no, the levity of the atmosphere in the tenement didn't seem to match up that possibility.

Solomon and Ira sat down at the dining table across from Benjamin and Abraham. Then, as he was supposed to be greeting them, Solomon's heart rose again into his throat as it had upon entering the apartment. This time, it had nothing to do with Ira and union bosses and images of broken limbs, but rather the silky voice of Leah Janowitz, who at present had made some wisecrack—the specific of which were inaudible to Solomon—to the raucous laughter of the

other two women. It was strange, hearing Miriam and Sarah's laughs; Solomon couldn't have pictured either of them laughing (**continuity** already shown laughing). Miriam was too severe and Sarah too meek. But if there was anyone to do it, Solomon thought, it must have been Leah.

"This one's in love," Benjamin said, removing his pipe from his mouth and pointing it at Solomon. "Drifts off to his bellowed before he even hears me say hello."

"What did I tell you?" Ira said, smiling and putting his arm around Solomon. "In another life, I could have been a matchmaker."

Solomon glanced at the open doorway of the kitchen and then back to the men. "Do you —do you think she might ever be interested in me?" he asked in a hush.

Benjamin leaned into Solomon from across the table. "Listen, I'm a man with a bit more discretion when it comes to women than your cousin here. For your ears only: I've been on this earth for quite a while, and I've seen all kinds of women—"

Abraham scoffed from his chair. "That's rich. My father giving romantic advice."

"You've seen the way he treats his wife," Benjamin said to Solomon without turning to his son. "Don't listen to him."

"Go ahead and ask my father about his marriage to my mother and then see what you think of his advice," Abraham replied.

Benjamin put a hand up to silence his son. "Listen, Sol," he said, "I've seen a lot of women in my life, and I've seen a lot of men chasing after women. I've seen some couples succeed and most of them burn each other to a crisp. And let me tell you, boy, this one's keen on you. That much is plain to see."

"You should listen to me more often, Sol," Ira said. "I know what I'm talking about from time to time."

Solomon's hear was still warm with encouragement when the women filed into the main space from the kitchen, Miriam carrying a tray of things for Havdalah, and he felt enough fire within him to lock eyes with Leah and smile at her as she sat down opposite him. She smiled back. This was a look that Solomon Klein of Rivne would have given a pretty girl. It was a relic from the old country, and like many of the oldest tricks, it worked perfectly.

Sammy at Home

"So, what's the Jewish life like at school?" my mother asked, loading beans and soft lamb onto her fork from the cholent she had spent the day slow cooking.

No amount of higher education could change the taste of that stew. The beans were rich and creamy, the lamb tender almost to flakiness.

"Good," I said, choosing my words carefully, not wanting to indulge them too much with any significant entry points into a life which was now mine to be private, but also not wanting to hurt their feelings in a way that might betray some kind of emotional regression. They were paying too much for school for me to become a boy again. Although in truth, American college was a likely vector to bring out the primal child from even, especially, the most formerly mature high schoolers; those who had sacrificed their beings to do the things which needed to be done to get into college. And as for the part about my new right to a private life, this was also a symptom of America. It's a confused country, tending more towards ultrasafe playgrounds indistinguishable from their 3d renderings, which at the same time instills a hyper focused importance on individuality and independence as core rights of the free human being. I've never met a libertarian who wasn't confused. "I think, like, fifteen percent of the school is Jewish. The Hillel's pretty strong."

"And do you go?" my dad asked.

"Once. There's free wine. That might be the reason so many people go," I said, smirking at my plate, starting to play it loose.

My parents gracefully smiled along to the tune of their college boy, thinking that maybe this would simply be an adjustment period. They were good people, as you know, and remarkably open-minded for their age, when the brain really starts losing its plasticity and hardening so that things that haven't yet been done in life feel like impossibilities. That is to say, they sat there thinking that maybe I really had now become an adult, and that they would have to adjust. They had the beauty in them to think that maybe they'd have to grow in the face of their son. Every kid in my family all the way back to Solomon wished they'd had parents like mine.

But beauty has its limits.

"It's just tough," I said, pouring myself a glass of wine into the cup my mother had laid out for me to fill with water. "They're all just kind of unthinking." I sipped leisurely, waiting for them to come to me and dictate the rules of the impending conversation—to fall squarely into blame.

"What does that mean?" Gabriel asked me tentatively.

"You know," I said with my fork. "About pro-Israel stuff."

To my disappointment, they said nothing. I charged on.

"I mean they say that they're liberals and that they hate Bibi or whatever, but they're not willing to actually do anything about it."

From my parents, only the shuffling of silverware. Please stop, they both thought in urgent, pressing waves. I would not stop.

"And nobody even mentions the issue of colonialism. There they are in class, talking about European genocide of Indigenous people in North America and posting shit about being on

stolen land, but then they refuse to acknowledge the fact that European Jews did—and still are continuing to do the same thing to Palestinians. And also, you guys hated Bush and Trump so much, but Israel literally wouldn't even exist without them. It's like the GOP just gives Israel daddy's money to buy fancy toys so they can keep slaughtering Palestinians, and the US gets an ally in the Middle East." I put my fork down and sighed. "It's all so obvious now. And this whole time at school and camp and everywhere, all I was hearing was romanticized shit about the IDF and was meeting kids who'd just gotten out of the army and overall, just essentially being brainwashed. Do you guys not even feel conflicted about this?"

I hadn't really been looking at them for any of my monologue, and when I finally stopped talking, I let them come into focus again. My mother was looking down at her plate with her eyes squeezed shut, hands on her lap. My father looked back at me, eyes wide, head slightly cocked in amazement.

"So—" he grasped for words, "—you're telling me that every other religion in the world should get to have their own country where they can be free from persecution, but not the Jews? Am I hearing that correctly?"

"I mean, that sounds nice in theory, but we form an apartheid state to do it?"

My rubbed her hand around her forehead in desperation. "Apartheid state?" she said in a tremble. "Israel gives the Palestinians food, water, medicine—they give them concrete to build hospitals. And you know what they do with it? They build missiles and bombs to murder as many innocent Israeli citizens as possible."

"And you don't think that Israel bombing hospitals in Gaza with fighter jets that cost literally millions of dollars might have something to do with that?"

"Do you know what Hamas and Hezbollah want, Sammy?" my father said, in a quiet tone

that I had never heard him use. “They want to exterminate the Jewish people. Not metaphorically, not poetically—literally. To annihilate them. That is the language they use.”

“Okay, yes, obviously no one should be exterminated, but that’s a total strawman argument. Hamas and Hezbollah aren’t the entire Palestinian populace. There’s a militant leadership in power because it’s a response to a militant government that is actively oppressing them. Plus, the wars in Lebanon? They were literally just farmers who were armed to fight a proxy war. You think they wanted that for themselves? You think each of them wanted to ‘exterminate’ the Jewish people? Seriously?”

“So, it’s excusable to go shoot women and bomb busses with kids on them!” he said.

“Come on,” I scoffed. “You think if you come into someone’s home, subjugate them in a new society which doesn’t work for their benefit, and ten continually exact murderous violence against them, people are going to just lay down and take it?”

My father shook his head. “So, set aside the fact, for a moment, that you’re equivocating Israel defending itself as a state, and terrorist organizations deliberately targeting civilians—set that aside. Where were we supposed to go after the Holocaust! Please, tell me!”

“I don’t know. We could have stayed put in Europe. The Allies were there to more or less forcibly reform the continent.”

“So, we just—”

“Excuse me,” I said, putting a hand up. “I was speaking. And yeah, it wouldn’t have been ideal for them to stay in the place that a genocide against them had just occurred in, but shouldn’t that be exactly the moment in history that the Jews have the most compassion for what it’s like to be displaced from their homes? The only reason the Holocaust ever gets talked about this much is because the violence was against White people. Why didn’t some colonizer country give the

Tutsis their own state? Or the Cambodians?"

"My god," he said. "I don't even know how to respond to that. But you still haven't actually told me, what the fuck are we then supposed to do with the millions of Jewish people living in Israel who have no part in any of this and call Israel their home? Where the fuck do they go? What, we give Israel over to Hamas and let them just be executed?"

"Well, first, that's operating under the assumption that Palestinians would even want to enact violence on—"

"You just said—and I quote, 'You think people are going to lay down and take it?'"

"Yes, but if we try to repair as much harm as possible, then what reason would they have to be violent?"

"Violence is not a reason driven thing, Sammy!"

"It is for us—we just call it Zionism!"

"You're fucking kidding me. You know, there are so many things I could say—"

"Then say them!"

"You're throwing out a whole lot of blame over there, but so far I don't hear a single solution. No more than what you claim the Jews at your school do.

"The wealthy, imperialist countries that make Israel possible in the first place redirect all that money and start offering incentives for Jews to move elsewhere. Most of them already know English, and a ton of them have totally transferable skills that they could be of use to other economies. Honestly, I don't even think they should be getting rewarded for having colonized and subjugated people, but that's the most marketable solution I can think of, really."

Now, my father rubbed his fingers against his forehead, creased in pain. When he looked back up at me again, his eyes were glossed over with tears.

"I don't understand how you can be saying this to us. Look at your mother."

Then, the kicker from me: "I don't understand how you got to be such an Israeli patriot, Gabe. You certainly weren't when you decided not to go to the army."

I stood up from the table and walked out of the kitchen to save them the trouble of not knowing what to do with me. Could you send an eighteen-year-old boy to his room? Would they tell me to get out of the house? Of course not. They didn't have it in them. Or another way of saying that: they loved me far too much. They loved me with the tendrils of their soul still hanging on to my own soul for dear life, though God knows I was trying to tear them away.

I didn't know where I was going; it didn't matter. I slipped my shoes on from beside the welcome mat, opened the door, and began walking away.

Solomon at Havdalah

Havdalah made Solomon feel at home in a vague way, more in his body than in conscious thought; like catching a glimpse out of a train window of a particular tree, knotting and twisting in just the way one familiar to a faraway place might have. The braided candle, the spice box, offered tiny windows across the sea.

Now, maybe you've forgotten about our friend Dov Ber of Mezerich. But sitting at the crowded table in New York City, USA, Solomon had not. Leah, prospects of becoming an older root in his own family tree—Leah made him think of Dov Ber. And then, as you'll have noticed, Solomon had neither heard from nor thought of the family tree that he had left behind in his two days since arriving. With dinner, Solomon began to feel guilty and resolved himself to dictate a letter before going to bed that night.

Being with Ira was seeming to give Solomon a residual sense of confidence. In general, Ira practically exuded it. Solomon felt like he might have a window of entry into this country

through him.

At dinner, Ira informed Miriam and the others that he would be taking Solomon to one of the factories tomorrow to get him started with a job on the floor. If he worked hard, Ira announced to the table, he'd be moving up in no time and start making some real money.

After dinner, Ira pulled Solomon into the stairwell and told him that he was going out to meet with an associated of his, a sort of double agent in the union leadership, close to Benioff.

"How do you keep this man loyal to you?" Solomon asked.

Ira smiled. "We pay him. Now listen, Sol," he said, putting a hand on Solomon's shoulder. "I hate to ask you to do this. If the circumstance didn't call for it necessarily, I wouldn't get you involved."

"What is it?" Solomon asked. Every moment, the fear and apprehension that had surrounded Solomon's thoughts about Ira's involvement with the underworld were being replaced with a hot thrill and a desire to please his cousin.

Ira was aware of this completely; and he was slightly conflicted at wielding such power over his impressionable cousin. But then again, Sol was not a child, and he was keen. Ira would protect him and take care of him.

"Benioff—if he doesn't know the face of every one of us involved, the goons around him certainly do. Of course," he patted Solomon's shoulder, "he doesn't know you. Lucky you. But listen, I'm going to meet with my associate tonight, and I'm going to find out where and when Benioff is going to be without his little guards. And God willing we can find such a window of time, I'll need you to play a small role in facilitating his agreeing to meet with me."

"How so?" Solomon, despite his best efforts, felt a nervousness trickling back into him.

"Well, as you can imagine, the kadokhes isn't willingly going to meet with me. So, we'll

need to force him." Ira saw the concern in his cousin's face. He squeezed Solomon's shoulder. "Don't worry. You're not going to have to lay a finger on him. I'll do everything I can to let this man away without so much as a scratch on his little shmuck face. All you'll need to do is help distract him for a moment. You'll need to act. To play a part. You understand?" Ira looked earnestly into Solomon's eyes.

Solomon straightened out his shoulders and replied gravely, "Yes. I understand."

Ira patted him on the cheek and smiled again. "Good boy. I'll see you soon. Go relax a bit; maybe have a chat with Leah, ah?" He winked at Solomon and turned to descend the stairs.

Solomon returned to the apartment and made his way to the bedroom which was presently empty. He reached under his bed and slid out his suitcase, clicking open the latch and retrieving the stationary that Rabbi Nachter (continuity) had gifted him so that he might send a few letters home before he acquired the means to buy more supplies. The suitcase released smells of home into the air—the muddy, sweet smell of manure in tall grass, the tinge of pulpy sawdust scattered onto the ground at the friction of a saw working to repair a roof or a wall. The more Solomon settled onto this new continent, the farther he moved from home, as if the Atlantic was expanding, pushing Russia farther East. And as he moved away, these little smells and glimpses of home seemed to tug him back more sharply. All the hands in Anapol were grabbing him; their eyes pleading with him not to forget—not to let the great distance of the sea break the strands that still bound them together. He heard them say, *we need you*.

Who knows the origin of Jewish guilt?

I had a friend once tell me he was a recovering Catholic. I think I know some about the famed Catholic guilt. The idea of confession has always seemed so foreign to me. Maybe that's because Jews don't hold anything in any of the time. If there was a Jewish version of confession,

the rabbis would never have time to do anything else. Everyone would take so long and probably at some point begin complaining about other people. This is not to say that *every* Jew is a kvetcher, but there's a reason the Yiddish word has become so popular. If there was a Jewish confession, they would need to ass an entire section to rabbinical school dedicated to tactfully cutting the confessor off.

And another that that really blew my mind when I made my first Catholic friends much later in life—they really believe heaven and hell are real places they can conceive of. Sure, they learn in spirit that they're inconceivable good or bad, but still there's eternal hellfire and a guy with horns down there. I don't know what they're supposed to learn; all I know is that I've had more than one recovering Catholic tell me that they used to cry at night after having masturbated. That can't be good. Meanwhile, I learned that heaven is essentially just being really close to God, and because God is so inconceivable that we're not even allowed to use Their actual name, we shouldn't really be spending a whole lot of time stuck on the idea of afterlife. As for the hell that Catholics are so fond of, I can't recall hearing about it much at all.

And maybe that's where Jewish comes from: in the absence of God and hell being constantly held over our heads as sticks in childhood, our eyes fall onto other living people to repent to. Who do we fuck up around the most as kids? Our family, of course. But family is so big. So overwhelmingly, tribally big, and there are so many people to be guilty towards. And equally, there are so few, because the Jews are always dying. So, you're feeling guilty towards the entire tribe, which is an enormous weight for one person, but then there are also few enough Jews out there when you stuck us up against the big boys, so we feel as though the eternal flame which has been burning on since forever-forever will sputter out and die without our active participation.

"You are not expected to complete the work, but neither are you permitted to abandon it."

That's a great quote, but as a mantra it becomes an engine of guilt. As it did for Solomon, who, in the moments when he was pulled back across the sea, even after having only been in America for forty-eight hours, felt the entire weight of Anapol on his shoulders; the entire weight of Europe's Jewry.

So, he needed to get a letter home. And luckily for him, Leah Janowitz had been schooled in both reading and writing. The surest cure for Jewish guilt is the intention of making more Jewish babies—not that Solomon was conscious in these terms of the solution of which he was currently at work. Regardless, as he thought of Leah, her voice, her hips, her smile—the guilty thoughts of Anapol faded away.

See? I told you it works.

Solomon in the Evening

Solomon found Leah sitting in a chair in the stairwell, reading a copy of the day's DDer Amerikaner. She looked up when he opened the door and smiled shyly.

"What are you doing in the stairwell?" Solomon asked, feeling more giddy and less confident than he had before. Maybe it was because Ira wasn't around to remind him of the rules of this game of courtship.

"It's quieter out here most of the time," she said. The sound of a domestic argument rang out from behind one of the doors a flight down the stairs. "Well, maybe not quieter, exactly, but I can't quite make out any one conversation, so it feels like no one's really talking. And the triplets don't tug at my dress out here," she said, smiling.

The pitch of the argument downstairs grew higher.

"That sounds nasty," Solomon said.

"They're always fighting like that. It's sad," Leah, said, placing the newspaper on her lap.

"What does the paper have to say?" Solomon said, trying to lean coolly on the banister.

"Careful!" Leah shouted, reaching out for Solomon's arm as the wood behind him bowed, nearly breaking off into the tall expanse of stairwell. "Don't lean on that. We still need to fix it."

Leah's hand was on Solomon's arm. For a moment, neither of them notice, and then at once they did, and there was a half moment of charged acknowledgement that they were touching before Leah pulled her hand away, back to the comfort of her lap.

"This place," she said, after recovering herself. "It's practically falling apart. This whole country."

Solomon's heart was beating wildly for a multitude of reasons, namely that he had almost just died and also because he could still feel the imprint of Leah's hand on his bicep. He only noticed it had been silent between them for several beats when Leah coughed gently.

"Do you—do you have any memories from the old country?" Solomon asked, the only thing he could conjure up to say.

Leah frowned. "Not really. I was so young when we left." Then, her lips curled into a faint smile that seemed to be for her alone. "I have one, actually. I remember my zayde holding my hand, walking me down a road a road in the shtetl. I don't remember where to." Her gaze returned to Solomon, who was trying his best to position himself against the wall in a way that might appear easy and natural. "How does it feel to have come so far away from home?"

Solomon tried to answer the question for himself. After a moment, he said, "I've barely even had time to think of it, so much has happened. But I suppose it feels—it feels less different here than I thought it would. But lonelier, when I stop and think about it."

"I can imagine."

"But I'm lucky. Everyone at home made such an effort to help me get here. And I've gotten to meet so many lovely people: Ira, Miriam, you." The words had slipped from Solomon's tongue without his permission, and now looking back at Leah, whowas blushing slightly, he realized what he had said. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"No, no, it's okay," Leah said. "I'm glad to have met you as well." More silence passed between them; someone walked out of the building on the first floor, shutting the door loudly behind them.

"Well," Solomon said, rubbing his chest nervously. "Speaking of home, I came to ask if you might be able to help me write a letter to send back there. I don't know how to write, unfortunately. I'm hoping to learn."

"I can teach you," Leah said. "If you'd like."

A smile ran away from Solomon as he said, "That would be wonderful!"

Leah reflected his warmth. "I'd be happy to. But for tonight, I should probably write that letter for you. Ira gave me a fountain pen for my birthday the year before last. Let me get it."

She got up, leaving her newspaper on the chair, and disappeared into the apartment. Solomon sat on the floor against the wall and thought of how Leah might look in a wedding dress. He thought of walking along New York City streets with her at dusk and asking her personal things about her life. He thought about running his fingers through her thick curls. He wondered what the smell of her skin was like; it must have been sweet and soft.

The apartment door opened again, and Leah emerged carrying a small wooden nightstand in one hand and a black fountain pen and inkwell in the other. Solomon bolted to his feet to take the nightstand from her hands. There was really no need, the thing was so small. Leah laughed

gently at his chivalry.

"Let me get you a chair so you don't have to sit on the floor like that," she said.

"Oh, I can—"

Leah shushed him and went back in, reemerging a moment later with a chair fro the dining table. "Here you are," she said.

Solomon sat next to her and handed her the paper and envelope.

Leah set them on the nightstand and uncapped the bottle of thick black ink with care, pouring out just what she needed into a small stone well. Then, she unscrewed the cap of the fountain pen and wet it in the ink. She hovered it above the top of the page for a moment and then turned to Solomon. "Well?" she said. "To whom are we writing?"

Solomon thought for a moment. "I suppose—to my family and to Rabbi Nachter."

"Alright," she said, touching the pen to the page and beginning to write. "Dear family and Rabbi Nachter," she looked at Solomon again. "What else?"

"To tell you the truth, I haven't really thought it out. I'm sometimes not very, ah, precise with my words."

"Well, I'm sure they'd like to know that you've arrived safely and all."

"That's true," Solomon nodded.

Leah continued to write. "I have arrived safely in New York City and have settled into my cousin Ira Klein's home. I am in good health." She picked up the pen and looked at Solomon. "Is that good?"

"Yes, perfect."

"What else?"

"Let's see… The boat passage was long and crowded. I am glad to be finished with it.

And… New York City is also very crowded. There are a great number of Jews here in the Lower East Side, which is the neighborhood in which I am currently living. I have enjoyed meeting Ira's family. There are many people living in his apartment, but they have all been—"

"Hold on," Leah said, writing as fast as she could. "Go a bit slower."

"Oh, I'm sorry," Solomon said, feeling embarrassed.

"Go ahead."

"They have still been very accommodating and have shared with me all the resources at their disposal." He waited for Leah to finish writing and continued, "Ira earns good money working in the garment industry, and tomorrow I will begin working at a factory as well. Then, I will be able to send you over the money for your travels, very soon." Solomon could think of nothing else to say.

Leah turned to him again. "Anything else?"

Solomon rubbed his two-day-old stubble. "Maybe… I miss you all very much. And… I look forward to seeing you soon." He turned to Leah as she finished writing. "What do you think?"

Leah shrugged. "It's good. They'll know it's from you, so straight to the point. How do you want to finish it?"

"How about… With love, Solomon."

"Sure." She transcribed it and lightly waved the paper in the air to dry the ink, then folded it over and slipped it into the envelope.

"Thank you," Solomon said earnestly.

"My pleasure," Leah said, capping the pen and looking up at Solomon, who she found was looking at her.

His eyes drifted down to her lips, and her eyes to his. Solomon's lips were slight and feminine; there was an innocent quality in their smoothness. Leah had never kissed a boy before, and had never had any intention of doing so before she found the one she would marry, but now there was something magnetic between the two of them.

I wish they had kissed that night in the stairwell. I wish I had it in me to tell you that they did. But in that long moment before that short moment when two lips meet, when the static of not quite knowing is strong enough to raise every hair, the door to the street at the bottom of the stairwell slammed shut. Someone's footsteps faded into the bustle outside, and Leah was reminded of the world beyond Solomon right there in front of her.

She looked to her lap and then to the apartment door. There would be other times, she thought; because Leah too had been dreaming of a life with Solomon, of a life outside the city. Somewhere where they could live together like in the shtetl. Somewhere with grass that ran away over the horizon and clear sunshine. She could see already that Solomon was not well suited to the city; he was too sensitive. That was a good thing. No one listened to anyone in this city.

Leah smiled at Solomon and stood up from her chair, handing him the sealed envelope. "It's late. I should be going to bed. Good luck with your job tomorrow," she said. "I'm sure you'll do great.

Solomon stood up as well. "Good night then," Solomon said. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She entered back into the apartment, and Solomon slumped back into his chair and exhaled at length.

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Solomon waited for Ira to come back for a while in the stairwell, but eventually gave up and retired to bed. Across the room, Leah was asleep. Solomon lay awake for a while, listening

to her long, pleasant breaths, and eventually drifted off.

It was still dark out when Ira rustled Solomon awake and whispered into his ear, “Come on. We need to go.”

Solomon squinted his eyes open, perceiving a blurry outline of his cousin. “Alright,” he whispered back, getting out of bed quietly and grabbing a pair of trousers from beneath his bed.

He followed Ira out into the dark dining room, taking care not to creak the floorboards amidst the sounds of the others asleep. Ira waited for him at the door as Solomon put on his shoes, and together they descended down and out to the street.

It was pleasant outside in the dark; a breeze brushed through the street as Solomon rubbed his eyes again. “What time is it?” he asked.

Ira removed his pocket watch from his jacket. “Three-thirty in the morning,” he said. “Which means we don’t have much time. Come—I’ll explain while we walk.”

They set off down the street, taking a right at the corner. The moon was nearly full, and Solomon caught a gleam of metal on Ira’s belt oin the light as a gust of warm wind kicked up his jacket for a moment.

“I met with my associate,” Ira said, pulling out a tin box and a box of matches from his trouser pocket. He opened it and removed a cigarette he must have rolled earlier, then replaced the box in his pocket and pulled out a match, then struck it against the side of the box and cradled the flame with both hands at the end of the cigarette. Ira took a few short puffs and waved the match out. “Right. So, I met with my associate, and I found out that, as we speak, Benioff and the other union leaders are having a secret little meeting. They’re planning to go to Meyer’s house tomorrow with a mob. Right now, they’re at a bar two blocks away from Benioff’s tenement, so I’m fairly certain that he’ll feel safe walking such a short distance without

his goons." They turned another corner, entering onto a narrow street. "All I need you to do is distract him for a moment, and then Moyz and I will grab him while he's not looking and drag him to an alleyway right nearby. Moyz is already waiting. Once we grab him, I want you to get out of there as quickly as possible and go back home. No need to run—you don't need to attract any attention to yourself—but just be quick. Straight home, alright? From where we're going, you'll take a left, walk straight for four blocks, then another left, then two blocks straight, and then a right. Got it?"

"Sure, Ira. But how should I distract him?"

Ira thought for a moment. They reached the corner of the block, where two narrow streets intersected. "Just… just pretend you're drunk. Say that you lost your pocket watch and ask him if he's seen it anywhere. Then, just keep asking him if he's sure he hasn't seen it."

"Sure."

"Alright," Ira said, patting Solomon on the shoulder then stubbing out his cigarette on the bottom of his shoe. "I'll leave you here. I'll be just over there, watching," he said, pointing to a thin, pitch black gap of an alley behind a hat store on the corner of the intersection. He began to walk towards it.

"Wait!" Solomon called after him in a whisper. "How do I know it's him?"

"He'll be bald. And walking around the corner any minute. Don't be nervous—you'll do fine, Sol." Then, he disappeared into the darkness of the alley.

Solomon looked up and down the street but could see no one in the moonlit darkness. He wished Ira had told him where to stand, how to talk. He had never had to act before—he had no clue where to put his hands. Should he stumble around? Slur his words?

Then, Benioff turned the corner. He wasn't a small man, but smaller than Solomon had

imagined. He momentarily forgot about his task the moment Benioff noticed him. Then, Solomon stumbled forward a few steps.

"Excuse me!" Solomon said. "Sir!"

Benioff froze. His hand clutched the side of his belt. "Who are you?" he said coldly.

"Ah, I seem to have lost my pocket watch somewhere around here. I just had too many drinks. I must have lost it in the street—have you seen it?"

Benioff began walking again. "Can't help you," he said.

Solomon turned around as he walked past, almost falling over accidentally, though it worked for effect. "Are you sure?" he called after him. "That you haven't seen it?"

At that moment, Ira and Moyz emerged from the alley, walking quickly behind Benioff and each pointing a revolver at him.

"Aaron," Ira said coolly, cocking his gun. "Don't move."

"You fucker," Benioff said without turning. "You piece of shit, Ira."

Moyz stepped to him and reached down to take the gun from Benioff's belt, but just when he was about to take it, Benioff elbowed behind him into Moyz's nose. In one quick motion, Benioff drew his gun, turned, and fired off two rounds into Moyz's chest, then held his huge, limp body as it fell over to use it as a shield while Ira fired off two rounds in response, both hitting Moyz's body and sending spurts of his blood onto Solomon, who had been frozen in place just a few paces from Benioff since the shooting began. Ira unloaded the last three shots in his chamber, hitting Moyz again twice but ripping through Benioff's shoulder with the last one, causing him to drop Moyz's body in pain.

"Come on!" Ira said as he reloaded his gun with bullets he'd produced from an interior coat pocket. "Sol! Get into the alley!"

Ira ran towards the alley with Solomon following behind. Finally, he loaded the last bullet into the chamber and snapped the revolver shut. He took aim and Benioff, and then a shot. Not from Ira's gun, but from Benioff's.

He missed Ira by a mile. Ira squeezed the trigger and hit Benioff square at the bottom of his nose, sending blood streaming through the air in all directions. Benioff's body crumpled to the ground and pooled red in the dirt.

"Sol?" Ira said, turning to his cousin but not seeing him anywhere.

Then, he looked down at the ground. There was Sol, lying motionless, a flower of red blooming out of the left side of his chest. Eyes wide with fear, lips slightly ajar as if about to say something.

There were no miracles for Solomon Klein. I wish there had been, but that was the end for him. It just was.

It was not the end for Ira Klein. He had kids with Miriam, their kids had kids, their kids had Alan Klein, Alan Klein had Gabriel Klein, and Gabriel Klein had me. Sometimes, I wish it was different, but that's just not how it went.

Sammy in the Coat Closet

I never really left the coat closet on the night of that shabbat service, when the pleasure of lighting the candles was stripped from me. If I ever have—left it, that is—I've never strayed far. I made it through the candle lighting this second time around, at least. It only took eighteen years.

The rest of that story I first told you ends with something a bit uncharacteristic on the part of my parents. They left me in there, for a time, at least. No one came and consoled me for the rest of that service. Through the series of walls separating me and the sanctuary, I heard a little

rustle of uncomfortable laughter at a joke from the rabbi, trying to diffuse whatever static I had rubbed into the air on my way out. Then, the wine and the challah—you know the drill—and the wind-down songs, then the sound of the congregation's body rising up from their pews and shuffling into a secular weekend.

I heard all of this from between the metal coatrack bars and soft darkness of the small room, but the sounds were distant; vague auditory cues that alerted me to the fact that no one had yet appeared to coo me out of the room. For whatever reason—maybe it was that my parents didn't want to attract any more attention to what had happened, maybe they thought it would be good for me to sit, maybe they thought they were respecting a wish of mine, or maybe they simply didn't have the energy—regardless of why, they let me sit there alone.

It was always hard for me to hold onto anger in these situations for very long if left undisturbed; I just didn't have the energy for it. This time was no different. The darkness was soothing—it felt like it held me within it; smooth from the countless hands who had brushed along the walls to place and collect the clothes they no longer needed inside the sanctuary. Something about the space felt very old.

My thoughts drifted, as you know they tend to do. They started out moving in wide circles, thinking of fragments of stories that had been told to me or colors I had seen in one place or another. But eventually, the circles began to tighten, coming closer to the ground, preparing to land.

They settled in from their wide reaches—above and below, past and present, to the things that had just come to pass, making memory for the first time out of scattered blocks of color, faces, and feelings. They stacked onto one another into a soft, claylike little marker set somewhere in my mind to harden overtime with the help of many hands along the way to mold

it. I can say with enough certainty that I didn't feel guilty about what I had just done upon first remembering it; that was for later. There was no one in that coat closet to tell me what I had done wrong. My own gears were left to turn as they would without anyone else's tinkering.

Eventually, I did of course emerge from the coat closet. When I heard the sanctuary doors open and the many feet begin to spill out, it was time to find my family. What would I do without them? I did find them, and for once, it was me who came to them. There was no apology from me, at least not outright, but I didn't ask for one from them. That was enough, I hope, to show them that I had come back for them.

In a sense, it wasn't really the worst transgression though, was it? Wanting so badly to light the candles on shabbat? I think they knew that.