

Chapter One → (November, 1979)

The old *frummer* took his life on Monday, using the engraved leather belt given to him by Burt Lancaster thirty years earlier. This was as a reward for his virtuous deeds during Israel's War for Independence.

Khaveyrim, always, Burt, the engraving read on the belt's cracked exterior just underneath the third hole worn by use into the shape of an Arab baby's scream. This *frummer* had, it seemed, wrested a lot of land from Palestine's indigenous population in the 1940's, mostly through what might be called terroristic acts. His specialty was setting farm houses on fire when their owners were still inside them. Also he used to plant bombs in the croquet mallets at the British consulate and wait for their discovery at the most inopportune moments. He used to dream up all manner of improvised devices that went bang in the night suddenly. These would create a shrapnel cloud for all to behold thereafter.

The leather belt was used as a noose suspended from a painted over hook in his room's ceiling that none of the *frummer's* present-day caretakers, the Taubs of Southfield, Michigan, had bothered removing, believing it too high for an aged, depressed *frummer* to manipulate into something especially dangerous.

"The yid had *batzim*, you gotta admit," Jeff Taub, age twelve, and the old man's grand-nephew said to all those assembled around the game of *Clue* ongoing in the basement rec room while shiva was sat upstairs. According to Jeff, a leather belt had made a less than ideal noose because of the material's give. Quite likely, he would have to have hung himself several times in order to do the deed properly. A truly courageous act it would have been if he had known what he was getting himself into. Maybe he was just desperate to end it as quickly as he might. He didn't give a damn about what it felt like. He could absorb pain in enormous amounts just as he had throughout his life.

Likely he would have had to struggle back onto the wooden chair that had been gently (and wisely) displaced just to the side of him so that he might try again. He would have had several cracked vertebrae and a bruised trachea. It was obviously an inefficient way to die to say the least. And it might not have worked at all.

This wasn't a suicide initiated by a man averse to hard work, obviously. In a way, such a hanging was far worse than blowing your own head off with a rifle. And maybe this was known by the *frummer* and this was why he had done it this way. He had a need for suffering unto death, that was to say. For him, it would have seemed entirely *goyishe*-decadent for his suicide to have ended within the blink of an eye.

It was the Taubs' Panamanian cleaning lady, Fernanda "Cha-Cha" Maddox, who had discovered the body two days later when her syncopated knock to enter his room went unanswered.

"The smells and the absences you get used to," Jeff said to his *Clue* partners by way of an explanation as to why nobody had checked into their house guest's well-being days after he had missed his first meal. Not a lot of meat on that zealot's bones and this apparently had helped to keep the death fragrance down slightly. More so was the fact that nobody in the house gave a shit whether he lived or died. One tended to blank out the sense data that was irrelevant to what one thought most important. His passing in fact was a relief to the Taubs. But nobody had the courage to admit that this was so. Even in death Reznik was

an intimidating presence. It would be decades likely before they would talk about him frankly amongst themselves.

A Holocaust survivor born into the once-thriving Jewish quarter of Lodz, so it was that a type of obligation was needed to be fulfilled by the Taubs regarding the old man's lodging and care. By the looks of him when he had arrived at their doorstep in the winter of 1974 it wouldn't have taken long. They had assumed it was a six month proposition at most. They assumed that their task would be along the lines of caring for a sickly dog.

He had been living on the street years prior to this in Jerusalem in the Via Dolorosa begging spare change from Christian tourists. Alienated even from his own Lubavitcher enclave, so this former Israeli hero had become a type of embarrassment for Israel of late and he needed to be dealt with.

The old *frummer* had a name, Yacob Reznik. But Jeff Taub had never been in his presence when anybody addressed him by it.

"We didn't call him anything," Jeff said when asked by one of the other players about whether or not there was an Anglicized "Jacob" used as an appellation or maybe—like so many others of these hyper-orthodox away from their own people—they insisted on the term *rebbe*. To Jeff Taub, Yacob Reznik was more or less an inanimate object like one of those buried sprinkler heads in one of this pre-planned subdivision's small back yards. He didn't call Yacob anything personally as it seemed over-familiar to do so. *Goyim* had pet names for their cars and trucks and this aspect of mainstream American life Jeff couldn't get behind hardly. Christian-Americans needed to have more appropriate receptacles for their overflowing affections altogether. Such as adopting abused animals or tending to the dying at the local hospice. At least stop with the deer hunting, *goyim*. Bambi never did anything to you. Bambi never so much as uttered a mendacious word against you or yours in his circumscribed, cervine life.

The *frummer* didn't answer to a proper name, more to the point, because proper names were societal devices used to indicate where one person ended and another person began.

"He had a passport, he traveled freely," Jeff explained to all those gathered around the family's rec room's hexagonal table, waiting for the mechanistic whodunit's resolution. "But in his heart of hearts, I think he was dead to the world. Just as those in his immediate circle became dead to him over time. Because he was so self-referential and didn't seem to know you were there. He wanted to drift, so people let him drift. He seemed happier that way. That way he seemed somebody in the know."

Not really a man blessed with especially deep spiritual experience despite all the Hassidic trappings and the incessant praying that sometimes mimicked an epileptic seizure in the mixture of swaying and close-eyed mumbling of a particular entreaty to the universe's solitary master, whose ears (so it was rumored) recorded even the faintest utterance perfectly as if the words were anticipated all along, Yacob seemed to have assumed the trappings of the ultra-orthodox as a matter of spite, but to exactly whom the spite was directed was a matter of intrigue for the Taubs.

"He hated ordinary Jews, we always thought, more than he hated the Nazis," Jeff told his sixth grade friends. Now in the manner of a Talmudic scholar's divination, an absolute truth was being laid bare, surmised for the ages and above reproach. *Colonel Mustard did it in the Conservatory with a Candlestick*. Well, this was unfortunate for all parties concerned, not least of which being Colonel Mustard. A war veteran sick of war, he would not have in ordinary circumstances hurt a fly. But jealousy pushed him into it. Somebody was fucking somebody else on the sly at which point a death was warranted. The Colonel must have been given an ultimatum at which point it was far too late to stop. It wasn't his fault in a way. In a very real way he was a victim of circumstance.

To Yacob, the Hasidic garb was a clown costume, and once or twice at dinner he was overheard saying exactly this in English reasonably well formed.

"They sent him to Auschwitz," Jeff told all assembled, "and, after surviving, he wanted to give the Nazis something to grow mournful over. He wanted to become their nightmare vision of a Jew so undistracted by Aryan superiority that he would barely would look up from his prayer book as the goose-

stepping commenced in his general direction. Very complex dynamic to the man. And I think what he hated most in his new life here and in Israel was the lack of somebody to hate properly. The Palestinians he never saw as worthy of such passion. It was the Nazis, God, and the Diaspora Jews in that order. But sometimes the order was mixed up.”

For years a commando in Moshe Dayan’s famous unit, Yacob Reznik didn’t convert—if that’s what you wanted to call it—until 1955 when a temporary lull in hostilities had been reached. It seemed Reznik wanted to pick a fight with a more worthy enemy at once.

The problem with being Israel’s most indefatigable *frummer*, however, was that, given time and a corresponding lack of interpersonal skill, even fellow Chabad members will begin to hit on various anti-Semitic tropes when discussing your penurious manner, your contempt for honest work, your hostility toward children regardless of their parents’ affiliation, and, worst of all, your heretical views of Torah. According to Yacob Reznik, God never meant to stay Abraham’s hand while on Mt. Moriah. Instead he counseled him to strike Isaac obtusely so as to create a wound that suppurated and festered for days.

“You are giving us pause with such scholarship as this,” the Jerusalem congregation’s head, Rebbe Mendel Freyer, told Yacob Reznik when in the fall of 1959 a bit of tough love seemed warranted. Also noting Reznik’s childless second marriage to a woman’s whose name both he and Yacob constantly forgot, his demonstrable sullenness while in the company of a senior scholar, and his rumored drinking habit, so it was decided that a type of unofficial separation from the Lubavitcher community at large was required of Yacob if only as a temporary fix for an entrenched problem. It was a mutual parting of the ways but when what they saw as the man’s intransigence became too great to bear for the community, a greater exile altogether was sought for Yacob Reznik in America. His stare of late had grown too cold for ordinary people not to take offense at. Nobody was being physically attacked, but being in Reznik’s silent presence was an assaultive experience by itself. His religiosity was the sort of deep abyss wherein if one stared into it continuously the eye would imagine bright colors as recompense. The mendacity that others attributed to Yacob was likely largely fictitious. Merely, he was simply devoid of either social grace or the ability to compromise. He didn’t really love God in that mystical way wherein joy would enter a seeker’s heart and bubble over to others. He was dead inside, so to speak. But this should in no way be considered a character flaw.

The contempt for his creator seemed so iron-clad in Yacob as to solidify into a life-long obsession for him. This was the same emotion that a stalker felt for a prospective victim.

“I think he died long ago, back in Auschwitz,” was how the brilliant sixth grader Jeff Taub put it to all assembled about his deceased great uncle even as he was putting the game pieces away. So the thing about *Clue* was that once the mystery was revealed, the game seemed to lose its attractiveness as a diversion. “I don’t think in reality this yid hanging himself was in his mind a very big deal,” Jeff said. “It was a minor detail to attend to. I don’t think he missed living very much at all.”

With one eye trained on the Eternal at all times, likely to Yacob death seemed a minor lifestyle adjustment rather than oblivion itself. Jeff thought his great uncle would have been disappointed if he had flown straight to heaven. He was girded for the torments of Gehinnom, rather. He was preparing for it in a way most of his adult life, ever since the walls ascended around the Lodz ghetto in the spring of 1940. It would have seemed a logical outcome in light of all of God’s previous manipulations. There would be no reward visited upon the pious, only more punishment. And so the effect would be to look back on one’s previous existence and consider the blessings therein. This, too, likely God had in mind. He had no intention whatsoever of allowing an ordinary man to let go ever and simply enjoy.

The bad news for Jeff Taub was that in accordance with Jewish Law there were four more days of shiva after this to be sat. Limited TV that meant. But the good news was that this gave Jeff all that time to root around in Yacob Reznik’s personal effects and divine his mystery prior to them being spirited away.

“He had a gun up there from his army days, I’m positive,” Jeff told all those assembled downstairs. This was his little brother Jon and a cousin whose name he constantly forgot as well as David Katz, a Jewish

acquaintance from school who merely happened to live nearby. Well, surely given a man of Reznik's ferocious nature, and despite his religious adherence, this gun was always loaded and was presently on prominent display in his tiny attic room. The truth was Jeff had been too chicken to enter there by himself when Yacob was alive. And so you now see the occurrence of the shiva as a blessing.

Always on such occasions the Taubs would have kids over, but held at an arm's length as it was felt that during the shiva the children and adults needed to be segregated. None of the crying and cloth-tearing and ritual asserted with a true Hassidic sitting was present in this affair. The Taubs belonged—and that word should be used loosely—to a Reformed congregation in West Bloomfield, Michigan. Except for the choice of wine and the gefilte fish, this affair would seem no different than one of those dry patrician gatherings Jeff was reading about lately in the dog-eared *Collected Stories of John Cheever* that he carried around with him everywhere nowadays, wherein silence dominated its war with expressiveness utterly and sentiment was nowhere to be found except in the boozy outbursts that constituted so many of Cheever's stories' dénouement, the unexpressed sorrow of a lifetime arising to the surface unexpectedly which, once articulated, could never be forgotten, at least so was the literary conceit.

The Taubs were Jews conflicted about being Jews, which was to say, modern American Jews. Which was to say, more American than Jewish and as such at the mercy of the guilt trips routinely perpetrated by the orthodox and ultra-orthodox who considered Reformed Judaism identical to non-belief.

"We need to get to the heart of the matter," Jeff Taub told his impromptu gang that, truth be told, he wouldn't have hung around with, if not having been consigned to the kiddee room of the shiva sit. Jeff was cooler than they were, smarter than they were considerably. If he saw any of them in school, maybe with the exception of David Katz who was always worth a laugh, he would stare right through them and walk on. He had a reputation of his own that he was cultivating, independent of objective reality. Didn't want to be bothered with these misfits. He didn't want to make it seem at any point that they were his social equals.

Jeff's parents had locked Yacob Reznik's door upon the body's removal and allowed in only those adults charged with cleaning up the mess he left behind him, which was mostly "Cha-Cha" Maddox.

"If the gun's anywhere," he said to Jon, "I'm guessing it's under his mattress. Good place for a gun," he said. "Somebody like him needed to be able to reach it at all hours even when nearly asleep. He might have slept with it under his pillow. He might have had it on his person when he hung himself because that was Plan B and when it came to death he was always somebody with an alternate plan."

So absurd to contemplate one of these fedora wearing ZZ Top types being a tough as nails commando, but with great-uncle Yacob the evidence was more or less on the record. Lord knew he didn't brag after the fact, retelling war stories or anything like that from either the days of '48 or the war prior to that one. The one in Europe where he was more or less treated as cattle and never had a chance to mount a spirited defense in the name of his people, which we all know now, he was eminently capable of doing.

According to Freyer, the Jerusalem rabbi who had acted as Reznik's more or less manager, this was his rage's source, the continuous replenishing spring of guilt and impotence felt at being unable to strike at his tormentors, the genocidal Teutonic race whose progression to the Final Solution should be rightly spoken of in terms of centuries not years (please recall the Crusades, the rape of Lodz, the hundreds of pogroms with no historical designations at all, and the calumnies endured from Gertrude of Aragon to Martin Luther forward to Joseph Goebbels who had cribbed his screeds from past centuries and therefore shouldn't be blamed as much as he sometimes was). It was Freyer's contention that the Hassidic "get-up" (his words) of Reznik's was a way of giving Herr Hitler the one-fingered salute echoing backward through the corridors of time. For so many Jews, there would be no need to practice Judaism absent of the Holocaust. In Freyer's view this was tragic. Yacob Reznik in this regard seemed an especially hard case. His rage was unceasing, elemental like the core of the sun. One would have thought it would have burned out

at some point but this was not so. He didn't seem to have the capacity to either forget or forgive. But given the context in which this deficiency was playing out, it seemed a deeply admirable trait.

If he wasn't such a closed-off character, this Reznik might have been a leader of men, or at least somebody worthy of praise within whatever community he chose to establish himself in.

"He isn't a bad man, *verstay*," Rebbe Freyer told them all over the phone in a conference call with the Taubs that he had arranged and insisted that every family member attend prior to Yacob's arrival. "Just damaged in some way, maybe fragile, which is to say somebody worthy of your pity for his flaws, not so much worthy of your contempt. He's just like you," he said to them all from his Jerusalem office, but then thought the better of it. "Well," he said, "maybe the *you* you've never been introduced to fully. You have the capacity to walk a mile in his shoes is what I'm saying to you. I'm not saying it's a pleasurable walk, *nu?* You have the ability to do these things because it's in your best interest to do them and, listen, the way to live with difficult others is through understanding and compassion as opposed to confrontation and guilt."

No return to sender available for Yacob Reznik. And initially that was OK for the Taubs as they were too guilt ridden to press the issue. For years he had the run of the place more or less but was insistent upon staying in his room. Often in his final months he ventured out but wouldn't advise the Taubs as to his destination. They weren't his keeper were they? And he wasn't one to be kept. He abided by the house rules for the most part which were minimal. He didn't make a fuss or make a mess even when he was at death's door.

Nowadays all the Taubs were self-conscious about turning off the light to empty rooms. Jeff's father, Howard, was a bulldog on this issue and confronted Yacob about it occasionally. He saw it as a moral duty. It's an act President Carter had told the nation to perform. He saw it as something required of all Americans, if America was to survive into the next century.

Realize, the Soviets had their eyes set on a warm water port, Jeff, who followed current events as closely as his father, said constantly to all those who would care to listen. And when Afghanistan was finally subdued—as was inevitable—Pakistan would be the next to fall, inevitably like the next domino over.

"They want to do us in, the Commies, to this there's no ifs, ands, or buts," he said to David Katz who at age twelve was suspected by Jeff Taub of passive pinko sympathies. David never said anything to give himself away in this regard. But David's interest in popular culture Jeff found deeply suspicious. He didn't see there as being a single moderate soul left in the artistic community to judge by press reports. Hollywood in particular was given over to a radicalized vision of the world. Its subversives and weirdos were devoted the realization of a post-capitalist heaven in which Jeff Taub had detected more than a slight religious yearning. They wanted life to be the way it was prior to Adam's Fall. They wanted to become Gods unto their own right and forgive the world's sins without any corresponding act of expiation.

In Jeff's view, religion and left-leaning politics were entirely intertwined and this was likely why he felt so repulsed to be in the presence of both at the same time. It was what his parents believed was the start of an extended bit of rebelliousness directed towards them only. To Jeff it was mere common sense. Somebody like Yacob Reznik after all could, despite his reactionary lifestyle, be seen as a somewhat leftist figure. He sensed the key to happiness was to be able to liberate yourself from the dreck of capitalism altogether. It was the physical manifestation of meaninglessness. It could only drag the spirit down when God had designed it to soar. Both communism's and religion's beliefs were derived from mystery cults. And those cults would only in the end trap you into becoming a member. It was inevitable, Jeff felt, in a way. It was man's original sin that caused this to be so, that he would so readily abandon his divine nature in exchange for the comforts of ideology and the promise of a final reward.

A brilliant kid blessed with the type of argumentative streak that worked against a rarified academic success, Jeff Taub nevertheless had already formed deeply wrought opinions about politics and the engineering of the world's clockwork that were entirely separate from his parents.

"I think what we should do is mingle a little before moving upstairs," Jeff said to David Katz. He claimed that it would allay suspicion in the adults as to where they would all be heading a few minutes later. If they lingered awhile before the journey began it would look like they had no destination at all. The key to Reznik's attic bedroom was in the same strong box where Jeff's father stored the deed to the house as well as the will he had drawn up years back dictating the majority of his money be left to a particular kibbutz near Haifa specializing in the care of those orphans whose parents were lost in war.

Such wary idealists as Howard Taub were a pain in the ass and needed to be maneuvered around slowly. But even at the advanced age of twelve, Jeff Taub was considered to be a cute kid and could schmooze a half-attentive aunt ably as any anybody while not calling attention to his own intentions.

"It's maybe a ten minute sort of operation," Jeff told David Katz, directing him to meet upstairs after that amount of time. Boredom being the overwhelming feeling at this sort of gathering wherein television watching was frowned upon, Jeff assumed the twenty minutes would pass slowly. It was hard to discourage the notion that the sitting of shiva was performed as a matter of penance for the living. It didn't seem any help for the grieving process but merely was an extra burden for the survivors. Of course in regards to Reznik, there was little grief to begin with. People perhaps needed to understand that this was so. They needed to be less doctrinaire in their approach to ritual and assume matters on a case by case basis.

The food that family outsiders brought in accordance with Jewish ritual would linger on the premises for hours as nobody saw this as an opportunity to stuff their faces.

"You remind me so much of my brother Herb at age ten," the optometrist Saul Barnes told David Katz a few minutes after he had left Jeff's company as per the plan. There was a dessert table of a sort set up in one corner whose half-stale fare David nevertheless wished to sample. The adults didn't see the attraction. There was too much opportunity for schmoozing to pass up and the nosing could wait. Presently adults were saying such things to each other out of the blue simply to say something. Very awkward occasions these, though people were loathe to admit it. But outside of work and the weather, the subject matter for small talk ran dry quickly. Only a half century liberated from the *shtetl*, Jews were finding out what other ethnic groups knew all too well which was that small talk was hard to make. That's why WASPs, for example, drank so heavily. They needed ice breakers with each other simply. They needed the wherewithal to say something to a relative stranger.

This Saul Barnes was David Katz' optometrist too, but somehow Saul had absolutely no idea that this was so. For David to have pointed this out to him at the moment would have seemed rude as Saul's oblivious state seemed a comfort to him.

"Polio," said Saul to David as a way of informing him about his brother Herb's fate. To David, this meant Herb was already dead of polio or squirreled away in a nursing facility so as to be thought of as dead to others. The only reason Saul Barnes talked about Herb was to bring up the subject of his demise. Polio. Saul couldn't separate the affliction from the afflicted. He didn't want to separate them very likely.

When Herb Barnes had contracted polio at age fourteen, Saul Barnes was only six-years-old.

"So I would always think, why not me next, Lord?" Dr. Barnes said to David Katz when reclaiming his chair in the corner next to the dessert table. Saul Barnes wore white tube socks that were exposed beneath his pinstripe trousers. The trousers rode up on his bony ankles and revealed a man not explicitly concerned with his sartorial appearance. Nobody came to Saul to talk to him. As if he had no connection to the shiva at all or maybe he was a ghost whom their gaze passed through. Upon his arrival mourners all had expected Saul Barnes to leave within twenty minutes. The truth was he made others nervous while they were in his presence. Dr. Barnes wasn't the world's greatest schmoozer. And he was gushingly sentimental about private matters that made others constantly speculate that he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Or at least somebody in need of extended psychological care.

Before polio, Saul admitted, Herb and he were not as close as brothers ought to be.

"It's a terrible disorder, polio, born of a ligament-dwelling bacillus," Saul told David Katz who did not give a damn. In those sepia-tinged days during the 1930s, David knew, polio was the scourge of millions and children especially were susceptible. But those days were long behind the world. Nobody David's age thought of a stiff neck in the morning as reason for alarm. They all had their vaccines and their boosters. And if they hadn't it was no big deal for them.

For the longest time after his brother's sickness, Saul assumed his own polio affliction was assured. He certainly hadn't been gifted and loved by God as Herb had been. Relatives assumed Saul was the one destined for an early death, the weak one who would succumb to one of God's vengeful acts invariably. Thus, they misunderstood Saul's continued health as a miscarriage of justice. God was not paying attention as much as he should have been apparently. But, nu? That was, of course, impossible. Because, lookit, Herbie Barnes was a hundred meter city swimming champ at age thirteen. And at age twelve he could play the violin better than Menuhin.

Herb's bother Saul, on the other hand, seemed to offer little to the world other than the gushy poetry dedicated to girls that he scrawled in the folds of his spiral notebook while matriculating in Detroit's fine public schools while his lessons passed largely unobserved:

*If my love for you was a helium balloon/
by now I'd be high in it/
staring down/
at the albescent moon/*

The reason David Katz reminded Saul of Herbie had little to do with physical resemblance so much as David's proclivity to avoid eye contact at all costs seemingly when speaking to another human being.

"You cherish your privacy greatly," Dr. Barnes told David when the carpet beneath David's feet had begun to sear slightly due to the intense gaze that David had directed at it. "With Herbie it was the same way," he said. "He would go places before he got sick and refuse to say where he had been to the family. From time to time he would be accused of being mentally retarded. But it was the farthest thing from the truth. He was shy merely. He didn't speak to people on his own as likely he had nothing to say."

Once bedridden, Saul recalled, Herb Barnes withdrew from the world even more until family members started taking his presence for granted.

"He didn't want to impose on anybody," Dr. Barnes recalled, noting that a cripple in those days was a true cripple and not somebody with such a high opinion of himself that he saw his infirmity as a badge of honor. "Eventually he needed help to make it to the bathroom," Saul said. "But even then he was insisting that he had everything he needed. If he pissed himself he did so intentionally according to him. And the way he disconnected from others it was easy for others to let him go, too. All the crying was done long before his casket was sealed. We saw his end as a type of blessing, the relief of suffering. We had already assumed that what had happened had happened for a reason. It was not one of God's truly sick jokes, like the duck-billed platypus of Australia, for example. Or better maybe the educational system in this fine country, which, truth be told, needs a wrecking ball taken to it, until every piece of it is gone."

In speaking of such matters, Saul Barnes referred to the recent string of violent incidents at his old high school, Mumford, which had made so many headlines recently in both local papers.

"They say education is a right, but in fact it's a privilege," Saul Barnes told David Katz, profoundly indifferent to the boy's level of understanding of what was being communicated to him. As in the upstanding tradition of many neurotics, Saul was talking only to hear himself talk. Because understanding between two human beings was a relative thing. And for many people, it's entirely secondary to the need to talk. Nobody's really sure what's known and what isn't between two people. So you might as well speak as a matter of self-assertion. You might as well make believe there is another person different from you

but capable of understanding. It's the dream that animates all human culture really, a perfect level of simpatico. It makes all expression possible, even though it's likely much is being lost in the translation.

What Saul was speaking to David Katz of in no uncertain terms was the horrible state of some public schools in the Detroit-area and the reason, he believed, for their decline.

"They say it's something that should be taken for granted, but it's nothing anybody in their right minds would ever take for granted. Education's something that so many others in other countries would want for their own," he said. "But here it's viewed as a burden by some. So I say: do whatever makes you happy. There's fields to plow and cotton to pick still. Men don't need an education to do these things. And likely for many of them school's just getting in the way of their true vocation."

In Saul's view, the country was not on the firm footing that it once was immediately after the war. And this was a truth we all needed to recognize before it was too late for all concerned.

"I remember Detroit the way it was," Saul said to David Katz, recalling the cable cars that ran up Woodward Avenue in the 1940s and the all the times their family slept with the door open to let the cool air circulate through the duplex in summer.

By contrast, nowadays Saul Barnes' optometry practice had relocated to Farmington Hills six years ago out of necessity. None of his patients had complained to him about having to commute all the way from Detroit. They had, the Jews and the white Gentiles, left the city behind by that point. Farmington Hills was more of a city center to them than his old office on Seven Mile Road. They had no intention of venturing into the city for something as trivial as glasses. His practice would have closed by '75 if he hadn't moved.

"I think they're all just at the stage where they're getting even with us," Saul said to David Katz concerning his own white flight though he declined to identify exactly who he was talking about precisely.

He told David that only weeks before his planned move, a "certain kind" of woman had come into his office and started demanding a free pair of glasses. To quote her, "as payment."

To Saul, more disturbing altogether was the notion that somebody had put her up to it. Maybe this was the start of a series of actions in the area designed to drive the small businessmen of Detroit out of business. There weren't many friends that a lone operator like Saul had nowadays in the corridors of power. They were all at the mercy of prevailing political forces. The Detroit city government wouldn't help them as regarded their security. Their stores were ripe for the plunder nowadays just as in the bad old days back in Europe before the boat to salvation was boarded. He felt the cops were in on it, this slow motion riot of the early seventies that had replaced the fast motion riot on '67. He didn't have proof but he thought if an emergency call was made from a Jewish-owned store nobody would respond on time. He had been mulling over a dry run where a 911 call would be placed and a stopwatch employed to ascertain the interval of response. But instead he had taken the path of least resistance and left.

Somebody like Herb, Saul thought, may he rest in peace, would never have been able to stand up to the rough and tumble of such a dolorous era as the early 1970s. Therein many of Saul's fellow business owners had taken to carrying a gun at their sides when it came time to drop off the day's receipts into the bank. It was like living in the Wild West. The situation seemed to have descended from the sky during the course of an afternoon. The entire city had changed. Who knew if it ever would be allowed to change back? Where there is life there is hope, so they say. But who knew if this was actually true?

"Myself, I figure a man should deal with the reality put in front of him and only that," Saul said to David Katz, after alluding to his own firearm purchased in the summer of 1972 just after a series of daylight break-ins in nearby stores. Saul wasn't a violent man by any stretch of the imagination. But in this life a man was required to do what he had to do to stay alive. He had four employees at that point and an eye on hiring another optometrist by year's end. Couldn't put up with acts of common thievery, he believed. He had a desire to retire well off, more or less. Whether or not life acquiesced, he still had the desire. He wanted to live a little before he died. To look upon Paris in the spring. He wrote a poem once dedicated to the city. He thought of Paris as his spiritual home.

The problem with such willfulness, as far as Saul Barnes saw it, was that the past kept intruding on the present. It kept on disrupting his schemes for success. It kept making him hesitate at the least opportune moments.

"When I went to college in 1949," he said to David Katz, "there was no free love or free jazz or notion of discontentment amongst the lower strata of society. There might have been but I was unaware of it. Now, that is all there is. We were happy with what we had in spades," he said. "We didn't know enough to see ourselves as victims. We smoked cigars and listened to classical music. We didn't think much of the plight of the colored at all."

At that moment Saul Barnes uttered the common truism about how youth was wasted on the young. He told David Katz that what was needed most in this country was the reinstatement of the common draft. President Ford had bungled absolutely when he had abolished it. But now you see the need for such compulsory duty absolutely. Now you know the wisdom behind the phrase, *spare the rod, spoil the child*.

Beneath the glasses cut for his own specialized requirements, Saul Barnes possessed large blue eyes whose tear ducts for some reason were hyperactive. They never stopped producing tears even when Saul was asleep with strips of a plush towel wrapped over his lids so as to stanch the flow temporarily. He couldn't control it. It had nothing to do with his true feelings.

"The world nowadays is a truly frightening place, *boychik*," Saul said to David Katz and began to cry. "And this I believe you will realize more fully the more you live in it."

Of late, the collar on Saul's shirt had grown damp because of his inattention to sopping up his eyes' discharge. Too much to witness and talk about at the moment to keep up appearances. The events related to bereavement were the only social life he had nowadays. To him, a shiva was a kind of party.

"Unlike me son," Saul Barnes said to David Katz, "I'm sure you'll do fine in it."

Like a Disneyland automaton that had come to the end of its program, Saul Barnes, O.D. folded his head onto his slightly damp chest. By then David Katz had passed from his field of interest. At least with a ratty kid like David, he lacked the social grace to articulate a proper *au revoir*. He didn't see the point of restating the obvious that communication was at an end. It just happened. The lips stilled and that was it. It was like declaring that it was raining in the midst of a summer storm.

Maybe Saul was the sort who would be better off with his nightmares all having come true. If only to relieve himself of the anxiety that they ever might. At that stage he wouldn't have to dread anything any longer. He would have it all there in front of him and he would have the satisfaction of having become a prophet with a follower of one.

Unmarried, of course, this *shmendrick*, and lately devoid of the chagrin that such permanent bachelorhood should rightly bestow upon a man of his generation. Nevertheless, Dr. Barnes simply burrowed into himself at times like these and only came out when the air surrounding grew heavy enough with his exhalations and a low-level panic set in. He was a nation of one person bent on national suicide. The flag under which he marched was of a piss yellow hue like the sheet of a bed wetter drying on the line. His teeth were falling out in accelerating multiples. Very soon he would require dentures.

"If I was a better person," Saul Barnes had said to himself when David was still in earshot, "I'd never speak to another human being again as long as I live."

But if you did that, *putz*, David Katz thought after doubling back from another angle toward the dessert table, how would you remember why you're keeping your mouth shut in the first place?

Soon David thought how willful muteness might be maintained in the wider world if one was pre-disposed to try. He who tried to do so would surely be getting grief from all quarters maybe only a couple hours into the project. People would be coming up to such a person and accusing him of rudeness. You're asked a question in this world and you're expected to reply. *People who acted like animals deserved to be put in cages*, David's mother would always say. But nobody was doing anybody any harm just simply refusing to talk to them. It wasn't something to grow angry over if you thought about it deeply. It wasn't something to write to a legislator about. The denial of conversation was every human's God-given right.

Certain sequestered monks, David Katz was aware, took vows of silence and likely kept them through the barely perceptible arc of their lives. But these adherents did so towards a particular end. Unlike Saul Barnes, they weren't being merely anti-social. Thus, their silence was infiltrated with a sort of purposefulness that Saul seemed to abhor on principle. His silence in contrast would be a silence that sealed God off from his soul, not enable His presence therein. The quiet that he so craved was prized for its austerity solely. It was an aesthetic quest as opposed to religious. Barnes never conceptualized himself as any sort of spiritual seeker. Simply he seemed to find all human relations an interminable chore. In this he had a certain affinity to Yacob Reznik. This was why, it could be reasoned, that he had made an appearance at all on the shiva's third day.

The one time David Katz had spied Yacob was in the Taubs' backyard. Yacob was *davening* with his Holy Book, yet doing so in a type of exaggerated way that made it seem that the whole thing was a mockery. As if Reznik was not a real believer at all or somebody who believed in these matters so tangentially that he could only have fun with the process even as he was mocking it. More like a dancer than *davener*, really. He seemed to be having the time of his life.

"I was delivering newspapers in the morning," David told one of Jeff's aunts, Belle, how it was he had come upon this sight. Such a sight seemed to a slightly embarrassing phenomenon to David like the witnessing of a public nose picking. Then again, maybe Yacob had executed it for public amusement. Many of these Chassidim walked by non-believers as if they didn't even share the universe with them. Maybe Yacob Reznik was the exception. Maybe he was a provocateur underneath it all and somebody for whom religion held no value unless it was practiced in a public way as a type of provocation unto mortified on-lookers who looked at the practitioners of the ritual as some threat to the common way of life like an alien invasion.

David Katz personally didn't see the threat in Yacob's *davening* but still thought it silly that a person would prostrate himself in such a way to an imaginary being. And that the ludicrous act itself should be considered so wholesome that the entire world was counseled to perform some version of it unto whatever version of God could be imagined. Less prayers, more sanity altogether. But many folks did not believe this to be the case.

David had come by his atheism naturally as an outgrowth of his interest in books of popular science. He assumed that the root of every believer's belief rested in simple benightedness as to the natural world's processes, along with the familiar death-fear that enveloped so many humans when a type of primary objectivity about one's true place in the natural order was lost.

"He didn't see me," David told Aunt Belle who like Saul Barnes had quickly disremembered his presence after an initial give-and-take. Smallish twelve year old like him who already bore the early indications of morphing into a physically unattractive adult was somebody for whom the ability to be forgotten about was a blessing. David seemed something of a dullard unlike his brilliant friend Jeff. He had no interesting perceptions to share with anybody seemingly. Well, he could meet a girl eventually and marry and God bless him. But he would exist as just a member of the herd, and this wasn't so terrible. Heaven needed its lightning bearers as well as its archangels. On the other hand, he had a developed a terrible habit of outstaying his welcome excessively.

Belle like everyone else at the shiva held no feelings toward Yacob Reznik at all.

She admired him, she said, just as she admired all Chassidim for "keeping Judaism alive." Like everybody else, truth be told, she found the sect's intransigence in the face of modernity infuriating. From Israel via one of Belle's nieces came a tale of being chased down the street by two black hats for wearing shorts. Both of them were brandishing knotted sticks which they would use to strike the backs of girls' bare legs. All for God, understand, all in accordance with the Law. On the other hand, you had to admire their lack of self-consciousness. These weren't the Americanized Jews who anglicized their names for business purposes. With them the overarching secular culture was utterly rejected. These weren't the type of Jews who whispered public prayers in Hebrew so as to not offend the *goy* next door. The anti-

Semite they gave no thought to at all. If a stone was thrown at them, let a stone be thrown. God would provide a shield for them. In its way such faith was inspiring to behold. They didn't seem to possess the same fears of ordinary people, ordinary Jews. They seemed to have convinced themselves of their Chosen status to such a degree that everything else seemed beside the point.

Yacob Reznik, Aunt Belle, told David Katz was of a particularly dark stripe of Chassid, as if sect members came in different flavors.

"You need to recall," Belle said to him, "what he went through in the War."

Reznik had a family at the time that didn't survive.

"They made him watch as his children were killed," she said to David, before turning back to the mah-jongg game on-going on the card table in front of her. Again, such a diversion was prohibited at times such as these in the Jewish religion. But the truly orthodox amongst their rank weren't attending. The important thing for Belle was that she had troubled herself to come at all. Somebody like Reznik likely wouldn't have been bothered if the shoe was on the other foot. He and his kind would denounce the deceased likely as heretical or unclean. He wouldn't so much as avoid shiva as hurl opprobrium at it and deliver the pronouncement that all true believers should stay away.

Which was their prerogative of course. But, you see, there are two sides to every coin and even piety can be taken past a point where it no longer seemed something you should encourage your children to pursue even in the ironic way of so many American Jews today.

"When the Germans came for him he put up a fight," was Belle's summation of the events in eastern Poland in the early 1940s. But she either couldn't or wouldn't elaborate. Bottom line for her was that Yacob was once far more normal than the *davening* skeleton he made of himself in his final years. For him, the sins of the Nazis had become the sins of all humanity. He refused to make a distinction between a concentration camp in Germany and a repatriation facility in British-controlled Palestine. Maybe he knew deep down the differences but he wouldn't honor the distinction. He felt his suffering had earned him the right to be so imperious. If there was another planet to go to escape others' presence he gladly would have gone. A kibbutz in Antarctica, perhaps? Well, of course, the *goyim* would find fault with that, too. They'd champion the rights of displaced penguins and set the Jews adrift on an ice floe as recompense.

So Yacob Reznik was the price all human beings must pay to live not by the laws of Leviticus and Deuteronomy but, so to speak, by their own wits.

"We always got along," she claimed to David who had grown uninterested in all the Reznik talk of late and was more focused on the rapid exchange of colored tiles that comprised mah-jongg's mad flow. It was much more interesting so it appeared than *Clue*, which possessed a mechanical progression toward a pre-ordained resolution. He didn't understand the game, but he felt compelled by its chatty, feminine aura. It seemed something that one needed to master over time. There was a lot of bluffing and exclamation in it. It seemed a game one could play for hours on end and not grow tired over it slightly.

Two crack for Belle in this hand, or so she claimed. This meant something intriguing enough to her as to disremember David Katz's presence temporarily.

"We needed to keep score," she said to her fellow participants as if this was an oversight that could be undone retroactively. The occasion seemed to call for an unofficial game so this was what occurred between them. Probably what they would do was stop the game two hours in and try to re-convene at another player's house a week later. They felt there needed to be a continuity to these games. They needed winners and losers to emerge from the contest. It wasn't fun merely participating. They all felt the need to validate their own skill in the contest as a pointed reminder about how long they had all been playing.

Mah-jongg was a game for women only, as if it had been a discovery by women and they were intent on keeping it for themselves solitarily.

Another hand and another exchange of those tiles with strange markings on them that David Katz felt that he would never be able to decipher even if their mysteries were opened up to him explicitly. So he was old enough to realize some things in life were to remain mysterious whether or not he had the wherewithal to learn them. There was a distance to people in terms of their psychology that couldn't be bridged certainly only with mere goodwill. Childhood ended once the notion of your personal experience as an absolute arbiter of the world ended. For some, therefore, childhood never ended. And it always guaranteed a disastrous set of encounters with other people when a grown child insisted that they knew somebody for who they really were as opposed to what they claimed they were.

So it was David Katz' fate to be ignored by the adults at this soiree, having assumed him to be a lifeless shoe gazer. This was fine with him. Because the mission at hand was to try to blend in and sneak up upstairs to the old *frummer's* room.

"You did a good job, man, I watched you," Jeff Taub said to David Katz minutes after he departed Belle's circle. He was referring to David's one-sided conversation with Aunt Belle and also the weird eye doctor. Katz had the gift of blending in as judged by adults, of not being suspected of harboring malign intent. A future nebbish, in other words, unless he chose to become more of a live wire like his acquaintance, Jeff. All the Taub children were routinely described as brilliant and not merely by their parents. This was meant in more than terms of mere academic success, but to describe a generalized persona of worldliness and prodigal qualities that marked them as ready for success far more than their peers. David Katz, on the other hand, was somebody judged far more likely to be dragged along in a brilliant boy's wake. He didn't seem to have much going for him in regards to other people. The braces were coming on within a few weeks and wouldn't be coming off until age fifteen. And without being psychic, you could tell he'd be scrounging for dates throughout his horrifying adolescence. That is, if he had the will to date at all.

*Some are born to sweet delight/
Some are born to sweet delight/
Some are born to the endless night*

David loved that particular Doors song off the album a cousin had bought him last Hanukkah. In his room at night he'd put it on the turntable and search in the dark for the proper groove to place the needle into. He would play the song constantly, crouched over the lowered turntable like a gargoyle on a cathedral pillar. He would need to look at the record's progression against the needle as relaxed listening wasn't enough. A prophet was in the midst of communicating his prophecy to him. He needed to open himself up to the experience of revelation, to become part of it like a Pentecostal worshipper in church. It was deeply religious but he didn't see it that way. He simply thought of himself as a fan of the Doors' music.

*Realms of fear/
Realms of light/
Some men born to sweet delight/
Some men born to endless night...*

Not just that song but all the others on the album as well he viewed in terms of prophecy. To David Katz, Jim Morrison was a character entirely out of place in this century. His music had nothing to do with casual entertainment and everything to do with mystical revelation. His lyrics spoke to David far more than any lecture, especially the banality of Sunday school sermons, spoke to him. Jim Morrison didn't know from pop music and, David assumed, when he was alive Morrison wouldn't have cared to be categorized as a pop performer. Eternal words burst forth from him spontaneously just like an encounter

with the endless night. But David was still too young to articulate what he found so attractive about them. He didn't know yet from either William Blake's *Auguries of Innocence* or his own drug overdoses and death. These would all be encountered later, well into the next decade and beyond. He never would play in a band but always would be a music fan. Up until the moment of his death, he always would be working out what rock and roll meant to him personally. And to David Katz, meaningful rock and roll always came back to the Doors. *Blonde on Blonde* era Dylan was far too dandyish and self-satisfied for him. And the Beatles, at least in their *All You Need is Love*-mode, he could never get behind at all.

Jeff Taub—who during the same period, would make a fortune on Wall Street shorting medical stocks on confidential information of patient deaths from the doctors that killed them—had no affinity for music apart from novelty dance records of the time such as Rick Dees' *Disco Duck*.

"Try your luck, don't be a cluck," Taub told David Katz as he set to the work of trying to find the correct key to the lock on Reznik's door. The set that he had nicked from his mother's purse minutes before had contained sixteen keys on its interlocked chains. This indicated a lot of responsibilities at work for her. Or maybe Jeff's parents were owners of properties he knew nothing of whatsoever. He didn't know really what either of them did after they left work in the morning. But all these keys hinted at some secondary life for them both. There were other physical spaces under lock and key whose care they were trusted with apparently. To Jeff, however, it didn't signal any sort of unsettled existence. Not then. He wasn't consulted about it and he hadn't asked.

On the chain there were a couple of obvious car keys that Taub, being so thorough, tried to fit in the lock regardless. It wasn't until key number seven that the lock's tumblers yielded entirely after it was pushed through.

Jeff didn't understand fully why his parents had kept the room locked in the first place. This was a classic half measure by his parents executed more or less, he felt, to give themselves confidence that they were being conscientious regarding their sons' safety. More or less, they had given up controlling Jeff and Jon by this point. They would let them do what they wanted but make them face the consequences later on.

When Reznik was alive, the door was never locked, because his redoubtable personality kept all potential intruders at bay even if he was absent of the room at the moment. For all Jeff knew, the lock had been placed there after he died. Presently it seemed more locks were needed. For the Taub children, this room was a sort of scary amusement park ride that they couldn't resist entering no matter how much trouble they might get into later. Jeff wanted to catch sight of Yacob's pistol and maybe keep it for himself afterward to show around in school. But for his little brother Jon who was of a dreamier, more mystical disposition altogether, the room's interest resided in all the strange religious articles no doubt that Reznik possessed imported from Jerusalem.

"The *tefillin* have magic powers somebody once told me," Jon had said to Jeff back on the staircase once castigated by his brother about the insipid nature of his interest in these. By far Jon Taub was the most religious family member under this roof. He lacked the ironic distance of Reformed Jews toward Judaism. He wanted to be bar mitzvahed in Jerusalem, for example. He didn't want the party later on. He didn't want any of his friends attending and he could care less if there were presents later on.

Probably this was a form of rebellion or counter-rebellion on Jon's part that would, over time, either be synthesized into a more orthodox form of worship than his parents had adopted or maybe be cast off entirely in the form of an outright religious contempt that his uncle Jack held on grounds of God worship's violation of rationalist principles. The third alternative would be for him to adopt the vestiges of the Chassidim which for his parents would be an unmitigated disaster, worse by far than adopting atheism as his world view or even converting to Christianity. As they saw it, such an adoption would be a sort of self-mutilation in the name of God. It would be an act that marked him not merely as separate from the American Jewish community at large but also from the rest of the world. Civilized people did not behave in the manner of Chasidim. By-and-large Chassidim were impervious to reason, to compromise, and to

the betterment of the social order. Always with both eyes focused on the word of God, these *frummers*. So you see that they were blind to so many things. In a way they were deeply perverse as a people, at least the ones such as Yacob Reznik who had adopted the faith from outside. They were getting even at the world for its collective sins against the Jewish people maybe. It was the only possible explanation as to why they would do such a thing to themselves. They couldn't have found succor in such rigid habits, surely. They couldn't have found life so much sweeter after the day's exertions were through, as in the manner of Rabbi Akiva, who once saw a fox emerging from the ruined place of Holy of Holies and began to laugh.

But that point at which Jon Taub's religious path would be certified was a long way off from the present moment. And when it came it would be beyond his ability to control consciously. So there was no real reason to fret over it even slightly before it arrived.

"The bits of Torah in the *tefillin*," Jon had said to Jeff when hesitating behind both he and David on the third step up, "you spread it on your soup like crackers and you'll be immune to disease for seventy-two hours."

According to Jon, the spiritual price one paid for raiding *tefillin* of its scripture was severe. The Lord G_d was never so jealous as when protecting His Words from defacement. It wouldn't be worth it for a man, trust him, even stricken with cancer to start cracking open *tefillin* like so many coconuts in order to get to its treasure. There's one's well-being in the afterlife to see to as well, realize. The punishment for the transgression wouldn't be worth the short term benefits one gained.

Not that Jon Taub would be tempted in any way to take one of his father's power tools to the plastic boxes attached to the leather straps. Rather he wanted to see what the head box felt like when it was wrapped around his skull and attached to the right spot on the forehead, just below the hairline, where the voice of God entered a Jew's heart readily and all understanding obtained was understanding for the better.

"I'll conduct an experiment and see what happens," Jon told Jeff when explaining what he would do with the mysterious *tefillin* once they were in his possession. For himself, Jeff was in the mood to throw the horrible thing away or give it to the dog to play with. If Jon wanted it he would need to claim it for himself early. So in a way this was the first test in his commitment to the faith. His brother thought of the whole thing as so much mystical balderdash. He thought he would be doing Jon a favor not letting him have access to them at least on this occasion.

Probably the bits of scripture that were in the black boxes had been curdled over and infected with microscopic parasites and would do no body any good having been exposed to it or worse having it been swallowed in a meal.

Jeff Taub said to David Katz, "Be on the lookout for something worn through. Maybe an arm had been constantly reaching out for the gun and worn its own path over the years."

He assumed that the IDF-issued pistol of Reznik's was his prize possession and as such it wouldn't have been out of his sight for more than a few hours at a time. For all he knew it might have still been out in the open or lying underneath one of the pillows in the room's corner. The gun wasn't used for Reznik's suicide which in Jeff's mind made it all the more legendary. It was cleaner because of it. Maybe it was too pristine an object to be used for suicide. Maybe Reznik had never considered using it in that way. He didn't want to be accused of taking its possession too lightly by whatever accusatory authority he might have encountered in the next realm.

Taub assumed that if a man had a real gun in his possession, then correspondingly his desire for God would fade into nothing by degrees.

Nobody fucked with you when you were a gun owner. Nobody assumed a weakness existed for which a dose of the Good Lord was the only permanent cure. But if you had a gun you could do what you wanted and did not have to scrape and bow up until the moment of your death. And when you died it was with supreme dignity as befitted a gun fighter. There was never a main character in a Clint Eastwood movie

calling out for God Almighty as death took him. These were self-assured men utterly. These were individuals requiring no supernatural interference to achieve their heart's desire in this life and more than likely in all other lives as well.

So here too was another layer of mystery concerning Yacob Reznik's consciousness, a guise that fused the personae of the warrior and suppliant at once. Jeff Taub wondered if in heaven even now Reznik was shooting accusatory glances at Yahweh's awesome golden seraphim wondering after their impiety. Even God Himself ultimately must yield to such a man concerning matters of the holiest of holies. Reznik was always a wolf in sheep's clothing as far as Jeff was concerned. He never understood what he saw in the abnegating rituals of the Chassidim. He never understood how you could admit powerlessness to your God daily and at the same time brandish a loaded pistol underneath your flowing blouse as if it was a natural appendage of your body.

The key to Reznik, thus, it must be contended, was his perverse nature as regarded both his religion and his fellow sufferers here on Earth simultaneously.

"The yid was a yid, through and through," Jeff Taub told David Katz in finding not a gun in the room's dresser but only the square knife for *shechita* hiding in the back. A little bit of dried blood on this *sakin's* edge, Jeff found, when holding it up, and a maybe a little goat fur stuck in the blood to provide the impression that it was freshly used. This last touch was pure theatricality. No need to slaughter livestock of course when a kosher butcher was only a mile away, so this knife was a sort of religious prop for Reznik, an unused instrument of his rigid faith that simply was there to draw a person's attention to it, or focus the mind on the divine in the same manner of the relics of Catholic saints. Even for a lifelong Lubavitcher, such a detail might have called for a rolling of the eyes or at least a questioning about how that property had come into his possession at all. It might have been purchased from a kosher butcher or maybe—who knew?—intended for more nefarious purposes altogether. Let's face it: with Yacob, the appearance of a bloody knife didn't necessarily put one in mind of fastidious dietary laws. A knife such as this was there to be used. But the mind would be left to wander about whose neck exactly its edge had been gliding against of late.

On the other hand, if Reznik had killed anybody during the length of his U.S. stay, somebody surely would have been made aware of it. Simply because he was so indifferent to secular authority that he would have not have covered his tracks as carefully as he needed to.

"He was hardcore definitely, really the Jewish Charles Manson," Jeff Taub told David Katz. He placed the *sakin* back into the drawer on a set of K-mart purchased tighty-whities. Very strange to see these, given the extravagant exterior garb of Reznik's sect. All three boys would have thought a rabbi at some point in Jewish history would have rendered a binding decision and created some orthodoxy on this matter. The Mormons, for example, had their own prescribed underwear worn snug against the genitals to counter the inevitable tingling of satanic origins when coming within a certain distance of the opposite sex. Yet the cock and balls of the Chassidim, the vaginas of the Chassidim were left to fend for themselves somehow. It couldn't be precisely that this was so. Perhaps the ordinary undies were Reznik's chosen form of rebellion. Living alone as he had, nobody would know about them. But certainly once in the afterlife, God would call him to his side and bust his balls about them. He'd make poor Yacob Reznik parade around in heaven in those tighty-whities for eternity, make him shake his pimply ass about to-and-fro likely for the pleasure of many of the slatterns of the former life for whom God's love (so sayeth the revealed word) was absent entirely.

For himself, Jeff Taub's personal strategy was to convert to whatever religion he felt would suit him best at the last possible moment. He thought Catholics let you do this when they delivered the last rites to you. Maybe there would be a little bit of lip service required from him prior to whatever ceremony was performed, thus assuring him of salvation forever. He'd probably have to write them a check for their services but maybe this wouldn't be for so much. Then he could close his eyes and die peacefully assuming he had done everything required to buy a ticket into the Greatest Party Ever Thrown. He assumed this

was the drift of all religion. He wondered why this loophole existed at all and why he had been able to identify it so early on.

Many Muslims in the world existed, on the other hand, and maybe they were right about the way of the world and they should be courted as death approached.

"I think we got something for you," Jeff said to his ten-year-old brother Jon when seeing another *tefillin* in the dresser drawer next to Reznik's Israeli passport and a busted wristwatch. "It's your radio to God," he said and tossed it at Jon's feet.

As it fell to the floor its black straps flayed out and reminded David Katz of one of the spineless sea creatures he had once seen washed up on an Atlantic beach when visiting his grandparents in Boca Raton.

"It's sad that it's dead," David said to both of the Taubs and commented that God's presence made itself known most strongly only when in the presence of death.

David Katz didn't love God and felt only fear toward Him during those times when the old horror stories about the torments of the afterlife were recalled in popular culture. *The Exorcist* which he had watched on TV the other day had scared the shit out of him. Never knew what lay beyond death's impenetrable veil. So, you see, religion held a certain fascination for him. But this didn't mean that he would ever love God. Similarly he would never love Adolph Hitler even though both of these figures likely existed at one point in the world.

"Fuck you," Jon Taub told David Katz, believing David's "it's sad that it's dead" comment to be just another put down directed at him. Soon he picked up the *tefillin*. Soon enough he was playing with it just like it was Hasbro's latest creation, a weird sort of doll that could be manipulated in any number of ways. Jon wanted to show David and Jeff how much he had taken to the object. He wanted to make the point to them that he was infatuated with its presence. He wanted to make the point to them that it was already too late to save him from himself.

Despite the promising find of the knife, it soon became clear that there was little booty to be extracted from Reznik's possessions that would hold value for twelve-year-old boys.

The pistol constantly rumored to be on Reznik's person while he was alive was nowhere to be found in this tiny room with its plywood walls. Short of a secret compartment somewhere in the room's floorboards, it seemed reasonable to assume that if the gun was nearby it would have been found by now. There were only so many hiding places in the room to inspect. Apart from the bed, there was only one other piece of furniture to root through in search of the object of fascination for Jeff.

No pistol certainly, nor was there any real relic to be found from one of Reznik's former lives either in Palestine or, prior to that, in a refugee camp in Cyprus waiting for passage east.

"Maybe he didn't think so much of packing heat after he came here," Jeff Taub commented after manipulating literally every item of Reznik's in the room, seeking out any clue for where his true valuables might be placed. The sad truth was that, based on available evidence, Reznik didn't seem to have any sort of affinity for his past at all. He wasn't sentimental in that way. He didn't seem to consider personal history, in the manner of many children, as a type of altar. Rather, he seemed to view it in entirely utilitarian terms. Which was to say it was merely a foundation that allowed him to inhabit the present moment. There was no war memorabilia present in Reznik's belongings at least not on visible display. The pistol he was rumored to have in his possession was missing from the room and quite possibly might have been confiscated by Jeff's parents shortly after he died.

You never knew but maybe Taub's father, Howard, had as much an affinity for guns as his son and wanted to keep the treasure for himself.

"Even as a victim of post-mortem theft," Jeff said to David after they were a half hour in there digging around, "Yacob Reznik proved a bitter disappointment."

Really, apart from the square knife, the only valuable object (as perceived by Yacob) was the score of thick hardcover books in the room's corners resting in precarious piles as if stacked there by poltergeists. With Hebrew lettering on their exteriors of which none of the boys, not even Jon, could

translate, they assumed such works to be compendiums of rabbinical commentary of the sort a true *tsaddik* read morning, noon, and night.

Maybe these were merely commentaries on the commentaries and as such could be read in such an informal manner as Reznik invariably would have had to do isolated in his tiny hutch, with his feet up on the room's lone chair, sitting up on the bed and listening to the electric fan's progress. The fan was needed to combat the stuffiness of the closed-in space as well as dampen the sound of a household wormy with two children. With one light bulb to count on, so it was that Reznik's eyes invariably would be strained with the effort of reading. But for somebody like him it would hardly have provided the impetus to stop. Just underneath the text, his fingers would shuffle and sweep in the manner of a scholar when seeking either the Torah's wisdom or an eminent rabbi's interpretation of it. Such a *frummer* as this needed to feel the truth, which was God's presence (which was also the Torah's words if one could understand them through the uni-sensate observation that mere reading afforded). Wasn't enough merely to understand, one needed to be transformed by the act of Torah study, you see. So the act of both reading and writing rabbinical commentary was likely highly formalized to the point of orthodoxy. A certain kind of ink and paper needed to be used, for example, blessed by the Chief Rabbi of Jerusalem and so forth. Superficially it was strange that these holy books existed in such highly secularized forms and perhaps they didn't. After all, didn't even *frummers* engage in light reading from time to time? Wasn't that allowed in the wake of a Jew's obligations to God? Wasn't it a blessing to allow oneself to relax with a good, albeit, inoffensive, tome on some speculative subject which did not challenge God's words so much as echo them and lend the reader's heart a little lightness therefore prior to the resumption of one's service?

Jeff Taub thought this was so and walked over and sought objective evidence for his theory.

The page that he opened up to was at the beginning of a chapter called *Letters from Prison*. These words were written in English, not Hebrew, which was something that Jeff Taub initially found inexplicable. Initially he thought it was a printing error and the wrong pages had been stitched into this particular book. He didn't understand initially why Reznik had kept the wrong book in his possession. To judge by the finger smears on the page, Yacob seemed to have read every English word many times over. He didn't understand how this could be the case unless he had succumbed to some temporary sort of dementia. Light reading aside, Yacob Reznik would never have read a book like this.

It was another several minutes of fumbling around with the rest of the pages before Jeff Taub realized that the Hebrew jacket cover was attached to a hardcover edition of *Soul on Ice* by Eldridge Cleaver.

In Soledad state prison, I fell in with a group of young blacks who like myself were in vociferous rebellion against what we perceived as a continuation of slavery on a higher plane. We cursed everything American including baseball and hot dogs.

They didn't know to which human issue these words referred. They knew immediately it had nothing to do with the Talmud or Judaism or even religious study in general. Almost seeming to be criticizing the study of religion on principle, but not quite, the chapter *Letters from Prison* seemed purposefully trying to start a fight. It seemed angry and politically involved and contra, therefore, to the transcendent expectations that all religions held, ultra-orthodox Judaism most especially. If a man was in prison, for example, one would assume the state had good cause for holding him there. There didn't seem a point to Reznik's having possessed the book. It seemed like a mistake on his part to have it in his collection. But, nevertheless, *Soul on Ice* was there. Its accusatory text was staring back at them when held in Jeff Taub's hands.

One of the chapters was titled *White Woman, Black Man*. When perused with interest by an elderly Chassid, it seemed grounds for commitment to a mental institution immediately. Or at the very least being kicked out of the faith altogether.

"He's crazy and here's the proof," Jeff said to David flipping the pages back and forth to confirm for himself that what he was seeing was real. Its possession constituted maybe a type of self-punishment. Or the fact that he didn't understand English as well as he seemed to. Maybe he hadn't fully understood the nature of the text in front of him. A certain fascination with *shvartzes* it seemed and that was OK. But you looked at Reznik's known history, and immediately you saw an unseemly similarity between it and the Black Panther Party. Like them he wasn't much into peace and accommodation. He assumed self-defense as an absolute right. And he never thought of himself as the aggressor in any given situation.

His testimony if ever provided would be a thug's theodicy recorded by a thug with all the expected rationalizations intact.

Probably at some point all this was explained in *Soul on Ice's* grimy innards.

"He wanted to be not who everybody thought he was," Jeff Taub told David Katz. Or maybe he simply was *not* who everybody thought he was. It wasn't an act. Or it was all an act depending on your interpretation of where theater began and reality ended. For himself, Reznik was far too taciturn to ever be caught in a moment of self-reflection. He never made much of a claim concerning being in possession of a governing perspective.

Indeed many of the books in Yacob Reznik's attic room were works of German philosophy disguised as religious texts. Some of these had been translated into English, others left in the German that Reznik seemed equally at ease with though Poland was his country of birth. Of course not dirty, not heretical even in the pigeonholed notion of the word held by Chassidic Jews, but more precisely extra-religious, occasionally counter-religious (in the case of Karl Marx) but written in such a high flown manner it would be impossible to perceive where the metaphysical speculation ended and the attack on the revealed word began.

The notion that these philosophy books represented some desire on Yacob's part to transgress was followed quickly by confusion about the transgressive nature of the material he was reading.

"No *Playboys*, for him, no *Penthouse*, or *Hustler*," Jeff said to David when inspecting another book and despairing over exactly what mystery was being revealed by their presence. Yacob Reznik wasn't a normal person obviously. Not somebody who responded to life's ordinary stimuli. Likely if you had asked him what motivated him, he couldn't honestly provide a detailed answer. He did what pleased him mostly. But this in itself was hardly a sign of an evolved nature. He was a brute deep down maybe who used philosophy as a type of consolation. The presence of a few lingered-over *Playboys* would have humanized him in Jeff's eyes. But, of course, such humane literature was missing from his possessions. Even in death Reznik was a task master. Even his hidden stash of porn turned out to be elevated, impenetrable, and secretive.

Neither Jeff Taub nor David Katz had any patience for elevated works of the mind, let alone Yacob Reznik's perceptions of them. When they set out to leave the room, they made sure it was made far more untidy than before they entered.

"*The terror of death is the vision of this negative nature of itself*," Jeff Taub read, throwing the thick book across the small metal framed cot that they had apologetically assigned Yacob upon his entry into their house, in lieu of a real bed.

Das da!, Yacob Reznik had written in a ballpoint pen in the page's margin after circling the passage. And then on the opposite margin using another writing utensil altogether, in Polish with the English translation being *Only in madness are we free*.

Crazy bastard, really was, and somebody whose interior mysteries were better off left unsolved.

"I'm taking the knife," Jeff Taub said to David before he turned the light off and reached into the dresser to retrieve the dirty object where it had been tossed minutes before. As he did so the shambolic wheel of life that had been taped to the door's inside came dislodged. None of the children knew what this symbol was meant to represent. They saw it as a colorful object, perhaps Hebraic in origin, and maybe for all they knew something Reznik had created himself.

The next time Jeff and his brother would be back in this room was to empty its contents out completely. Most of the books would be thrown away. But by then a month had passed and they would have lost interest in the mystery of Yacob Reznik. Along with his parents, they would come to see everything that he had possessed as garbage, as valueless, as absent of any sentimental connection to the rest of humanity and its desperate need for comfort in the face of the constant threat of annihilation. Nothing that was disposed of was given a second glance. And that which was not disposed of, such as the phrase in Sanskrit *shantih, shantih, shantih*, carved into the dresser wood work by Reznik was ignored too as there had been no context to explain what these words (if that's what they were even) meant.

So it was that the inheritance of Yacob Reznik's legacy had been passed over from Jeff Taub unto David Katz. Withdrawn from the world so much like Yacob, David alone took such mysteries to heart.

"I know what you're saying," David Katz would say, decades later, to a resident of a state mental facility whose floors he had been employed to mop. What he had drawn there in crayon was an exact replica of the colorful wheel Reznik had taped to his dresser's interior. By that point every explicit memory of that *shiva* had faded from view. He had not known after the whereabouts of either of the Taub children. It would have been fifteen years since he had spoken to either of them.

The stethoscope around the resident's neck would be transmogrified into another dead *tefillin*. David was wondering why it existed in the first place. He was wondering why somebody would stick it in their ears and think to pray. God wasn't there to answer anybody. You heard a *thump thump thump* but that was all. It wasn't the ocean calling to you. It was just blood passing through the body on the way to the drain.