

Crime, Ramen, and Punishment

“Aunt Pesya!’ Benya then said to the disheveled old woman rolling on the floor. ‘If you want my life,
you can have it, but everyone makes mistakes—even God!’”

-“How Things Were Done in Odessa”, Isaac Babel

Part One: Larry Dressler

Before

At Otisville, I was Noodles. Larry Noodles. Lawrence Noodles, Esq. But I didn't insist on formalities; in prison, to be an attorney is no great shakes. And at Otisville in particular we're not a rarity. Just ask Michael Cohen. He's paying his debt to society there now, a regular master of the legal profession—a stoolie who gets *himself* put away, and leaves his boss fancy-free!

Baruch Hashem—praise the Lord! In America, anything is possible.

Noodles is also the name of the Jewish hood played by Robert de Niro in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in America*. De Niro is not the right type to play me, and neither am I a hood, but Jewish I am, as are about 75% of the inmates at Otisville. In these United States, the biggest, most powerful prison gang is the Aryan Brotherhood. The members of the Aryan Brotherhood admire Hitler. Jews, on the other hand, mostly hate Hitler. They think he was a Bad Guy. In Otisville, the Aryan Brotherhood is not such a big enterprise. In Otisville, you're more likely to bunk with a member of Hadassah than a member of the GOPG, the Grand Old Prison Gang—Aryan Brothers, Inc.

The reason I was called Noodles, even though my name is Dressler (which isn't so hard to pronounce), is because of the time I was caught with contraband in my cell. But let me clarify. *Noodles* is not a euphemism for anything. *Noodles* was code for: noodles. Now, in most circumstances, in most places, noodles are not forbidden. On the contrary. They are permitted. But let me clarify. These were *spiral* noodles. These were *cooked*, spiral noodles. And, okay, I stole them. Officer Grogan, a real schtarker, real head-buster, a scary mamzar, an officer of the peace—he was the one who busted me. Grogan was five-foot six and had a belly that made him look like an Irish Buddha. He held my humble bag of noodles in the air, by the neck, like it was a shot pheasant. And said, “Well?” Grogan was an enthusiast for busting the guys under his care. Some people think that when you're in prison, you've already been busted. But it is possible to be busted further.

Ashamnu, bagadnu, and the rest of it. Which translates, in goyish, to mea culpa, mea culpa, mea maxima culpa...

In prison, everybody gets a nickname. Before I was Larry Noodles I was Larry Ding Dong. Which was a demotion, because before *that*, I was Larry Love. I preferred Larry Noodles to Larry Ding Dong. Wouldn't you?

And I confess to stealing the noodles. As for my other crimes, I'll let you be the judge, and jury too:

Before I was Lawrence Noodles, Esq., pasta burglar, scourge of the Goat—we'll get to the Goat later, and you'll hate him, I promise—I was Lawrence Dressler, Esq., and in most respects you would have to say that I was a regular guy. I wouldn't make you say it, but if you saw me at the time, you'd say, *There goes Larry Dressler, a regular guy.*

I was an attorney, of course. But I didn't work for a fancy white-shoe firm, like Roy Cohn. I didn't work at a prestige university, like Alan Dershowitz. Mostly, I worked as a closing attorney on real estate deals.

Real estate hadn't always been my line. Before 2001, I did all kinds of things. Criminal defense, family court, bankruptcy, workers' compensation. But in 1999, the federal government repealed the Glass-Steagall Act. And by 2001—when I started closing mortgage deals—the market had turned into an absolute feed-and-fuck frenzy that nobody understood. Everybody was buying land. Everybody was selling land. Everybody was taking out loans. Nobody could believe it was so easy. Everybody knew that it wouldn't last forever. But while it did last, you got into it. That is, if you were a divorced father who didn't work at a fancy white-shoe firm. If you had a son to support. And, most of all, if you didn't realize—like most people didn't realize—just how many people were lying, cheating, swindling in this new, beautiful market. If, like most people, you thought that real estate was a legitimate business.

But to tell the truth, I saw the signs that it wasn't pretty early on.

Like when I was working with John Connelly, at A-1 Mortgage.

It was 2004, and everything was beautiful. I was having lunch with Howard Lawrence, who had been my boss back when I was doing criminal defense.

"Mortgage brokering," I told Howard, when he asked what I was up to now. "My cousin got me into it. You know my cousin?"

"I don't know your cousin," Howard said, "but who are you working with?"

I gave him some names. And then I got to John. "John X., over at A-1 Mortgage," I told him. He sprayed croissant flakes all over his shirt, and almost all over mine, too.

"What's the matter, Howard?"

"Nothing, nothing," he said. "But—I defended him, a couple years back."

"What for?" I said. And Howard told me.

And I thought, I'd better check this John guy out myself. I don't want to get into needless trouble. Who does?

John worked out of an office next to the highway. There was a big billboard out front, facing traffic, advertising A-1 Mortgage's services. So I was sitting there, in the reception area of John's building, hands folded on a loan application in my lap. And I was contemplating a difficult problem.

Do not pass judgment. The difficult problem was this:

Why did both of John's assistants—these two young women in identical purple blouses, with big eyes and round faces, answering the phones, closing deals, tapping their teeth with their acrylic nails as they thought things over—why did both of John's assistants, on top of having the same blouses, have the

same breasts? Because both John's assistants were buxom. Very much so. And though that's something you see in an office environment, it's not something you see in *all the women* in one office, for the most part. When everybody looks just the same, in a weird little way like that, it becomes a problem worth contemplating. And I contemplated it.

John called me into his office.

I went through with him. John wore a checkered shirt to match his past. He had one of those Newton's cradle office toys on his desk, and he set it going when I introduced myself. He started to tell me that he knew who I was—we'd talked on the phone—when somebody knocked.

The guy who leaned his head through John's door looked like a killer. But I don't mean in the white-collar, headhunter sense. I don't mean that the guy who leaned his head through John's door looked like he'd graduated top of his class at Rutgers. I mean that the guy who leaned his head through John's door looked like he'd killed people before. He was huge, for one thing. His hair, which went down to his chest, hung like greyish-black drapes. And he looked at everything like it belonged to him. Including John and me.

And on top of that, John said, "What is it, Bear?"

"I took care of that thing," Bear said. He smiled at me. "I'm Bear," he said.

"Larry."

"Great," John said. "Anything else?"

"We're out of cyan toner in the copier," Bear said.

"Thank you, Bear," John said. And Bear went back to his den.

I turned again in my chair to look at John. I gave him the application I'd come to drop off, and then figured: why not? I posed him my difficult problem. Not in so many words, of course. I just said: "Where'd you find those girls out front?"

John, leafing through the paperwork, named a well-known local strip club. Then he looked at me. "You can ask them out, if you want," he said. "But one's got a kid."

I thought, Maybe John is bad news. Maybe John isn't a totally reputable businessman.

But it was 2004. Everything was beautiful.

I kept on closing deals for John. I closed a couple for Bear, too. About a year later, Bear, who was the leader of a motorcycle gang, was shot and killed in a dispute with a rival club. It was in all the papers. John was devastated. He made a shrine to Bear in the offices of A-1 Mortgage. He left Bear's desk exactly the way it was before he died, and even put a few pictures up.

Real estate is a crazy business. But in 2004, it was a *really* crazy business.

And everyone knew it wouldn't last forever.

See in 2008 there was this financial crisis, in America—and, after America, the world. You've heard of it. They called it the Great Recession. What happened was *very complicated*, as I'm sure you know. It was *extremely complicated*, so complicated no ordinary mortal could ever hope to understand it. Basically, big Wall Street banks bribed credit agencies to lie about bullshit mortgages so they could swindle ordinary people out of their money twice: once on the dotted line, and once again, when the Fed had to bail the banks out for their losses on the bullshit mortgages. There is a technical term for bullshit. The technical term is *subprime*.

Isn't that complicated? Get out your highlighters, class. Make sure you got that down. I'll wait.

Waiting.

Okay. You're back?

Quick learner.

Now, when the whole thing blew up in everybody's stupid faces, most Americans wanted somebody to pay for it. That's a totally normal human impulse. I, too, think somebody should pay for it. (Do you pay taxes? Then you paid for it, friend.)

The Justice Department got onto things right away. The way I hear it, there was a big meeting. All the serious gentlemen at the Justice Department sat around a fancy conference table, with their green visors, and their little strawberry milk cartons with bendy straws. "Somebody's gotta go to prison over this," somebody said. "But who?" said somebody else. "Somebody important," said a third guy. Then everybody laughed.

"No, seriously," the first guy said.

The Justice Department thought and thought. They put their heads together. They called in consultants. They got out their protractors and graphing calculators. They completed difficult differential equations. Then somebody said, I've got it.

Well—maybe that part of it is speculation. But here are the facts, and you can double-check them if you want:

In the aftermath of the financial crisis the Justice Department decided to bring indictments against closing attorneys, realtors, and mortgage brokers throughout the country in a celebrated operation that they called—no kidding—Operation Broken Dreams. Nobody at the big financial institutions got indicted. The Justice Department's press release boasted that it had employed "intelligence, enhanced surveillance, and undercover operations to find the key players behind large-scale fraud as part of a nationwide mortgage fraud takedown." I was not a key player behind this nationwide mortgage fraud

network. I was never subjected to “intelligence, enhanced surveillance, and undercover operations.” In 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010, the Justice Department did not seem to be interested in me.

Then, in November of 2010, I got a fax (!) from the Justice Department. I nearly had a stroke. The Justice Department requested that I produce ten closing files from 2007 and 2008. As it happened, I remembered those deals.

Those deals were, in fact, dirty deals.

Here’s what happened.

In 2006, when I was 41 years old, everything was up in the air and I didn't know how to juggle. My son's bar mitzvah was coming up, and my ex-wife was fighting me on every little thing. Catering. The band. The venue. When you've got one kid—my son's name is Jake—sometimes you can lavish too much attention on him. When you're divorced, sometimes what this looks like is endless fighting.

That was when I became religious.

Or tried to. I was closing mortgage deals, fighting with my ex-wife; Jake wanted to switch schools; I didn't know what I was doing with my life.

I knew I wanted seriousness, gravity. Ritual. I wanted the things that some people get out of politics and some people get out of sex, but I wasn't getting out of either. And I happened to be a New Haven Jew, and the Jewish religion was waiting for me.

It had seriousness. It had gravity. It had ritual. What it didn't have was, well—a united front.

A parable, to explain:

A Jew is discovered, marooned, on a desert island. Two beautiful buildings are there, that he's built out of palm lumber and vines. His rescuers ask him, "What's that building over there?"

"That's the synagogue I go to," he says.

"And what's that one?"

"That's the synagogue I *don't* go to," he says.

In the New Haven area, all these different ecosystems, these different ways of being a Jew, were rubbing up against each other. They sometimes celebrated together, sometimes ended up on the same side of a municipal issue, usually to do with the community's right to run its own schools. But for the most

part they were independent, and they fought each other. And I went everywhere, looking for meaning. I tried everything.

I tried Chabad Lubavitch. Chabad is the biggest of the Chasidic dynasties, the great families, or courts if you like, of the Chasidic movement. Lots of people don't realize the shades of difference, which are abundant, between one Chasid's family and another, but the truth is that Chasidic Jews have always had a very particular hierarchical way of organizing their communities. The Cosa Nostra ripped it off from the Jews, along with the fedoras.

In Chasidic Judaism, you have the Chabad Lubavitch—they're the biggest. Lubavitch Jews, also called Chabadniks or Lubavitchers, are followers of the Schneerson rabbinic dynasty, which goes all the way back to a little village in the Old Country called, you guessed it, Lubavitch. (Just like Don Corleone got his name from the Sicilian city of Corleone.) Lubavitcher Jews are famous for their outreach activities. There's a Chabad shul¹ on every college campus and every continent except Antarctica. If you're lost in the Sahara and you're dying of thirst, and you cry out, "No, I *haven't* wrapped tefillin yet today," a little Chabad bukher² will appear by your side like Jiminy Cricket, and, if it isn't Yom Kippur, he'll give you something to drink.

The last Lubavitcher Rebbe died in the 1990s. Chabad has never elected a successor.

Then there are the Satmars, the Belz, the Brestlovers... each of them have their own uniforms, their own ways of thinking about God.

But I'm getting away from New Haven.

There, in addition to Chabad, there was Rabbi Daniel Greer. Back then, I thought Daniel Greer was Rabbi Daniel Greer's name. I didn't know yet that he was the Goat.

¹ Synagogue

² Young, male Chasid

The Chabadniks ran a school called Southern Connecticut Hebrew Academy in a suburb of New Haven. For religious Jews in the area, the place to send your kids was either SCHA or the school run by Greer, the Gan School. The Gan School was a much smaller enterprise.

Greer had a reputation for eccentricity. He dressed like a Chasid, but was attached to no dynasty. And unlike most Chasidim, he'd been educated at the finest secular institutions in the country. An undergraduate degree from Princeton, his law degree from Yale. Greer was a maven³, a makher⁴, a true chochem⁵. And what Greer loved—more than Toyreh, more than mitzvot, more than anything else in the world (I thought)—was stirring up shit. Causing trouble. Greer liked to swing his beard around.

Greer didn't trust shochets⁶ that he hadn't trained himself, and so he slaughtered his own meat on the fenced-in compound he owned in New Haven. He'd sued Yale University, when they introduced co-ed dorms, to try and make them separate the sexes again. He was arrogant, brilliant, and more insular than Elba.

The thing about a guy like that is—it's hard to get *around* him. That is, when somebody brilliant knows he's brilliant—and is missing, maybe, a scruple here and there—it can be easy to become absorbed in his myth of himself. I got a little absorbed. I got absorbed enough to send my son to Greer's school.

Yaacov lived down the street from me. And maybe—even though I met Yaacov through Chabad, and not through Greer—but maybe for a frum⁷ guy like Yaacov, it was sending my kid to get a real, classical Jewish education, with Talmud, Torah, halakhah, and everything, that showed him I was somebody to be trusted. Because Yaacov worked with people frum and not, even gentiles, but for his inner circle he liked to find people as much like him as possible. So it is with every criminal. Even if you're kind of a moron, like Yaacov, you have an instinct that tells you who to trust. And the guy you can

³ A really together guy

⁴ A *really* together guy

⁵ A *really, unbelievably* together guy

⁶ Ritual slaughterers

⁷ Religiously observant

trust the most is the guy who sees so much of himself in you that sometimes he even gets the two of you confused.

I wasn't that guy for Yaacov. Yossi Levitin was that guy for Yaacov.

Yaacov was thirty-five, heavysset, and married, with two boys about the same age as my son. He had a thick, broad beard, but a short one. Yossi was only twenty-one, and single. Like a lot of twenty-one-year-old Chasidim, Yossi had wispy facial hair that only aspired to beardhood. He had that quality that a lot of white-collar crooks have, of striking you as about twice as smart as they really are. This because of his nervous eyes. They darted around everywhere, and you thought he was taking in everything. You thought he was appraising the environment, that he had an eye for strategy. The truth was he was just a guy who really believed that getting ass was a matter of being alert for it at all times. At any moment, ass might appear. Every moment is the door through which ass might enter. And Yossi would go for it.

When Yaacov was out with Yossi, he was single, too.

I thought they were good Jewish boys at first. I didn't know about the way they spent their time together—strip clubs, titty bars, massage parlors, casinos. They were Chasidim, and they didn't really belong to the world. They belonged to Hashem. But they liked the world. They liked to dip into it from time to time. They liked to get their toes wet.

They *loved* to get their toes wet.

It was only when I was invited to one of Yaacov's poker games that I began to have misgivings about these two. Most of the guys at the game were frum, and that's why, I think, I was the only one who noticed that Yaacov and Yossi, smoking these rich, fat Jamaican cigars, were cheating. Cheating is against halakhah. Yaacov and Yossi, sure, were a couple of sleazeballs. But they must have *some* limits.

They did. Yossi and Yaacov liked to invite his shiksas over for Shabbos, show them how to light the candles, because he couldn't drive out to see them. Driving is forbidden on the Day of Rest. Marital

relations, on the other hand, are recommended. Like I said, Chabadniks are famous for their outreach activities. It was weird. It was cute. Probably not to the Mrs., but Yaacov wasn't terribly worried about that. Let her divorce him if she wanted, was his attitude. Yossi made being single look like the only way to live, anyway.

And Yossi, too, was from the whole time he was hustling. He made a lot of money very quickly, and it went to his head. He liked to bring his buddies with him on European vacations. For a Chasid, Europe is a complicated place. It puts you on edge. The Jews, in Europe, have a bad record. Yossi liked to talk about the fat-faced German who was giving him dirty looks, poolside in Southern Italy. Yossi liked to talk about how he smacked the German around a little bit and tossed him in the pool. Jews-1, Germans...

Well, okay. The Germans are still ahead.

One day Yaacov came to me with a business proposition. Yaacov worked for his uncle, a lawyer of thirty years, a man with a good reputation. Yaacov said he was representing a buyer in a real estate deal for a couple of properties on Ellsworth Avenue in New Haven. He wanted me to represent the sellers, an Israeli couple, Anna and Tsvi. The buyer was this guy Ron Jones: a Black guy, not Jewish. In New Haven, as in Crown Heights, the Black and Chasidic neighborhoods are right next to each other. They even overlap. I didn't realize Ron Jones was a straw buyer. Yossi had recruited him. The deal was bullshit.

I suspected Yaacov was a shady guy, but in real estate in 2006, *everybody* was a shady guy. If you weren't in the business, you probably don't realize. But in 2006, there simply wasn't a legitimate real estate market in the United States. If you tried to be 100% pristine, you were run out of a job. That's capitalism, baby.

So I figured—yeah, Yaacov is a shady guy, but not every deal made by a shady guy is a shady deal. A murderer doesn't kill everybody he ever meets, and a thief doesn't pick every pocket. Things looked like they might be on the level, which was good enough for me.

Yaacov told me that he'd do most of the paperwork, which is the buyer's job anyway. I had to do almost nothing. Anna and Tsvi had already had an attorney, a guy by the name of Skolnick, who'd done much of my job already. I didn't think to ask why Skolnick backed out at the last second. Skolnick was a little more on the ball about Anna and Tsvi than I was.

The houses sold for \$342,000 and \$295,000. They were worth maybe half of that. But Yaacov's friend Yossi, as the realtor, could list them for whatever he wanted when he already had a straw buyer lined up in the person of Ron Jones. And when the deal was ready, Yaacov had a mortgage broker friend of his, this guy Chaim, squeeze a couple juicy loans out of the bank. Deals like this were going down all the time. Deals like this were *de rigueur*.

I had some misgivings when Anna called me up, two in the morning, the night before the closing was finalized. "Is everything kosher?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I said. "Don't worry about it. Everything's kosher."

Then I went back to sleep.

After that, I did a few more deals with Yaacov. Yossi, too. The one that put me away was a deal I closed in April of 2007. By then, the truth is, I knew enough. I'd seen guys in my office threaten to kill each other over closings. I heard Yossi was bragging about his scams in the bars around New Haven. But I never thought I was too important in any of it. I thought there may be something going on that I didn't want to think about. And I thought that if anybody was gonna go to prison, it wasn't going to be me. It wasn't going to be the guy who did the closing paperwork.

Mea culpa, mea culpa. For real, though, this time.

November 2010. I needed a criminal defense attorney, pronto. I got some names and made the rounds in New Haven.

First was this guy Epstein, who used to be an attorney for the state. Epstein had a gap in his front teeth, Letterman-style, but I wasn't worried about it. Something about Epstein did worry me, however. He had a client's twenty-year-old acquittal framed on his office wall. It was nice that he got somebody acquitted. But there weren't any other acquittals, and twenty years is a long time.

Epstein began by telling me he didn't know anything about real estate closings. "Larry," he said, "this is really not my area." He said I would have to educate him. I wondered how he was going to defend me if he knew nothing about property law. Epstein said he would have to spend a lot of time reviewing my files. I wondered why, since we were educating each other, Epstein didn't just teach me how I should go about representing myself. I am all in favor of continuing education, but Epstein, I felt, was asking too much.

Next I met with Attorney John Williams. Williams had been practicing criminal defense law for over fifty years, but he did not have a fifty-year-old acquittal on his wall. Instead he had pictures from his vacation to Greece. That was a comfort. When I told him about my case, John laughed. It was a big, friendly laugh. John seemed to think everything would be alright. He told me that the Justice Department wasn't going to waste time indicting me for the few closings I had handled three years ago. He unbuttoned his suit jacket and told me not to worry. I wrote him a check for five thousand dollars on the spot.

John went to meet with United States Attorney Huang, who was in charge of my case. Huang told John I was the subject of an Operation Broken Dreams investigation, but not a target.

“What does that mean?” I asked John.

“It means, don’t worry,” John said.

So I worried. If an attorney just says, *Don’t worry*, it means, *Worry*. *Don’t worry*, not otherwise specified, is always—subprime. I would pace back and forth in my kitchen. When Jake would ask, “What are you doing, Dad?” I’d say, “Worrying.”

I called another attorney. Hugh Keefe, who I’d heard had good relations with some people in the Justice Department. Keefe promised to *reach out* to Attorney Huang. He said that they would *touch base*, and maybe, even, *be in touch*. A couple weeks later I got a call back from Attorney Keefe.

His report: “Huang says, *I’m a subject of the investigation but not a target at this point.*”

Not knowing whether I was going to be indicted was a burden. The days passed like weeks. The weeks passed like months. The months passed like hard labor. All the while I was calling up John. He always told me to relax. No news is good news. Okay, okay—no news is good news. I made it my mantra. I even stopped calling John.

And I guess John got lonely. Because after a while, he called me. When I saw his name on the caller ID, I nearly died. When he told me he had bad news, my soul went to the afterlife, looked around, saw JFK eating lunch with Lee Harvey Oswald, and hopped right back into my body. John told me that Huang wanted me to plead guilty to a felony and cooperate with the federal government against two other local real estate attorneys.

“John,” I said, “didn’t you say, *Don’t worry?*”

“Sure,” John said. “And did you worry?”

“Yeah,” I said.

“And did it help?”

Okay. But the problem was that I didn’t know anything. Nothing, anyway, that would help the Justice Department make a case against the other closers. I knew the attorneys’ names, but so did they. I knew which one needed a breath mint, but who cares? Is needing a breath mint a crime? And who would tell me if it was? How could I believe anybody? About anything? Where would the truth be found? Could I find it? Me, Larry Dressler?

I was so bewildered and devastated that I was beginning to get metaphysical.

Huang scheduled a court date for my arraignment.

That was when I told my family. They hadn’t known I was a subject, though-not-a-target, of a federal investigation. My mother wept heroically. My father squeezed my mother. I felt ridiculous. I was not a criminal—mostly. Except for a couple real estate closings in 2007, and a parking ticket from time to time, I was not a criminal. And it was 2011 now! And I thought about Anna and Tsvi, asking me so innocently if everything was kosher. I smote my forehead. O, Larry! I said to myself. Why, O why, didst thou not just say, Fuck it, and walk away! Why, O why, didst thou ever trust the Wolf of Whalley Avenue with *anything*? Why, O why, wert thou not a Wells Fargo executive, so that ye might be found blameless in the eyes of the JD!

Mom called her brother, my uncle, himself a bigshot attorney. He advised that I call up Attorney Stan Twardy, who had just represented one of the other defendants who had pled guilty in my case. But Huang forbade Stan to represent me. He considered it a conflict of interest.

After Stan was called by me, who had been called my uncle, who had been called by my mother, who had been called by me—khad gadya, khad gadya—Stan told me to call a guy by the name of Eugene

Riccio, based in Bridgeport. The Office of the United States Attorney was also in Bridgeport. My only hope was that Gene Riccio and Attorney Huang sometimes went out together for softshell crab.

The procession of lawyers who would represent me, or try to, over the course of my case would make a tidy little police line-up.

And in the middle—smiling with terror, swelling with misgivings—me!

Lots of people have stress dreams. Among the most common subjects for stress dreams are: showing up to a test you haven't studied for; having your teeth fall out; realizing, on the highway, that you've forgotten how to drive.

Dr. Freud says: These are nightmares of impotence.

Larry Noodles says: Sure, but a car crash is no picnic either!

I didn't get into a car crash. But if you have dreams about showing up to school unprepared, or forgetting how to drive while you're stuck behind the wheel, a lot of the fear has to do with the familiarity of everything. It's scary because most of it is the same as always, except that one unpredictable detail is different. It reminds you how little has to change for everything to go totally, totally wrong. Your rearview mirror is adjusted just right, but your brain is on the fritz. You think: how the hell did I get here?

The word for it is *uncanny*.

And that's what it's like, when you're a lawyer, and you find yourself in a courtroom—the courtroom same as always, same polished wood paneling, same smell of nervous sweat and cheap fabric, same judge's bench with the same ludicrous toylike gavel, same crowds of miserable defendants and wisecracking attorneys—except that you're not a wisecracking attorney anymore, but a miserable defendant. You think: somebody must have made a mistake. *I'm* not the one in the hot seat. I'm *never* the one in the hot seat.

But I was in the hot seat. Seated at a bench, waiting with all the rest of the defendants. There were a lot of them to get through before me. At least, I thought, it was Gene Riccio next to me, and not John Williams. Save me, Gene Riccio! Thou art my Rock and my Salvation. Gene Riccio hadn't told me yet that I shouldn't worry. He seemed to think that worrying was perfectly in order.

To hear him tell it, I hadn't been worrying *enough*.

John Williams is a flamethrower, Gene said. That's lawyer jargon for a guy who talks a lot of subprime. Gene had told me that I was like a patient on an operating table with my guts hanging out. Only Dr. Gene could put me back together again. He struck me as a consummate professional. I liked him so much that I could've written him a check for five thousand dollars on the spot. But I'd learned my lesson about that.

And there was Huang, at a desk to one side of the judge's bench. A young guy, short and bald, as confident and purposeful as a bullet. Next to him was US Attorney McReynolds. Older, with red hair—the guy Huang would one day replace, and probably sooner rather than later. They wore more or less the same, boring, navy-blue suits with grey ties. They had nothing to flaunt, nothing to laugh about. They had the appearance you want, in agents of the state. Lithic. Unchangeable.

Then, on the other side of the bench, was the desk for the defense attorneys. Gene went over, starting shaking hands. There was more of a social spread there. Because half of these guys are public defenders, paid worse than public school teachers, and with comparable class sizes. Their clothes don't really fit, because they ordered them off eBay, musty suits that probably belonged to somebody's recently dead dad. But there were also the high-priced attorneys, the guys who can get just about anybody off for just about anything. When they check the time, their watches flash, and you could almost believe it was accidental. The poor guys, the public defenders, are the ones who tell the jokes. The rich guys, the bigshots, are the ones who laugh. Their front teeth are perfect, white, TV teeth, and their molars are jeweled. When they laugh, you can see their gold fillings. Almost accidental.

Who was I? I should've been the guy between the rich guys and the poor guys. Still telling jokes, but clawing his way up. Clawing my way to the point where I wouldn't have to worry anymore about where I could send my son to school. Let him be the one to laugh. I didn't mind telling jokes forever. That didn't sound so bad.

Judge Fitzsimmons entered. The Marshal shouted, "All rise!" All rose.

Then the judge read off our rights. We had a right to an attorney. We had a right to a public defender if we could not afford an attorney out of our own means. We had a right to a continuance if we needed time to catch a lawyer. We had a right to request a postponement. Oh, we had plenty of rights.

Judge Fitzsimmons read the names. McReynolds read the charges. People pled. Not guilty, not guilty, not guilty.

"United States vs. Lawrence Dressler."

Me, versus the United States?

I didn't stand a chance!

Gene met me at the podium. Meanwhile, McReynolds was looking at me with this expression of total hatred. McReynolds was a professional. He could muster up hatred for anybody.

They say a good politician can make you feel like the only guy in the room.

I pled not guilty, like everybody else. Judge Fitzsimmons released me on a non-surety bond. I didn't have to post money or property or anything. Judge Fitzsimmons had sized me up. Judge Fitzsimmons didn't think I was a flight risk.

After the arraignment Gene took me to the probation office for processing. They took my picture, got my good side. Then it was time for fingerprinting. But the fingerprinting machine wasn't working.

The officer went on mashing my hand against the glass plate, bored and rough at the same time, like the hand wasn't attached to a person. Finally they had to reboot the machine.

The officer said, apologetically: "Windows Vista."

*

As part of my release from federal custody I was required to make monthly, in-person reports to the probation office. Had I violated my probation terms? No. Had I been arrested in the last month? No. Had I been good? Yes.

I wasn't allowed to travel outside the tri-state area. Every month two probation officers came by to inspect my house. For some reason, they were always pretty, young women. I wasn't allowed to walk behind them while they went through my belongings. I had to walk in front of them, so they could keep an eye on me. This because I was a dangerous criminal.

Meanwhile, from Gene I heard bupkes. He didn't take my calls or answer my emails. I'd always heard clients complain that attorneys didn't get back to them. I guess they were telling the truth.

One night I was having drinks with a friend of mine who was interning at Yale New Haven Hospital. I was still allowed to have drinks. I drank Guinness, and she had seltzer with a lime slice. I told her my troubles. I spilled my guts, and it felt like spilling my guts. It felt like I was holding up my kidneys, and telling her they had stones; then my lungs, and telling her they had punctures; and my heart, telling her that it murmured. Months and months it's been, I told my friend, and I don't hear from my lawyer, and I don't even really understand what's going on, or how bad it was what I did, and I don't know, I think maybe I'm gonna go to prison.

"That's nothing," she said. "You know for my fellowship, they make us work eighty hours a week?"

I ordered another drink. She perceived that I was distressed.

“So, listen,” she told me. “Go and see Rav Avraham Dovid in Brooklyn. He’s a Kabbalist, a real baal shem. Maybe he can help you.”

What is this, I thought, a Bashevis Singer story? But I looked him up. Some people called him a charlatan. Okay. And some people said he was a saint. Better. I’d seen plenty of charlatans in the last few months, but none of them had even the suggestion of sainthood credentials. I thought I’d give it a try.

The Kabbalist had a small office in Crown Heights. It didn’t feel like the digs of a mystic. It felt like a chiropractor’s. Still, though, I gave the secretary my check for fifty dollars and my Hebrew name. She sent me through to speak to Rav Dovid.

He had high cheekbones, a narrow chin, and the long beard mandated by his Torah and his hustle, so that his whole face looked like one big isosceles triangle. I told him about my case. We talked for maybe five minutes. He blessed me and gave me a sheet of prayers. He told me to read them every morning.

His office called me every Friday to wish me a good Shabbos. My dentist, also, sends me a birthday card.

Then I met with a rabbi in my own neighborhood in New Haven. He, in turn, told me to go daven at the Ohel. To daven is to pray. The Ohel is the tomb of the late Lubavitcher Rebbe, Rabbi Menachem Mendel Schneerson. People go there when they want miracles, or quiet, or both. I went looking for miracles. And the truth is, it did make me feel better. At least, I thought, I wasn’t dead.

And I davened again, wrapped tefillin too, on the day of my sentencing a few months later. I davened that my sentencing should go well. I davened that my family should be okay while I was gone. I davened that Yossi and Yaacov should get hemorrhoids the size of hubcaps.

The sentencing went okay. Good, not great.

I got twenty-four months in federal prison.

Gene kept saying, "It's not fair, it's not fair."

I thought: No shit, Gene.

Part Two:

Larry Noodles

The Dressler Death-Grip

Prison is time-out for grown-ups. Silently, everyone acknowledges that this is the truth.

The idea of prison is, maybe, to take the dangerous element out of society so he can do no more harm. But if you think about it for a second you realize that's not a very good justification for the American system. As everyone knows, most first-time offenders come out of lock-up a lot more dangerous than they went into it. *Prison*, as you and I understand it—and I hope for your sake I understand it better than you do—*prison* as you and I understand it is not the kind of thing that a society that wants to get rid of the dangerous element comes up with.

Another theory is that the point of incarceration is rehabilitative. Prison is the place we send *maladjusted* people so that they can be *readjusted*. Brought into line with the prevailing values. Taught to be good citizens. Honest. There are Harvard professors coming in to teach classes in prison. Classes in law, politics, molecular biology. Prison is like a college, actually. Like a *good* college—Harvard! There are even these old Jewish hippie types, lapsed of course either as hippies or Jews, who come in every week to run group therapy. Yes, prison is a very educational place.

You try learning anything while a fat investment banker from Queens has diarrhea five feet from your bed.

None of this is a secret. It's not a secret that prison is time-out. That it's a kindergarten teacher's idea of punishment—punishment, in this theory, being a major social good—only this time the kindergarten teachers have .22 rifles and truncheons and the kindergarteners have been *really* naughty.

And so it shouldn't be any surprise that when you're on your way to prison, a regression can happen. You can regress to a childhood role. Especially if it's your older sister dropping you off, like for soccer practice. Especially if it's Mom and Dad who brought you over to her house in the first place.

It was the day before I was turning myself in to Otisville. Picture me, Larry Dressler still, not yet Larry Noodles, my hands folded on the kitchen table where I used to eat celery sticks with peanut butter. Mom crying while she looks out a window, Dad drinking out of a thermal coffee cup while he explains about the *Dressler death-grip*. The *Dressler death-grip*, Dad explains—like he did when I was in the sixth grade—will get me out of anything. Don't worry about prison, son. They won't know what hit 'em when you hit 'em with the *Dressler death-grip*, not unless you tell 'em, and you shouldn't, boychik: this is precious information.

Now that I have been released from the penitentiary, I can reveal the details of the *Dressler death-grip*. Revealing the details of the *Dressler death-grip* is like putting a 3D-printable blueprint for an

AR-15 online for free. If you are given to sudden rages, it is probably better for you to turn the page now, as it may be too dangerous to the commonwealth for you to possess the knowledge I am about to disclose.

Ready?

First you wrap your arms around your victim's torso. Then you dig your chin into his backbone.

This is valuable prison knowledge.

I told Dad that actually, I was going to Otisville, and Otisville was a prison for white-collar criminals. I didn't expect to have to do a lot of fighting there. The violence at Otisville, I speculated, would be mainly psychological.

"Okay," Dad said. "If you're such an expert in prison."

Who knows what Mom said. She was saying it to the window, not to us. And even if she said it to us we couldn't make it out. All Mom could do was cry.

My parents dropped me off at the Palisades Shopping Mall, where my sister picked me up. She took me to her house in New York, not far from Otisville. We ate dinner together with her teenage son. He wasn't particularly interested in prison. Who can blame him? I wasn't particularly interested in prison, either.

I didn't sleep much that night.

In the morning I went out to the dock behind my sister's house. There's a lake there, and early in the morning it's calm and grey. It looks a little bit like asphalt under a heat-haze—you can tell there's motion, but part of you isn't sure it's real. A great blue heron watched me from far away, the other side of the water. I davened shacharis; I wrapped tefillin. I hoped and prayed that everything I knew about the world was wrong. I wanted to believe that I was going to be okay. Maybe in prison I'd be a big hit. Think of it, I said to myself, like summer camp.

Then I went back inside and told my sister I thought we'd better get going.

"I don't wanna be late," I said, "for my first day."

St. Peter

In the town of Otisville, New York, which is located in the lower Catskills, there are two main industries. These two industries employ the majority of the local population. Otisville is a little bit like the old idea of the factory town. In fact, it may be the only kind of factory town there really is in America anymore.

The two industries that employ the local population are related. One is the state prison system. The other is the federal prison system.

Somebody a long time ago visited this town, and looked around, and said, "This is just the place for a couple of prisons." Whoever it was who said it was right.

There's probably nowhere else in the world for the combination of natural beauty and human ugliness like the region of New York that surrounds the Catskills. The mountains soar. Trees are laid along them like a great, green shawl. You always have a sense of your altitude there, because it's always changing. The post office is at the bottom of a hill, the grocery store at the top. That kind of thing. Depending on where you stand you can look to your right and see roaring—but dirty—natural waters a hundred feet below you, waters which nowadays feed the Genesee Brewing Company, then look to your left, at old red-brick buildings like eleven-year-old smiles. Teeth missing everywhere. The windows are knocked out with stones, sometimes bullets. The people are missing teeth, too. The Catskills are meth country.

At the bottom of Two-Mile Road there was a sign that said FEDERAL CAMP.

Hey, I thought. I wasn't too far off after all.

So: my sister drove me up the hill to prison. A parking lot cratered with potholes. Bitter-looking guards, with rifles slung across their backs, rode around in pickup trucks. There was a basketball court visible from the lot, empty for the moment, the hoops denuded of their nets. Somehow, I had the sense that I was in a place that was getting ready for a war. Maybe because *I* was, inside. Or maybe because places like that really are a weird kind of relic from wartime. Prison seems to me to be something that comes, anyway, from a wartime mentality.

The guards wore blue. The inmates wore green. I, for the moment, was wearing mustard slacks. I was overdressed.

What do you want? I was new.

My sister came with me into the building. The lobby was as austere, clean, and grey as a crypt or an expensive refrigerator. The cheap tile gleamed, like it had been spit-shined. The ceilings were high

enough that if you were crying, like my sister was crying, there was a slight echo—it sounded like a whole bunch of sisters were crying, somewhere far away.

There were rows of chairs with faux-leather cushions and, at the back of the room, a metal detector. Guards were passing through it, setting it off—who cared?—in a slow trickle. Off to the side, behind a pane of bright bulletproof glass that made him look like a bank teller, was a prison officer, looking as bored as St. Peter no doubt is by now. Unlike St. Peter, however—and maybe I'm making unfair assumptions here about the heavenly bouncer, but I think I'm right on this point—unlike St. Peter, the guard behind the glass had a tattoo of a Chinese dragon climbing up from his collar and licking his right ear with a long, pink tongue.

My sister and I approached the window. I was ready, even, for him to ask if we were there to make a deposit or withdrawal.

Deposit, obviously.

Instead he asked for my paperwork, so I handed over the letter I had from the Bureau of Prisons. My invitation, if you want. Check the list, man. I'm there. Do you know who I am?

Evidently, he didn't, because he asked me for some photo identification. I didn't have any. I'd been advised not to bring anything extraneous along with me, as the prison would just take it away and there was a good chance I'd never get it back again. The only personal possessions I had were my tefillin, my tallis, and a handwritten list of important phone numbers and email addresses, all of which, I'd been led to believe, it was my constitutional right to bring in with me.

Well, the St. Peter of Otisville got upset with me. The dragon's tongue flickered. He thought I was trying to muscle my way into prison. No ID. I could've gotten that letter *anywhere*. Listen, Dressler—or whatever your name is—this is an *exclusive establishment*.

He told my sister she couldn't wait with me in the lobby. So they bickered. The guard had picked up a thing or two, working in a 75% Jewish prison. He didn't back down in an argument.

Or then, maybe that was just the confidence that comes from carrying a pistol with you to work every day. Who can say?

She burst into tears again, and so did the echo-chorus, the bunch of little sisters in the distance somewhere. Guards' boot-soles squeaked on the tile, and beside that—and my sister sobbing like I hadn't seen her sob in years—there wasn't a single human sound. I hugged her and told her it was going to be okay. I said, "Go home." And, "I love you." I didn't know when the next time I'd get to hug someone I loved was.

Twenty-four months, probably.

I watched her leave. Her car looked small, surrounded by the guards' pickup trucks—as small as she looked, in the Otisville lobby. It disappeared, away, down the hill. I sat down to wait while St. Peter made some phone calls.

That uncanny feeling started to set in again, the feeling I'd had at my arraignment. This time, though, it wasn't that the place was somewhere I'd been before but was forced to look at from a new perspective. This time it was me. It was my hands—I looked down at them—the same ones I'd always had, but now, not really mine anymore. *I* wasn't mine anymore. I belonged to the federal government. I was on loan from the collection at the Slifka Center.

I looked out the lobby window. A deeply suntanned inmate, wearing the requisite olive-green and a yarmulke, was staring in at me. I turned to ask St. Peter who it was.

"Who?"

I pointed, but the guy was gone.

So then I really started to feel weird. I leaned back in my chair and looked at the ceiling. High up, far away.

I heard the sound of plastic wheels running along the tile. I looked. Two Jews, inmates, wearing big black yarmulkes, were wheeling a cleaning cart into the lobby. They took a couple of mops off the cart and set to work on the floor, speaking to each other nervously in Yiddish. The floor was already, as I've said, spit-polished, but that didn't seem to matter. The guard spoke to them with severity, pointed out this spot and that spot, and they obeyed. Every once in a while, they would try and speak to me in Yiddish, and I would smile, nod. I know about as much Yiddish as most Jews of my generation; I can use it to curse, kvell, and criticize, but not much else.

It didn't seem real. When I was a kid, it wasn't that uncommon to hear Yiddish spoken on the street in New York by older Jews. But what a lot of people don't realize is that the lion's share of American Jewry come from families that *wanted* Yiddish to die. Or anyway they didn't want their kids to speak it, to be any less American than anybody else was. Nowadays, if you hear people speaking Yiddish, they're Chasidim. And usually, they're not mopping the prison floor. These were learned boys. They should've been at the books.

They spoke loud enough so that I could hear them, but the guard couldn't.

They knew the guard wouldn't have liked it.

Finally, he called me through.

Officer Scalba

That was when I met Officer Scalba. He was not the kind of guy you really ever want to meet.

In prison I learned, after a while, about the different kinds of faces guys get from different criminal vices. I told you, already, about Yossi. How guys like that—small-time fraudsters, local crooks—seem smart because they're nervous, and it reads as nervous intelligence. How their eyes dart around. And I'll tell you, later, about other things I noticed. Things about, say, big-time fraudsters, and crooked clergy, and connected guys. But Officer Scalba, too, belonged to a special type. Let's just say

Officer Scalba was born to wear a uniform. Let's just say, whatever the time and place Officer Scalba was born into, he would've worn the uniform. If he'd been born 10,000 years ago he would've made himself a sheriff's star out of a leaf and busted guys for unlicensed bonfires.

People like that, they get blank faces after a while. By a blank face I don't mean a face with no expression. Just the opposite. I mean a face with *nothing but* expression. Officer Scalba didn't have a face; he had a whiteboard. He didn't have eyes, a nose, a mouth, cheekbones—he had messages. Usually the messages were two words long. Usually, they were two-word imperatives, and the second word was *you*.

He was in charge of the camp, and he'd given himself the job of testing Larry Dressler on the subject of Larry Dressler's crimes. This because I had no photo ID. Instead of a photo ID, they had to make do with a pop quiz.

I was in Scalba's office. Through a window to my right I could see two guards in blue uniforms typing, henpeck-style.

"Name?"

"Lawrence Dressler."

"You're doing great," Scalba said, leafing through my file like it was the morning paper. "What brings you here, Larry?"

"Mortgage fraud," I said. "I have a letter from the Bureau of Prisons."

He raised his eyebrows. "I've seen your letter from the Bureau of Prisons," Scalba said. "Everybody has a letter from the Bureau of Prisons. Don't get excited."

Scalba took a sip from the paper cup of coffee on his desk. I almost asked for one, then thought better of it.

“And who was your sentencing judge?”

I told him.

“And what did you think of her?”

I shrugged. “She seems like a fine person.”

“A *fair* person, Larry,” Officer Scalba said. “She’s a very *fair* person.”

Scalba asked me for a couple more details of my case. I got a passing score. I was admitted into Otisville.

Full-ride.

They took my mugshot and the bag with my tefillin and other things. They gave me my inmate number: 21502-014. Then Scalba tried to make me an inmate ID card. But his computer wasn’t properly hooked up to the laminating machine.

While he was trying to get the machine to work, he asked me again about my crimes, so that the other guys in the office could hear about them. What’d you do, Larry. Closed on some fraudulent mortgages. How much did you make, Larry? Just the attorney fees.

“That’s funny, Larry. Most guys here—they stole millions of dollars.”

The guards laughed. I realized that even though I’d passed, in Otisville I was an underachiever. Even the guards thought I wasn’t much of a criminal.

Finally, Scalba gave up and wrote my name and ID number on a scrap of loose paper.

“Windows Vista,” he said, by way of explanation.

They put me in a cell with steel bars while they processed my paperwork. I laid on the berth in there, fell asleep after a while. Then another guard, someone I didn’t recognize, woke me up and took me

to a bigger cell. There was another inmate in there already, a short guy missing a couple of teeth, and St. Peter, from the lobby. St. Peter had rubber gloves on. Oh, *no*, I thought.

Oh, yes. “Cavity search,” St. Peter said. Then he actually smiled. “And I don’t mean like at the dentist.”

The other inmate set up a wail. Gnashed what was left of his teeth. “Shut *up*,” I said to him, as quietly as I could, “or you’ll make it worse for both of us.”

I had to take all my clothes off and... well, use your imagination.

Welcome to Camp

After that I dressed in green, like everybody else. I wasn’t overdressed anymore. I was dressed just right.

The uniform was a hand-me-down, obviously. It was worn out in most places, and I didn’t feel great about the little hole right next to my bellybutton that looked a lot like it might have been left by a

knife. The boxers, at least, were new. They were too small, and they felt stiff against my skin, like cardboard.

St. Peter took me out to the parking lot where my sister had left me. He pointed to a building in the distance. He told me to walk along the barbed-wire fence, past the dumpsters, past the baseball field, until I hit the Camp. He trusted me to make the walk by myself. I hadn't even stolen any money, he'd heard. I'd landed here for attorney fees.

I started to walk. I passed a tall watchtower, at the top of which a couple guards were sharing a cigarette. They both had rifles strapped to their backs.

At Otisville, there was the Medium and the Camp. The Camp, where I was headed, was lower security. We were the guys in olive-green—greens, they were called. Guys at the Medium wore tan. I passed them playing basketball in a fenced-in court.

As I got closer to the Camp, I started to see more and more guys in greens. Some were taking walks, others sat at picnic tables. A few of them welcomed me.

One—a Syrian Jew probably, with two expressive eyes squeezed by their orbits—said: “New, huh? Well, you better go see Bernie Grobarz. He’s in charge of orientation.”

Officer Scalba hadn't mentioned anything to me about Bernie Grobarz. Perhaps Officer Scalba and Bernie belonged to parallel command structures.

“He’s probably in the dining area,” the Syrian told me, when he noticed my expression. I thought it was funny they called it the *dining area*.

Tonight, I will dine at the *dining area*.

The wine selection isn't great, but what do you want?

And that's where I found him. Bernie had the composer, the mathematician body type. He was thin as a guy who only eats prison food, but his head was so big it looked to be at risk of tottering off of his neck. He wore tortoiseshell glasses and his hair had begun to grey in a distinguished pattern. His air was professorial. Bernie was even from Manhattan, which was where he'd been busted for bribery. That tells you something about Bernie. Manhattan bribery is a rarefied kind. Once you're buying off judges there, you can buy 'em off anywhere.

He gave me the tour. Showed me how to use the phones—you were allowed 200 minutes a month—and the computers, which could only be used to send and receive emails. I'd closed enough real estate deals that I recognized the way Bernie felt about the place. He felt it was a fixer-upper. Not without some promise.

Decent bones.

It was also Bernie who explained to me about the Count. Every few hours, prisoners had to line up to be counted by the guards. Most guys had cheap digital watches from the commissary that they'd set to go off ten minutes before each Count. When the Count happens, you don't want to miss it. Though not because it is such a thrilling event.

Bernie went on to warn me not to start trouble with other prisoners. Better, he said, to get along with everybody. This I found mildly offensive. Did he think I lacked people skills?

When he was done with the tour, Bernie dropped me off at Scalba's office in the Camp. In the time that I'd been gone, Scalba hadn't missed me. Absence had not made his heart grow fonder.

"Welcome to the Camp," Scalba said to me, playing with his baton the way a cheerleader does. "You probably remember me from outside the Camp. Outside the Camp, you and I were different people. You were Lawrence Dressler, citizen. I was Officer Scalba, agent of the state. But now we are inside the Camp. Now you are Larry Dressler, ulcer. And I am Officer Scalba, stomach. I want you out but I can't get rid of you. What I can do is take measures when you aggravate me. Fight with my other ulcers?"

Solitary. Steal from the commissary? Solitary. Smuggle, buy, own, use contraband of any kind? We have a place for you. Solitary confinement.”

Amnesty International says that solitary confinement is a form of torture. Officer Scalba thought it was a form of medicine.

“Officer,” I told him, “you have nothing to worry about from me. All I got away with were attorneys’ fees.”

He took me to the dorm. The dorm was what we called the communal room for new inmates. There were twenty bunk beds, crowded close together—so close that if you reached out from your bed you could touch the next guy over. There was also a toilet, and a couple shower stalls. The dorm was located in the same building as the chapel, Scalba’s office, the TV room, the library, and the visitor’s room. The other building contained the kitchen, the dining room, and another 75 bunks.

When I came in with Scalba, the other guys in the dorm scattered, except for a couple who kept trying to make conversation with him. He wasn’t interested in conversation. Scalba was not a particularly social individual. He pointed out my bunk and left me to get acquainted with the other freshmen.

I looked around. Most of the other guys just stared at me. Somebody offered me a snack, somebody else welcomed me to Otisville, like it was the family home. Some of the guys were yelling at each other. Others, reading.

Nobody seemed happy to see me.

I stretched out on my bunk in a pair of gym shorts—one of the only alternative garments we were permitted—and tried to relax. I thought about the smooth, asphalt-like lake in my sister’s backyard. It felt premature to miss anybody. But I missed everybody. Even people I never saw on the outside. When I was out again, I would be more available. I would accept more invitations.

Soon it was time for evening prayers, and the religious prisoners started to get ready. I followed them to the chapel, which was right across the hall from the dorm.

The Tale of the Gym Shorts

What were they whispering about, I wanted to know?

For the devout Jew, there are three sets of prayers a day. The first, in the morning, is shacharis. Then there's minchah in the afternoon and ma'ariv in the evening. Each time, you pray facing east, towards Jerusalem. That part we got from the Muslims, who face Mecca. (The daily prayers at intervals, I think, they got from us.)

I'd arrived in the chapel and the stares of the dorm had turned into whispers. Guys cupped their hands in front of their mouths like they were trying to light cigarettes in a stiff breeze. Leaning into each other's ears, like doctors in a Renaissance painting, or like they were all consiglieres. I felt like a cat at a dog show. I felt like a whore in church. But it wasn't church, it was shul. And I wasn't a whore. They have other prisons for that.

Finally, one of the guys, a Chasid judging from his facial hair, broke away from the group and came up to me. He had a rhythmic walk, like a classical dancer, but it came from his efforts not to look at me. He had to look at each of his feet as they were extended instead, and he was kind of pigeon-toed, so it looked almost like he was trying to walk away from himself, like his feet each wanted to head off in their own direction and leave the rest of his body to fend for itself in Otisville.

"What's your name?" he said to me, in Yiddish-speaker's singsong, the pitch of his voice changing three times in as many syllables.

"Larry," I said. "Nice to meet you. What's yours?"

"Larry," he repeated. Suspiciously: "And you're Jewish?"

"I even wrapped tefillin this morning," I said.

"Nice, Larry," the little bukher said. "Listen. I've been talking," he gestured back to the others, "with the *guys*. And we think maybe you should go back to the dorm, if you're not gonna dress for shul."

I stared at him uncomprehendingly for a couple of seconds. *None* of us were dressed for shul. We were dressed for work at the Wonka Chocolate Factory.

“What are you talking about?”

“The gym shorts, Larry. It’s Hashem we’re talking to here, not your personal trainer.”

The guys exploded. But, to my surprise, not at me.

Instead, the crowd kind of folded in on itself. Almost naturally, like time-lapse photography of a flower budding. They arranged themselves in a circle and began shaking fingers, yelling, lifting the folding chairs off the ground and slamming them down again. They had a disagreement. They didn’t agree on whether I was dressed properly to daven. They’d all heard me tell the bukher my name, and they were tossing it at each other like a baseball with a nail in it.

One guy—a tall, husky Jew called Michael Bleich—broke off from the group to stand next to me and hurl insults and imprecations.

“*You’re* the ones showing no respect!” Michael cried. “*You’re* the ones arguing instead of davening!”

“Better to argue,” said the original Chasid, “than to insult.”

And things went on like this, until silently I went out into the hallway to daven by myself. I could hear that they were still fighting. But Michael joined me out of solidarity.

“Which way is east?” I said.

“We’re not sure,” Michael replied. “But the Chabad opinion is—this way.”

He pointed. Together we bent our bodies towards Jerusalem. We asked for wisdom, patience, a long life; we sang some songs of praise.

I had been in Otisville less than twenty-four hours. But, I thought appeasingly to myself—already, already I’m a part of the family.

When I got back to the dorm, I was approached by a guy called Harry. I recognized him. He'd been the suntanned Jew in the window that morning, the one I'd pointed out and St. Peter hadn't caught a glimpse of. He handed me a granola bar. I wondered why. I'd just met Harry, but I could tell already that he didn't like me.

Then he said, "You were early."

My mouth was full. I said, basically, "What?"

"We have a mutual friend in New Haven," Harry said. "I promised him I'd look out for you while you were here. But you were supposed to get in at 11. Instead, 10:30." He tapped the cheap digital watch from the commissary. "Half an hour early. How am I supposed to look out for you if you're not gonna be where you're supposed to?"

"I don't know anything about it, Harry," I said. "And I certainly wasn't watching the clock this morning."

"Just don't do it again," Harry said.

Then he showed me how to climb up into my bunk. It was a more complicated operation than you might think. The bunk was six feet from the ground, and there was no ladder. Instead you put one foot on a little metal knob while you took hold of the crossbar on top of the bed, then used that leverage to swing one foot, then the other, over the top. Getting down was even messier. You had to be something of a gymnast either way, especially if you had to get up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom. You didn't want to kick your downstairs neighbor in the head.

The mattress, which rested on a steel platform, wasn't much thicker than a yoga mat. The ceiling was only a couple feet above your head, and there were no side rails. I was worried about rolling off my bed in the middle of the night. I asked Harry if that ever happened.

He shrugged. He told me this Connecticut lawyer, Mickey Sherman, fell out of his bunk once. Mickey split his skull pretty bad. It was impossible to tell how Harry felt about it. But he certainly wasn't as broken up as Mickey's skull was.

I made my bed with the flat sheet I'd been given. No fitted sheets in prison. Around 11pm I finally got to sleep. Only to be woken up, about an hour later, by the sound of the guards making their nighttime Count. Nobody had told me they did it while we slept, too. They jangled their keys at their sides and held their flashlights like knives. They shone the lights directly in the sleeping inmates' faces. They didn't want us to sleep comfortably. If they couldn't, we couldn't.

Eventually, I got to sleep again. I dreamt about nothing.

Shabbos

I don't know what time the sun rose the next day. But the guys rose at 6am, for breakfast. I missed it. Sleeping right in prison is a talent and a skill, and it has to be cultivated. Waking up is a late-stage, advanced technique. I understand that in pilot training, the landing is often the most difficult part to learn.

But I made it to shacharis, at 7. That time I dressed up in this nifty green outfit I had. Nobody criticized my clothes.

Things were calmer. As calm as they ever got. Somebody gently explained to me that there were assigned seats for prayers. There were seven folding tables, each of which could sit six. I was directed to the one furthest west—towards the back—at which my only tablemate was this guy Mshulem (*meh-shoe-lem*). He was short, Chasidic, older, and spoke very quickly, with a Yiddish accent so strong I wasn't sure he was speaking English at first. Anyway I couldn't understand a word he said.

Mshulem was, I would shortly learn, an important figure in the Otisville congregation. The table was cluttered with his books, papers, notes, tissues, empty coffee cups. Like a genuine rabbinical office. He was always in the chapel. Sometimes he prayed with others, sometimes alone. His prison job was the supervision of the synagogue and the kosher kitchen. That meant he had a lot of authority. He was a kind of patrician of the Otisville Jews.

When he prayed, he rocked back and forth, tugged at his clothes, and howled at the top of his lungs. Mshulem never led the services.

Who could follow?

He'd staked out the whole folding table as his territory, and I had nowhere to put my tallis or tefillin or anything. But I wasn't going to complain. I was the Fucking New Guy, the FNG. And I would be until some other poor schnook got suckered into the position.

Before I'd come to Otisville, I'd done some asking around and heard that the Jewish inmates had a kind of unofficial leader in the person of one Herman Jacobowitz. Jacobowitz was the son of another Jacobowitz, and that Jacobowitz was the owner of Allou, the biggest pharmaceutical company in Long Island. Herman had been involved in a pump and dump scheme. He and a couple other major shareholders had made fraudulent press releases as a way to drive up the value of Allou stock, then, when it reached what they figured was its peak, they sold, and the value of the company took a sharp dive. Herman and his associates made millions of dollars. Allou's other shareholders went bust.

After that, Jacobowitz had set fire to Allou's warehouse, hoping to wipe out some incriminating evidence and collect big on property insurance. It took 254 firefighters to put out the blaze. Herman had tried to bribe the fire marshal a hundred thousand dollars to file a false report to the insurance company, ruling out arson. Instead, the fire marshal had turned the Jacobowitz men in. Herman's father died not long after he and his conspirators pled guilty to bank fraud, securities fraud, corporate fraud, and a host of other charges. They were each sentenced to about fifteen years.

Naturally, I'd been curious to meet this Herman Jacobowitz. It's not every day you get to shake hands with a criminal of that caliber. In the coming weeks, I was introduced to around a hundred guys. I couldn't keep names, faces, professions straight. I got the Jewish lawyers mixed up with the Jewish doctors. I got the Jews mixed up with the gentiles. But nobody seemed eager to introduce me to Herman, even though I asked about him plenty. I felt slighted. Why was I left out of the loop?

I didn't realize that *Herman* was only Herman's legal name. I didn't know that Herman Jacobowitz was really Mshulem Jacobowitz, the oddball who shared my table at shul and was always howling at God. And Mshulem never bothered to introduce himself to me as one of Long Island's great fraudsters, as Otisville's rosh yeshivah. I guess he figured I knew exactly who he was.

Then again, maybe he did tell me.

Like I told you, I couldn't make out a word the guy said.

The place you really felt Mshulem's authority was at Shabbos dinner. Shabbos was a major production at Otisville. There was a strict policy forbidding greens in shul on Shabbos. Greens were work clothes: at Shabbos services, you wore sweatpants and a white crewneck. I had a hard time with this at first—following rules made by other inmates. Weren't these guys here because they didn't follow the rules? But I remembered Bernie's advice, and Scalba's. I didn't cause trouble.

Chasidim, Israelis, Russians, even secular Jews came to services on Friday nights. I met guys with non-Jewish fathers and Jewish mothers, and guys with non-Jewish mothers and Jewish fathers. I met a Bukharian Jew who went by Roman. The Chasidim wore black gartels, ropes around their waists, and little rectangular felt hats to symbolize the fedoras they'd have worn on the outside. The guards only let them wear those hats for Shabbos. The Chasidim looked like small, anguished train conductors.

The guards understood that this weekly ritual was something they'd be crazy to interfere with. During the week, we'd have to leave the chapel if it was time for the Count; on Shabbos, the guards let us stay put, and came to us. They'd walk between the aisles, joking about the Jews and their special treatment, or—if they really would've meant the jokes—keeping totally quiet, refusing to say a word to us. Some guys tried to joke with the guards on these nights. Some even offered them blessings, which they usually refused. Every once in a while, the guards joked about guys who were missing that night because they'd been tossed in solitary. Nobody ever really knew where they stood with anybody else.

But it really was a day—a night—of rest, and peace. There were still fights between inmates, but many fewer. I didn't understand that my first Shabbos at Otisville. I was just as miserable as I'd been all week, only confused, now, too, at the way the other guys seemed not to notice the sheer humiliation of our circumstances. After a month or so, I started to understand. A man finds his level. A man gets used to anything. Your complaints and your miseries don't mean shit until you're accustomed enough to them to know them as a part of yourself. Only when the ache becomes routine do you begin to understand it well enough to hate it with meaning, and to live in relief from it, even when it hasn't gone anywhere.

I volunteered to help prepare Shabbos dinner, which meant I worked directly under Mshulem in the kitchen. Every Friday afternoon I spent an hour cutting garlic with a plastic knife. If I were Henry Hill, I'd have had a razor blade: but I was Larry Dressler, and I only had a plastic knife.

After services we'd have kiddush, and dinner. Friday nights we ate in the shul.

Mshulem was the grape juice bearer. Nobody else was allowed to touch the bottle. He went from table to table, filling—almost to overflow—everybody's cups for the blessings. The Chasidim believe that wine symbolizes joy, and that one's cup should overflow. The inmate believes that grape juice symbolizes wine, with the same consequence.

When this was done, and the grape juice returned safely to the kosher food closet, Mshulem would distribute challah rolls. Again, nobody but Mshulem was permitted this honor. Every inmate received two rolls, sealed in individual plastic bags. Every now and then an inmate would try and steal an extra. Mshulem would scream and wave his arms, as if he was talking not to an Otisville inmate, but to his Maker.

Meanwhile, each table was furnished with a plate of extra challah slices. These were cut from giant loaves by Rabbi Menachem Youlus, who had some kind of nerve condition which caused his hands to tremble. Youlus never referred to himself as a rabbi. He'd run a Jewish bookstore in Baltimore. Youlus got five years for selling overpriced Torah scrolls he'd claimed to have rescued from Eastern European villages destroyed in the Holocaust. He said he'd had to fight off rabid antisemites to get his hands on those scrolls. In fact, he'd never been to Eastern Europe. He bought the Torahs in New York, and told his marks that he'd picked them up from the very communities where their families had been wiped out.

When Youlus was being sentenced, his victims sent letters to the judge requesting leniency.

He seemed like a nice guy, I guess.

After we convicts had taken our seats, and our grape juice had been poured, and we'd sung Shalom Aleichem, the tune that welcomes in the Shabbos angels—then it was time for kiddush, the sanctification of the wine and the evening. We were a cosmopolitan society at Otisville. An Orthodox Jew will have two ovens in his house, one for meats and one for dairy, just to ensure that a particle of one will never contaminate the other. But no matter how Orthodox, how frum you are, you don't do two kiddushes. In prison, we had three.

For kiddush, you could take your pick between Rabbi Pinter, Rabbi Ben Haim, or Naftuli Schlesinger. Each of the three drank his grape juice from a silver cup; the rest of us had plastic. Pinter read for the Ashkenazi Jews, the Jews of European descent. Pinter was in his sixties, long and thin as a treble clef. He was doing five years for mortgage fraud. Ben Haim was the Sephardi representative, Sephardim being, strictly speaking, the Jews of the Iberian peninsula, though he read for the Mizrahim too, the Jews of the Middle East. He was short, bald, and pale, with bright blue eyes incongruous in his face. Ben Haim was also doing five years: money laundering. But Schlesinger, 78-year-old Schlesinger, with his white hair like a thick fog on a Pennsylvania highway, read for the Satmars alone. The Satmar Chasidim are among the most exclusive of the Chasidic dynasties. They don't fraternize with other Jews if they can avoid it. Schlesinger was the most distinguished of the three. He was doing fifteen years for fire insurance fraud.

Naftuli was the oldest Jew of them all. And a fussy bastard, too, getting into fights all the time—things had to be done a certain way, the Satmar way, and the Satmar way is very different, very particular. This tendency to granular, even neurotic observance is a central tradition for the Satmar Chasidim. The originator of their sect, a certain Rabbi Teitelbaum, used, as a child, to rise from prayers six or seven times to wash his hands. The Satmars say this is because he was so holy he could not stand the idea of being even slightly impure before Hashem. Probably my friends at Yale Medical School would have offered a different explanation for that behavior.

Though hand washing does have a religious significance for Jews, and that was the next part of the service. Once kiddush was made we went out to wash, the rabbis permitted to go to the head of the line. This ritual, called Netilat Yadayim, has the devout Jew decanting water thrice on each of his hands from a special two-handled jug designated for that purpose. After that, one is not permitted to speak until he has tasted bread.

We began with the challah rolls. Then there was gefilte fish with horseradish, and hummus, made fresh in the kitchen. There was always enough to go around, but everybody cleaned his plate. After that, chicken soup. The soup had little shreds of meat in it, and bits of ramen-style noodles. Every once in a while, a matzah ball. It wasn't much better than a Cup of Noodles, but it was not only chicken soup: it symbolized chicken soup. As a symbol, it was fine. It was steaming hot, best in the winter. I liked to dip my challah in it.

Then the main meal: farfel, fried chicken, kasha varnishkes, boiled carrots—whatever the guys in the kosher kitchen could get that week. We helped ourselves to seconds. The chapel was full of the rich, warm odor of garlic. We were full of onions. On Shabbos, at Otisville, in the twenty-first century, you could be mistaken for thinking you were in Odessa at the turn of the twentieth.

As we ate, Ben Haim, the Sephardic rabbi, gave a D'var Torah, a speech on the week's Torah portion. Ben Haim used the Torah to answer the question of how one should live. The fact that he, too, was an inmate simultaneously helped the guys take him seriously and undercut him sometimes. He admitted to what he'd done; he said he regretted it. Still, who was Rabbi Ben Haim, the money launderer, to instruct us in the laundering of our souls?

Moshe Rabbeinu. Moses our teacher. Yaakov Avinu. Jacob our father. Dovid ha'Melekh. David the king... these men and others were the subjects of Ben Haim's lectures, and hadn't they, too, been guilty in their time? Hadn't Moshe been prevented, by his disobedience, from setting foot in the Promised

Land? Hadn't Yaakov hoodwinked his own brother out of a birthright, and his father out of a blessing?
Hadn't Dovid whacked his goomar's husband when the poor bastard got inconvenient?

We ate; we listened. Ben Haim told shtetl stories he'd read in Ashkenazi books. As Ben Haim spoke dessert was brought out—cooked apples. The men poked the soft fruit with their plastic forks and watched the sage speak. They were wondering, maybe, how to go about becoming more righteous men. Or they were wondering how to get their hands on Ben Haim's silver cup.

The Rabbis

Dovid ha'Melekh was guilty, and Yaakov Avinu, and Moshe Rabbeinu. So what if our rabbis were, too? And if Moses himself offered us advice, would we turn that down, also?

Even though Ben Haim was Sephardi, his following was mostly among the secular Jews and the Russians. Maybe that was why he dug around for Ashkenaz folktales in the prison books—to better appeal to this demographic. The Russians and the secularists—and the Russians were almost always secularists—liked Ben Haim, because he spoke in terms of morality, principle, and poetic tales. Ben Haim wasn't interested so much in halakhah, Jewish law. It was alright for him to follow it, but he wasn't a Satmar about things. If you had a gang tattoo from your halcyon days with the Russian mob, it wouldn't be Ben Haim who told you you could never be buried in a Jewish cemetery.

Which, anyway, is a myth. Where do you get these ideas from? The sheet with a hole in it: also bullshit.

Every now and then, Ben Haim went on a tear about former New Jersey Governor Chris Christie. Christie had been one of the prosecutors on Ben Haim's case. When Ben Haim wasn't telling miracle tales from Ukraine, or stories from the period of the First Temple, he was slapping his forehead. He was slapping his forehead and saying, “Christie, that swine-looking guinea, *of course he had it out for me from the beginning*. You think a guy named, twice, after Jesus has friendly feelings towards the Jews?” And a wise man knew to nod. Nobody took Ben Haim's outbursts seriously.

The more religious Jews gravitated towards Pinter, Rabbi Yehudah Leib, no relation to the playwright. Also the Jews who had no background in religion and wanted to learn. Rabbi Pinter was the one who would show you how to wrap tefillin properly, and explain to you the rules of kashrut, and help you get a palm frond for the Feast of Tabernacles (a lulav for Sukkot).

Ben Haim spoke on Friday nights, when the guys felt sentimental, homesick, holy. Pinter spoke at lunch on Saturday, when guys felt alert, rested, and bored. Ben Haim was Syrian originally, but Pinter's

family had been in America for generations. He had a very Calvinist outlook, for a Jew. Every week his D'var Torah, his little sermon, if you want, had one theme and one theme only. Every week Pinter got up and explained to us that it was God who'd put us in prison. The Justice Department, Blessed Be Its Name, is a wing of God's enforcement apparatus. When He is too busy with other things to scourge you with leprosy or flaming hail, it is the JD that He sends, knocking, to your door. It was time to stop blaming everybody else—the government, snitches—for your situation.

You were a little masochistic, I think, if you liked Pinter's D'var Torahs. If you were Pinter yourself, you were a little masochistic, even.

Rabbi Pinter didn't talk much about his own criminal history, but he had a long one. Back in the '70s he'd been a lobbyist working in Washington. In 1978 he'd been busted bribing a congressman and done some time in the federal penitentiary. Most recently he'd been caught up in the 2008 crash. He'd owned a financial services company, Olympia, that never paid back the mortgages they refinanced. They ended up owing tens of millions of dollars, and Pinter got 97 months.

So when I first heard Pinter's speeches, I was intrigued. Why did he waste his time trying to reform us Otisville crooks? When he was one of the biggest criminals out of any of us. He had a whole career behind him. Why should I take advice from such a man?

The truth is, plenty of religious rabbis get tossed in lock-up. Guys give tax-deductible donations to their congregations, and the rabbi figures out a way to give most of the money back—keeping 10%. These little rings were running all over the Northeast.

Hold your judgment, Christians—let's not forget your clergy has run into some scandal too, lately.

Pinter and Ben Haim made it their business to be model inmates for the community. They were virtuous men, upright and holy. When there were fights, they intervened. When guys got restless, jealous that other guys got more furloughs than them, or special treatment from the guards, or a bigger slice of

gefilte fish on Friday night, it was Pinter and Ben Haim who counseled: Be Cool. There is a song in *West Side Story* by that name; most people do not know that it is adapted from a Jewish prayer. *West Side Story* stole a lot of material from Otisville.

The rabbis took their moral position seriously. They understood that people saw them as hypocrites, and they understood that people were right. But neither Pinter nor Ben Haim was happy to be a hypocrite. It pained them to be what they were. So they did good deeds, modeled good behavior, as teshuvah, repentance, return.

And we watched them struggle against the burden of their own criminality as a way of watching ourselves. We learned from them. Ben Haim and Pinter were just like any of the rest of the guys, with the contradictions heightened a little bit, maybe. But anybody who goes to shul on Friday and bribes congressmen on Monday is as much a hypocrite as Ben Haim or Pinter. They didn't feel that way.

The rabbis felt that more than anyone else in Otisville, they were in unpayable debt to God.

Most of us agreed.

College Days

My first few weeks at Otisville, I was bored out of my mind.

Like with time-out, that's part of the point. People naturally have a lot of energy, a lot of curiosity. Maybe you don't even realize how much you have, but it's a lot. Quit your day job; you'll find out. That's why retirees buy a shed and make birdhouses all day long. That's why so many famous artists are rich kids. A human being wants to make things, do things, learn things. Wants to mate with other human beings. Nowadays, caning is illegal, and you can't put people in the stocks. What you can do is take away any chance they have to express their instincts. Repression of instincts is what prison is all about.

And it's the worst when you're new. I had no prison job, no prison buddies, nothing to do. I was too depressed and angry and nervous for much of anything. I read a little bit, books and magazines from the library. I felt I had suffered a terrible injustice, and every day that nobody noticed made me feel crazy. It made me feel crazy, too, the way some of the guys didn't seem to be losing their minds at all. I was afraid of getting used to things. I was afraid of starting to think that this way of living was normal.

I drifted. I thought big thoughts. I paced around the compound. Shabbos and davening gave me something. Some kind of way to string the days together. But it wasn't enough. Of course it wasn't.

Scalba moved me out of the dorm, into a cubicle. I had a little more privacy after that.

Jogging helped, for a little while. We were allowed to move around on the compound pretty freely, and for a New Havenite, the Catskills have a melancholy beauty. The sky is a watery grey-blue and the people stand out against it. The grass is slick and green and perfect, and in the distance, on the mountains, there are trees that were there before this place was called New York.

Guys were always out, walking the campgrounds, solo or in twos or threes. I'd weave between them, jogging on my own, until the day I turned a corner and was faced down by a Russian Jew with his

fists up. There were symbols I didn't recognize tattooed on his knuckles. I guess he thought I was getting ready to jump him.

"Get the fuck back, motherfucker!" That was what he said to me.

"I'm very sorry," I said, and jogged around him. After that, I kept to the baseball diamond when I took my constitutionals. Nobody hung out around the baseball diamond. I only ever seemed to make homeruns.

Sometimes I'd sit around and watch people. The Native American inmates were allowed to have a smoker that they used for religious ceremonies. I'd sit and watch them send up great clouds of smoke, grey-blue like the upstate sky, only of a deeper shade. I wondered if they ever watched us Jews, wrapping our tefillin and swaying to our old prayers in their minor keys, the same way. With the same sense of awed difference.

Everybody was allowed freedom of religious practice in Otisville. The Christians held Sunday services in the same chapel we used for Shabbos, and they brought in special food for Easter and Christmas. The Muslims brought their prayer rugs into the chapel, too, for their daily prayers. And we had our kosher kitchen. At least while I was there.

I heard a few years later, in 2019, that the warden shut down the kosher kitchen—which was really only a closet anyway. This was shortly after Mshulem was released, along with one Sholom Rubashkin, who had had his sentence commuted by President Trump. Both of them were machers with political connections. Turns out, their political connections were what kept the kosher closet open.

I was in Otisville thirty days before my official orientation. Orientation is where you get assigned a job. Scalba'd told me, already, that he'd put me in the kitchen when it was time for me to have work. I was fine with this, but the religious prisoners were not. They felt it was improper for a Jew to work in the

treyf kitchen, preparing chazerei, shellfish, and cheeseburgers for the goyim. I reassured them. I told them I'd try my best not to eat, touch, or even look at pork.

Still, they felt, it didn't look right.

By working with pork, I risked reflecting poorly on the Jewish people.

Like I said, it was thirty days in before orientation finally arrived. Scalba wanted a full classroom, needed a few more guys to turn up. When they did, he sat us all down in the visitors' room. It was like high school health class, when it's taught by the gym teacher. Or a sexual harassment seminar in an office. Everything had the shape of education but the tone of a reprimand.

St. Peter, Scalba, and a couple other guys I didn't know led the class. Normally they carried truncheons, but today they had laser pointers. A guard I didn't know, who looked about sixteen—maybe on an unpaid internship—ran us through a PowerPoint. The PowerPoint explained a great many things of importance.

First of all, Scalba explained: "It is vitally necessary that you attend to your mental health needs, and those of the other dirtbags." If some inmate confessed to us that he was experiencing suicidal feelings, we were asked to report it. Even if we ourselves were experiencing suicidal feelings, we were expected to report it.

Scalba wanted us to rat on our own psyches!

Everybody knew that if you had suicidal thoughts, Otisville didn't get you a counselor. Instead, they tossed you in solitary. In solitary, you had an opportunity to contemplate your life without distractions. It was a very spiritual experience, a little like visiting a Buddhist temple in Tibet. The guards even helped you fast: you got half the normal food ration in solitary. The guards would leave you there until you weren't suicidal anymore. In the language of the psychological profession, this technique is referred to as *letting it mellow*.

Some guard I didn't know, a guy with a long, pinkish, vertical scar dividing his forehead into halves, explained about the prison medical system. Every time you went to the prison doctor, a two-dollar co-pay was taken out of your commissary account. That might not sound like very much, but prison jobs pay less than a quarter an hour. That co-pay was worth at least eight hours of labor, usually a lot more. Don't worry, though, Two-Face explained. The charge is waived if it is determined that your health issues were caused by an attack from another inmate. I noticed he said nothing about an attack from one of the guards.

Then it was St. Peter's turn to speak. He was charged with sexual education. St. Peter explained to us that we were forbidden to fornicate with other inmates. He went on to say that no inmate could force another inmate to have sex with him. That was illegal. I was grateful to him for saying so. Vaguely, I remembered hearing about a rule like that in law school. I noticed he said nothing about sex with one of the guards.

Scalba then asked if any of us knew how to use a sewing machine. I was the only one who raised my hand. So I didn't end up in the kitchen, after all. I was made the prison tailor. I worked in the warehouse.

It was something to do, at least. On the way there and back I'd look through the barbed-wire fence at the guys in the Medium. They would look back, their eyes bleary with sleeplessness. I was glad I wasn't in the Medium.

The dynamic between the prisoners and the guards was completely different there. Most guys in the Camp were doing between one and five years for white-collar crime. The guards weren't scared of us. They'd probably been picking on the kinds of guys who ended up in the Camp since they were five years old.

The Medium wasn't like that. Guys in the Medium were doing five to ten, for violent offenses. You'd think the guards would be rougher with those guys, but the opposite was the case. In the Medium,

the inmates policed themselves. They had their own rules, and the guards stayed out of it. As long as there weren't riots, whatever went on between guys in the Medium was none of their business.

Two guards ran the warehouse, and they didn't like each other much. Officer Ferriola and Officer Travers. While we unloaded trucks, Ferriola and Travers would stare glumly at their computer screens, surfing social media, surfing porn, doing anything at all to avoid having to talk. There was a culture clash between them.

Ferriola was in charge of the inedibles that came in: clothing, toilet paper, tools, equipment, mail. I was his direct underling. I was shown the ropes by an irritable older inmate, Sunn, who yelled at me in Mandarin when I made mistakes. Sunn had been busted for running a knockoff designer sweatshop in Chinatown. Therefore, he had experience in the garment industry. I altered new uniforms as they came in, got pretty good at it pretty quickly. Ferriola was quiet, a tranquil, romantic kind of guy, given to poetic silences. He was tall and thin, and his hairline receded with dignity. He'd married another guard some years ago. Officer Travers struck him, I think, as vulgar.

When I didn't have tailoring work to do, I unloaded the food trucks, which was Travers' area. Travers was a redneck, 300 pounds, an Otisville local who didn't seem to know which side of the Civil War his home state had been on. He'd blow up at the inmates sometimes, but you could stay on his good side if you were quiet and you did your work. He didn't want to make trouble with us.

As a proud redneck, he didn't like to think of himself as too different from the prisoners. He was uneasy with a position of authority; he played outlaw country music while we unloaded the trucks. When art billionaire Helle Nahmad joined us at the warehouse—Nahmad been busted for running high-stakes poker games for Russian mobsters out of Trump Tower—Travers liked to join in with us as an equal to hear Nahmad's stories. And they were remarkable stories. Nahmad, boozing it up with his best friend Leonardo DiCaprio; Nahmad, buying up every apartment on one floor of Trump Tower so he could knock down the walls and make himself a penthouse; Nahmad blowing tens of millions on Picassos and then

forgetting which of his houses he'd left them in. Nahmad was a mathematical genius, but the guys gambled with him anyway. And I'm the guy who taught him how to mop a floor. He'd never mopped a floor before in his life.

Every week a white minivan filled with Shabbos food—challah, babkas, gefilte fish—would come into the warehouse, and I'd banter with the driver, a Chasid from Brooklyn. He'd ask me about Sholom Rubashkin. Rubashkin was in the Medium, so I didn't know much, but I'd tell him what I could. Rubashkin used to own the biggest kosher slaughterhouse in the world. Now he, and me, and Helle Nahmad, and Mshulem Jacobowitz, and that little Russian Yid who told me to fuck off when I was going for my morning jog—now we were all equals.

I got paid thirteen cents an hour for my labor. I complained, and a guard told me if I could produce a high school diploma they'd bump me up to eighteen. But my postgraduate degree meant bupkes.

I'd have thought a law license would be worth at least twenty cents.

Noodles

So one day I was sitting near the visitors' parking lot, listening to music on my headphones. I had a secret that day, but not a big one. That was the day I stole the noodles. I hadn't stolen anything before Otisville.

Maybe my peer group had had a bad influence on me.

So I was sitting there, by the visitors' lot, enjoying three things. The first thing I was enjoying was the radio, on my headphones, a local station that played klezmer music and other cultural favorites. On top of that it was an Otisville day when the grey-blue leaned pearly, and therefore beautiful, and I could see three deer playing at the other side of the lot. And the third thing I was enjoying was, of course, the secret I had that day. I'll say a little bit more about enjoying a secret.

First of all, everybody does. Lots of people like to shoplift candy. Most of these people can afford a candy bar just fine; that's not the point. The point is, sometimes being readable, being knowable, makes you feel kind of boring. You can start to feel like an automaton, following the rules all the time. And I think you can start to get scared that you don't have any internal life at all, when you've gone a while without keeping a secret. A secret is an ornament for your interior. A diamond earring nobody else can see.

But in prison, being able to have a secret from time to time is especially important. Because in prison, not even the ordinary, pedestrian, day-to-day secrecies and privacies normal people enjoy are provided to you. You don't get to be alone on the john. You don't get to be alone in the shower. You can't sneak a snack that nobody else knows about. You can't even read a book without other guys knowing what it is, unless you want to take exhaustive precautions, and then they know, at least, that you're taking precautions about something. So a frightening sense of emptiness comes about. You start to have a hard time telling the difference between your internal life and your external life. There's nothing

hidden about you, nothing you have the power to decide when to reveal. To have a secret—even if it's just a bag of stolen noodles—is a small relief. A small relief, and a joy.

But I had made a mistake.

You see that at Otisville, as at every prison, there is a smuggling problem. Now, it's very important that prison administrators never ferret out smuggling entirely. They know as well as anybody that a certain amount of smuggling, a certain amount of contraband, is necessary to keep the inmates from going dangerously insane. At the same time, however, the smuggling economy can be threatening to the guards. They can begin to feel left out of things. They realize that there's business going on in the prison that they don't know about, and it has an effect on their social lives. What did they do wrong? Why weren't they invited?

Even in my first week, I'd been introduced to the guy everyone called Sam's Club. Sam's Club could get you anything, though not at the real Sam's Club's famous discount prices. I'd tell you what he looked like but shouldn't, for obvious reasons. If you need a mental image for him, just use your favorite fast-food mascot.

The important thing to realize about prison is that *everything* is contraband. We're not talking about fentanyl and machine guns, here. If it isn't bought from the prison commissary, it's strictly verboten. Yes, even a candy bar—even a candy bar can get you written up. Getting written up was what the guys called getting a shot. Too many shots, and they tossed you in solitary.

Amnesty International says: Solitary confinement is a form of torture.

Larry Noodles says: *You're telling me!*

My first time making use of Sam's Club was for a piece of frozen pizza. Sometimes guys smuggled money into the Camp, which inmates weren't allowed to have. There were vending machines in the visiting room; we weren't allowed to use them. Guys put smuggled dollar bills in library books for

safekeeping. Sometimes the guards went through the books and pocketed the cash. For them it was beer money. For us, frozen pizza.

Sam's Club bought the slice from the machine for me, but I had to microwave it. Of course I knew what I was doing was illegal, and I spent the whole time looking over both shoulders. I ate the pizza hunched over in my cubicle, paper towel for a plate, afraid I'd get busted and tossed in solitary. Maybe Sam's Club was even setting me up. Who could I trust?

It was trusting too easily that had gotten me here in the first place.

The Chasidim had their own little smuggling ring. Some Chasidic Jews will not eat dairy products that have not been supervised by Jews from the very moment the milk left the teat. They are concerned that they might accidentally eat cheese that was used for idol worship. Idol worship is a big taboo among the Chasidim. Most things the goyim do seem to qualify.

I heard the way it worked was that some Chasid brought the cheese all the way from Brooklyn. He'd drive his big white van up Two-Mile Road and toss the package out the window. At an appointed time, a camper would go to retrieve it.

It was that kind of thing—cheese smuggling, and cash smuggling, drug smuggling, cellphone smuggling—that led to the rule: no prisoner was to hang out by the visitors' parking lot. You could be there to make a deal. And I guess I got careless. I just wanted to watch the deer. But Officer Grogan saw me.

Remember Officer Grogan?

Grogan was in a bad mood that day. Maybe the Celtics had lost. He had a Celtics tattoo on his neck and a nightstick strapped to his waist. It ran down to his knee. "Dressler," he asked me, politely, "Dressler, what the fuck are you doing by the visitors' lot? Do you think that this is the fucking Otisville Hotel?"

I thought about explaining to Grogan about the deer.

Instead I just said, “No, sir. My mistake, sir.”

“You’re right, Dressler,” Grogan said. “That *was* your mistake. And now’s your chance to tell me what you’re doing here, before I start poking around in your things.”

I thought again about pointing to the deer.

First Officer Grogan searched my person. He didn’t want to waste a pair of gloves, so he conducted no cavity search. Instead we went together to my cubicle. There, triumphantly, he discovered the bag of noodles, hanging on a hook on the wall. He held the bag close to my face. He pointed at it. He growled.

“Are these,” he wanted to know, “*authorized* noodles?”

Grogan then conducted an investigation. He questioned the kitchen staff. They reported that they had no spiral noodles, but that there were plenty of them in the prison warehouse. Grogan reviewed my file. There he discovered that *I* was employed at the prison warehouse. An idea began to take shape in the mind of Officer Grogan. He was hot on my tail.

He had me taken to an interrogation room, where he leaned on me hard. He splashed my file out in front of me on the table. He brought his face very close to mine, like it was a bag of noodles. “What I want to know,” Officer Grogan asked, “is how spiral noodles, which are not for sale at the commissary and not available at the kitchen, but are available at the warehouse, where you work, ended up in your cell. I want to know this now, Dressler, and if I don’t get answers soon, you can rest assured I’ll have every other guy who works in the warehouse hauled in, and if they don’t talk, you can all take a day in solitary.”

I confessed.

I thought if I confessed, that'd be the end of it. Instead, I got a shot. Only one, though. Luckily, Grogan hadn't found the other illegal items in my cell.

My disciplinary report indicated that I had violated Code 305. I have a copy of this report. It says: *On November 23, 2014 at approximately 10:58 am, I, Senior Officer Specialist S. Grogan, conducted an area search of cube 17 in the camp. Cube 17 is assigned to inmates Cruz, Romeo, 16160-067, and Dressler, Lawrence 21502-014. In the area search of cube 17 I found a bag of spiraled pasta in a net bag that was hanging on a hook in cube 17. This spiral pasta is not sold through the commissary and is part of the food service supply. Inmate Dressler admitted that the spiral pasta was his and that he took it from the warehouse.*

Grogan cataloged the noodles and put them in an evidence locker. He was a zealot in the pursuit of justice. Grogan liked to display the contraband he'd collected, often after he'd destroyed it. Guys would put little shelves together from scrap wood for the books in their cells, and Grogan would smash them to pieces and hang the fragments in the office window.

He punched out at 5. New guards arrived. At around 8, I was approached by another inmate, David Jewmark. Jewmark had been the CFO of a billion-dollar hedge fund. He'd wired ten million of the fund's money into his own personal offshore gambling account. He got five years. It was Jewmark who gave me back the bag of noodles, which he'd swiped from the evidence locker. I thanked him but told him that I was not in the mood to eat noodles.

Scalba handed me down two sanctions for this offense. The first was *loss of quarters*. That meant I was forced to move back into the dorm, with the new guys and Gas Leak Romano. Gas Leak had a flatulence problem. This he blamed on the feds. If they served better food, he wouldn't have his problem.

I had to carry all my belongings back to the first building I'd occupied at Otisville. Guys mocked me on my walk of shame. Roman came up with my new nickname—Larry Noodles. Some people still call me that today.

My cellmate, a short Filipino guy called Romeo Cruz, put up a fight. Romeo was like a furious Yoda. He was from Connecticut, too, and he didn't want to be saddled with somebody crazier than Larry Noodles. Larry Lokshen, to the Yiddish speakers. He was in luck. Romeo's new bunkmate was another mortgage attorney.

I also got sixty days without visitation, suspended for a ninety-day probation period. That meant that if I got into trouble again in the next ninety days, I'd be punished with a sixty-day visitor fast. Luckily, I made it through the next three months without any more run-ins with Grogan.

Then, about six months later, I was in a van he was driving, taking a bunch of us Jews to the mikveh, the ritual bath. He heard somebody call me Noodles.

"Larry," he said to me, "why do they call you Noodles?"

I explained. He barely had any memory of the incident at all. For him, it was another day at the office, another day with the punks. But for me—well, I was Larry Noodles forever.

Larry Noodles. Nice to meet you.

larrynoodles.com

So in prison, I kept a diary. Lots of guys do. It has to do with the same thing as having a secret. It has to do with knowing that, whatever else they can take away from you—your home, your family, your visiting privileges, your nice Filipino roommate—they can't take away from you your rich internal life. Just like outside prison, inside prison, some guys have rich internal lives, and other guys have not-so-rich internal lives. To record mine, to remind myself that it still belonged to me, I kept a diary.

I wrote things down on scraps of paper a lot of the time. I wrote about Shabbos. I wrote about the weather. I wrote about the inmates. I wrote about what I did, and who I met, and after a while I got to the point where I'd sit and look at what I'd written and think... nobody is ever gonna believe a word I say.

There are crazier things in the world than Otisville. There's a kind of fish that swims into another fish's mouth and fastens itself on the root of the tongue. It sucks all the nutrients away from the host fish until it's close to death. Then it replaces the original tongue and it's as if nothing happened, except now two fish are living on a diet meant for one.

That's crazier than Otisville.

But Otisville is not so sane. I thought this to myself often. I thought it to myself when Nahmad was talking about cruising and boozing with Leonardo DiCaprio. I thought it to myself when Schlesinger was making his little kiddush-for-one every Shabbos. I thought it to myself when Officer Grogan took me to the interrogation room for a bag of noodles to play out his cop fantasy, a cop fantasy that was amazing to me because Grogan was already two-thirds of a cop.

What else could he want?

It wasn't just that Otisville was too crazy to believe in. I knew it wasn't. I was reminded every day that *nothing* is too crazy to believe in. Naftuli Schlesinger believed that the Creator of Heaven and Earth took an interest in what I wore to shul to on Shabbos. Menachem Youlus believed he'd been doing

those poor families he sold Torahs good, that he'd helped them connect with their ancestors. Everybody believed he was innocent, even though he knew he was guilty. So nothing was too crazy to believe in. Nothing is.

But I was a disgraced man. Not so long ago I'd been, if not Alan Dershowitz, if not Roy Cohn, at least a respected figure in the New Haven smart set. My friends and lovers were at Yale Medical School. My rabbi, Daniel Greer, had been a graduate of Princeton. I associated with the good and brilliant rich; now I associated with the rich, still, but the rest had changed. I wanted to cry out to the world I'd been kidnapped from. I wanted to show them that I was still alive, still thinking, still the complete man, even though so much had been taken by me. Even though I'd fucked it all up so bad.

That's when I started the blog.

At first, it was another secret. I didn't tell the other inmates about it, of course. But I was sending clips from my diary out into the world. Paul Bass, an old friend and the editor of *The New Haven Independent*, agreed to publish some of what I'd written. Little character sketches, little stories. I told about Youlus and Jacobowitz, Bernie and Scalba. I told about my strange experiences in the chapel and the warehouse. They're still out there, those blogs. You can look all the way back to my prison days if you want to.

Here's one of my clips from *The New Haven Independent*:

An 80-year-old Hasidic inmate got permission to go to a wedding accompanied by the Blue Boy who is my boss at the warehouse. Talk about an odd couple. The Blue Boy is a self-proclaimed "redneck" who weighs in at about 300 pounds. The Hasid is a 100-pound ornery old man who doesn't think much of secular Jews, or the "goyim" for that matter. The Blue Boy had to drive him to the wedding and drive him back to the prison. I asked the Blue Boy if he could bring me back some whitefish and herring. I also reminded him to make sure the inmate brought his Depends with him, you don't want

to have any accidents in the prison van. He proceeded to flip me the bird and tell me to go bleep myself. I said, "Have a nice time."

And then, for a while, I lived in thrilled fear. I'd never been in prison before. I didn't really know what—if anything—I was risking. I knew that people were reading what I'd written. That made me feel, at least, like I hadn't disappeared. It made me feel as if Larry Dressler and Larry Noodles were both alive, sharing one body, like a couple of fish. Two names, two identities that belonged to different worlds but the same man. And it also made me laugh. It was funny, to think about self-important Mshulem and Naftuli, their portraits in twelve-point scribbled out on a thousand computer screens. Or a hundred. Or ten thousand! Who cared?

It was something that made me whole.

I wasn't just a convict anymore. I was a reporter on the convict life. The poet laureate of Otisville. Suddenly, the things that were happening to me weren't happening *to me* anymore. They were happening for me. They were material. Every embarrassment, every fight, every deprivation. I was two men.

I was the prisoner and the writer.

When you had a problem, you went to Mshulem. Mshulem, as I've already explained, was kind of an arch-criminal. He was also somebody whose English was not so easy to parse. I read somewhere once that after *The Godfather* came out in theaters, the whole Mafia changed. They'd never seen themselves the way Coppola portrayed them. They didn't know they were men of honor, men with a code, men with style. After *The Godfather*, they tried to live up to that portrait of them. It changed American crime forever.

Sometimes I wondered if Mshulem's power was related to the Godfather Effect. When people do a Brando impression they stuff wadded-up cotton balls in their mouths to simulate his unintelligibility. Brando himself was doing an impression as Don Corleone—an impression of Francis Costello, whose weird voice was broadcast in America as part of the Kefauver Committee hearings in the 1950s. (At the Kefauver Committee, someone asked the actress Virginia Hill why she hung out with so many gangsters. "Because, your honor," she said, "I'm the best damn cocksucker in America.") Somehow, everybody got the idea that the harder you were to understand, the more worthy you were of power and respect. If somebody had to lean his ear a little closer to your mouth to know what you were saying, he was in your control already.

You made him lean, didn't you?

So Mshulem was the guy you went to when you needed a favor, because Mshulem was the guy nobody could understand.

This guy Ari was giving me a hard time. Ari was short, fat, and an asshole. Ari had the idea in his head that he had to find somebody to dominate or he was going to be toast in Otisville. For some reason, he picked me. Maybe somebody gave him some advice before he went away. Maybe somebody said to him, "Listen up, Ari. When you get in there, the first thing you do is find the biggest, toughest mortgage attorney you can. And you're gonna want to make that mortgage attorney your bitch."

I'd have had no problem with the little Yid if it'd come to a physical altercation. But I remembered the wisdom of Bernie; I recalled the words of Scalba. Baruch Bernie, baruch Scalba. So I went to Mshulem. I explained to Mshulem—this guy is giving me trouble. He swears at me for no reason, he seems a little psycho, maybe, I don't know what to do about it. Guide me, teach me. Mshulem said, "Don't worry about it." I think that's what he said, anyway.

I didn't worry. Next time I talked to Ari, he was positively Edwardian in his manners.

*

Not too long after I published my first few blogs in the *New Haven Independent*, a strange thing started to happen. The strange thing was this. A guy would come up to me. "I'm gonna fucking kill you, Noodles," the guy would say. And that would make up most of the conversation.

It didn't take me too long to figure out what was going on. Somebody had heard about the blogs. Then he'd ratted. Everybody knew about it now. And everybody wanted a slice of Noodle Kugel.

Danny Greenberg, AKA Danna Banana. So-called because of the time Mshulem sliced up a handful of banana pieces to toss at his head. Mshulem did this, no doubt, to teach Danna Banana a lesson. Danna Banana had learned, but who remembers what the lesson was? All I know is he was one of the guys to propagate the rumors about me. Rumors that I wasn't just writing funny stories. That what I was writing could maybe get somebody into trouble.

Banana went to the inmate gabbai, the inmate beadle, Ari Glucksman. Glucksman tried to get me tossed into solitary. He went to the guards with it. Larry Noodles is embarrassing you. Larry Noodles is writing unflattering things about Otisville.

I was lucky. The guards thought Glucksman was so annoying that they *didn't* toss me in solitary, just to spite him.

Then Jewmark, the guy who'd returned my noodles, came after me. He came up behind me in the prison library. He leaned over me while I was studying Talmud. What a good Jew I was! What a bad Jew Jewmark was, to come after me like that! He leaned over me and whispered in my ear. He told me he was gonna get inmate Badboy Russell after me.

"Badboy Russell was let out," I told him. "He's in a halfway house."

"Badboy Russell could still fuck you up," Jewmark said. But he seemed a little less sure of himself.

"Badboy Russell can take a number."

Jewmark thought about this. “When I get out,” he said, “I’m gonna sue the cheeks off your ass.”

Jewmark and I agreed that that was a reasonable place to leave things. He took off to go practice his growl in the mirror. I forgot how to read Aramaic for an upsetting minute-and-a-half.

I expected to catch a beating. I worried I might catch worse. But the weeks went by and nothing really happened to me. Inmates said the worst things they could think of, but that was it. It was white-collar prison. On the outside, maybe one of these guys would pay somebody to clip me, or at least to kick the shit out of me. But on the inside, who were you gonna hire? Was Helle Nahmad gonna get his fingernails dirty? Was Walter Forbes?

The truth was, they just knew there was a way they were supposed to act. They knew they were supposed to threaten me. It was prison. They’d seen movies. They were as surprised as I was when the ritual turned out to be empty.

And then Mshulem sent for me. Mshulem! Now I was worried. Mshulem would burn down a warehouse. Surely, Mshulem would not hesitate to burn down a mortgage attorney.

Two guys came to get me on one of my jogs around the baseball diamond. Chasidim. “Come with us,” they, basically, said. They were the kind of Chasidim that, like Mshulem, you filled in some blanks for when they talked to you.

Mshulem was hanging out in the library. He made me sit down.

“Noodles,” he said. “And why do you wanna cause trouble for everybody? You wanna know the week I’ve had? With this one in my ear about Larry Noodles, and that one in my ear about Larry Noodles. Why do you wanna go telling loshen hara on everybody in Otisville?”

“Loshen hara!” I said. Loshen hara is Evil Speech. “Mshulem, is it loshen hara when I don’t even use a guy’s real name?”

“Loshen hara, maybe it is and maybe it isn’t,” Mshulem said. “It’s trouble! Now it’s my trouble! Now it’s one of my troubles! Don’t I have enough on my plate?”

“Mshulem,” I promised, “never will I post a word that could get time added to somebody’s sentence. Never will I post a word that could make a wife leave her husband. But I will go on posting, Mshulem. I have some rights!” And I was beginning to feel the old powers, the old courtroom talents rushing back to me. I felt prepared to call on the Constitution. I felt ready to speak stirringly of human rights, tyranny, freedom of religion, freedom of speech.

Maybe I was a pain in Mshulem’s ass. In fact, I *was* a pain in Mshulem’s ass. Good! Larry Noodles would henceforth be a pain in the ass. Larry Noodles would henceforth be a fly in the ointment. And all of a sudden, with Mshulem leaning on me, I felt that I had more than a pastime on my hands with these blogs. I had the chance to tell the truth! And the truth upsets some people. It makes them uneasy.

“If you don’t cut it out,” Mshulem said, “I can’t protect you from what some of the guys might do. They’re very upset, Larry.”

“Let them do what they will,” I said. I walked out of the library, feeling a little like Woodward and a little more like Bernstein.

Hoffman is a little closer than DeNiro to my type, but we’ll keep looking.

Things continued like that for a while. Guys threatening to kill me, threatening to kill Paul Bass. The longer it went on, the less afraid of it I was. The more it felt like material. The more I realized that I had discovered, quite by accident, a way of pissing people off that brought me, even in prison, unalloyed joy.

When Naftuli heard about the blog I’d written on him—because he was, of course, the 80-year-old Chasid in the clipping—he came at me hard. Hard for an 80-year-old, anyway. He jumped and yelled and cursed me in Yiddish. He told me I should be like a chandelier, hanging at day and burning at night.

He told me all my teeth should fall out except one, and in that one I should get a toothache. Maybe. I don't speak Yiddish.

"Naftuli, Naftuli," I said. "English, please! This is America."

And Naftuli grinned an off-white grin. "I'm only seventy-nine," he said. "Not eighty."

I feel bad, now, about the Depends joke.

Sorry Naftuli!

The Murder Investigation/Some Rats

Criminals in Otisville have no manners. There are all kinds of reasons for it. First of all, there's no reward for good manners. Manners do not enter into the computation of *good behavior*, for sentencing purposes.

When somebody treated you rudely, or inconsiderately, the best thing to do was to remind yourself of that. They had no manners. Usually, therefore, it wasn't about you.

It was a lazy, hazy day and I was reading on a bench overlooking the forest. Just as I started to doze off, an inmate I didn't know appeared. When I opened my eyes, he was already barking in my face. He yelled that Scalba wanted to see me. Put the book down, Noodles! You're wanted.

Criminals in Otisville have no manners, I reminded myself. Forgive him. He knows not what he does.

As I walked over to Scalba's, the lazy, hazy day it was began to take a turn. Prisoners who saw me shouted and jeered. Everybody wanted to tell me that Scalba wanted to see me. They all figured I was in big trouble. There can be a lot of fun, sometimes, in being the bearer of bad news.

I didn't know what I'd done, and that seemed to me to be a bad sign. If I knew what I'd done, at least I could prepare a defense. If I didn't know what I'd done—and I didn't—maybe I'd committed a crime of great severity. It could be anything. And it could be anything, done by anybody. What would Scalba care if he nailed the wrong dirtbag? A dirtbag is a dirtbag. The reflexive property.

When I got to the guards' office, they let me in immediately. That was unusual. Most of the time you had to wait around a little bit. The more unusual things got, the more concerned I became.

I could see that Scalba was on the phone. "Dressler," he said. "A police lieutenant in Connecticut wants to talk to you about a murder investigation."

The guards got quiet. They looked at me. They looked at me very differently from the way they normally did.

That's right, boys. Larry Noodles is ordering hits right from his top bunk. Larry Noodles is the next Al Capone.

Scalba cleared the room. The guards gathered outside the door to listen. I could see their heads pressed up against the window. Doesn't matter how long you've worked in the federal prison system. Everybody finds murder interesting.

I was the attorney for a guy called Jeff Hamburg. Jeff, it turns out, was suspected of murdering his ex-wife in Madison, Connecticut. The cops were on his trail. They wanted to know if I had any information. If they were in the room with me, I'd have pointed to my greens. I'd have said, *Do I look like a guy with a lot of information? Or do I look, I'd ask them, like a guy who sews greens for eighteen cents an hour?*

Of course I knew nothing about any murder. I was a different order of criminal. I'd signed some papers. Maybe the pen is mightier than the sword, but probably not. Still, though, the boys in blue wanted to come see me. I said that was fine with me. Just stop off at Monsey and bring me a pizza. I knew they wouldn't, but I hoped at least they'd buy me a slice in the visitors' room.

Scalba made the appointment for me. He asked if I was busy any time in the next week. I checked my pocket calendar. No, I had nothing going on for another year and a half.

On the day of the interview, Scalba cleared out the visitors' room for us. I explained to these nice cops from Madison that I knew nothing about what Hamburg had been up to, and certainly didn't know anything about any murder. I didn't know anything about the murder, I said—but I'd like to know something. Everybody finds murder interesting.

I told the cops I didn't think Jeff was a killer. Who knows if they believed me? *They* thought Jeff was a killer. That was enough. They didn't buy me any pizza.

After that, I thought I might get some special privileges. The guards and the guys all thought I was ordering hits. Would I get a private room? My own TV? Some cans of tuna fish? A spring mattress? There were only two or three spring mattresses in the Camp, and guys sold them back and forth. Surely, as such a dangerous individual, I merited access to a spring mattress!

Some of the guys thought I was a rat after that. They thought I was talking to the feds. I asked them if they'd seen the car the blue boys rode in. If they'd seen TOWN OF MADISON written on the side.

Other guys—guys who'd been around longer—knew I wasn't a rat. If I'd been ratting, the cops would have taken me off the compound. But inmates were always paranoid about rats. It was impossible to follow every prison rule, because the rules kept changing. That was a deliberate policy. Keep changing the rules—make sure nobody can keep up—and you can always find a reason to bust a troublemaker down.

Things were made complicated by the fact that, often, it was ratting that got you into the Camp, and not the Medium. I was ratted on by the heads of the conspiracy in which I was entangled. Kind of a Whitey Bulger situation—you remember Whitey Bulger. Head of a crime family, and informant for the FBI. Lots of reasonable people take the opportunity to rat when it's presented to them. If I'd had enough information to be useful to the feds, who knows—maybe I could've dodged Otisville altogether.

When guys turned up in the Camp who had ratting reputations, it wasn't easy for them. Take inmate Alex Schleider.

Alex Schleider was a rat. He'd worked under Eliyahu Weinstein, a bigshot's bigshot, a Madoff-like figure. Weinstein ran a billion-dollar Ponzi scheme and a real estate empire. Schleider was his

righthand man, but he only got a year and a day. I'd gotten just short of two years myself. So it was obvious that Schleider was a rat.

It didn't help him that he was a tall guy who spoke with an English accent. Americans resent people who speak with English accents, especially the English ones. There is an Oedipal element involved. We think the English think they're better than us. On the other hand, for their part, the English think—well, they think they're better than us.

People called Alex all kinds of things. Sir Schleider, King Schleider, Lord Bentley. Prince Schleider expected guys to attend to his every need. We didn't want to. He was a rodent from green Albion.

Ratting is complicated by the Jewish religion. Jewish law demands that violations, corruption and so forth be taken care of within the community. A Jew isn't supposed to rat on another Jew to the authorities. This rule is called omerta in other cultures. Violation of omerta is known, in Hebrew, as mesirah.

Guys asked Schleider—a religious guy, seen at chapel every Shabbos—how he came to break with halakhah by ratting. Schleider explained that it was simple. He had spoken to his rabbi about it. He had received an indulgence, permission—called a heter. Schleider's rabbi told him that it was alright if he wanted to cooperate with the authorities.

At least three times a week, Schleider received visits from his family. He had a beautiful wife and an abundance of beautiful daughters, all of them dressed and made-up exquisitely for every visit. Schleider was a lucky man. No wonder he felt like a Sir, a King, a Lord. No wonder he felt he could do whatever he wanted.

I don't know what Schleider did to piss Rabbi Pinter off, but he did something. I heard that one day, at Pinter's Talmud class, the two had a little showdown. I heard that Schleider got tossed out of Talmud for good. Beware an exiled king. These guys tend to go crazy.

Schleider stole Pinter's gartel and religious books. Where he put them, I don't know. What I do know was that Pinter saw himself as a role model. Pinter was an upstanding member of the community. He wasn't a mesirahnik. He wasn't going to fink of Schleider to the guards, even if Schleider, of all people, deserved it.

Instead Pinter had his old friend Naftuli, AKA Zaidy, AKA the Depends Satmar, lift Schleider's fancy kiddush cup. Naftuli thought he was just helping out his buddy Pinter. But Naftuli hadn't thought things out politically.

The kiddush cups were used on holidays and, more importantly, every Shabbos. And Shabbos, as I've said, was Mshulem's domain. Mshulem's and God's. But Mshulem was the one you could actually have a conversation with. And Mshulem considered the theft of a kiddush cup, even if it was in just retaliation for the theft of a gartel, to be an infringement on his domain. That Shabbos, Mshulem halted everything. Before even the challah was served, he delivered a speech.

"Somebody in this room," Mshulem proclaimed, "somebody in this room is a gonif. Okay, there are plenty of you. But somebody in this room has stolen Lord Bentley's kiddush cup. Until Lord Bentley gets his cup back—no kiddush!"

The Russians started to go crazy right away. They swore to themselves and each other. "Blat," the Russians said. I don't know what *blat* means. But the Russians liked to say it when things weren't going the way they wanted.

Naftuli stood his ground. Guys were hungry. A few guys snuck out and snuck back in with matzah. When Ari Glucksman, gabbai and Mshulem's righthand man, saw what was happening, he yelled at the rule-breakers and took their matzah away from them.

Quiet in the chapel, except for the small, soft pops of Russians, saying *blat*.

Finally, someone exploded. It was Dr. Goldberg, from New Jersey. He got very angry. He stood on his chair. Dr. Goldberg said he was trying to grow in his Judaism. Prison threw up plenty of obstacles, but he was trying. Dr. Goldberg wanted to live, but Otisville killed him a hundred times a day. This childishness, he said, stunted his growth. It was not only a kiddush cup that was being withheld. It was Dr. Goldberg's personal and spiritual development.

Zaidy gave in. He didn't want to be an obstacle to Dr. Goldberg's Judaism. It was as if the Red Sea had parted. We ate, were merry.

When Schleider's term was up, he took his family on a tour of the prison grounds in his Cadillac. Such an unauthorized tour is illegal. It is trespassing on federal property. The guards didn't bust him, though. They wanted him gone as much as we did.

That night, I posted a sign on his bunk:

FEDERALLY PROTECTED LANDMARK

KING SCHLEIDER SLEPT HERE

2015, ANNO DOMANORUM

Holidays

American law obliged the administration at Otisville to permit us Jews the observance of our holidays. It is well-known, among major employers in America's cosmopolitan capitals, that the Jews have an abundance of holidays in comparison to the Christians. The Christians, it's true, have a Saint's Day every day, but for the most part American Christians have between two and four holidays they actually celebrate. As Lenny Bruce remarked, it is only Christians who celebrate holidays. Jews observe them.

Rosh HaShanah

The Jewish calendar, which, unlike the Gregorian, is a lunar calendar, begins on Rosh HaShanah, typically in September. Rosh HaShanah initiates the ten-day period known to devout Jews as the Days of Awe, which end with Yom Kippur. During this brief span, the Gates of Heaven are left open. Prayers, especially prayers of repentance, are especially likely to be considered while the Gates of Heaven are open. You have to rush to get your requests in before they swing shut again.

On Rosh HaShanah, one is obligated to hear one hundred blasts from the shofar. The day is both festive and solemn. Traditional foods include apples with honey, fish heads, pomegranates, and round challahs. I spent the afternoon before Rosh HaShanah on a school bus fitted out with bars on the windows. We were being taken to the mikveh, the ritual bath, to purify ourselves before the new year began. You submerge yourself, totally, in the nude. The mikveh doesn't count unless every inch of your body is touched by the waters.

There was a surreal quality to our little field trips. Outside the world of barbed wire, guards, beatings, concrete, into the wild world of the regular... watching ordinary people speed by in minivans on the highway, kids in the backseat, maybe watching Elmo. And a different smell, indoors. A smell of not-sweat.

The first night of Rosh HaShanah, we had a feast. Apples and honey, round challah, pomegranates, fish heads. Golden soup with eyelets of fat. A couple yeshivah bukhers visited with us when we'd finished eating, were relaxing in the candlelight, bellies full. They were sleeping on the prison grounds, in a trailer, to visit with Shalom Rubashkin, in the Medium. You remember Rubashkin. The slaughterhouse owner who was pardoned by Trump in 2017.

Inmate Ken Starr, who was incarcerated with us for ripping off real bigshots—Uma Thurman, Sylvester Stallone—loved chopping it up with these bukhers. The yeshivah students conveyed to us that Rubashkin was offering a minor bribe, a free meal, to any Jew in the Medium who would attend the shofar blowing the next day. Starr mocked the kids. He asked them—what's the matter, you couldn't get a post in Belize?

The chabadniks are everywhere. A position in upstate was not a distinguished one.

One of the bukhers told us he'd left his watch at home, out of fear that we'd steal it.

Why would he say that? Nobody asked.

Starr told the bukhers he'd been a devout Jew, once upon a time. Everything had changed when he'd met a beautiful Roman Catholic girl, and married her. We didn't know if Starr was talking about his first or his second wife. His second wife was a high-class stripper. The bukhers complimented Starr for his honesty, which was ironic, given what he was doing here—which was time.

After speaking with the youngsters, inmate Jack Chaz realized he was related to one of them. Starr laughed. He said he'd never admit to being related to one of these kids. Then he joked that we should beat them up. Take their clothes, walk out of the Camp. Everybody laughed. Almost everybody.

We spent the next day praying that our sins, our transgressions, our iniquities, our misdemeanors, felonies, and underlying acts in furtherance of conspiracy, be forgiven. Services were run by Glucksman, Youlus, and Moshe Butler, AKA Teaneck Trouble, the guy voted Most Likely to Return to Prison.

During services, Dr. Mos, the podiatrist, wouldn't shut up about trying to find a Jewish mate on a Russian matchmaking website. Starr suggested a couple of women he knew from Hollywood. Oprah. Whoopie Goldberg. Whoopie's name sounds Jewish, but she isn't, Dr. Mos complained. Oh well. Mos' loss.

Yom Kippur

The feds' favorite holiday was Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, they saved money. They didn't have to feed the Jewish prisoners. For our part, we did not love Yom Kippur. On Yom Kippur, the devout Jew is forbidden both food and marital relations. Food was one of our only prison pleasures. As for marital relations—who needed reminding?

Yom Kippur services begin with the singing of a prayer called Kol Nidrei. Kol Nidrei is the Nullification of Vows. You ask God not to hold you to any promises you might make Him in the coming year, just in case you can't follow through. This is a redundancy mechanism. It is a way to marginally reduce the odds of being whacked by the Lord.

Kol Nidrei happens, also, to be a piece of famously elegant liturgical music. On Yom Kippur, you are forbidden to eat, drink, wear leather, wash your hands past the knuckle, or enjoy marital relations. Liturgical music is your only permitted pleasure. And Kol Nidrei comes only once a year. Understandably, you want it to be good.

Two Jews were competing for the right to lead Kol Nidrei. First was Chaim. Chaim was religious, complete with long peyos, yarmulke, and, on Shabbos, his train conductor cap. Art was not religious. Art had been raised Satmar but had ditched the whole thing. He shaved his beard and his head. He had donated his shtreimel to an Inuit. Art liked to sing, and he did it beautifully. Most of us favored Art. We thought he belonged on Broadway.

The Chasidim, however, thought of Art as a traitor. Naftuli most of all. Naftuli thought it was real fucking rich, that a kid like Art, who'd turned his back on Satmardom, now had the gall to lead Kol

Nidrei. Naftuli communicated to us all that it would be over his dead body that Art got that part.

Somebody took Naftuli's pulse. He was still alive.

But the vote went our way. Art led Kol Nidrei. At first, Naftuli and Rabbi Pinter threatened to boycott services. In the end, they succumbed. They davened Kol Nidrei with the rest of us. But, I heard—when Art led, they didn't say amen. Naftuli and Pinter davened under protest.

To break the fast, there was honey cake. We ate. We had been sealed, sentenced, for another year, to the Book of Life.

Sukkot

Jewish prayers are adjusted according to the calendar. Every Shabbos, Jews recite Shemoneh Esrei, the Eighteen Blessings. As a part of those blessings, one asks God for favorable agricultural conditions in the Holy Land. Rain or dew, depending on the season. Wherever you live, the tradition's still to pray for the weather there. The Jews are still hung up on their Exile. The Jews can hold a grudge for a long time.

When Moshiach—the Messiah—comes, the Exile will end. God will gather the Jews back into the Promised Land, and He will put an end to war, and resurrect the dead, and grant eternal life. When guys talk about Moshiach, they are talking about a coming moment of perfect justice and tranquility.

The prayers for rain begin only at the end of Sukkot. This is for a few reasons, the most important of which is that, on Sukkot, one is obligated to take one's meals in a makeshift hut outdoors, called a sukkah. The roof of the sukkah must be made from sgach, branches, through which it must be possible to see the stars. Therefore, rain is not desirable on Sukkot. It would get the food wet.

Jews can affect the quality of the harvest in the Holy Land, depending on how hard, how sincerely, and when they pray for rain. More rain in the fall, better harvest in spring. Jews also pray for an early release, but that never happens. God has more pull with the weather than the parole board.

During one such service, one such commission for rain, the Jews got into a big fight. A guy from the Tishler conspiracy was leading the prayers when Moshe “Teaneck Trouble” Butler decided to have some fun. Butler had a cup of water with him from lunch, and he started to flick it onto the Tishler guy as he shuckled⁸. Naftuli, who was still pissed off about losing out to the mixed multitude on Yom Kippur, decided to put a stop to this sacrilegious behavior. He ran to the front of the shul to rebuke Butler.

“Alright, alright,” Butler said, and he stopped. Naftuli sat down in a chair close to Butler to keep an eye on him.

So Naftuli’s back was turned to almost everybody. And here comes Sam’s Club, like Bugs Bunny, big cartoon tiptoes, holding his finger to his lips and giggling silently at the rest of us. His gartel, his belt is in his hands. He’s sneaking up on Naftuli.

Then—in an instant—Sam’s Club had the gartel wrapped around Naftuli, this eighty-year-old Satmar, in his seat. He tied him down, and Butler started splashing water on the Tishler guy again. Naftuli managed to get one hand free and knock the cup out of Butler’s hand.

Junkyard Al—who had stepped out a minute before—was back, and he had a bucket full of water. He went straight for Naftuli to pour its contents all over him, but Naftuli still had his free hand. Just as Junkyard Al was about to make his move, Naftuli swung out and tipped the bucket back onto his assailant.

Naftuli—Zaidy—wasn’t afraid of anyone, even at his age, even after piling up four scores of years. Zaidy was recently released. He’s doing the rest of his sentence at a halfway house in Brooklyn. I heard the blue boys tried to pull a fast one on Zaidy at the last minute. They told him there wasn’t room at the halfway house, and he’d have to finish out his time in Otisville. I heard he went bananas and got on everybody’s nerves.

⁸ A type of Jewish swaying.

Mshulem saved him. Mshulem was still locked up, but his outside connections meant something. He helped Zaidy out, out of ancient Yid solidarity. I heard Zaidy was picked up from Otisville, taken to Brooklyn, in a gleaming white Mercedes. He didn't even have to get processed at the Medium before his release, the way most inmates do. Mshulem couldn't use his connections to spring himself, but they were still of some value.

The feds say Zaidy's not allowed out of the halfway house until he gets a job. If you know of a position that's hiring 80-year-old convicts, give Zaidy a call. The feds have this policy in order to ensure that dangerous individuals like Zaidy do not immediately resume their lives of crime. Who knows? Zaidy could have another ten years of malfeasance in him. Even forty.

Ad mea v'esrim!

Unto one-hundred-and-twenty!

Pesach (Passover)

It is traditional for the Four Questions to be read by the youngest person present at the seder, so long as that person can parse the Hebrew. Our youngest was 25-year-old David Greenberg. David Greenberg was a club drug dealer. Ecstasy, coke, ketamine. He was Paris Hilton's plug, along with that of assorted other significant heiresses. He had been prominent in his field. Now he was the youngest child at Otisville.

Greenberg was raised Reform, so he couldn't read Hebrew very well. All the guys helped out. Greenberg was our little brother. He had time, now, to learn the Hebrew perfectly, if he wanted to.

Pinter and Zaidy were on furlough for the seders, so there was nobody to challenge Rabbi Ben Haim. Ben Haim handed out nuts and raisins before the afikomen was eaten. David Greenberg may have been our younger brother, but we were all Rabbi Ben Haim's sons. At the seder, the Jews celebrate their

freedom. In prison, the celebration is relative. You could always be less free. You could always be in solitary.

Blessed be the Lord, who safeguards us from solitary!

And now a lesson on the Tribes of Israel:

The Tribes of Israel, B'nei Yisrael, derive their names and number from the male offspring of Jacob, whose alias was Israel. Jacob had twelve sons, and one daughter, Dinah. The usual count says that there were twelve tribes, each corresponding to a son, but the true number is fourteen, because Joseph—Jacob's second-youngest—actually produced *two* tribes, one named for each of his sons, and in addition to those thirteen there is also the Priestly Tribe, the Kohanim. The Kohanim are a subset of the tribe of Levi. Tradition holds that they are the descendants of Aaron, Moses' brother, the first High Priest of Israel.

Many, many years ago, Jewish teaching holds, the land between the Jordan and the Mediterranean, along with parts of modern-day Jordan, Syria, and Egypt, were divided between thirteen of the fourteen tribes. The Kohanim had no territory; they were a peripatetic community supported by tithes from the other thirteen. Over the course of sundry conquests, enslavements, and destructions of temples, most of the tribes were destroyed, and those that weren't destroyed were largely mixed together. Consequently, today there are only three tribes remaining: the Kohanim and the Levites, each of whom had a special role to play in the Temple Service of Hebrew Antiquity, and Yisrael, the multitude, consisting of everybody else. Tribal identity, unlike Judaism itself, is patrilineal. Your mother determines whether you're Jewish; your father determines which of the three remaining tribes is yours.

The Kohanim and the Levites are considerably scarcer than members of Yisrael, and even today they have special roles to play in religious rites. Even special rules apply to them—Kohanim are forbidden from marrying converts to the Jewish religion, for example.

The Kohanim deliver a special portion of the prayers on Passover. There was a problem, however. The Kohanim we actually had did not rise to the Jewish people's high historical standard. By the Jewish people, I mean, of course, Rabbi Pinter and Naftuli, who had returned from furlough. Pinter and Naftuli felt that our two Kohanim—Art, the ex-Satmar with the golden voice, and Mike, a secular ex-Chasid who had gone on to become a drug dealer and money launderer—were not holy enough to run the Kohen service.

But Mike insisted. He wanted to piss off Pinter and Naftuli, and there, he was a success. They didn't have the power to stop him.

Once again, they davened under protest. Pinter and Naftuli were perpetually in a state of protest. The community could never achieve the state of purity they wanted. In that respect, they were perhaps lucky. Pinter and Naftuli had something they could aspire to. Their prison lives were given purpose by their endlessly frustrated desire to see the Jews reform themselves, become as holy as they were. And they provided a valuable service to the rest of us. There was nothing so amusing, so soothing to the spirit, as antagonizing those two, the Righteous Among the Felons.

Shavuot

But Pinter's greatest enemy was not to be found amongst us merry pranksters. Mshulem was his true nemesis. This because Mshulem held the position of gabbai, the position of beadle, in our congregation. There were not many posts of honor available to us incarcerated Jews, but gabbai was one of them. Like the chazan on Yom Kippur, the gabbai was a democratically appointed role.

Referenda on gabbaidom were called whenever someone wanted to challenge Mshulem. Pinter was the only one who did. The two of them never spoke to each other, so deep did the rivalry run. Pinter was engaged in a constant campaign to displace Mshulem, to gin up the necessary votes, but he never seemed to get any closer. Again and again he ran, and was defeated. Nevertheless, Mshulem—a generous don, beneficent, slow to anger and quick to forgiveness—could from time to time be found in Pinter's

corner, if Pinter's corner was the place from which he could best evangelize for the religious life. As happened on Shavuos.

Shavuos, some fifty days after Pesach, commemorates, according to tradition, the giving of the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai. Jews believe that the entirety of the Torah was also given to the gathered refugees at the foot of the mountain. It is traditional to eat dairy on Shavuos, in spite of the digestive disorders with which such a sizable proportion of the Am Segulah is smitten. In America, this means cheesecake.

The Jews got a big shipment of cheesecake running up to Shavuos, and the treat quickly took the place traditionally occupied by cigarettes in the prison economy. Cake was swapped for privileges, favors, and other contraband with the goyim, who had no access to our religiously guaranteed supply. Pinter stood against this practice, which he felt lowered us. To profit so cynically from our religion! Tell it to Youlus, Pinter.

Guys collected fruiting branches, flowers, and ferns to decorate the chapel. This is a tradition on Shavuos. A minor scandal ensued when one of the guys noticed that a bough of poison oak had been used to ornament the Aron Kodesh, the cabinet where the Torah is kept. The guy who'd picked the poison oak threatened to kill anyone who threw away his offering. He had meant sincerely to honor the holy day. It wasn't his fault he didn't have a PhD in botany. His hands swelled and turned pink; they started to look like raw seal flippers.

Then there were services. And that's where Pinter aroused the communal ire. The ire he aroused, in particular, was that of the Russians. The Russians, who tended to be secular, were the most dangerous Jews to offend. The rest of us had been softened by generations in America. For the Russians, the memory of state-sanctioned persecution was fresh. They were tough. They were fugitives from the stories of Damon Runyon.

Pinter gave a D'var Torah the first night of Shavuos. He said that the giving of the Torah had effected a physical change in the structure of the universe. This change had been noticed, registered, by Jethro, the father of Moses' wife. Jethro was not ethnically Jewish. But when he felt the universe change, he accepted the Torah. He was lucky to have been a witness to this most significant of cosmic-historical events.

Pinter went on to say that a newly religious Jew was capable of registering this same physical change that Jethro had been aware of. He told us that in studying Torah, we would become more and more profoundly aware of the mysteries of Creation. We would be conscious of quantum-level events. We would become miraculous beings.

Torah, Pinter said, was not just about eating cheesecake. And he closed with a denunciation of our cheesecake worship.

The Russians felt that Pinter was rebuking them. The cheesecake trade had profited them most of all, probably because they were so indifferent to American culinary pleasures that they were perfectly happy to trade their rations away. The next day, they boycotted Pinter's second speech. Pinter could call on no one for help. But Mshulem, magnanimously, saw that it was not merely Pinter who stood to be harmed by this turn of events. The loss of the Russians was a danger to the entire Jewish people.

Mshulem put the word on the street out that nobody was to talk behind Pinter's back. Mshulem made sure everybody understood the way things worked at Otisville. You paid respect to upstanding members of the community. You didn't cause problems where there didn't need to be any. And if you just studied Torah for five minutes a day, would it kill you? That's all Pinter was asking for.

I have not mentioned Purim. I will.

Body Riot

4 in the morning. I'm more than a year into my time in Otisville. By now, I have mastered a wide range of specialized prison skills. These skills include going to sleep and waking up. An inmate must be able to go to sleep and wake up on command. In this respect, he is like a medical intern. But our pay is not commensurate.

To be able to sleep in prison, to be able to wake up in prison, is a matter of the will, of practice, and, yes, a little bit of talent. You must be able to sleep through anything. You must be able to concentrate on not concentrating, on letting your consciousness dissolve away. The way that a Buddhist monk treats meditation, you must learn to treat sleep. It is actually an extraordinary ability to possess once you possess it.

But this morning, that morning, 4am, I was suddenly awake, and hadn't meant to be. Therefore I looked around, to register the disaster. There must have been a disaster. But looking around was reflex. I knew where the disaster was. It was inside of me. My stomach had been transformed, in the night, into a sea urchin. The spines were pricking my other organs. *Pricking* doesn't really give a sense of it.

I had a medieval weapon in my belly and it hurt. I stared at the ceiling. The ceiling was a featureless plane. Consequently I had the impression that the only thing that existed in the world was the pain. My body consisted of one white-hot point. Ouch.

At first, I thought if I laid there, the pain would go away. I laid there for six hours. When the six hours were up, it was 4:15. I decided that laying there would not cause the pain to go away, so I got up to walk around.

I went to the library. Ken Starr was sitting there, writing something.

"What are you doing up so early, Ken?" I said.

Ken looked at me. "What are *you* doing up so early?"

Then he went back to writing whatever he was writing. Evidently, it was an important document. I didn't have the patience for conversation. The pain wasn't going away.

I went back to my bunk. There, I woke up Dr. Charles. I tried to explain to him about what was going on inside my body. I don't think I was very articulate.

He looked at me, touched my stomach, then woke up another doctor. The doctors sat me down and poked at me and talked about me. I had the impression that they liked having the chance to flex the old muscles. I was a puzzle to these two incarcerated doctors. They were thinking, and touching their chins, and nodding, and using medical jargon. The words they used were very nice ones, expensive, not off-the-rack. I liked the feeling that I was giving someone joy. Experiencing, simultaneous with the now-even-worse pain in my stomach, any kind of pleasure at all, was not an improvement. It was like a little reminder: what is happening to you is not normal. It is very bad.

I was crying. I needed to go to the bathroom, but I could barely walk.

The doctors had an idea. Their idea was that I should go to the hospital. I wasn't thrilled to hear it. Like I said, it was over a year I'd been in Otisville. I'd seen guys have heart attacks. And when a guy had a heart attack in Otisville, it meant he rolled around on the floor for a couple hours while the guards took care of bureaucratic matters. If they cared at all. Guys die all the time in lock-up, just because of administrative indifference. The guys who work in the prisons don't mind all that much if their procrastination kills someone. They have other pressing matters to contend with, such as the triangulation of contraband noodles.

The doctors walked me to the bathroom, then took me to talk to a couple of guards. The guards were not terribly interested. They, too, were doctors. They had seen this before. Back pain, Dressler. It is perfectly normal for a man of your age. Sleep it off.

I tried to explain that the pain had not begun in my back, but had only radiated there. I didn't do a very good job, and the doctors—the inmate doctors—took over for me. There was a negotiation. Finally

the guards agreed that they'd take me to the hospital—after they'd done the morning Count. The Count would start at 5.

And it entailed the guys in the Medium, too.

The Count took another half hour. After that, I was bundled into a pickup truck by one of the guards. No ambulance. The drive to the hospital took yet another half hour. I tried to chat with the guard who was driving. He was not terribly interested in hearing about my life. But I knew that it was only by talking that I could keep myself from collapsing into tears of sheer pain.

It was still dark outside. The sky was a bruise. The moon was a smooth stone.

The guard escorted me into the hospital lobby, spotless, gleaming. Things were busy, even at this hour. And it was humiliating, to be the spot of olive-green, the inmate, the prisoner in this place of perfect white. I hadn't been back in civilization, except for the mikveh, in well over a year. And the mikveh had been with other prisoners. This was different. This was a return to the real world. But with a chaperone.

I was given a hospital bed. Hospital beds are not known for being wonderfully comfortable. But they're a lot better than prison beds. They're a lot thicker than a yoga mat. The real world again. Except, of course, that when you've been gone from the real world for a while, there's nothing that seems faker. Nothing seems more like a dream, more surreal, than the perfectly ordinary. Like waking up, after years away, in your childhood bedroom. You are no longer a child.

You are no longer an innocent.

The doctor spoke to me as if I was a human being. I wanted to look over my shoulder. I wanted to say, *Who, me?* I wanted to apologize for showing up in my prison greens. I wanted to tell him that I wasn't such a bad guy, after all.

They took some x-rays and told me I had a kidney stone. They gave me a couple of Oxys and told me to relax. I kept going to the bathroom. Passing a kidney stone is not an easy thing. It's not quite giving birth, but the comparison suggests itself.

The hospital bathroom was a place of beauty. I would rather live in the hospital bathroom than my prison bunk.

I hoped maybe I'd be allowed to stay overnight. No such luck. I had the Oxys to lighten my load. That was the idea, anyway. I was whisked back to Otisville. I looked at the hospital out the window and actually wept.

The whole thing was so fast that I was back in time for morning services. There was jubilation and singing in the shul. The guys felt I was lucky that I hadn't been killed by the Bureau of Prisons. And I felt lucky that they gave a shit one way or another. Everyone cheered for me. Even my enemies.

The Oxys made things a lot easier. I was exempt from work for a while. I sat in my bunk and read for hours. After a while, administration got impatient with me. They felt I was milking my condition. They told me that I had a choice: either go back to work, or be completely confined to my bunk 24/7, only permitted the three-foot journey to the toilet.

I took the latter option for a little while. When the weather got better, and I felt ready to go for a jog, I told Scalba I'd experienced a miraculous recovery. I'd go back to work in the morning.

I got off the Oxys, too. You had to stand in line for them with the guys who needed anti-psychotic meds. I found the whole thing embarrassing.

In the matter of the kidney stone, I was a lucky yid. It's not a joke, about guys dying every day in prison care. It doesn't matter what you did, it doesn't matter who you are. (Well, if you're Helle Nahmad it matters. If you're very fucking rich it matters.) But once you pass through those prison gates, your life is worth—well, it's not worth *nothing*. But it's not worth as much as, say, a mid-range food processor. It's

not in the hundreds and hundreds of dollars. I was okay; I was lucky. But as Tehillim says, the Book of Psalms: There but for the grace of God...

The Visitors

Fights are something, books are something, classes are something, TV is something, but visitors are *really* something: something to give the time shape. I don't wanna say kill time. Maybe you can kill time on the outside. (Take your shots. Time's killing you, too.) On the inside, you can't kill time. You try and you'll go crazy. It doesn't make it go by any quicker.

Instead, be an octopus. An octopus decorates its den. Decorate your time. Daven, read a book, and watch a fight. And if you can, have visitors. Visitors are like jazz. In jazz, it's all about the notes they *don't* play. In prison, it's all about the visits you *don't* get. You notice those.

And what do the guys notice? What does Scalba, rosh yeshivah of Otisville, notice? The guys—the guards—and Officer Scalba, too—what they notice is: women. If you're visited by a woman, that is an event of some significance. Women constitute approximately half of all people, and yet, in Otisville, the proportion was different.

A woman is something, a young woman is something, a pretty woman is something, a pretty young woman is something, but a pretty young woman in a short skirt on a summer's day—

So, it was a summer's day. And I'd handed off some of my active cases, when I got locked up, to an attorney friend of mine. This attorney friend of mine happened to be an attractive young woman. Descriptions out of the noir canon would be appropriate for her. She walked into a room like a saxophone solo. In jazz, it's all about the notes they *don't* play. In fashion, it's all about the garments you... oh, forget it.

In addition to this, I was a wealthy man. Not in money. And not in the sense of Pirkei Avot, the Sayings of Our Fathers, according to whom the wealthy man is the man who is content with his lot. I was not content with my lot. But I was wealthy, because not only did I have a beautiful young attorney friend, but a beautiful young office manager as well. And it happened that the two of them came to visit me

together one day. This caused a general increase in the Otisville blood temperature, and had a destabilizing effect on people's moods.

Because it was hot both young women wore short skirts. Because it was the twenty-first century, and my attorney friend had, in her possession, a cellphone, in which device it is possible to transcribe notes, she didn't have a briefcase or a notebook with her. The two young women were greeted by Otisville's administrative staff with suspicion.

An attorney doesn't need to have an appointment to visit a prisoner. As long as she has her bar card, she's good to go. Ordinarily, it would have been considered acceptable for my attorney friend to bring my office manager in with her. But the office manager's skirt was ruled to be too inflaming by the prison authorities. She was commanded to cover up or wait outside. She had not brought an alternate drip.

My attorney friend explained all this to me in the visitor's room, eating the barbecue Fritos she'd bought from the vending machine, looking, in a white sleeveless top, admittedly inflaming.

"It's like high school here," she said to me, confidentially. Like she was explaining how it worked. "Rulers and protractors brought out to check we don't show too much skin. It's grown men here, isn't it? Don't you think grown men can handle a flash of ankle? Maybe even a little flash of calf?"

"Calf, fine," I said. "Inner thigh is a lot to ask for."

There was barbecue dust around her mouth.

"You don't know how humiliating it is," my attorney friend told me, "to be treated as inherently dangerous like that. Like the mere sight of me is going to drive a man wild. I've looked around here, Larry. Looks to me like a lot of Jews over the age of fifty who fucked up, big time. I think even if I do drive them wild they'll just want to show me *Goodfellas* and take me to meet their mothers."

"The mothers dress differently," I said. "Not that I'm unappreciative."

"How's prison life treating you?"

I told her a little bit about it. Then, after a while, I realized something. Standing next to the table we were sharing was Officer Scalba. Scalba stared at both of us, slowly, in our turns. Scalba's hatred was so immense that it made his eyes seem like they were different sizes.

"Larry," Scalba said. "Could you come to my office for a moment?"

I agreed. We walked over to Scalba's office in silence. Scalba closed the door behind me. Then he became a whirlwind.

"*No pen, no briefcase, no notebook, no nothing*, and you want me to believe that Chiquita banana is an attorney? I wasn't born in Otisville, you know. I was born far away from here, and educated, and worked my way to the top of the federal prison system! I am a man of experience! You, Larry Dressler, are trying to put one over on a man who made it to the top of the federal prison system! Maybe you need to learn a lesson in solitary. Maybe you need to forget what a woman looks like altogether!"

Scalba wasn't even the warden. But he was at the top of the prison system, alright. He was at the top of the prison system because there were two guys in the room, and I was at the bottom.

He didn't toss me in solitary, though. Though the women who had come to visit me were dressed immodestly, put a bad face on the prison system, risked unduly inflaming the other inmates, the big fact remained that they were beautiful women, and I knew them. Scalba didn't toss me in solitary, I think, because he didn't want to look like a tyrant to the Chiquita bananas.

After that incident, Otisville changed the visitor rules. You couldn't just sashay in on the strength of your law degree anymore. Even lawyers had to be approved ahead of time. The guys called it the Noodles Rule. I always did like the idea of getting a law named after me.

I was also visited, from time to time, by Rabbi Dov Greer. He was my minister of record—that is to say, as far as the state was concerned, Rabbi Greer was my official source of spiritual guidance. Dov

was the son of Rabbi Daniel Greer, the man whom I was eventually to discover was not a man at all, but, instead, the Goat.

Dov, like his father, was combative and individualistic. He picked fights on my behalf with Otisville administrators and Rabbi Lucky Charms, the official prison chaplain. When I fell asleep on the bleachers once during Count, and had my visits suspended for sixty days, Dov went to Luck Charms. He gave LC the business. What kind of a Jew was he—to treat a fellow member of the Am Segulah with such disrespect?

And so when I had no one, Dov Greer was on my side. Dov, as the offspring of the Goat, understood something of the importance of loyalty. To somebody like the Goat, loyalty is the most important virtue of them all. A favor is worth more than any sum of money.

You never know when you're gonna need to call one in.

The Witch Doctor

And now I'll tell the story of the Witch Doctor. Don't look at me sideways over the nickname, reader—I didn't give it to him. (Roman Empire did.) I have already told you that convicts in Otisville have no manners. And in Otisville, if you were a Black Haitian—a Black Haitian *Catholic*, as the Witch Doctor was—you may as well have had a bone through your nose.

In fact, the Witch Doctor was not a witch doctor. He was an orthopedist. But truthfully, Orthopedic Doctor doesn't exactly roll off the tongue. If the Witch Doctor had insisted on being referred to *not* as the Witch Doctor, but, rather, as the Orthopedic Doctor, he would've been laughed out of the room. To be laughed out of the room aggravated the Witch Doctor's temper. It would aggravate anybody's temper, but the Witch Doctor in particular. He had a chip on his shoulder. Many of the doctors did.

I knew the Witch Doctor through Otisville's anger management class. There were lots of angry guys in Otisville. There are lots of angry guys in Nashville and Amityville also, but the ratio is different in prison. For example there were the guys who taught the anger management class. It was co-taught, supposedly, but everyone understood there was a hierarchy.

The vice-teacher, the second-in-command, was a guy called George Motz. George was the former mayor of the village of Quogue, in the Hamptons. He'd also been a trader on Wall Street. Oddly enough, it was corruption in the latter job that got him tossed in lock-up.

George was found guilty of a crime the government calls "cherry-picking." He'd shuffle trades between clients at his firm in order to show profits on weaker accounts. And so we see why it was the government went after him. The victims in a cherry-picking case are—the rich.

Motz was so pissed off not because he'd been busted but because of the opacity of his sentencing. Nobody could make an accurate estimate of the amount of money his scheme had cost his clients. It was somewhere south of two million dollars, certainly—if north of it, not by much. He was 68-years-old at the

time of his conviction. He had a distinguished war record; some of his victims even wrote letters in defense of his character. The government recommended three years. He got eight.

So he was angry. He didn't show it most of the time. But he was always cooking, cooking. George was one of those guys who counted every day he spent behind bars. If you'd have asked him, he'd have known what day he was on. I never counted the days, myself. For me, it was easier—it was better not to think about it. I didn't have the same kind of heat in my chest that George did. Maybe that kind of quiet rage has something to do with a war record like his.

But George wasn't as angry as the guy who really led the anger management class, Ed Stein. And Ed Stein had no reason to be angry. Ed Stein had gotten off easy.

Stein, for ten years, had run a Ponzi scheme. It was up to twenty million dollars by the time he was busted. He was systematic and cruel in his methods. His targets were vulnerable, people who had been knocked on their asses, often those who had recently suffered a loss in the family. When he was forty million dollars in debt to his victims, he spent a million on a down payment for a luxury Manhattan apartment. The government felt that he had been ostentatious. There was even an article in *The New York Times* about Ed Stein and his penthouse.

He ended up getting nine years. One more than George.

When I was doing time with Ed, he got a weekend furlough to go visit his buddies on Wall Street. But he forgot to bring his driver's license. All he had on him was his prison ID. The buildings where his friends worked wouldn't let him in. Talk about humiliation. Ed blew up. Ed blew up so bad that he decided it was time to master his rage.

I signed up for Ed Stein's anger management class because I'd been told prison classes looked good on your record. It really was like high school. I don't think Oberlin would be that interested to know, though, that I graduated from Ed Stein's anger management workshop. Maybe I'm underestimating the openness of the admissions committee.

Stein, unfortunately, could be counted among my enemies. It wasn't long that I was taking his anger management class when he made his position on the Larry Noodles question perfectly clear. "How would you feel," he asked his assembled students—and his eyes rolled in their big orbits towards me, "if you learned that one of your fellow inmates was telling tales about you to the outside world? How would you manage your anger in that situation? Could you?"

But I digress.

First day of Ed Stein's anger management class, we filled out a questionnaire to determine our individual levels of rage. The questionnaire asked us questions about how we handled issues in our lives, how we talked to people, when we felt angriest. The Russian inmates had pretty high scores across the board. But by far the highest score—higher even than Ed Stein's—was that of the Witch Doctor, Eric Senat, the human PEZ dispenser with his long, wise skull and his lanky strap of a body. Wtch. Dr. Senat was given to excesses in the expression of his discontent. Partly this was because he was a righteous man. Dr. Senat was a devout Catholic. He took 600,000 dollars from the collection plate.

Or the insurance companies, rather. Dr. Senat was sending them bills while he was on vacation. Big mistake.

Anger management class soon became the Witch Doctor Hour. Dr. Senat had grievances, and he had them with everybody. He felt isolated, disrespected. He *was* isolated and disrespected. We'd begin each day's session with a brief lecture, learn some techniques for controlling our feelings, not letting them get the better of us. Then we would have group discussion. In group discussion, the Witch Doctor would help us practice by giving us all some of his anger to manage.

"Friends," he would say, and the tone would start out plaintive, "I am a doctor! I am a serious person! People say I am argumentative. This is because they are afraid of a Haitian man with an opinion! I touch a man on the shoulder, and he cries out in pain! What about me? What about my pain? What about Sal Romano, the Gas Leak?"

A name, a specificity—anything at all to give his words a particular quality, to make them refer to a real thing or person we may have met in the world, made the Witch Doctor feel he had established a rapport with his audience. That we would join with him in his spirit of fierce condemnation. And that would permit him to begin raising his voice, to become more outrageous in his language, to start to show us an image of that vast rage he had.

“Sal rips ass from morning to evening and then evening to morning. I have to sleep next to this public health hazard! I went to medical school. I have unpacked a cadaver! I have dealt with dead human flesh!”

He would become more animated. He would begin to express himself with his hands. Probably it was because he was a doctor that his hands were so eloquent. They spoke with just as much volume as he did.

“*SAL ‘GAS LEAK’ ROMANO IS MORE REPULSIVE TO ME THAN DEAD HUMAN FLESH. I am a man, not an animal! But Sal is not a man! He is an animal! Prison transforms men into animals.*”

“This is my professional opinion! My professional opinion as a *doctor*. I went to medical school and I know what the human being is. He is an animal unless he is charged not to be one. I see how inmates clean themselves. I see how inmates talk. I hear the way they talk about me! The things they *say* to me! Animals! Animals! Animals!”

And, spent, he would collapse into his seat again. The fact that prison had degenerated us into animals was a great theme with Dr. Senat. He had a lively moral sense.

Dr. Senat had grown up wanting to become a priest. He was an altar boy in his early youth. Nothing outrageous was done to him. But, he told us, he had become disenchanted with the clergy when he saw wealthy men of the cloth ignoring the teachings of Jesus, living lavishly while their parishioners languished in poverty. The Witch Doctor could detect the monstrous. He was sensitive to human beings

who failed to live up to their humanity. He saw that side of the Otisville inmates more than most of us did.

Like Neighborhood Mitch. Neighborhood Mitch had been a bill collector for the Gambino crime family. Mitch hurled obscenities at Dr. Senat endlessly. There was nothing anyone could do about it—or if there was, nothing anybody wanted to roll the dice on trying. Mitch found Dr. Senat to be uppity. Dr. Senat had never met anybody like Mitch before.

Remember that Dr. Senat was a wealthy Long Island doctor. He was used to another class of person. In addition to Dr. Senat's lively moral sense, of course, there was a healthy enthusiasm for money. When he rejected the priesthood, it was not the lavish lifestyle of the priests he had seen as a child that outraged him. It was their hypocrisy. Dr. Senat would take the power, the freedom, the prestige—and he would refuse the bullshit, he would refuse to lie and claim that he lived only in the service of God and the people.

When he was released, he went in style. He dressed in a tux and was picked up by his family in a white Mercedes.

Guys were real happy to see him go. For an end to the fights, the rage coming off of him all the time that nobody understood.

Dr. Senat's beautiful daughter was driving. She had sung "The Star-Spangled Banner" at her law school graduation. Just the first stanza, of course. The second stanza of "The Star-Spangled Banner" contains an embarrassing allusion to slavery. Haiti is the only state in the world founded in a successful slave revolt.

The white Mercedes was a beautiful vehicle, beautiful as the girl driving it, and for the Senats, there was none of that German gravity. Some Jews still will not get behind the wheel of a German car. The car was a shock of light against the green, grey and blue.

It was as if the orthopedist—and the orthopedist’s family—had never gone down in the world.
The Witch Doctor was never to be called the Witch Doctor again.

Vegetables

After a certain length of time inside, a man can begin to feel an affinity with his vegetables. Guys become aimless. They sleep all day, choomed out on prison meds. They experience half a death, and grow closer to the vegetables. The way to escape it is a routine.

I had only a few more months left in Otisville, and I had my routine down. I slept with earphones in, the radio playing to drown out the other guys. I woke up at 6 every morning, to a radio show called *JM in the AM with Nachum Segal*. I knew it was 6 because Nachum played the same song at that time every day.

Then I would go to the kitchen to pick up my breakfast. Breakfast was a banana, a box of cold cereal, and a carton of milk. If the guard wasn't looking, and you were friendly with the inmate handing out the food, you could get an extra banana. Maybe even some extra cereal if you were lucky. I didn't need to pick up my ration, really, because I was working in the kitchen by then. But I did anyway—extra food was something you could barter with other prisoners.

Between breakfast and Shacharis, which was at 7, I'd sit in Rabbi Pinter's class. Rabbi Pinter had written a book. The book was called *Don't Give Up*. When you are stuck in jail for five years, like Rabbi Pinter was, you cannot give up. You must keep going. If you don't, you will become a vegetable. You will be tossed in solitary or shot full of government dope. Rabbi Pinter was a moralist. He believed in the Protestant work ethic.

Shacharis would wrap up at 8. Then I'd change into my greens. This was a tiny act of rebellion—you were supposed to be in your greens by 7. Tiny acts of rebellion were necessary. I'd learned that by now. If you don't show the other inmates that you can't be pushed around—even with something as insignificant as that—then you'll belong to somebody else. You'll never get to the end of it. Do your own time, not somebody else's.

I was a dishwasher. As I walked to work, after changing into my greens, guys would accost me. “Noodles,” they would say to me, “Noodles, my friend, my brother. Could you pick me up something? Could you pick me up a tomato? A cucumber?” Guys would show me their hands, palms out, empty. They would pull on their earlobes. They would show me that they were in distress.

“Friend,” I would say, “if I gave out tomatoes to everybody who asked, there would be no tomatoes left.” And there the negotiations would end.

But the truth was, I wasn’t being honest with them: my friends, my brothers. I had a stash. Under my bunk was a bag of contraband vegetables. This was another tiny rebellion. Bust me for noodles? *Fuck* you. I still have my little inch of freedom. I’ll eat carrots if I want to. Some guys like heroin and I’m not their judge or jury. Myself, I’m partial to a chopped salad.

In the kitchen I worked under some blueboy—new, I didn’t know him—and Stephen Shea, another inmate. Shea was the head cook. Shea had an itchy snitching finger. He liked to bawl guys out, give them a hard time. He disapproved of bad language and used the word *idiot* so much it started to sound like a tic or a hiccup. It’s not a good time to work under a guy like that. But that’s the kind of guy who ends up in a position of authority, don’t you know.

Shea was paranoid. He felt himself to be surrounded by crooks. He wasn’t 100% wrong.

He had been the accomplice of one Ross Mandell in a \$140 million stock scam. The scam had been featured on *American Greed*, which gave both of them a certain amount of cred with the other inmates. Shea and Mandell had cold-called investors in the UK instead of the US throughout their fraudulent enterprise. They found the English to be more gullible than Americans. The same way Americans sense class coming off the English, the English sense money coming off Americans. Shea and Mandell wrote off their visits to strip clubs and bars as work expenses. Bad news. The kind of thing that gets people caught.

But Shea hadn't sunk so low. He didn't chop garlic. He had the power to command others to chop garlic. It doesn't take a lot of power to turn a man into something less than one. Just the little bit of difference between one guy and another.

The day I got busted for my vegetable stash, I had woken up at 6. Nachum Segal. I had picked up breakfast, I had studied with Pinter, I had davened Shacharis, I had changed into my greens. Then I went to work, and Officer Scalba was waiting for me. Well, a year into Otisville, and even the departures from routine are routine. I didn't feel that I had been tossed from the horse. I felt that I was having a conversation with a horse on an equal and civilized basis.

Scalba felt differently. He wanted to take up more space in that tiny kitchen than he did already. He moved his body like a novice drummer, simultaneously deliberate and clumsy in everything he did. He waved a spatula in my face for emphasis and the spatula caused him to seem like a figure of legitimate authority.

"Contraband in the cube, Dressler!" he said. "I found vegetables in your cube," your cube, see, is your cage, "stashed under your bed, and what do you have to say about it? This isn't the first time with you!"

I protested. I knew by now how to handle a horse. "I was set up," I said, "somebody planted those vegetables to frame me."

The new blueboy looked at me like I was a criminal. He looked distressed to have a criminal working under him in his kitchen.

"Carrots," Scalba said, "tomatoes, cucumbers—you're sitting on a garden in there!"

Here, Shea decided to contribute. "Dressler, you *idiot*. We haven't had carrots in weeks. How long have you been hoarding?"

Scalba looked at Shea the way a trainer at SeaWorld looks at a dolphin right before he tosses it a fish. Then he trotted off somewhere. He had other honest American citizens to pillory and criticize. Dishonest ones, too, probably.

When I went back to my cage—*sorry*, my cube—for a short break, I found that Scalba had taken extreme measures with me. He'd broken one of my carrots up into four pieces and left them on the floor, like a warning. The rest of the produce was gone. My bunkmate explained that he'd thrown it away after Scalba had scattered it around the cell, stomped on it, generally communicated physically how disrespected he felt by my vegetable smuggling. I chastised my bunkmate. I told him I could've washed the stuff off. Next time, sit tight and wait for instructions.

Then, I worked until one. Lunch. Back to work. Minchah. Jog. Dinner. Email room. Phone call. Reading. TV. Bed.

The Chief Rabbi of Russia

Now that I have been out of Otisville for a few years, I feel it is safe to write about the Chief Rabbi of Russia. Russia's Chief Rabbi, Rabbi Berel Lazar, was a friend and supporter of Sholom Rubashkin's. Sholom Rubashkin, remember, ran the largest kosher slaughterhouse in America. Rubashkin was in the Medium. He was more dangerous than those of us in the lower-security Camp.

It was for Rubashkin's sake that Rabbi Lazar visited Otisville. That was in 2014. In the summer of 2016, Rabbi Lazar met with Jason Greenblatt, a top man in the Trump campaign. In the fall of 2016, Donald Trump was elected President. In the winter of 2017, President Trump pardoned Sholom Rubashkin for his numerous crimes. Rubashkin was released from prison and reintegrated into the world of high industry and corruption.

Lazar celebrated Rubashkin's release by singing a joyful song to the Lord, jubilating, dancing on the streets of Moscow. He delivered a D'var Torah, in which he spoke of how ardently he had prayed for Rubashkin to be spared further ignoble incarceration. He didn't mention that he had visited with Lazar in Otisville in 2014. That visit is mentioned nowhere on the internet except on my blog.

Who knows what channels were activated, and which were significant, in the course of the campaign for Rubashkin's release—maybe Lazar's visit, and his conference with Greenblatt, had no bearing on the matter at all. There were other significant people who wanted Rubashkin released, a great many interested parties. Maybe Michael Cohen knows something about it. But I'm not going back to Otisville to ask him.

At the time, of course, I knew none of this. Nobody did. All we knew was that we were being visited by the Chief Rabbi of Russia. We were Jews. Many of us were Russian Jews. Even those of us who were not Russian Jews knew something about the Jews of Russia, and what they had meant for history, and for our people. It was an exciting thing to be visited by such an important person.

Lazar's great motif was the color black. He arrived at Otisville in a roomy black sedan with tinted windows, himself dressed in all black, except for a white shirt underneath his jacket as an accent piece. And who knows, maybe socks in Russian red. Nobody asked to look.

Russia is a lot like America. This is for more or less the same reason that Germany and Japan are a lot like America—because America won against Russia, and redesigning the country was a part of the spoils. In the 1990s, Russian society was built from the ground up by such economic chochems as Larry Summers, who was also one of the major architects of the Obama administration's reaction to the 2008 financial crisis. During that period Russia experienced the sharpest decline in life expectancy ever recorded in a developed nation that wasn't at war. I was in Otisville as part of that reaction. Russia and I were both fucked over by Larry Summers.

One of the ways that Russia is a lot like America is that it takes hustle to get to the top of anything. In Russia hustle maybe is a little rougher, these days, than it usually is in America. More assassinations, fewer sharply worded letters. But it is a reasonable assumption about a powerful person in Russia, as in America, that part of the process of getting powerful was demonstrating that one was capable of being a real hard-nosed sonofabitch. Rabbi Berel Lazar certainly gave that impression. He didn't fit right in at Otisville. He was a much better hustler than we were.

Naturally, Lazar prioritized time with the VIP inmates. He had a long conference with Mshulem. He had a long conference with Helle. He didn't bother to meet with Walter Forbes. Forbes may have been rich and powerful, but he was still only a goy.

Lazar did, however, have time to meet with me. Me! Larry Noodles! Talking to the Chief Rabbi of Russia! What was I going to say to the learned man?

"You're a very inspiring man." That was one of the first things that... *he said to me!* Me, Larry Noodles! Inspiring! Larry Noodles usually caused people to experience pain and suffering, not

inspiration. I was flattered by Lazar's words. They were spoken in educated, softly accented English, an English cross-pollinated by Russian and Yiddish.

He said he was inspired by me because of the hardship I was enduring. He was inspired by all of us imprisoned Jews. What kind of a world was it we were living in? What kind of a world caged human beings alive?

I told Lazar not to worry too much about us Otisville Jews. I told him we were doing just fine. That when the going gets tough, the tough get going. That's an American expression. It isn't difficult enough to be Russian. Also, too optimistic.

Before he left, Rabbi Lazar delivered a speech to the assembled Otisville Jews. But I wasn't there for it. I was playing soccer with the Russian Medicare fraudsters and the Latino drug dealers. Soccer was taken very seriously in Otisville. There were usually one or two fights per game, but real fist fights were rare. That was because a real fist fight would cause the blue boys to shut down the Camp. There was nothing more inconveniencing and miserable than a Camp shutdown. Especially in the middle of a soccer game. The soccer games were sacred. In the shul, there was prayer with our words. In soccer, there was prayer with our bodies.

Always we were crying out to something great, greater, for help, for freedom.

But I missed the speech of Rabbi Berel Lazar, the Chief Rabbi of Russia, not because I put a higher premium on the soccer game than his wisdom but because I didn't hear about it until it was too late. Maybe if I had gone I would be a wise man, myself, today.

Important rabbis often visited the Camp. The Bobover Rebbe, the Slonimer Rebbe... believe me, these are names that mean something to somebody. And I did want to hear them speak. But I never did. It always happened the same way. When a prominent rabbi came to visit, I always heard about it only after they'd left, or when they were leaving. Even in Otisville, where things were so simple, it was not always easy to take an opportunity for spiritual enrichment when it was made available to you. I'm sure the

Bobover Rebbe and the Slonimer Rebbe missed me, even if they didn't know about it. I'm sure they left the Camp feeling somehow incomplete.

But what could they possibly know about true religious feeling? They *could* leave the Camp, whenever they wanted to. For them a soccer game was a thing without any special meaning. They believed they had something to teach.

My Release

A week before my release from prison, we were visited by the Belzer Rebbe. The Belzer Rebbe spoke only Yiddish, but he'd brought a translator with him.

He told us a story about the Chernobyl Rebbe. The Chernobyl Rebbe had devoted his life to getting Jewish prisoners released from captivity. This at a time when Jews were harshly persecuted by the Russian government. But one day, the Chernobyl Rebbe himself was arrested and sent to jail. The Belzer Rebbe told us that God had sent the Chernobyl Rebbe into the penal system the same way he'd sent Avraham Avinu, Abraham our Father, into Canaan. God had intended to teach both of them what it was like to be a stranger in a strange land.

Before the Belzer Rebbe left, we inmates were treated to chocolate cake. The Rebbe gave us each a slice and a blessing. In prison, a fresh-baked piece of chocolate cake is not something you forget. It is precious to you.

Did God send me to prison, too? Maybe if the Belzer Rebbe spoke English I'd have been able to squeeze the answer out of him.

Finally, I guess the state had had enough of Larry Noodles. I was a deadbeat, paid no rent, had worn out my generous welcome with the American government. It was late October, 2015. In early November I would be released. The world was waiting for me and I was both excited for it and frightened of it.

I remembered the incident of the kidney stone. I knew that neither I nor the place I came from would be the same when I went back, and in a way, it would be like becoming a child again. Some people would be grateful for the opportunity to become a child again. I was grateful for the opportunity to buy a slice of pizza and go to a movie. I was excited to see my son whenever I wanted to, and to speak freely

without fear of getting tossed in solitary confinement. I wanted to wear ordinary clothes; I wanted to speak to ordinary people. And I knew all of this would be more complicated than it had been before, and that complication was both joy and trembling.

The rabbis say: Where there is joy, there should be trembling.

Larry Noodles says: I'll take it if you through in the vice versa.

A few days before my release I was granted a reprieve from work in the kitchen. I had a little prison vacation to prepare me for the freedoms of the real world. The blueboy who ran the kitchen took me aside during my last day working under him.

"Listen, Noodles," he said to me, "I've heard about your blog."

I wondered if he was going to threaten to murder me. I thought back to orientation. I did not remember any explicit rules against such behavior.

"And I want you to get this straight," the blueboy continued—"my name, Linc, is spelt with a C at the end. It's short for Lincoln Continental."

I told the blueboy I had always assumed Linc was short for The Missing Link. The whiff of freedom was making me brash. He didn't find the crack funny.

Linc had lost his watch once, early on in my time working in the kitchen. He'd taken it off to show me how to wash the bigger pots and pans, and attached it to a pipe. After he'd finished his demonstration, he forgot about the watch for a little while. When he remembered to check back for it, it was gone. Imagine that!

The watch miraculously reappeared when Linc threatened a cubicle-by-cubicle search, to be called off, no questions asked, if his property were returned to him. I suspect it was Shea who took the watch. He hated Linc, and I'm sure he enjoyed watching him go crazy.

“At the Medium,” he said, “they just call me Continental.”

I told him I’d make a note of it. Lincoln Continental didn’t figure too prominently in my life, however, and if he read my blog, I’m sure he was disappointed.

When Jews left, they made farewell speeches in the chapel. Like my friend, Dr. Charles. He’d been my bunkmate once upon a time, but got spooked by my enemies. People angry about my blog, trying to create trouble for me and anybody close to me. He was looking into getting transferred when I went ahead and did it myself—got moved to a cell with this guy Sonny, a real nut, a literary person. He liked my blogs. Dr. Charles ended up bunking with Chaz, a bully who had made an enormous Russian we all called Shrek his main target. Even though Dr. Charles and I had separated, we remained in touch. Our cells were directly across from each other.

Dr. Charles’ parting words to the chapel were about mussar, self-improvement, ethics. He talked about how prison transformed men into less-than-men. He talked about the difference between the way the Jews behaved in the chapel and outside of it. He told how fearful he had been every day of coming to believe that the guards, who treated us all like trash, were right—how afraid he was that sooner or later, he’d see himself as trash, too. It was important, Dr. Charles said, to cleave to goodness. Compassion. Generosity. Uprightness.

It was complicated, watching these speeches. You were happy for your friends who could return to the world, and also pained that they were gone. Friends, in prison, are a hell of a lot better even than a slice of freshly baked chocolate cake. You are surrounded by enemies. You are beset on all sides. The bond means something more than it does on the outside.

Besides, you’re jealous. Why should this lucky bastard get the golden ticket?

Most guys, like Dr. Charles, use their farewells as an opportunity to speak of the nobility of the human spirit. They praise their spiritual teachers, urge an ethical life. They try to sound like they’re giving a D’var Torah. But Larry Noodles was the fly in the ointment blogger, the pain in everybody’s neck and

ass, and, on top of that, had never stolen a cent before he ended up at Otisville. I didn't have the cred as a sage or a criminal to give them the grand narrative of my moral redemption. Instead, I spoke what was in my heart.

I don't have a transcript; I don't have it exact. So I'll take a few liberties—there's no more appropriate context for it. This is what I said, more or less:

Farewell

Friends, Roman, countrymen. I'm sorry to say I'm graduating. I guess I'm not sorry that I'm graduating, but I'm sorry if you aren't. I hope I'll see you on the other side, maybe. I have heard reports that there is still a real world out there.

Some of you have threatened to murder me because I have maintained a blog, telling my story here. Better hurry up. I'll be out be next Shabbos, and statistics show very clearly that the solve rate for murders is higher on the outside.

And now, I will give my thanks to the good civil servants who tried to rehabilitate me in my time here at Otisville. Thank you to Officer Scalba, who threatened to toss me in solitary because my attorney dressed too skimpy. Thank you to Officer Ferrari, who threatened to toss me in solitary because he saw me talking to my alarm clock. Thank you to Officer Grogan, who threatened to toss me in solitary for falling asleep on the baseball bleachers. Thank you to Officer Babcock, who threatened to toss me in solitary because he thought I was stealing greens from the prison warehouse. Thank you to Officer Lincoln Continental, who threatened to toss me in solitary for refusing to wash thousands of dishes from the Medium after their kitchen got destroyed. Thank you to Officer Fiello, who threatened to toss me in solitary because my son took pictures of the deer.

Thank you all for failing to follow through on your threats. Truly, you are quick to rage, and even quicker to amnesia.

Now I will give a blessing.

Our rabbis and sages teach us that every Jew has the power to give a blessing, and the blessing will be heard in heaven. Today, I am going to bless Muss, the foot doctor. I want to bless Muss that he should find a woman to love and keep him. Baruch HaKodesh Baruch Hu, baruch Hu. Muss, I know many inmates have tried to help you already. You have tried to set Muss up with Lipa's mother-in-law and

Charlie's sister. You have posted ads on Facebook pages for Russian singles. But the truth is, there is only one source of help. That source is Mshulem.

Mshulem, I implore you! Help our beloved Muss to find a match!

(to the tune of 'Matchmaker')

Dictator, dictator, make Muss a match!

Find Muss a find!

Catch Muss a catch!

Dictator, dictator, make Muss a match!

Make Muss a perfect maaaaaatch....

Friends, Roman, countrymen, not so long ago you sat here and you heard pearls of wisdom from the Belzer Rebbe. The Belzer Rebbe told you that HaShem himself sent you into perdition, so that you might learn what it was to be a stranger in a strange land, like Avraham Avinu. Our father, Abraham. The Belzer Rebbe did not mention that Avraham himself told the Canaanites that he was *not* only a stranger—he also belonged to the land of Canaan. His exile was his homeland. So it has always been for us. The exile is the homeland. What's the difference whether I'm in exile here or there? On *Earth* I'm a stranger. This is what Avraham said to the Canaanites. On *Earth* I am away from my true place. My residence is in Olam HaBa, the World to Come. Our sages teach that the World to Come is the world of the Messianic Age, the age of the Moshiach.

Moshiach now!

Let us have universal peace and freedom!

Brothers, just as Avraham attempted to make his exile in peace, just as he tried to live side-by-side with the Canaanites without strife, so I tried to make my life in Otisville in peace. Bernie advised me

to go about things that way and that's just what I did. But it wasn't easy. I lived in conditions that would be condemned anywhere in the civilized world. I was abused by the blueboys. I was treated like filth by man and security guard alike. When I began my blog, many of you threatened to kill me. Already, your time has run out. My time is still going. I don't see no light.

I made sense of it all this way.

Some of you know that I was indicted on Purim. Purim is the holiday of the upside-down. A vizier turned on his head, a king, an empire even brought low. On Purim, the Jews hanged their persecutors on the very gallows that had been built for them. The Jewish neck was spared the noose. Therefore we celebrate.

That Purim has never ended. Two years I have lived now in the world of the upside-down. And I have learned something that both English and Math teachers at your local high school will tell you is false. Also engineers, and acrobats, and tumblers of all kinds. I learned that when you take a thing that is already upside-down—and my life was upside-down—and you turn it upside-down again, you do not get a thing that's right-side up. Things can just keep getting shaken up. The world can get crazier and crazier. As one of our sages said, as long as the world is spinning, people are gonna be dizzy, and if they're dizzy, they're gonna act crazy...

On Purim, we read Megillat Esther. In prison, I heard Megillat Esther for what felt like every day. I am not speaking metaphorically. Ben Turner used to practice every day, with Useless. That was until Ben was tossed in solitary because he had an illegal DVD player.

Everything can change at any moment. What is safeguarded against it? Where shall wisdom be found? Everything on Earth changes all the time. Therefore we may derive that to find something which does not change all the time, to find a center for a life, you must find something that does not exist here on Earth.

Peace maybe?

Justice?

Moshiach now! Moshiach now! Moshiach now!

Part Three:

Larry Noodles Versus the Goat

Goat

When my son was a couple of years old, I was living on Wooster Square—that is, in New Haven—and I was looking for a daycare for him.

New Haven is a wonderful town. It is called New *Haven*, not *New Haven*. There is an indigenous style of pizza, and the American hamburger was invented here. I did not say town by mistake. New Haven wants to be a city, seems to grow ever-closer, and yet it is a town, an American town, a New England town with New England qualities—it is haunted, the buildings are red brick and wood, the bones of many Indians are buried beneath the New Haven Green...

And of course there is Yale University. Some people feel that Yale is, even, one of the best universities in the country. Certainly the people that attend it feel that way. Downtown is Yale's territory, and there the buildings are neo-Gothic in style, faux-European. Coats-of-arms leer out of stained-glass windows at passersby who belong to the wrong century—the twenty-first...

I was living in New Haven, on Wooster Square. New Haven is sometimes known as the Elm City. I wanted my son to have a Jewish education. Without Jewish education there are no Jews. I wanted my son to be a Jew. Why?

Well, I was a Jew, and my father was a Jew, and his father before him was a Jew, and so on and on.

The JCC was full. That's the Jewish Community Center. And anyway they were too expensive. This was the 1990s. I read the newspaper with my morning coffee while a fishbowl TV prattled in the corner. The president of the United States was Bill Clinton. This was another time. The century was closer to the right one—it was the twentieth. And in America, certainly in Puritan New England, it was still possible for the public to be shocked and outraged at the idea that the President had received a blowjob in the Oval Office. Even if *Deep Throat* was twenty years old already, and a Yale professor had named a famous computer program after Linda Lovelace.

Therefore—because it was the 1990s—I read the newspaper in the morning, and drank coffee that today, no doubt, would be thought foul. Americans have developed more sophisticated palates. They drink better coffee than they did in the 1990s, and they can't be outraged by a blowjob, even one involving the President. And when my son needed a daycare, I did something that was common to do in that time, and I looked in the phonebook. The Yellow Pages.

The ad said that the Gan School—the school that belonged to, and was run by, Rabbi Daniel Greer, known to us later as the Goat—was warm, welcoming, Jewish. I was not Orthodox then, but the Gan School—though Greer was Orthodox—did not exclude people on that basis. I had been raised attending a reform shul. Reform Jews refer to their synagogues as Temples. This because the founding philosopher of the Reform movement, Moses Mendelssohn, proclaimed that Jews should no longer hold out hope for a Messianic Age in which the Jerusalem Temple was to be rebuilt. Maybe it was the eschewing of the Messianic Age—the age of Moshiach—that made me want to look elsewhere.

Moshiach never? This did not accord, even then, with my sentiments.

Felix Mendelssohn—a descendant of Moses Mendelssohn's, best known for the wedding music he wrote for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*—was one of the Goat's favorite composers. The Goat only

listened to Jewish composers. Mendelssohn and Mahler were his favorite. He played Mendelssohn and Mahler to his cattle before he slaughtered them. As I have said, the Goat trusted only his own kin in the matter of kashrut. He played the cattle classical music in order to calm their jangled nerves. Then he sawed through their throats.

I took my son to the Gan School.

In the years 2007 and 2008, I was the closing attorney on several fraudulent real estate deals. The consequence of my participation in that conspiracy, a conspiracy of which I was not author and from which I did not profit except in the piddling form of my legal fees, was that I was thrown in prison for two years. In prison men threatened to murder me for keeping a blog, and other men threatened to throw me in solitary confinement—which, I remind you, is considered by international human rights' organizations to be a form of torture—for the crime of hoarding vegetables.

If I were traveling on a dark road some night, and I were accosted by a sheyd—a demon—and that demon told me I was cursed to relive my life from the very beginning, but I was permitted to make a single change, I would still close those mortgage deals. Because I'd want to save my change for Jake, my son. I would never have brought him to the Gan School.

*

A man who wants to tell the story of his life, including his mistakes, is put in a curious position—that is, if he wishes the story of his life to be that: a story. Scheherazade kept her head because she knew that a story must never really finish answering the question of what-happens-next. Not until the story is done.

But the story of my life is a true story, and I am the one telling it, and of course I know what-happens-next. And in some instances, an event can so totally revise your understanding of everything that came before it that it can be nigh-on impossible to communicate your own obliviousness and naivete in an honest way. If you have already seen the movie the twist is obvious and it is like that also with the events

and accidents and tragedies of your life. Today it is hardly possible for me to conceive of a time when I did not know what the Goat was. I cannot talk about his school, and my first experiences there, and what it was like to bring my son there, in an honest way if I do not first tell you that the Goat was a serial child abuser and rapist, at least violent with his children, possibly sexually coercive as well, that over the course of many decades he repeatedly groomed and sodomized male teenagers under his care, and that he committed these crimes, which are not only crimes but acts of evil, all while presenting himself in public as the last devout Jew in America.

He did not touch my son. But he touched other boys.

I disclose all of this now because in the pages that follow I will be telling you about the decades-long relationship I had with the Goat, with his synagogue, his school, his family. I will tell about his daycare, and the strange things that happened there. And because I know what he really was—and maybe you knew before picking this book up about the Greer case, maybe you picked it up for exactly that reason—I know that it will be impossible for me to show you him the way I saw him before his case emerged into public view. You will read about the crazy things that Greer and his underlings did, and you will wonder how he got away with everything for so long.

I also wonder.

I have told you about my crimes, and I have told you about what prison was like for me. And now I have to tell you about something very, very different. Where before I told about folly and selfishness and corruption, bratty prison guards and the brattier doctors and lawyers who were their property, where I told you about frum men, men of God, who nevertheless live for flesh and easy money, what I did not tell you about was evil. Because, though there is everywhere a trace of evil, the real thing—the human being who has given himself to evil utterly—is rare. Greer was such a person. And what I have brought you in this final section of this narrative of my life is an account of what it is like to be close to evil. And evil, like a great many things, is easier to recognize from afar than it is in the very bosom.

Some people will wave away the possibility of evil as cosmic superstition, a simplification of complicated emotional and psychological events within human beings. They will say that evil is qualitatively no different from self-interest or thoughtlessness, and that the difference is always one of degree. But I am a Jew, and the world's surviving Jews know something about evil. Like the Indians under the New Haven Green.

There is in some people a spirit of annihilation and cruelty that cannot be explained by your psychology.

*

I took my son to the Gan School.

And the Gan School was housed in a charming old New England building, as unassuming and traditional as a minister's wife. Steps cut from stone led up to a front door painted black in peeling paint. But the school was only one building—it belonged to a compound, a fenced-in set of properties belonging to the mysterious Rabbi Greer.

I had heard one or two things about him before. I knew that Greer was eccentric. He did not trust other people; he trusted only in himself, the law, and the Law. Though he dressed like a Chasid, he was not one. He had been educated at Princeton, and then Yale Law School. Like me, he was a lawyer.

At that time, I was impressed by what I knew of Rav Greer. Apparently he had worked on Wall Street. Now, his life was determined by, revolved around, religion and religious practice. His sons were all getting into Yale, getting serious educations just as he had done, but they were not vulgar or materialistic. They were serious people. They were proud of being Jews—not ashamed, proud! One of these sons was Dov. Dov Greer, you'll remember, was eventually to become one of my most consistent visitors in prison.

I was shown around the compound by Rabbi Greer's wife. Greer himself was conspicuous by his sudden appearances and disappearances—it seemed he had to check on everything, the classes, the office, his wife, and, of course, me. He was a disheveled, serious-looking man, with a skinny face but a slightly rounded belly. He had a long, impressive beard that augmented the gauntness of his features. Then he was very grey already, though there were still veins of black and brown, some autumn tones, in his hair. He didn't speak to me. I had not yet become worthy of his attention.

The Ewe encouraged me to watch a class conducted. The teacher was a Rabbi Gettinger. His students were well-drilled, behaved, seemed to be as familiar with Biblical Hebrew as they were with English. In the Gan School I recognized the lineaments of the shtetl. I felt somehow, romantically, that this was a place where a young Jew would receive a real acquaintance with his tradition, with his heritage, and with the learning that was his rightful inheritance. I asked for application papers. The daycare fee was half of what the JCC charged.

Daycare

A ba'al teshuvah is, depending on the room he's in, an honored member of the Jewish community. In Christian terms the nearest analog to a ba'al teshuvah is a Born Again—somebody who, though he has always had a religion, has returned to it with special fervor. Teshuvah is the Jewish word for repentance, atonement. Literally, in Hebrew, it means *turning*. A ba'al teshuvah is a person who turns from the path he is on back to the upright one, back to the path of righteousness. He relinquishes treyf (non-Kosher) food, doesn't drive on Shabbos, prays with regularity, obeys the laws of family purity. Like I said, the ba'al teshuvah's status depends on the room he's in. Sometimes, he's honored—he's somebody who made a choice, somebody who didn't have to be frum, but wanted to be, found halakhah not constricting but liberating. Sometimes, he is just another outsider, stumbling through the prayers, not knowing his mizrach from his mechitzah and his mechitzah from his machzor.

I wasn't a ba'al teshuvah then. But when I'd take Jake to daycare at the Gan School—a place which was frum, which honored halakhah, even while accepting the non-Orthodox—I began see ba'alim

teshuvah, people who, as I would years down the line, had found the rhythms and rituals of traditional Jewish life to be a sustenance and a source of meaning.

Ronald Scherban, a lawyer in New Haven, was one such person. Ron had come from a rough-and-tumble background, clawed his way to ownership of a small legal practice housed in a little white colonial downtown. His wife, a Persian Jew he'd met years ago in Israel, was not a lawyer, though she was employed at the firm. Her name was Mazi, pronounced mah-zee. Ron and Mazi had very different ideas about teshuvah. They had very different ideas about the Gan School.

Under the employ of the Scherban practice, by the way, was a frum Jew called Yaacov, with whom, years later, I would have an entanglement. See Part One: Larry Dressler. It's covered there in Technicolor.

When I brought Jake to the Gan School for daycare, often I would see Ron, or Mazi. What I heard, what I learned about Greer—about being frum—about everything that, at that time, mattered to me, was radically different depending on whether it was Ron or Mazi I ran into. They were beginning to belong to different worlds, those two. Ron was being pulled into the shtetl, into another century. Mazi was trying to drag him back again.

If it was Ron I saw, dropping off his boys—he had five, and a girl—everything was fraternity, energy, the joy of mutual Jewishness. That joy is an authentic thing, and one that is too often ignored by the people who might best appreciate it. It's true that the Cossacks are no longer just beyond the next hill; it's true that the Jews today live in much the same state of security and wellbeing as anybody else. But a spirit of being joined in the same struggle—the struggle to survive, and to remain a Jew, and to remain a Jew with some pride—can still unify two Jewish men who have little else in common. When it comes from a ba'al teshuvah, it's irresistible. A ba'al teshuvah has just discovered three thousand years of cultural heritage. He bursts with the enthusiasm to share it.

The boys disappearing up the stone-cut steps behind us, Ron would grip my hand in both of his. It was autumn, in those early days, the days of Ron's greatest excitement. Autumn in New England has been widely commented upon. The street rustles like an old book. The air has a playful bite.

"Larry," Ron would say, "what a pleasure it is to see you here of all places, in a place of Torah. What a pleasure it is to know that there are other Jews in this town who care to induct their children into our tradition! Tell me, Larry, tell me. What do you think of the Jonathan Pollard case?"

I would say, "Ron, to tell you the truth, Jonathan Pollard, it seems to me, is a traitor to this country. I'm no enemy of Israel, but I don't see how it helps anything for American Jews to be seen spying for a foreign country."

And Ron would grip my hand tighter, as if he had found a third with which to squeeze it. He would look at me as if I had graduated kindergarten only with the exercise of serious political influence.

"Larry!" Ron would say. "I'm embarrassed to hear such an opinion from you, from a self-respecting Jew, a man with whom I share nothing less than a school and a profession! Jonathan Pollard is the hero of American Jewry. In a thousand years' time, schools like this one will be showing children like our boys—my five, your one—pictures of Jonathan Pollard, and telling the story of his heroism, and of his persecution at the hands of the fed. Without Jews like Jonathan Pollard, Larry, you and I, we're nothing, we're dog food. And for our government to brutalize him, to treat him as an agent of intrigue, of chaos, a treasonous individual... it's nothing less than antisemitism! And I'm surprised to hear that you, yourself, have chosen to align with that antisemitism. A Jew who will not act to protect himself by any means necessary—such a Jew is dead before he knows it."

And indeed, Ron required each of his sons to study Tae Kwon Do. And he required, sooner or later, each of his friends to profess an at-least neutrality on the subject of Jonathan Pollard, if not an outright admiration for the bravery of a solitary Jew who took his career and his life into his hands in order to contribute to the safety and security of his people.

But Mazi did not believe in teshuvah. She did not believe in being frum. At that time, she was still driving her children to shul on Shabbos. And most of all, she did not believe in Greer. But Mazi, unlike Ron, was not given to monologue. She did not take you by the hand and trap you against a brick wall and recite to you the history of Jewish persecution, rain pogroms and expulsions on your head like hailstones, indulge in the whole great lachrymose narrative of Jewish history as a means of securing your agreement in the matter of Jonathan Pollard or the estate tax. No: Mazi didn't talk. She just looked at you, sadly, a little warily. She looked at you in a way that said, So. So, you're crazy too, just like my husband?

I think that maybe women sensed the dark thing that lived in Greer naturally, in a way that Ron and I simply could not, did not understand. My then-wife, too, was suspicious of him. My son had light-up sneakers. Greer found the lights distracting and irritating, and covered them up with tape.

And then we learned that when the children in the daycare cried during naptime, their mouths were taped closed.

My wife, then, wanted out. But what I saw, then, was discipline, seriousness. Dr. Hack, the school disciplinarian, had a Ph.D. in Greek History. He was dressed, always, in a suit and tie. He had the affect of an undertaker, a mortician. If Dr. Hack believed that putting tape over children's mouths was an acceptable way to silence them, it was not out of laziness. It was out of a belief in something. The idea that a child could not be educated in the ways of the world by gentleness alone.

And it wasn't just the tape that offended my wife. It was the whole prospect of becoming Orthodox. To her, it was craziness, superstition. And who could blame her? From the outside, that's the way anything looks. And when you begin to take steps away from the derekh, the path, of mainstream bourgeois America—when you begin to go looking for another way of living, a way of living that isn't about expressing who you are by the purchases you make but devoting oneself to the greater life and meaning of a community bound up with God—it's very, very hard to know what's crazy and what isn't.

Because you've been taught—by TV, basically—to think it's all crazy. And you've figured out that that's not true. It can make it hard to know what, or who, to believe.

I was starting to go to Chabad from time to time. I knew that there was something in that way of life that mattered to me, something in that way of life which could be an escape from the stupidity and mediocrity of life at the end of the twentieth century, the beginning of the twenty-first. She did not see the beautiful thing Greer was torturing into a justification for his life. She saw only Greer. Greer, a crazy, white-bearded man who ran a school full of eccentrics, who slaughtered his own meat, whose employees seemed to look at him like he was some kind of minor God himself.

And she saw what it meant when a teacher puts tape over a child's mouth.

At the end of Jake's second year at the Gan School, my wife won. We took him out, but that wasn't the end of it. By then our fates—mine and Greer's—were tied up with each other. Because one of the first people I'd met on the journey I took into a life of halakhah, a life with religion, and God, was Rabbi Daniel Greer.

And that meant that if I kept walking the path I wanted to walk—if I was going to become a frum Jew, if I was going to become a serious man—sooner or later, I was going to run into him again. And sooner or later, one or the other of us was going to get knocked off that road.

The Court

Some men are kings. It's not necessarily a compliment. When I say that some men are kings what I'm saying is that some men construct their own court, then fill it with courtiers. Usually these men have a Fool, and a few sons if they can get any, and a devoted queen. This was the Greer court:

There was, first of all, the Ewe, the Goat's wife, who, while not exactly a Lady Macbeth, did have a couple of qualities in common with Eva Braun. While she did not, so far as I can tell, push him to his crimes, she certainly knew about them. When the Goat returned home from work every day, his children would hear his car in the driveway. They would all flee to their rooms. Only the Ewe would be waiting for him to greet him with open arms.

It seems that there are stronger things in the world, after all, than a mother's love. What it was that kept the Ewe tied to her husband will probably be a mystery forever. But I don't believe it could have been as simple as money or religion or even romantic love. I think she had to believe in the myth of him. So did the rest of them.

So did Ezi, so did Dov, the Goat's sons. Dov used to come visit me in Otisville. He had something in common with his father—cunning, maybe. Diplomacy. Except that the Goat himself was never very good at pretending, at putting a nice face on things. Dov had to learn to do that for himself. Lots of children of abusive parents get very good at that, at keeping people calm. Dov used it as a strategy to get by in the world, to do well in business. When he came to Otisville, it wasn't just to see me. There was Nahmad there, there was Jacobowitz. Dov came to network. Dov Greer is the only guy I ever knew who went to prison to make conversation. Most guys who go away come back into the world with insight, knowledge, experience. Dov Greer came back with a Rolodex and a couple new LinkedIn connections.

Dov, even from his childhood, was always in trouble with his dad. If the Greer court had a Fool—if the Greer court had only one Fool—Dov was it. It was Dov who was mocked and excoriated endlessly, whose misfortunes were the source of Greer's amusement. Greer wasn't a big laugher. But he laughed at Dov, and Dov absorbed the message. He never rose to his father's standards.

There are some fathers, of course, whose standards you never want to rise and meet. Some fathers, their standards look more like the Dark Triad. You know the Dark Triad, from *Law and Order*: cruelty to animals, late bedwetting, pyromania...

Ezi, also Greer's son, was married to the daughter of Dr. Hack, the Ph.D. in Greek History. Dr. Hack was one of the Goat's most important advisors and assistants. Maybe it would even be fair to call him consiglieri. Dr. Hack and his wife were both overeducated and underemployed when they first came to New Haven. They didn't have connections, they didn't have opportunities. They had Greek and Latin, they knew their Ovid and their Homer, but they worked odd jobs, retail, maintenance at a garden center. Harold Hack had a flamboyant personal style and an old-fashioned seriousness. It wasn't just suits and ties he wore. He carried a pocket watch, wore English caps, sweater-vests. Greer recognized talent, he recognized desperation, and he recognized the potential for unscrupulousness. No one in the orbit of

Rabbi Daniel Greer gave up so much to be there, to stay there, as Dr. Hack and his wife. They made the same sacrifice Abraham did. They gave Greer their son, Avi.

And Avi eventually took over some of the family responsibilities. He worked for Greer on the compound, taking over for a guy by the name of Mordechai Biser. Mordechai was another one of those stories that, years later, make you wonder how many people knew about Greer and didn't say a word. He'd worked for the Goat for ten years, until 2002, then disappeared. Got married, had kids, and never returned to the compound. He had something of an authoritarian personality, not unlike the Goat's. Maybe the two of them were lovers, and fell out. Maybe the Goat just couldn't handle having another guy like that around. Maybe he destabilized the whole solution. Not a lot of people went after me as hard as Biser when I started talking about him on my blog.

And there was also Eli Mirlis. Eli Mirlis came to the Gan School in 2005. He was from a big family, social services were involved, his father was abusive. Eli Mirlis was a gentle, Jewish boy, a gentle boy with gentle features, black curly hair and wounded eyes, and he was a boy who had been taught by his own household to regard himself as worthless. Education, Mirlis believed, was his way out, up, beyond. His teachers were his surrogate parents. And he believed that in making them happy, in making them proud, he could show himself to be worthy of such happiness and pride.

Rabbi Greer fell in love with Eli Mirlis. He fell in love with him like a black hole falls in love with a passing comet. Greer was a field nobody escaped.

Larry and the Minyan

But it wasn't when Jake was in daycare that I really became involved with the Goat and His Court. That happened many years later. The '90s were no more; it was the Bush years, years of another set of American delusions. The end of history, the period of universal security, the halcyon moment of post-Cold War geopolitical unipolarity had passed. History resumed in 2001 with events I won't bother to retread. And just as the illusion of certainty, understandability, rationality that had enveloped the world in the years before 2001 had evaporated—so had the illusion I had of an orderly, simple domestic life.

I was now divorced. Jake was with his mother most of the time, in and out of private schools, Jewish and otherwise. Like a lot of young men—or boys, really, which is what Jake still was—he didn't like to do his homework. My ex-wife, I felt, was too accommodating on that point. As my son was bounced from school after school, always the same complaints, always the same problems, she never varied in blaming and excoriating his teachers for his delinquencies. They failed to motivate him; they failed to impart to him any authentic enthusiasm for learning.

In those intervening years, those years of uncertainty, of dissolving fictions, I had become religious. I've already told you about the draw that lifestyle exerted, but, unsurprisingly, it exerted no similar draw on my son. What do you expect? He was a young man; he was a boy. God isn't useful to a healthy child. A young person doesn't begin to understand until he begins to encounter death.

Or: until the schools start to run out. We tried Ezra Academy, a school for Conservative Jews—we tried Wrightwood, Hamden Hall, both secular, every option there was for a boy in our area. Every option, that is, except for the Orthodox Jewish schools. Our experience with Greer had left a bad taste in my ex-wife's mouth, and besides, I was the one who wanted religion. As far as she was concerned, Orthodox Judaism was just another institutional apparatus set up to fail her son by holding him to impossible standards.

And what young boy *signs up* for an end to cheeseburgers and TV on Saturdays?

Detention is the mother of necessity. Disciplinary mishap after disciplinary mishap finally made it so that we had no choice but to reach out to the Orthodox schools. But we remembered Greer. And, as you'll remember, there was another option out there for religious Jewish families. The Chabad school—formerly New Haven Hebrew Day School, now, classing itself up, called Southern Connecticut Hebrew Academy.

I guess Jake had a reputation. Southern Connecticut Hebrew Academy was not a big operation. K-12, it had maybe two-hundred and fifty students, tops. Still, the Chabad Rabbi did not answer my phone calls. So we turned to the Gan School. It was the last option in town.

Avi Hack didn't hesitate to answer my calls. I arranged to bring Jake to the Gan School to tour, meet the students and the teachers, see what it would be like. The high school students, of whom there were only three others, lived in dorms on the Compound. I was sure that Jake would reject the whole thing at once. But he needed to go to school somewhere, and, whatever else it was possible to say of the

Gan School, it had to be acknowledged that the students there seemed to get good educations. Greer's sons were off to Yale. They were doing something right.

So I took Jake to the Compound. Avi, in a tweed jacket with elbow patches, ever the image of penurious tenure, the image of his father, walked us around the campus. In ten years it hadn't changed. Except, perhaps, that it was a little smaller. There weren't so many families at the Gan School anymore. The Scherbans were gone. So were the Gimbels, who had brought their own complement of four children, not an insignificant number for an Orthodox Jewish school in secular New England.

The other boys in the high school were a few years older than Jake, and, of course, they had a lot more experience of Jewish scholarship.

It's worth saying a word or two about the rigor of a classical Jewish education. It used to be pretty widely believed, in the Americas and Europe, that an educated person would speak Greek and Latin, know geometry, know Shakespeare, and have a handle on the rudiments of prosody in his or her spoken language. Nowadays that sounds like a hopelessly heavy burden, and even when we meet a Ph.D. recipient we don't expect them to be able to quote Lear and Ovid and conjugate Greek verbs, too. For this is an age of specialization.

And the student who receives a classical Jewish education—which, nowadays, means an Orthodox Jewish education—is certainly *specialized*. These young Jews, they maybe don't master their geometry. They aren't so good on geography, or geology either. They know about the fossil record, but they look at it the way most Americans look at the Warren Commission. Still: they are *educated*. They know Hebrew, Classical and Modern. They know Aramaic. They pick up some Yiddish. They know halakhah—Jewish law—and mussar—Jewish ethics. They know what makes an animal Kosher, and what makes a slaughter Kosher, and they know on what days a Jew is obligated to fast and on what days a Jew is forbidden to wear leather, they know which fabrics may be mixed and they can tell you the names of Aaron's sons, how they died, and what they should have done differently. They learn to read Hebrew in at

least three scripts—one, the so-called Rashi script, is studied in order to enable them to read one writer and one writer alone—and they learn to read a system of musical notation called *trop* which guides the public recitation of verses from the Torah. They can tell their Midrash from their Mishnah, their Talmud from their Tehillim, their tzitzit from their tzedakah, and their souls from their bodies.

Jake had not been in an Orthodox school. Like Avi said, he had catching up to do. But Avi made it sound like no big deal. You study up over the summer, you work extra hard for six months, you'll be up to date in no time. (Up to date: the year was 5775ish.) And Avi made it all sound—serious. You wake up at 6:30, daven at 7, then “learn”—the Orthodox euphemism for studying Torah and related texts—from 8am until 10pm. It was not a school. It was a life. And it was not a life of play.

As it turned out, that was exactly what my son wanted.

As we rode home that day, he sung the praises of Avi Hack. My son, who had never done his homework, wanted to take on a fourteen-hour study day. And I forgot my misgivings, for the moment, about Greer, about Hack, about the creepy way Greer's sycophants hung on and worshipped him. What I heard, on that car ride, was that my son, far from being reluctant to work hard, had been casting around for something to devote himself to totally. He was not aimless. He was a determined boy in search of a horizon.

I was hopelessly, indulgently proud.

Jake started to move his things into the dormitory on the Greer Compound. And I—I started davening there. I'd been going to Chabad minyans, but now, to be closer to my son, made the switch. 7am, every morning.

Together with Jake, I had joined a community. A rarefied community, elite in certain respects. Like I said, my son lived with his mom most of the time. But here was an opportunity to share in something with him that his mother could not. He was beginning to be a person of responsibilities. And I was there to be a part of that transformation. The days of endlessly berating teachers for *their* failures,

their inability to motivate my son, were over. Now we would try things my way. Now he was going to learn, as I had had to learn, that to make one's way in the world means to take on heavy burdens, to carry them, to relinquish them to no one because they are *gifts*.

That's when I got to know Dov. Often he davened there with us, especially on Shabbos. The Greer minyan was small. In fact, it was barely a minyan. There were plenty of occasions on which it wasn't one. But, as in every small community, there was an especially profound bond that seemed to emerge between its members. We weren't exactly friends, and we weren't exactly family. We were people who had invested, together, in an obligation. That obligation extended not only to ourselves, and to God, but to each other. A member of the minyan who was sick or suffering was a person to whom you had a duty.

And it was for that reason exactly that when, one day when I was visiting my son in the dorms and discovered the state of their bathrooms, I cleaned them myself.

I, Larry Dressler, attorney-at-law, scrubbed out the toilets at the Gan School. Another sign, another thing I should've known meant trouble. That Greer kept teenagers here, and yet could not provide for their most basic necessities, was amazing.

But I allowed it to become another part of the picture of Greer, the eccentric genius. Greer, absentminded, couldn't be expected both to foster an environment of extraordinary learning *and* keep the bathrooms clean.

The next time I scrubbed toilets, it was in greens.

I imagined all of this—responsibility, seriousness—was what my son was learning at the Gan School. Later on, when Greer went to trial, I learned a little more about what things were really like.

Later on, I learned that Avi used to encourage the boys to fight. As PR man for the Goat, he sought out troubled Jewish kids to bring them into the fold; then, in the early days, he protected them

from the bullying. But when they'd gotten acclimated, the Gan School turned into the barracks from *Full Metal Jacket*. One boy—Shimmy—was the main target of the violence when my son was at the Gan School. I met Shimmy plenty of times. He struck me as shy, gentle, a boy with a feminine spirit. Years later, years out, Shimmy would agree, and experiment with womanhood.

In the Gan School, there was no place for that. Instead, Shimmy was ruthlessly beaten, especially by one of the older boys, Yaacov. (No relation.)

Shimmy was, for some reason, identified by Avi and Greer as a problem. Probably he was resistant to their sexual advances. For that crime, he was separated from the other boys on weekends. Locked up in a so-called "Shabbos apartment" where the other boys would bring him food and water.

On one of these occasions, Shimmy used a challah knife to cut open his arm in a bid for freedom. I don't know whether he wanted to bleed out and die or just be taken out of solitary.

Solitary confinement, according to Amnesty International, is a form of torture. American prisons are not the only institutions which go on practicing it anyway.

After Otisville

I went to prison, in the 2010s, for a minor financial crime of which I was not neither architect nor planner. The two heads of the conspiracy in which I was implicated, Yaacov and Yossi, turned state's evidence and sent the attorneys they'd used in their schemes to prison. Yaacov and Yossi themselves did not join the pawns they'd manipulated in federal lockup.

Let me remind the reader that I spent about two years in prison over three thousand dollars in attorney fees. Let me remind the reader, also, that the reason I was prosecuted so harshly and aggressively was because of Operation Broken Dreams, a widely advertised and feted project of the government's whose stated purpose was to put away the financial criminals responsible for the 2008 financial crisis. Nobody at the big banks got indicted. Nobody responsible for the crisis got indicted. Bernie Madoff, who stole mostly from rich people, had his face slapped on every magazine cover in America so that it would look like something was being done to protect ordinary people. I'm no defender of Bernie Madoff's. But

Bernie Madoff destroyed many, many fewer lives than the good people at the Wells Fargo Corporation did.

It didn't matter. And it didn't matter that I wasn't a dangerous criminal. It didn't matter that the court withheld exculpatory evidence in my case that would have demonstrated I was not fully cognizant of the fraudulent dimensions of Yaacov and Yossi's plans. I went to the Catskills for two years, and it wasn't to tell jokes to alter kakers.

I came out of Otisville having learned something about justice.

Dov Greer and Avi Hack both had visited me periodically in prison. Avi never even bothered with a visitor's pass. A guy dressed like that didn't have to. If you were wearing a suit, and you looked like an important man, it was pretty easy to get waved through. Hack always wanted to learn about the bigshots behind bars with me. We didn't talk about religion. Dov, on the other hand, caused trouble on my behalf. He was an advocate for me among the prison's religious authorities. And, he promised, when I was released I'd be welcomed back to the shul that had become mine—Greer's minyan in New Haven—with a kiddush in my honor.

And, the first Shabbos after my release, the Greer shul is exactly where I went. And it was odd.

There was no kiddush. There was no acknowledgement that I had even been away. The members of the shul—Dov, the Goat himself—acted as if it were any other Shabbos. I couldn't understand it then.

I started to understand it very soon after that. I started to understand it when I began to hear the rumors about Rabbi Daniel Greer, the Goat. And I started to realize that the Greer minyan couldn't go advertising its association with dangerous criminals such as myself. It was incumbent upon them to appear to be a respectable establishment.

You see, the truth was that there were always rumors around about the Goat. But they had no content. People knew, people said, people heard that he was odd, authoritarian, eccentric. He caused

trouble in public, drew attention to himself with legal theatrics. Suing Yale, suing New Haven, inveighing against the moral and sexual slipperiness of our time. There was always a hint, in the air, that somebody like the Goat couldn't possibly be for real.

It was a hint that I didn't believe before Otisville. The truth is that I was naïve. Just as I was naïve when Yaacov kept handing me funny closing after funny closing, just as I was naïve when I cleaned out the Gan School bathrooms... I believed in Torah, and I believed in men of Torah. I believed that to live a life by the edicts of that book was to live a life of honesty, ethical integrity.

Then I went to Otisville.

Then I went to Otisville, and I met Mshulem, I met Zaydy, I met Menachem. I met countless men of principle whose principles, somewhere, ceased to be relevant. I learned that a man doesn't have to know he's a hypocrite to be a hypocrite. The truth is that a religious man who commits hideous crimes is not a man who *pretends* to be religious in order to receive social acclamation. He's a man who doesn't have the power to look at himself.

Greer, the great genius, the serious thinker, was too weak ever to doubt himself. And because he was too weak to doubt himself he did cruelties to children that go far beyond what any ordinary human being would like to imagine. When I got out of Otisville, I went to the Greer shul for my first Shabbos. But it wasn't that there was no kiddush that startled me. It was that the man, and his place, his shul, no longer seemed to belong to the shtetl. Greer wasn't a man straddling centuries to me, anymore. He was an ordinary man in a long white beard, and an ordinary man in a long white beard is capable of anything that an ordinary man with a narrow black moustache is.

I began to wonder about the rumors. And I started to look into them.

In the months that followed, I became the Goat's enemy. And my little prison blog—
larrynoodles.com, the same website that had gotten me death threat after death threat in prison, that had

allowed me to maintain my sanity and my sense of myself in a situation designed to strip me and everyone around me of our humanity—my little prison blog was the way I did it.

The Story Breaks

And here is how the facts began to open themselves in front of me.

I knew the principals. Some of them I knew well myself, and some were better known to my son. In the days after Otisville, when the world had taken on a new aspect of dark honesty, I thought back on the weird, cowed, sometimes frightened-seeming behavior of the high school boys at the Gan School. I was sure that, if there was any substance to the rumors at all—the rumors that Greer had somehow traumatized several of the children under his care—those boys would know about it.

And I was sure, also, that my son would not. A great many lies were told over the years by Avi Hack, and in the aggregate of his crimes and manipulations, what he said to Jake when we toured the Gan School barely registered. The truth was that a summer of study was not, actually, enough to make up for eight years of prior religious education, and I knew that, though Jake had become friends with the other boys in his class, he had never really been inducted into the school's secrets.

What he did know about was the violence between the boys. It was Jake who, after my return from Otisville, when I began asking him probing questions about his time at the Gan School, told me about the brutality to which Shimmy was subjected. A teenager doesn't know how weird, how wild, his experiences are. He is too much a stranger to himself to recognize the strangeness of others, the strangeness of the world around him. Some exposure to the prison system will hurry up this process of realization, this sense that the reason you don't feel quite like you belong in the world might be partly the world's fault, and not entirely your own.

Yaacov, Jake told me—again, no relation to the Yaacov whose conspiracy I was punished for participating in—would be the one to know anything if anybody did. He had always obviously been Avi's favorite, and at the Gan School, it was understood that the favorites had secret privileges of which the other students weren't even aware. The public privilege Yaacov enjoyed was the freedom to beat Shimmy to a pulp at will. Jake suspected there was more to it.

At that time, Yaacov was living in Brooklyn. I was hesitant about going to Brooklyn so soon after my release. I've written already about the surreal feeling that set in when I visited a hospital for my kidney stone while still at Otisville. That feeling, and the vertigo that accompanied it—the fear that the world had moved too far beyond me, that I was now a total stranger to everyone and everything—was difficult enough in the city of my residence, New Haven. New Haven is a town, not a city. It was familiar. It does not have the same quality of chaos and life that Brooklyn does, the rhythm, and freneticism, of a thousand local cultures rubbing up against each other every hour of every day. But by now a principle was beginning to be involved. Fuck it. I went to Brooklyn.

I went to stay there for a Shabbos and arranged to meet with him. I didn't conceal my purpose. Yaacov knew that I wanted to learn what had really been going on at the Gan School over the years. Though it was obvious he knew, it was impossible for him to tell me.

We shared a meal together, much of it in silence. Chilly, Shabbos food. There is a stillness and a quiet that accompanies a frum Shabbos. The outside world exists at a remove. How many membranes were between me and it then! The strangeness of having been a prisoner, and being free again; the strangeness of speaking, on such co-equal terms, with a classmate of my son; of speaking, potentially, about horrors I had been near enough to to smell; the hermetically sealed chamber in time that is Shabbos. The only thing that existed for me was Yaacov.

Yaacov wept.

It was not that it was impossible for him to tell me the things he knew because he was in danger, he had been threatened, anything of that nature. This man, who was also, to me, a boy, was much too overwhelmed, much too destroyed in the most intimate portions of his interior self, to tell me the truth. It was at that meal that I began to understand that Yaacov was not only a witness. He, too, had been a victim of something. Something at the hands of Avi Hack. What exactly that was, I still don't know for certain—but as I disclose to you more and more the details of the Greer case, I think you will come to suspect exactly the same thing I did.

What Yaacov did tell me was what the rumors, the whispers about Greer meant. Until that moment, I did not know exactly what he was guilty of. I'd hear there was something wrong with Greer, something wrong at the school. Dark murmurings. It was Yaacov who told me that those dark murmurings referred to something in particular, and that something was rape, by Greer, going back many, many years. It was Yaacov who gave me the name of Eli Mirlis. The last thing he told me was that Mirlis had the answers I wanted.

Before I decided to contact Mirlis, I reached out to Rabbi Muroff, who taught at the Goat's Yeshiva for a number of years. He suddenly decided to move to Georgia just before I got out of Otisville. Muroff was in the national news a few years earlier when he returned a hundred thousand dollars in cash that he had found hidden in a desk that he had purchased on Craigslist from a New Haven local. He

wanted to world to know that religious Jews are good, decent people. A kiddush Hashem. He didn't disclose to the media that he was born in Canada. Canadians are far more trusting than Americans. The individual who was the beneficiary of the Rabbi's honesty refused to disclose any information about him or herself to the media. Probably a local drug dealer.

I sent Muroff a message on Facebook in which I told him I suspected that a former student, ie., Yaacov, had been molested by Avi Hack. Muroff broke down in tears and told me that his experience at the Gan school was too difficult for him to even talk about it. He told me that he would reveal information to me as long as I promised to keep it a secret. Pinky swear. Muroff told me that a different student had either settled or brought a legal claim against the Goat in which the Goat settled for millions of dollars. Muroff said that the case was kept quiet in order to protect Avi Hack's reputation, as Avi was molested by the Goat for years. Muroff wouldn't tell me the name of this student. I was in shock. I decided that this information needed to be published on the Noodles blog, despite my pinky swear. The world needed to know about the monster known as Greer.

After I posted to my blog the truth about the Goat I got barraged with frantic calls by Muroff. He cried. He was upset that I did not honor my pinky swear. He told me to take down the blog immediately in order to protect his family. What about the families who had their children raped by the Goat? I stopped taking his calls. I then decided to contact Mirlis.

I knew Mirlis already, through the community. A nice, intelligent young man, eloquent, with a cynical edge. I arranged to speak to him next, over coffee. With Mirlis, feeling that the situation was more delicate, I didn't broach things directly myself. But word was getting around that I was looking into the Greer business, and Mirlis brought it up of his own accord.

He asked me if I'd heard the rumors—the rumors that someone had been molested by Greer.

I told him if I had.

“And who,” Mirlis asked me, almost with a spirit of mischief, “who do you think it was that Rabbi Greer touched?”

I sipped my drink and half-wished to burn my tongue.

“People say you,” I told him.

Mirlis only laughed. A crazy, knowing laugh, with the whole semi-circle of his upper teeth visible for half a moment of abandon. He told me nothing that day.

But after that conversation, I knew that it was true. And from Mirlis’ laugh, from Mirlis’ warmth towards me—a soldierly warmth, a warmth even like the one that exists between prisoners, people burdened by the same grievous task or the same grievous knowledge—I knew that he was preparing his revenge against Greer.

Well, we live in the 21st century. We are so civilized now that we are difficult to scandalize. But the important thing about the 21st century, in this instance, is that revenge is no longer taken, by most people, in the form of murder. Though certainly, given what was soon to be revealed, if Mirlis had massacred the Goat, along with his children and the Hacks, even by machete, he would be vindicated, at least, in the court of public opinion. But the court of public opinion is, in such matters as these, less important than the Courts of the State of Connecticut. Hadn’t I learned it myself, not so long ago, that justice is justice, but the industry of justice is something else entirely?

Mirlis could not, sadly, file a petition with the State of Connecticut to have Greer publicly hanged. I knew, though, that he would be filing something. I began to monitor filings at the New Haven courts on a daily basis. When the accusations against Greer were made public and official, I wanted to be the first to report on them.

I just missed it.

The case was filed the week before Pesach in 2016. Mirlis himself tipped me off about it, told me to check the *New Haven Independent*. They, remember, had been the same local paper to publish my blogs from prison. Mirlis had given them the story just ahead of me, but I didn't care. Now it was out. Now it was public record that Greer, who I had just begun, then, to call the Goat, was a rapist and a child molester.

And that meant there was no reason for me to hold back anymore on larrynoodles.com.

War had been declared. I had not been the one to fire the first shot. I didn't have the best armaments, either. I couldn't add to the case against Greer; I couldn't bust his kneecaps. But I could be the Jeremiah to his wanton Jerusalem. And I would raise my voice to the loudest and most obnoxious possible pitch to ensure that everyone in Connecticut—and, especially, every Jew in Connecticut—understood that yes, there was such a thing as evil in the world, and what evil looked like was the Goat.

I had learned, in prison, the truth about hypocrisy and human beings, about cruelty, malice, and delusion. In addition to this, I had been a Jew all my life. The Jews are just like everybody else. Just like Frenchmen don't like to think about Robespierre, and Catholics don't like to think about the Inquisition, and Americans don't like to think about slavery, Jews don't like to think about the nasty things done by other Jews. This is not clannishness or primitivism. It is a perfectly natural feeling, a desire to be proud of one's heritage and identity, to see only the best in it. And among Jews especially, that desire—the desire to see the Jewish people as special, moral, unique—is pronounced, and communally encouraged, because so many Jews are so deathly afraid that if the goyim ever find out just how normal, just how capable of human frailties we are, they'll fire up the crematoria again.

Pride and fear, mixed up together, make a nasty cocktail. And a lot of Jews get drunk on it. A lot of Jews don't want to believe that an Orthodox Rabbi is capable of systematic child rape. They don't want to believe that Woody Allen might have touched his *other* stepdaughter. (Just the Vietnamese one. She

was eighteen! It's different!) They want to believe that when Jews on the other side of the world light up a city with bombs, they take scrupulous care to avoid harming children.

Larry Noodles says:

Set your own house in order, Brothers and Sisters!

Larry Noodles says:

Be a light unto the nations!

Larry Noodles says:

Has not a Jew hands, has not a Jew eyes, has not a Jew senses, dimensions, passions, has not a Jew the same capacity for murder and rape and brigandry as any gentile? And isn't it about fucking time we stopped acting as if acknowledgment of the crimes committed by our co-religionists is tantamount to signing our own death warrants? Isn't it about fucking time to apply that famous Jewish conscience, that famous Jewish guilt and moral rigor, to the behavior of our own communal leaders?

Because I'll tell you something, Jewish friends, if you're still reading. You're not gonna bring Moshiach by pretending that there aren't any Rabbi Greers in the world.

Like I said, it was the week before Pesach, 2016, that Mirlis filed his suit. In the suit Mirlis claimed that Rabbi Daniel Greer had raped him repeatedly when he was a student at the Gan School, continuing the abuse into Mirlis' adulthood. Avi Hack, also, was repeatedly raped by the Goat, also continuing into his adulthood. Hack would eventually testify that he never reported what was happening to him because he didn't want to endanger his parents' employment.

On larrynoodles.com, I told the world that Rabbi Daniel Greer, Yale Law graduate, was a pedophile. Then I sent the blog around. I wanted to make sure everybody in the community knew exactly what was going on.

Pesach at the Greer Minyan was cancelled. Greer's family, along with the Hacks, skipped town.

I heard about one poor Jew who didn't know that the Greer family Passover was no more. Some poor Jew who didn't keep up to date on the news. It's a small community. Even something as sad, and simple, as a poor idiot knocking on the door of an empty synagogue on the first day of Passover gets around. Maybe because there's something a little haunting about the image.

And a couple weeks later I heard two more rumors. I heard that Greer, giving a speech at his shul again, talked about somebody in the community who was committing loshen hara, spreading evil rumors about him. Greer said that there was an untrustworthy man, a convicted criminal, running a blog that spread vicious and untrue calumnies against his good name. Of course the Goat never said that this enemy of his was none other than Larry Noodles. To do so would have legitimized me.

And I heard, also, that in the women's Torah study class run by the Ewe, the subject of Larry Noodles had come up. One of the women had brought up the subject of loshen hara. She'd said that somebody in the community who spread vicious lies about a man as holy and learned as Rabbi Greer was surely someone the community could not tolerate. She said that Larry Noodles, as an enemy of the community, should, perhaps, be killed.

You can take the Jew out of the shtetl.

But you can't take the shtetl out of the Jew.

The Undertaker

Larry Noodles, the alter ego, the Moishe Pipik I had been in Otisville, was beginning to be just as hated on the outside as he'd been on the inside. Good.

The Goat was a powerful man in more ways than one. It was not only that he ran a school and a synagogue, that he'd been a successful Wall Street attorney years ago, that he was respected by the community and his congregants abided by his omerta. He was also something of a local real estate baron.

He owned several houses, apartment buildings, and sundry other properties in New Haven. He especially liked to rent—as, in his affairs, he liked to deal generally—to Jews. Sometimes he would make a kind of deal with his Jewish tenants. They understood that it was a part of their lease agreement that they had to attend Greer's minyan. This way, he kept attendance up. Especially after the Mirlis case was filed.

Lots of people, naturally, wanted nothing to do with Greer anymore. And yet he had his boosters, his loyalists. I set out to expose and humiliate those people. The Talmud teaches us that to humiliate a

man is worse than murdering him. The blood that flees the whitening face is likened to the blood spilled in a crime of violence. Luckily for me, the Talmud is not considered a legitimate basis of jurisprudence in the state of Connecticut.

There were few sources of information or gossip, few sources of, to use Greer's phrase, *loshen hara*, that were richer than his tenants themselves. The Goat was a true psychopath, and in some ways that made him especially predictable. There is, of course, human complexity present in the psychopath. He is not a perfect machine. But with someone like Greer, it is reasonable to expect that he will act—whatever the moral situation—in a way that accords with his self-interest. He isn't motivated by rage. Lust is his weakness.

For that reason, I expected that sources who regularly paid him rent—even if he did trace my information to them—would be protected from his ire. I did not want to draw Greer's fire on anyone other than myself. He was rich and had a formidable legal mind in his own right. Greer, like Alan Dershowitz, has the rhetorical genius and lack of scruples a guy needs to destroy his enemies. Unlike Alan Dershowitz, Greer never flew on Jeffrey Epstein's airplane. He had to build his own stable of victims from scratch.

A minor member of the Greer Court, Reb Zalmon Alpert, was one of my first targets. I was tipped off to the situation with Reb Zalmon by a source I will refer to only as the Undertaker. The Undertaker had been a tenant of the Goat's for close to thirty years. He had long been close to the Greer family. He had been especially close to the Goat's father, Moses Greer. As Moses declined mentally in his old age, he was attended to by the Undertaker, who studied Torah with him to keep his mind, his memory sharp.

Reb Zalmon was a reactionary zealot, a real freak. Years ago the Greer family had organized an armed patrol of Orthodox Jewish neighborhoods in New Haven in order to protect them from *the criminal element*. You know what is meant by *the criminal element*. They are the good folks who brought us jazz

and rock 'n roll. Rabbi Greer was concerned that intercommunal violence between the Jews and *the criminal element* would soon escalate in the fashion of the Crown Heights Riot. He thought the best solution to this problem was armed intimidation.

Zalmon was a defender of Greer's patrol. The real low-rent kind, a comments-section warrior—the kind of guy who gets noticed only in small local contexts like this one. But after the Mirlis case was filed, Zalmon got nervous. He stopped attending the Greer shul for a little while. That didn't last long.

Recently, the Undertaker informed me, Reb Zalmon—who was not a Rabbi—had not only reappeared at the Greer synagogue, but been accorded religious honors reserved for those who had achieved their rabbinical certification. On my blog, I told the story. I implied that Reb Zalmon was getting paid off by the Greers to stay loyal—paid off in prestige and, probably, cash in the bargain. The way that I implied it was that I said it.

I urged the community to exorcise itself of the malign influence embodied in the person of Reb Zalmon. This was no innocent wingnut, no slack-jawed rube whose excesses had simply to be tolerated. Zalmon was complicit, now, in Greer's crimes. Just like the former Rabbi of the Westville Synagogue, who had written a character letter in his support to the court. Just like the countless local community leaders who were too afraid to speak up against Greer in the press.

It's like I said. Pride and fear make a nasty cocktail. It's not easy to persuade Jews—frightened, cautious Jews—to stand up against their own leaders. It wasn't so hard for me. I was on the outs whatever I did.

Well, the Goat traced the story to its source. The Undertaker. I had miscalculated. The Goat, apparently, felt that setting an example in this matter was a more important interest than protecting one of his streams of rental income. He didn't wait for the Undertaker's lease to run out. He took him to eviction court, claiming that the Undertaker was running a business out of his basement in violation of his lease terms.

I went to court myself to cover the proceedings. The Undertaker had started to look like his nickname. Greer himself didn't show up for the hearing. More and more he'd taken to lurking in his Compound on Elm Street. It had become a lot more difficult to get an audience with the Goat, to get a chance to talk to the wise man. Becoming a publicly accused rapist had made him even more important than he had been before.

Instead, Greer dispatched a couple of his deputies to the Undertaker's hearing. Conspicuously absent was one Mark Winik, the Goat's marshal. Winik had threatened to jump me the week before, at a bris. The Goat's guys were getting less and less confident. More and more they seemed ready to resort to violence at a moment's notice. Not very Jewish of them, if you ask me.

There was nothing I could do to help out the Undertaker. The Goat had gone through this routine a thousand times before. A slumlord pedophile with a Yale Law degree can be a difficult person to deal with. Everything about him, since his teenage years, has taught him how to behave with more quickness and brutality than the other guy.

The Undertaker lost his home. Greer had made his point. I would have to be more careful, going forward, to protect my sources.

And when possible, I shouldn't use any sources at all. When possible, I should get close to Greer myself. Like the fat guy tells Michael Corleone in the first Godfather. You get close. And you make a lot of fucking noise.

The Civil Case

The civil case against the Goat was organized by a local New Haven attorney, a real bigshot—not a Jew—by the name of Ponvert. Ponvert had been involved in a few very high-profile cases in his time. His business tended to be multi-million dollar cases, which this one was. Greer was a very powerful and very wealthy man. Mirlis was going after him for a sum that would bankrupt the state of Louisiana.

What Mirlis wanted—or, at least, what Ponvert helped him to want, showed him it was possible to want—was a sixty-five-million-dollar payout. For irreparable harm to the psyche of a child, who can say if this is high or low. Certainly, though, if Greer had the money, nobody could dispute that he didn't deserve to keep it. On the contrary—he deserved much worse than to pay out sixty-five-million dollars. But we live in a civilized time, and Greer was confronted not by bike chains but the civil court.

By this time, I'd started calling Greer the Goat in print. In law school I'd learned the way a name plays tricks on people. You humanize your friends; you dehumanize your opponent. Don't call your client *the defendant*, even if that's what he is. He's Mr. Rogers, Mr. Chips. And, well, in court you don't call

people goats, no matter what side you're on, or they are. But prison filled in for me some of what I didn't pick up in law school. In prison, to call somebody a goat was really not a terrible insult, all things considered.

I saw myself as air support. Ponvert was on the ground, in the trenches, in a way that I could not be. A yarmulke-wearing Jew may have been just the thing, just the image to make the arguments in this case, but a yarmulke-wearing Jew who'd earned his semichah at Otisville was another matter. Much as I would have loved to be the one to crush the wormy Greer beneath my heel, that honor fell to another, one not even of the tribe. But I did what I could.

As Larry Noodles, I castigated the hypocrites, the bigshots, the liars, the sleazes, the thugs who, placed as they were in high and dignified positions in the local Jewish community, did not want to risk their institutional standing by helping to excommunicate the Goat. Not that excommunication, in the Jewish context, is such a simple enterprise. If I remember correctly, it takes three hundred rams' horns, among other materials. So excommunication, maybe, would be too much.

But you didn't hear a word from these guys, guys who'd stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Greer for years. The former rabbi of a prominent New Haven synagogue, Westville, wrote a letter in support of Greer's character to the court. Of course ordinary Jews, the congregants at Westville and elsewhere, found this behavior reprehensible. Or they would have found it reprehensible if any had bothered to tell them it was going on. Larry Noodles, on the case.

And it was also my blog that first broached the possibility of going after Greer's non-profits. I made the point that there were millions of dollars locked away in those props, that gallery of masks on which Greer relied in his project to counterfeit a decent Jewish life. About a month later, Ponvert added those non-profits to the civil case. Maybe a coincidence; maybe my small contribution. Ponvert certainly isn't saying.

But I was known in the court. Infamous, famous, whatever. Conspicuous in my yarmulke, obviously a local, and, after a while, obviously the local ex-con with the inflammatory blog. The jurors knew who I was. It's the judge's job to tell the jury not to look any of the principals up on the internet. But this is like telling teenage boys not to look up what, well, teenage boys want to look up on the internet. It's a gesture towards propriety. Nobody thinks the injunction will actually be obeyed. And the jurors didn't even pretend not to know who I was. One even smiled and winked at me on a break from court proceedings.

Therefore I knew I had it in my hands to shape opinion somewhat. This I considered a major responsibility. Not even in Otisville had my blog meant so much to me. There, it was a message to the world, asking only that they hear me as a human being, know that I remained alive, a complicated spirit with experiences and perceptions no less nuanced and fascinating for their enclosure within the federal camp. Now, however, I wanted them to *change* something. Now I wanted them to send a man to the poorhouse—if only as a precursor to the Big House.

I had my work cut out for me. In a case like this, to put something compelling, something unavoidably true together is damn-near impossible. It had been years since the abuse, and no physical evidence was possible. People get squeamish in its absence. Besides, Avi Hack, on whose testimony the whole thing hinged, kept dodging subpoenas. He never turned up to court in person but, instead, submitted a deposition on videotape from Rhode Island.

A tape is never as strong as a live testimony, and besides, the judge didn't even allow the whole thing to be shown. I posted what Ponvert was forced to omit on my blog. Maybe some of the jurors saw it. Maybe it helped give them a bigger picture. But they certainly didn't all find Hack compelling. During deliberations they asked for his deposition tape to be played back. This is never a good sign. Jurors don't ask to review evidence that way if they were persuaded by it the first time around.

Besides Hack's testimony, there was that of Mirlis himself, his wife, and a psychologist who had treated Mirlis for PTSD. Mirlis' testimony was chilly, unconvincing. To be convincing is not necessarily a matter of telling the truth. Even the truth sometimes requires drama, animation, or it will be mistaken for a forgery of itself. This was Mirlis' problem. Like a lot of people who have suffered, he found the idea that someone could hear of his suffering and doubt it totally amazing. Very often this is our first instinct when confronted by suffering. Otherwise, it threatens to crowd from our minds our own.

So Mirlis didn't cry. Point one against him. Then his wife spoke. She wasn't very good either. These crimes, too hideous to picture, had long ago become a part of her domestic life with her husband. She knew what had been done to him. She knew how it had changed him—she *must have*. But, like Mirlis himself, it seemed, she had found it necessary to demote the significance of those acts in her imagination in order to make room for herself to live. Mirlis and his wife had robbed this thing of its power in order to make it possible to wake up in the morning. Now, when they needed to access the fire of indignity again, they couldn't. They were too well disciplined, too much the master and mistress of their own emotions.

The psychologist spoke well. Mirlis clearly suffered from PTSD, she explained. A set of extramarital dalliances at a massage parlor were explained away expertly by the expert witness as a function of that condition.

The case was good, but not airtight. And the Goat's attorneys sensed weakness as soon as the jury requested to review Avi Hack's deposition. They started doing cartwheels. One day, towards the end of deliberations, I waited for Greer and his attorney, David Grudberg, outside the court. I had a video camera with me. I followed them down the street as they left for the day, asking questions. David split, and I stuck with the Goat. It was like I was more loyal to him than his own counsel! Strangely, the Goat had nothing to say to me.

You can still find the video on my blog, if you go looking for it.

Then Greer's lawyers tried to get me kicked out of court. One of them waved an unsigned restraining order in the judge's face, hoping he wouldn't take too close a look at the document. This was elementary school, didn't-do-the-reading level stuff. I was not, of course, tossed out on account of that particular incomplete document.

William Ward and Amanda Nugent, two more of Greer's attorneys, were the ones who looked straight at me in the pews and grinned when the jury began digging deeper and deeper into Avi's testimony. Why hadn't he bothered to show up, if what he said was true? Why had he continued his close association with the Greer family so long? Why had he accepted such abundant gifts, both in cash and property, from his abuser? Perhaps, if Avi had been in the courtroom, he would've been the one to receive Ward's and Nugent's spitefully appraising glares. But I was the emissary of the enemy, or anyway one of them.

Ward and Nugent didn't look at me at all, however, when the jury returned from deliberations with a verdict.

Rabbi Daniel Greer, also known as the Goat, was to pay ten million dollars in damages to Eli Mirlis, and five million dollars in attorney fees.

Everyone knew what that meant. After the civil case, there was sure to be a criminal one. And with a civil defeat on the books, Greer was probably going to end up going away to prison. And child molesters in prison have worse problems even than bloggers. Child molesters in prison are punished, Dante-style.

Greer looked bad. Real bad. For a second, he looked like Rabbi Daniel Greer might look—Rabbi Daniel Greer, with all that he had done—he looked like Rabbi Daniel Greer might look if he believed in God.

Interlude

At some point Dov stopped davening at his dad's shul. He would sit in the back, at a table next to the back door. He would pace back and forth during davening but rarely looked at his siddur. He spent a good part of the day preparing for the daily daf, a reading from the Talmud, which he would deliver with his father and ezi in attendance. It always ended with the Goat berating his son for getting some minor point, some minor detail wrong. In Otisville, I remember, Rabbi Pinter would daven very early in the morning and during the minyan would just stand there and not daven, back when he thought services were being led by a reprobate. In the mornings, Dov walked around with his coffee, just like the Goat, wearing suit and tie, trying to look busy and important. His overgrown hair a mess. His beard a nest. After he left the compound and got jobs elsewhere, he gained weight, he got color in his face, he trimmed his beard and his hair. He didn't look like the son of an eccentric millionaire genius anymore.

Four days after the Goat was charged by the court, Dov Greer lost the vote to head the congregation of Young Israel in New Haven, Connecticut.

And now there was a moment of peace. Between the humiliation of the civil trial, and the inevitable humiliation of the criminal trial to come, the Goat found a little bit of time to try and settle scores. One of his vendettas was the one he now had against Larry Noodles, an as-of-late law-abiding citizen Jew of the New Haven area. The Goat, Rabbi Daniel Greer, wasn't sure he could save his reputation. But, he thought, at *least*—at *least* he could ruin somebody's week. Evil, without power, becomes pathetic. Think of David Duke. Is there anything sadder than this southern Yenta trying to pull a white ethnonationalism together on the internet in the twenty-first century?

Greer, having recently received a lesson in the power of the civil court, brought a case of defamation against me. In the case he alleged that “on or about April 14, 2016, the defendant falsely reported that a claim of sexual molestation against Rabbi Greer recently settled in the millions of dollars and described said settlement as ‘hush money’... this allegation made by the defendant was false and the defendant made the allegation knowing it were false and made the allegation with the intention of causing harm and damage to the plaintiff’s reputation as well as his career... the defendant knew or should have known that the statement was damaging and false... as a result of the defendant’s actions the plaintiff’s reputation was harmed... the plaintiff suffered emotional pain and suffering...the plaintiff is charging general damages for the harm caused to his reputation and for the humiliation and mental suffering the libel and slanderous comments have and are continuing to cause him...”

I thought it was interesting that the Goat didn't bother claiming *not* to be a child-molesting psychopath. If I had been accused of being a child-molesting psychopath, I would take special care to ensure that people knew I wasn't. Probably, if I couldn't persuade people that I wasn't, I would kill myself. Better to be dead than falsely accused of sexual abuse of children. Greer didn't kill himself. Instead, he contacted his lawyers, and he flexed the only muscle he had left.

Of course, the case went nowhere. I had had worse people after me than the Goat. Well, not *worse* people—find me a worse one, I dare you—but scarier people. The Ukrainians and the Russians in prison, they didn't mind killing people.

The Goat, on the other hand, would certainly hesitate to have somebody whacked. Whacking carries a life sentence, bubbeleh. The Goat preferred to bestow such sentences on others.

The Criminal Case

Jury selection. Since a certain well-known murder case involving a Jewish waiter, a white trophy wife, and a Black football player—not the set-up to a joke, sadly—the sophistication with which jury selection can be approached when conditions call for it has been familiar even to the general public. Most of the time, it is best for the general public not to be aware of anything. Especially anything important, like the mechanisms of jury selection in our criminal justice system. Now that most Americans *are* aware of the caution and meticulousness with which the average jury is assembled, it is harder and harder to persuade ordinary people that there exists the fantastic entity called *a jury of one's peers*. In fact, a jury attracts a very specific kind of person.

This is the kind of person without racial, ethnic, religious, national, or sexual prejudices—either that or racial, ethnic, religious, national or sexual prejudices that are consented to both by the prosecution and the defense. In America, this means one of three things:

1. The racial, ethnic, religious, national, or sexual prejudices of the juror must be recognized consciously by the juror, and therefore concealed. This selects for especially racist people.
2. The racial, ethnic, religious, national, or sexual prejudices of the juror must not be recognized by the juror, who presents him or herself honestly as the possessor of only the most generous impulses towards his or her fellow man or woman. This selects for especially stupid people.
3. The juror must find his or her own time to be of sufficiently little value not to bother *pretending* to have racial, ethnic, religious, national, or sexual prejudices in order to avoid a quite possibly long and exceedingly boring ordeal. This selects for do-gooders, busybodies, gossips, and the clinically dysthymic.

Or, sometimes, a combination of some of the above.

In the trial of Rabbi Daniel Greer, it was first of all necessary to ensure that any jurors infected with the bacillus of antisemitism could shut up about it when called upon to do so. The truth is that Americans, generally speaking, are not very antisemitic. They do not dislike Jews per se.

Most of them do, however, dislike religious Jews. This is not because they believe that religious Jews, unlike other Jews, are in on the world-bestridding conspiracy. It is because religious Jews wear funny hats. These funny hats are inexplicable to the average gentile. They breed suspicion. And in a town like New Haven, where there are many influential Jews and many visibly religious Jews, uncharitable assumptions concerning them are not terribly unusual. We are not in 1890s Ukraine. But neither are we the most popular community in the tristate area.

I, Larry Noodles, served the role of model Jew for the jury in the criminal case against Rabbi Daniel Greer. I was the one picked out by the attorney's shaking finger as he asked his jurors, hands

folded in their laps like children, whether they could control any animus they might feel towards members of the Chosen People over the course of the trial. Only when the jurors had agreed to restrict their attention to the facts of the case, and not to notice that the defendant was a white-bearded Pharisee, were proceedings set in motion.

The state had waited nine months to arrest the Goat. The reason was simple: if there was already a civil judgment against him, as there now was, a conviction was nearly guaranteed. Had there been no civil judgment, it's possible they never would have bothered with him. And if the Goat had just paid off the Mirlis'—given them the 1.5 million they asked for before going to court—he could've avoided everything. But the Goat didn't believe that anybody could take him down. A lawyer, a teacher, a clergyman, a former Wall Street personality. He had every reason to believe that he was too smart and too well-connected ever to be exposed as the serial rapist of a child. Somehow the Goat believed that he was *so* smart, *so* powerful, *so* rich that, once someone had accused him of rape, it would be possible to become again the voice of ancient authority he had once been. The fact that the Goat believed this should have been a major plank in his defense, as it demonstrated beyond any reasonable doubt that whatever kind of mind he was of, it wasn't the sound variety.

Besides, the Goat felt he'd done enough for his victims already. Certainly he was giving them money over the years. Mirlis, who had come from a family of poor and desperate people, had enough cash coming in to purchase several nursing homes and populate them with beardless carbon copies of the Goat. The Hack family had remained close to the Greer bosom, accruing wealth, influence, power.

And the Goat believed that those boys were in love with him.

So that now, facing a criminal court, facing the no-less-rigorous penalties of secular law, the Goat seemed as shocked as distressed. Confused, even. He looked like a man in a dream, a man who has suddenly discovered that he has no clothes. He looked guilty.

I did my part for the criminal case against the Goat. Rafi, another of the Goat's victims, had been in the Goat School at the same time as my son. When everything started to come out, I remembered some odd things about Rafi. I remembered that the Goat liked to have private time with Rafi. I remembered that Rafi had been pulled out of the Goat School in the middle of the year. I remembered that nobody knew why.

At the time of the trial, Rafi was in Israel. He didn't want to testify against his old headmaster. Who would? Who would want to stand in front of a room of strangers and describe in detail the vilest events of one's life—and to do it under conditions of doubt, to do it when a cross-examining attorney might try and show you up for an opportunist, a liar?

But I begged Rafi to turn up. I remembered the civil trial. I remembered the way that Mirlis' too-chilly testimony, that Avi Hack's avoidance of the public gaze had helped the Goat. I knew the State needed everything it could get its hands on. Sometimes the State can make do with very little—when it's going after somebody for an extremely serious crime, like mortgage fraud, it doesn't take that much to put somebody away. But when the crime is relatively mild, such as child rape, the State often has a harder time. It needs the assistance of civically-minded citizens. Without such assistance, it'll nail only the *most* dangerous criminals, and leave us to fend for ourselves against the rest.

I ended up offering to lodge Rafi for the duration of the trial. Though he didn't take me up on my offer—he claimed to stay with a friend at Yale, though I suspect he had no such friend and may have been too scared to stay in the city—he did finally oblige me.

Rafi was a wild man. He had his own dark history. So many of the Goat's victims, it seemed, did. The annihilation of their faith in anything, their sense of a world governed by nothing but charisma, cash, and power led them into, well, iniquity. Rafi had been accused of rape in a case I knew very little about; he'd been acquitted, but acquittal rates in rape cases are higher, one suspects, than the true rate of innocence. Mirlis, too, had been involved in some shady activities. A pharmaceuticals-related financial

scam, again somewhat fuzzy, never fully delineated in the way such scams are when they're uncovered by the State.

It didn't take long to get a conviction. The defense claimed that Mirlis was after Greer's money. This didn't hold much sway with the jury, which knew he'd already been awarded a hefty amount in the civil case—a hefty amount that Greer was yet to pay. And by now, Greer was well-known in New Haven. Jury selection may be a fine instrument, but it cannot always produce exactly the desired results. When it comes to somebody like Rabbi Daniel Greer, you simply cannot avoid having a prior opinion. Generally, the prior opinion shared by most of the trial's participants was that Greer was a loathsome stain on society, lower than a worm, and it was very difficult for any serious person—or even any unserious person—to take issue with that assessment.

One who did was a certain Alan Dershowitz. Alan Dershowitz, who knew Greer from way back, was offended by the treatment of Rabbi Greer. Alan Dershowitz, who flew on Jeffrey Epstein's plane several times, felt that Rabbi Greer was being treated unfairly. During sentencing deliberations, Dershowitz submitted a letter to the judge in the Greer case in which he worried that antisemitism might be animating some courtroom discussion. Dershowitz is very concerned about protecting the reputations of Jews, especially Good Jews, like Rabbi Greer and Benjamin Netanyahu—not Bad Jews, like Noam Chomsky or Norman Finkelstein. Dershowitz and the Goat had gone to Yale Law School together. Both of them were high achievers, serious people deserving of high estimation.

Dershowitz's letter of support did not prevent the Goat from having a monitoring bracelet clapped onto his ankle. It was determined that the Goat was a flight risk. Who wouldn't be, when he'd been convicted of four counts of risk of injury to a minor—each one carrying a possible sentence of twenty years? It was possible that the Goat would be spending the remainder of his days in prison.

Even though it was an electronic device, the Goat permitted himself to use the anklet on Shabbos. If it were deactivated, the New Haven police would be alerted automatically. The Goat had had enough

embarrassment, and he didn't need to get tackled in the middle of Shabbos services on top of everything else he had to deal with lately.

The State messed up badly, of course. They had plenty of evidence to go after the Goat on assault charges on top of the felonies they did convict on, but the State Attorney, known to suffer from ADHD, filed those charges under the wrong statute. Why a case of this importance was handed to an attorney known to struggle with organization—an attorney who, when working on the most significant case of her life, would still head home every day at exactly 5 to feed her dog—will forever be unknown to me. Maybe the State didn't mind fumbling this one. After all, the boys who got raped were themselves little Orthodox Jews. Maybe this was a matter where the State figured that the Jews had better sort things out amongst themselves.

Ironic, then, that at the moment the Goat's sentence was read—twenty years in prison—he turned to his wife, and mouthed, “*Antisemite.*”

Justice

Tzedek, tzedek tirdof, it says in the Torah: Justice, justice shall you pursue.

For Daniel Greer, can there be justice?

When the huckstering preacher Jerry Falwell died, during the Bush years, the then-famous polemicist Christopher Hitchens remarked that it was a shame there was no Hell for Falwell to go to.

The Jews are famous for being, at least, skeptical of Hell. Certainly eternal damnation is not a part of the Jewish religion. It has been remarked that in Judaism, Heaven and Hell are the same place. The afterlife is a garden where one spends out one's days studying Torah in the presence of Hashem. For the righteous, this is Heaven; for the wicked...

Somehow this isn't good enough.

But then, lakes of boiling pitch, sunburned line-cooks rotisserieing human beings, Satan with his throbbing phallus correcting the inequities introduced into the cosmos by those who could not keep their hands to themselves—all this has an inelegance, and a permanence that makes it cease to be punishment. To be burned in Hell forever, surely, means to get used to it. I learned in prison that a man adjusts to anything. And *I* didn't even have a hundred thousand years to work with.

What are we trying to do with evil? What are we trying to do about it? America incinerated Ted Bundy. He was strapped to a chair, then had an electrical current run through him until his flesh was cooked. Some feel that we could not have done otherwise. Bundy raped and murdered his way across the country, seemed to possess no capacity for remorse, seemed as much the incarnation of evil as anyone else who had ever lived. So his body had to be annihilated. *He* had to be annihilated. We could not tolerate the idea that he could be just as alive as we are.

And Jeffrey Dahmer, he didn't get the same sentence. But when he was bludgeoned to death in prison, pretty much everybody seemed to agree that the crime, as brutal as it was, couldn't have been

done to a nicer guy. Mussolini hanging upside down by a dusty road in Italy. Epstein strangled to death in his cell by a former colleague. Eichmann scattered at sea.

Are we happy? And if not, why not? Would we be happier in a world crowded with these thugs and perverts and cold-blooded murderers?

The truth is that murder is the worst thing we can think of. It is. And there are certain human beings who seem to forfeit their right to be called by the name of human being, and we imagine that our rage, our wish for justice will be consummated if their bodies are destroyed, if they're dead, if they can never hurt anybody ever again...

But I propose that this is not what we really want. This is just our clumsy, human way of trying to get the thing we're really after.

What we really want—the only thing we really want—is to speak the truth in the killer's, rapist's, dictator's ear. What we really want is to make him know—and so often, when it comes to killers and rapists, it *is* a him—what we really want is to make him know what he is. What he did. And what what he did makes him.

If evil men had open ears—if anybody did—sentencing would be a very different exercise. We would not announce the harm we intend to do to the defendant's body in punishment, in correction of his crimes. We would only read those crimes, aloud, in detail. We would allow the defendant, the killer, the rapist, to drink in his own deeds in language as naked of rationalization or extenuation as the language of the law, at the heights of its poetry, has the power to be. If evil were not a part of the human being in which it lingers—if it took hold of him, and then departed when it was finished—this would be the most fitting punishment it was possible to imagine. But evil men are not that way.

Sometimes they are remorseless, and sometimes they are remorseful. It doesn't really matter one way or another. What they are not—what none of them are, or ever will be—is capable of looking upon themselves as if from the outside.

What we want is to show evil its own face. But evil cannot see its own face. Evil cannot see anyone else's, either. Evil is visionary. It is the creative impulse, unbounded totally. Evil wants, and evil ignores what already is in the aim of becoming what it wants to be.

The closest we can come, then, to doing justice is to look evil in the face ourselves. It is good that Daniel Greer was tossed in prison. It would've been even better if they'd roughed him up a little bit first. But you and I both know that Daniel Greer's crimes are a message from the bleakest and most shadowy regions of the human psyche. This is not a message it is possible to ignore. This is a message that, if ignored, destroys. It isn't going anywhere. It is I WANT unburdened either by I AM or YOU ARE.

When the Einsatzgruppen, Hitler's mobile killing squads, first set out across Europe, the Nazis did not believe that ordinary men, ordinary soldiers would go along readily with the orders that had been handed down to them. They realized that too strong a hand with the agents of what would later be known as the Holocaust risked triggering revolt against the officer class and its political guarantors. So they instated a rule. A simple rule: anyone serving in the Einsatzgruppen, should he decide that conscience prevented him from participating in the massacres, had only to *ask to be excused*, and he would be. There was no penalty for failing to comply with orders. No penalty except, perhaps, mild embarrassment. Maybe the boys would rib you about being a pussy when you got back to the beerhouse.

Almost nobody took this option.

Greer, Free

And justice always is deferred a little bit further. Does it wither like a raisin in the sun? Maybe. Human beings in the sun, however, do not wither. They glow: with life.

When Hashem sent a mackah, a plague upon humanity, the Coronavirus pandemic, He spared one among his Chosen people. The truth is that the Orthodox community was ravaged by this plague. It was like nothing since the disease that wiped out the students of Rav Shimon bar Yochai. Good chasidim were dropping dead in Crown Heights by the dozens.

The Goat, however, received special dispensation from the State to be released from prison at the time of the pandemic. He was considered to be at high risk for infection. It is possible that the influence of Alan Dershowitz had something to do with the State's uncharacteristic generosity in this instance.

The COVID pandemic, which destroyed so many human beings, human beings today numbered in the millions, was the Goat's first benison in years. The Goat was out in the sun. Human beings do not wither in the sun. They glow. With life—they glow!

The Greer slaughterhouse, the old garage in the Goat's complex that had been transformed by him into a barn, now sheltered one more animal. But I had been banned from the Goat complex. I was forbidden to go see the Maggid of Goatdom because of my bad behavior.

He listened to Mendelssohn and Gershwin. He read the poems of Heine and Bialik. The Goat resumed the life of pious decency that Eliyahu Mirlis and his gang of miscreants had interrupted. Picture the Goat stretched on a lawn chair, his wispy and shallow chest open to the fingers of the chilly New England wind, his beard which reaches almost to his navel, his austere face, his high, almost Protestant forehead, his horny feet protruding, oh, let your lamp affix its beam...

And picture me, too, Larry Noodles. This is the picture I want to leave you with, reader. Picture me, Larry Noodles, a man balanced on three milk crates taped together with duct tape, bearing aloft, over

the fence of the Greer compound, a camera that looks like a periscope, peeking over the fence into the territory forever forbidden to me, something like Moses looking over the Jordan, something like Gatsby looking at the green light, only what it is, what I cannot have, what I can never have, is the fancy-freedom in evil, the indulgence in wickedness, the incredible power—that has something to do with money—that permits the cloven-hoofed to loaf at their ease. Picture me with the camera not because I was there but because I have learned that in America in the twenty-first century there is no disturbing that ease. I have learned that wickedness is deeply rooted, that it will not be driven out by human beings, and that what is left to us is only to record it, to look on it, to show it with our gazes that it is hideous, and hope for a dilatory moment, a long moment the length of two-or-three breaths, during which the image fixed blackly in our pupils will recognize itself...

But neither human hand nor eye will turn that mirror.

Moshiach now! Moshiach now! Moshiach now!