

The Brothers Wright: A Novel

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Summary:

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This Artistic Expression Thesis is a novel that follows Alex Bernstein, a fifth year rabbinical student in New York City, as he tries to make meaning of his own life and confusion through interaction with Jewish text and time. The central development in the novel is his receiving a package from an estranged aunt that contains a journal written by a family member, Theodore Tannenbaum who claims to have spent time with the Wright Brothers. The novel alternates between present day encounters of Alex and the journal writings of Theodore. The alternating between past and present where the stories have overlapping themes and connections is a trope that is found in modern American Jewish literature, perhaps best embodied by Dara Horn and Nicole Krauss. This novel seeks to enter that conversation about how discoveries about the past can help or hinder modern Jews from understanding their own identity and their relationship to the Jewish people. The novel also aims to take up the example set by Sholem Aleichem in *Tevye the Dairyman*, where Tevye's daily interactions are deeply fueled by his Jewish learning. Both Alex and Theodore understand the world through their own knowledge of Jewish text. This aims to make the Jewish content of the main characters more substantive than that found in novels that examine secular American Jews who are ambivalent about their Jewishness. The novel is infused by texts ranging from Isaiah 21 to the Netziv's interpretation of the Tower of Babel to Talmudic stories about Rabbi Eliezer. The novel seeks to be a creative synthesis of the author's study of the past five years of the Jewish people through their textual history and their current moment in the United States.

*For Artem and all the kids who made Dayton great*

*For Gran, for unbeknownst being the namesake*

*For Matt, for all the conversation*

*For Anna, for everything*

*“Alright, we got a song called “Dayton, Ohio Nineteen Something and Five for you right now.  
This is a ballad of Guided by Voices from Dayton, Ohio. Not a bad place to visit, not a good  
place to stay.”*

**-Robert Pollard**

## Personal Statement

When I was younger, I wanted to be an author. I think that it's not dissimilar from my desire to be a rockstar. I idealized the glory of the lifestyle and the mythos surrounding it. It seemed to be the peak of hedonistic, artistic living. But when I started seeing low budget, DIY bands performing, I started to notice something. Being a rockstar-- or really just being a regular musician as one has to be before becoming a rockstar-- was grueling, hard work. At every performance, one had to go through the laborious efforts of setting up equipment that is heavy, expensive and finicky. Often they performed in front of an unloving, enthusiastic, unappreciative crowd. If they were lucky, a few people might take note of them and maybe one person becomes a fan. The more I became exposed to the realities of the life of a musician, the more the veneer of glory faded away. This fall, my wife and I saw a friend play a rooftop concert in San Francisco. This friend lives the modern yuppie dream: she has a beautiful apartment, a high paying job at a start-up with benefits that make you want to weep with jealousy, and a close-knit crew of friends. But she is haunted by a desire to be a touring musician. It keeps her up at night. She wants to throw away her comfortable, bourgeois life to tour the country, sleep in a van, play to potentially indifferent audiences, and subsist on a scurvy inducing diet of chips and fast food.

After she finished performing, she leaned over to me, and I could tell her adrenaline was still rushing through her from the joy of performing and said, "you know, Josh, you really have to love this to want to do it." Maybe this should have been obvious

but it helped me make a realization: in order to be a musician, one had to *love* playing music.

This is all to say that this year has been a process of realizing that writing is not a glamor filled activity. It is lonely. It is frustrating. It is exhausting. It involves waking up to work at 6 AM in the heart of winter when you wish for nothing more than to snooze forever. It causes an enormous amount of self-doubt. Writing, in short, is hard work. This has been a year of discovering this over and over again.

At the same time, writing is joyous. This year, I had the amazing and transcendent privilege to devote massive chunks of my time to creating an entire world with its own smells, characters, jokes, etc. I was able to inhabit my characters not only during the writing process but at almost all times. Biking to school, I would become lost in thought as I imagined what might happen to the characters or what made sense for them. The characters started to become utterly real to me. I felt like they were my friends and my confidants as I worked to shape them. Each morning when I would make a cup of coffee and sit down to write was a happy morning. And I know with full confidence that this is a period of my life that I will look back upon with great fondness.

So much of the writing was a balancing act. I wanted to create something that had both a snarky edge and was full of deep meaning. I wanted there to be crude jokes and sentimental moments. And I wanted each of them to feel real and powerful-- but to not overwhelm the other. I also had to figure out how to insert my own ideologies and beliefs without it becoming too heavy handed or feel didactic.

I learned significantly about mentorship. Writing is by nature a solitary activity that locks one in the universe she is creating. It is perhaps the ultimate echo chamber. For this reason, it is so essential to be able to have someone who can come into your closed world and reflect with you openly and honestly. I have been gifted with a truly wonderful mentor and advisor in Dr. Zierler. She has provided me compelling and effective guidance and constantly urged me on. She has been the kind of motivating force that has kept the project going at a consistent pace-- instead of ending up half-formed as so many of my other solitary ventures have gone. I am utterly indebted to her for not only the crafting of this work but also for helping me consider how writing could become a life-long practice. This experience has shaped me permanently and profoundly.

The work that I have spent the last months crafting has been a kind of culmination of so much of my learning and work over the past years. What I sought to do from the beginning had its genesis in Dr. Zierler's class on Modern Jewish Literature. I was struck while reading some of the Yiddish authors, in particular Sholem Aleichem, in how Judaism was utterly infused into the lives of the characters. This was so different from how the overwhelming majority of American Jewish authors write. Part of this no doubt is due to the fact that Yiddish is a Jewish language and English is not. But if one looks at the work of Philip Roth, Jonathan Safran Foer or Nicole Krauss, their work does in fact feel deeply Jewish as do their characters. But the characters do not necessarily exist in conversation with Jewish text, time, and history like Tevye does. What I sought to do with this project was imagine what it would be like if someone like Tevye lived today. This did not mean trying to recreate the shtetl in either 19th century Poland or 21st

century Williamsburg-- but to look down the street in Brooklyn to rapidly gentrifying Bed-Stuy where a young rabbinical student, wrestling with how to live a Jewish life and balance that with his overwhelmingly secular life, could try to figure things out. He wouldn't *not* be a "bagel and lox Jew," but he would be living in relation to the texts and traditions that have structured Jewish life for thousands of years. It has been a joy to explore this character and to bring him to life. The story is by no means autobiographical, though it is inspired by my experience in New York City and as a rabbinical student. It is certainly informed by my identity as Jew from Dayton, and that has been a true thrill-- to connect this experience to some of Dayton's most famous sons, The Wright Brothers.

As to where this story goes next-- this is certainly not the end. I am thrilled that I have made it to over 35,000 words. Based on my amateur research, I have seen 70 to 80 thousand words as an ideal goal for the length of a novel. I do feel that I am almost at a halfway point in the work, and I plan to use the next three months before ordination to craft this into a full novel. I want the main character to continue to explore his relationship with Jewish text and with the text that he inherits from his uncle. The story will take place over three days as he attends classes, makes mistakes, and tries to discover the origin and veracity of this diary. Ultimately, I envision the story ending of a note of real ambiguity about whether the diary is fictitious or not-- and to use this as a meditation on how we deal with truth claims in religion and in our own lives. It will continue to examine how we relate to Jewish history and text in a world that is overwhelmingly secular. The diary will continue to investigate the uncle's relationship with the Wright Brothers and provide his own story a kind of tragic resolution-- but one that also helps



explain fully how Alex's family beyond his uncle make it to Dayton. Ultimately, I wish for the story to end on an optimistic note, because I am an optimist when it comes to the future of Jewish life. I certainly do not know what shape it will take, but to me, the story of the Jewish people is one of a continued existence and reinvention against all odds-- and I have seen nothing that challenges my faith that will continue this. Additionally, I have faith in the future of the liberal Rabbi. Despite all of the challenges that this enterprise faces, I believe that we have a unique role to play in helping Jews to understand their lives as a continuation of the Jewish story however they situate themselves on the spectrum of observance. I hope that this story make a unique contribution. And I hope that it makes people laugh and think. Most importantly, I hope that this story provides a kind of portrayal of a unique moment in American Jewish life that I believe can be best captured in the form of a novel.

*The Brothers Wright: A Novel*

Alex reached into his right pocket, fished out the fingernail sized baggie of coke, and studied it over the page of Talmud. It sat before him, a river of text-- the Mishnah text perched at the river's source with the Gemara flowing beneath it. On its side lay the embankments of Rashi and Tosefot-- there to guide, edify, confuse the embarking sailor. He had opened to the first page of *Brachot*, and wrapped up in inky vines that made up a border was the first word: "מַאֲמִיתִי --When?" From prior learning, Alex already knew the text would go on to investigate a panoply of whens: when does one recite the Shema in the morning, when is too early, when is too late. On the particular morning, though, the word floated there stubbornly-- an inquisitor with a knowing look. "When, Alex, when?" it demanded of him. The word in its brevity and solitude was sufficient to bother him. Since his first days of pimply high school, he felt the ghostly presence of this word: when is too early, when is too late? All his actions-- from leaning in for that first uncertain kiss to debating whether to run to the net to volley after a meandering second serve-- were the site of a great When. The more he could push back on the great When, the better he performed, whether in kissing or high school tennis; but if the great When pushed back, he stumbled on his two right feet.

Which all brought him to the baggie of coke that he held before this page of Talmud. He typically derided the arty Bushwick kids who lined his apartment's sink with coke when Rachel, one of his roommate's, would throw an unannounced but over-attended party. They would steamroll out of the bathroom, pushing the door with

Hulk force, sinking the doorknob further and further into the supple pockmarked white wall. He hated their red eager animal eyes.

“Don’t these fucking kids bother you?” he would ask their other roommate Tim who sat at his desk, the only furniture in his minimalist, closet of a room besides a sunken mattress. Tim, in the middle of one of his interminable coding projects, would slowly turn to Alex, tilt his head ponderously, pause, and then shake his head with a few consistent sharp turns of the chin. Tim would then turn back to his laptop and return to calmly crushing the keys of his keyboard.

Despite his loathing of the Pratt grads and their drug habit semi-knowingly sponsored by some childless great-uncle’s investment in the military-industrial complex, Alex did not loathe coke. He liked the focus and intensity it brought him. It made him feel like the world was his oyster-- all his to scoop out and to inspect in its slimy, treyf richness. He would admire the pathways of veins along his arm, clenching and releasing his fist, as he watched the blood migrate at a pace that he dictated, that he owned. There must be a prayer for this, he thought. But his mind would always get swept away by the strange mechanics of his body to some other topic of fascination.

He unzipped the baggie and turned it upside down on top of the page to unleash a *tohu va’vohu*, a formless mass, of powder. Out of this mess, he would use his pinkie to form a snortable order. A connoisseur of coke he was not, and this would be the first time that he dabbled on his own. His most recent venture into this world was with a college friend named David in the bathroom of Doris, an inexplicably San Antonio- themed bar in Bed-Stuy. David, whose net worth vacillated between zilch and millions due to the

volatility of the start-up world, directed all of the action. The only place where Alex did not follow along was when David lifted and tensed his upper lip and massaged the silky coke residue into his upper lip. There was just something about the garish face that David made that unsettled Alex. He enjoyed the coke without question, but David's face, like a terrifying Pennywise without makeup, was not one he wished to imitate.

He knew: a page of Talmud was an odd staging ground for drugs. He had been sitting in his room for a half-hour of deliberation. The question in this case was not the great When but the more immediate Where. Flat surfaces abounded in his room. In fact, he was sitting down at his very flat desk. And on his very flat desk rested his wallet with a few very flat credit cards-- that after all was David's recommended surface in the Doris bathroom. But a creeping paranoia slithered up Alex. If the coke touched his desk, he was certain it would be discoverable. No matter how Swiffer-ed or Clorox-ed or bleached or hydrogen bombed his desk could be, he knew that his mother possessed a superpower of detection that could outwit all of the lame omniscient characters in comic books. The moment coke touched his desk it would render his desk radioactive to her senses. During her next visit, her Spidey senses would be alerted. She would turn to the desk with those laser eyes of hers that would blind Alex with shame. Though she no longer possessed the ability to punish him by depriving him of watching Power Rangers or driving the family's 1996 Volvo Sedan, her powers to guilt him remained sharp. Coke on the desk would be a fast track to a cavalcade of questions that Alex sought to avoid. The great When stared at him from the page of Talmud-- he did not need his mom to bring electric questions of her own.

As for the credit cards, Alex possessed a similar sense of inevitability: the next time that he walked through security at JFK, the TSA hounds would discover him. On an intellectual level, he knew the absurdity of this. Despite the olive tint of his skin in the summer, he still benefited from all of the white privilege that had been forbidden to his great-grandfather but allowed in increasing increments to subsequent generations-- such that he would never be stopped and frisked and he could almost certainly make it through security with actual cocaine.

All of that aside, he knew further that TSA could not prosecute him for having snorted coke in the comfort of his Bed Stuy apartment on the first day of his last year of rabbinical school. Yet, his paranoia won out. He was certain that traces of coke on his credit card would trigger a manhunt of Dillinger proportions with images of him posted as flyers on supermarket community announcement boards. So, ix-nay to desks and certainly no to credit cards. Which was how *Brachot* landed in his lap.

Alex hovered over the coke on the page like a distracted toddler playing with sand. He pushed it gently underneath the text box that held the word When and began to form it into a thin line. With his fist clenched and his pinky extended, he could not help but compare his hand's shape to that of his grandfather's when he would wrap a fringe of his tallis around his pinky and lift it in the air as the Torah was raised.

"Zeyde, why do you do that?" Alex had asked as a timorous eight year old. His grandfather turned to him confused.

"Does a Yid need to have a reason for everything? My zeyde used to do it. Maybe his zeyde did it before him and his zayde too? Or maybe that zeyde was trying to block

the sun as it came through the window on Shabbos morning and all the other Yid'n thought he was doing something sacred that some holy rebbe or fool taught him so they did it too? And when they asked him-- 'Yankl, what's with the pinky?' he felt embarrassed and in too deep so he made up something. Who knows, Alex? Don't ask so many questions."

"But Zeyde, you told me that Jews are supposed to ask questions!"

"Yes, sorry. Don't ask so many schmendrick questions."

His grandfather smiled, bent over unnecessarily because time had hunched his body, kissed him on the head.

"Ask lots of questions," he whispered. "Just don't expect easy answers. And the past? It's an uncertain place."

Alex sighed and wished he could ask his grandfather a question or two. He had been gone for two years; life still had an unreal quality that Alex had been hoping would clear like fog when the sun cuts through but the surreality still lingered before him.

Alex formed an orderly line and marveled at his artistry. He was going to wind up rabbinical school with a bang. Of course, he could have picked any old book to use as a snorting surface, but the image of snorting coke from a Talmud appeared too transgressive to pass up. Still, it was not exactly pulling a Portnoy with his beloved chopped liver. This act of transgression would not be pornographic but a private one whose symbolism felt just out of reach of his naming. Was it blasphemy? Was it hilarity? Was it value-neutral? Alex could not put his finger on it, but he knew that he liked the imagery of it. He did not seek to throw his Talmud in a bonfire of euphoric deviance nor

did he seek to wed himself to its obligations. When he was honest with himself, he was not sure what he wanted from this text. So at the very least, he would use it in the most utilitarian way he knew.

Alex leaned forward as if to get into the rhythm of davenning. With eyes peeled, he pushed his nose toward the great When. At the instant when he knew he was within striking distance, he closed his eyes. And as if returning the breath that God breathed into the nostrils of Adam to give him life, Alex breathed in deep the fine white dust.

The particles sped ferociously up his nose. Alex started coughing up angry, sour coughs as he felt the coke make its way into his sinuses- or what he assumed were his sinuses, that part of his ear-nose-and-throat system that flooded with pollen every spring and made life near grass unbearable. He felt that battery acid was covering the back of his throat, and a sneeze came upon him that set his whole body shuddering. He shook his head back and forth, as if trying to knock loose a dybbuk that had settled into him and produced a blubbering sound when he set his lips vibrating one against the other. The coke was overtaking his senses, and he hoped to hold on to a semblance of control.

Alex had been a poor biology student. When he imagined the internal workings of his body, it was an anthropomorphized cartoon with little connection to science's real functioning. He imagined the powder overtaking his blood vessels like a howling Barbarian army unleashing wild yaps as their horses' hooves thundered against the inside of his nose. His blood vessels bore an uncanny resemblance to a brigade of young, tired Woody Allen working at a sterile Midtown job-- panicked at the slightest instability.

Needless to say, the Barbarians kicked Woody Allens' asses. As the coke started to work its magic, Alex imagined himself a barbarian or maybe even a cossack. He was Isaac Babel who in the middle of the night had smashed his Jewish spectacles and striped the beard of his sleeping cossack bunkmate, a semi-Bolshevik Jacob enacting his dreams of violence against Ivan Esau-- fashioning it on to his baby fresh skin-- and riding deep into White Poland. White Poland, he giggled to himself. He loved how coke set his brain aflame, everything firing at double, triple speed. Making connections between the color of the drug and the anti-Bolshevik color of the early 1920s. Nothing genius of course, and something that later on would strike him as humorless and silly. But with all cannons roaring, his manic mind felt like he could tackle all days of *The New York Times*' Crossword Puzzle with ease that might even impress his nonplussed bubbe. He remembered reading how Robert Moses' grandmother used to do multiple crossword puzzles in German and English every morning. Fuck that, he thought, I am electric.

He roared out of his room and the words of the morning prayers came to his lips.

*Modeh Ani l'fanacha*-- Wow, thanks God.

*Melech hai v'kayam*-- King, living and fucking existing.

*Shehechzarta bi nishmati b'hemle*-- that despite all of my drug and burrito consumption and neglect of my health, You let me keep on keeping on

*Rabah emunatecha*-- Not sure what I've done to deserve this, but You seem to have faith that it's worth me keeping on



Alex thought of the preceeding lines in the morning blessings liturgy—Elohai Neshamah—My God, my soul, an acknowledgement of death’s inevitability and hope in resurrection during the messianic age-- that Enlightened Jews before him had cast aside as a) too morbid and b) too shamanistic. He liked the words; he liked the idea of staring death down and hoping for something beyond it. Anyone who had ever biked through midday Manhattan could resonate with the words, “God, who gave me my soul and who plans to take it back,” with their balance of precariousness and hope. One angry MTA turn could bring about your own end of days; and yet, the feeling of sailing down 5th Avenue with Nas on and rejecting every red light, shit, that was a taste of eternal life if he had to say.

He stalked past Tim’s room, the door slightly ajar. Leaning against the crack, he squeezed his left eye shut to sharpen his right eye. Yes, there was Tim, at his desk. Hunchbacked over a hoarder’s worth of notepads, books, and takeout boxes, Tim was working on whatever it was he was always working on.

“You know, Tim, I heard that there’s a weird meteorological...phenomenon today where if you never go outside, your ass will actually merge with your chair. It might be convenient in the short run, but the docs just can’t predict what to expect later with side effects and all,” he said smirking at the door to Tim’s room.

Tim slowly rotated to stare at Alex and crack a slow, deliberate smile.

“Don’t worry, Alex. I’ll take care of my ass. Why don’t you get down to saving the Jewish People?” he responded with measured breaths punctuated by the faintest trace of humor.

“Every day, every dollar,” Alex replied as he brushed off into their kitchen. It didn’t make much sense, he acknowledged, but his earthquake brain delighted in reciting this lame expression. Plus, conversing with Tim meant that one could always push things into the absurd. Tim, with red hair that teetered between Morrissey and Mr. Eraserhead and freckles that dotted his face, had some start-up job that Alex didn’t understand. He was either plastered to his chair or gone for days at a time. Alex once found a plane ticket to Shanghai at the top of the trashcan with Tim’s name on it. Tim never mentioned any trip anywhere let alone to China. His privacy was notorious. In college, he had broken off an engagement and only alerted his friends a few weeks afterwards. Alex remembered his nonchalance when making known news that for most would have been shattering or at least worthy of consternation. Yet, Tim sat nonplussed and continued life like any college junior who hadn’t ended what most assumed would be a lifetime commitment.

Occasionally, Alex would see Tim in his room, undecorated except for a Dali portrait of Jesus’ crucifixion-- an almost comically bleak scene-- gazing out his window into their dorm room’s parking lot that was dotted with a few measly trees. It was the kind of infinite gaze that Alex knew was not Tim’s standard spacing out but actually quite painful. Alex never interrupted or asked, constantly uncertain about what Tim needed from him. A wave of sorrow and concern greeted Tim through awkward expressions of empathy and knowing looks-- did he really need more from Alex? Yet, in those rare moments of sorrow, Alex wanted to interrupt, lay a hand on Tim’s shoulder, grip tightly and give him a grim smile of love or understanding or whatever would ekk out from his

pained expression. He never did-- and the question of whether he ought to have would randomly strike him in the street and fill him with regret.

Rachel sat at the kitchen table- typing away with gleeful fury- every keystroke constructing a nauseating rhythm that set Alex's addled heart into further stress. Her bare feet dangled from her chair, and she turned her heels in circles. Her frenetic energy was simply not what Alex wanted, needed, or desired on this drug altered last first day of rabbinical school. Rachel, who at 5'2 managed to tower over anyone, had a buoyant intensity that lit up her oak brown eyes that she regularly had to migrate her curly hair out of in order to see. She gazed up at him, held his eyes for a bruisingly long two seconds, and burst into manic laughter.

"What the fuck, Rachel? It's 7:54 AM on a Monday, and I'm already worthy of your mocking laughter?" he asked with faux-exasperation that did not fully hide the fact that he was in a perpetual state of exasperation with her.

"Really, cokehead rabbi? Really?" she said with a smirk as elegant as the Brooklyn Bridge.

"Fuck. Is it that obvious?" he wondered out loud.

"Maybe a less informed person might assume it's your religious intensity-- that you're some kind of Baal Shem Tov of Brooklyn-- eyes lit up with your unwavering passion to serve the Almighty, just more bloodshot than lit up, I suppose. Or some unsuspecting tourist might think you a Jewish DeNiro, as they desperately try to snap a pic of you to let their Instagram followers know that New York isn't dead and that they found the real Taxi Driver, and that it turns out, the psychopath is a Jew!"

“Jesus, Rachel. Is there a way you could possibly lay it on a little less thick?”

“Oh, sorry, Alex. It’s just that...aren’t you supposed to be some kind of spiritual or ethical guide and here you are, how do I put it...high as fuck?”

“Give me a brea--”

“And plus, you’re always such a prick about my friends and their drug habits. If I remember correctly, weren’t you drunker than a Lubavitcher last weekend, shouting about how they need to learn to just *experience* life without ‘bullshit’ mediating factors.”

“Okay, I would say that it’s an unfair characterization of a larger argument about social media and technology.”

“I think your exact words were ‘coked up, trust fund, gallery vultures?’”

“I may have gone a little over the top, I’ll admit it,” Alex exhaled through his teeth.

Rachel turned back to her laptop, rattling away.

“So nu, Rachel,” Alex leaned on the table with his elbows and cradled his head like a lovesick teen, “what bullshit scheme are you working on today?”

“Oh, excuse me for being entrepreneurial,” she snorted back.

“Come on, I just want to know about your newest project,” Alex smiled.

“Fine. I am working on a program where we match people to their family nigguns,” she explained with a look somewhere between exasperation and glee.

“The fuck does that mean?” Alex asked with genuine confusion.

“Well, you know how different places have different traditions? The Jews who live near us don’t wear visible socks but some in Borough Park look like they’re getting ready to audition for *Cats*?”

“Sure.”

“Different shtetls also have their own song traditions. And some of the nigguns have survived and been recorded by ethnomusicologist grad student weirdos or there’s musical notation somewhere.”

“So, you do what?”

“People write us and tell us their family background. Where the family comes from, surnames, maybe they might have heard from their grandfather that his grandfather’s grandfather was a hasid of some rebbe. And I research and find the music that connects to them. You know how some goys like having their family symbol? They write into some bullshit company, and they get some pseudo-fictional “family crest.” This is basically that.”

“And what happens when someone writes in that their family was from some backwater town in Austro-Hungary with nothing to account for. Like my people are from Presov-- there’s no way there’s a Presover niggun.”

Rachel looks at him like a teacher who can’t believe that she has to answer the student’s question about who is buried in Grant’s tomb.

“Oh my god!” Alex exclaims. “You fucking make it up!” He starts laughing maniacally. “You take advantage of these poor fuckers who are trying to make sense of

their white-bread Jewish selves by connecting to something authentic in the past, and you fucking make them pay for it. You are why people hate us!”

“Relax, cokehead rabbi. I don’t *make* it up.”

“What do you do?”

“You remember Jerome from the party week? Short dreads, short guy, lots of rings?”

“Yeah?”

“Well, turns out that he loves klezmer type music. So, I pay him some of the money, and he makes something up and records it in his basement. He crinkles candy wrappers or something to give it that shitty recording background noise and then loops it.”

“Jesus Christ, Rachel. You’ve really outdone yourself. Some non-Jewish, black dude who wears a distressing number of rings is creating “authentic” hasidic music?”

“Oh, get off your high horse, Alex. If I had a quarter for every made up Jewish folk tale or aphorism you blurt out to try to impress gullible A E Phi NYU girls...”

“Come on! That’s different!”

“Really? Really? And plus, what’s the big deal? These people want roots, and sometimes you know what, the roots just aren’t there. Their town probably had something distinct-- but then Hitler or Stalin or some blood curdling Cossack pulverized it into the soil. They might never find something tangible that links them to the past. I’m giving them something!”

“You’re deceiving them, Rachel! You’re tricking them into believing in a past that doesn’t exist!”

“Let’s just call it...musical midrash, cokehead rabbi. You’re probably late. I’ve got work to do. Hey! Maybe you can find these people’s family folk stories!”

“You’re evil, and you’re right, I am late,” Alex huffed as he grabbed his backpack and bike helmet to hustle out the door.

“Offer’s on the table, Al!”

Alex, against the deepest and most heartfelt wishes of his mother, had become that most obnoxious of species: a New York City biker. Now, he always liked to qualify, he didn’t publically identify as a biker or consider it an essential part of his identity. He also wasn’t anything like the stereotype: he had never ridden a fixie-- whenever he saw bikers flying down the Williamsburg bridge, feet perched on the seat like a nausea inducing yoga pose, pedals turning and turning unpedaled with the mania of a malfunctioning robot, he felt the kind of fear he assumed his mother felt when she imagined him biking: a certainty that immediate and painful death was a divot in the asphalt away. He also wasn’t like the bike messengers whose leg muscles had more dips and indentations than a muscled skeleton med-school prop and who cut in and out of demonic traffic. They were maniacs. Alex was a law abiding bicyclist. He pedantically reprimanded bikers heading the wrong direction with the occasional eye roll; he never soared through red lights like the fixies or bike messengers-- he labored his way through, checking left and right like he used to do while walking his parents’ dog to the

neighborhood playground and only doing so when he knew that he could fall down, tie his shoe and comfortably get up without even the most remote risk of death. So not precisely a law abiding biker-- but in the animal world of NYC bikers, he belonged a more cautious sub-species than most of his bike-riding peers. Yet, he acknowledged that in the larger animal kingdom of New York-- there was no differentiation. Just as a lamb does not make note of the specificities of the wolf that stands prepared to envelop it with jagged jaws, pedestrians or drivers or even other bikers did not truly care who *kind* of biker you were. Like most things in New York, it was a war of sorts-- a language without words or apologies, a land that devours its inhabitants. Yet, as opposed to the 12 spies, no one in NYC thought of himself as a grasshopper. Part of the New York narcotic was the possibility of power, sitting right around the corner. One could become a giant at any moment-- and this ego inducing concept made transportation a war of grasshoppers who considered themselves giants. Alex loved this part of New York. The close quarters, the intensity, the friction. Those who did not understand had just never ridden their bike through a sea of tourists on the Brooklyn Bridge, bumping shoulders with Spaniards and pissing off Germans and howling at Hassids for being in the way, had never descended low into the city-- City Hall within reach of your fingertips and the East River asking you to dip your toes in. Or maybe those who did not understand just did not have the right money or the right drugs. Alex certainly lacked the money. But he always had a bike and he often had what promised to be the right drugs.

Yet, Alex also feared the randomness of New York and the fact that all of its intensity could turn on you in an instant. On his way out of the apartment, he saw two



notifications from DNAinfo-- a local news site of questionable origin but decent repete: "5 dead and 15 wounded as MTA bus crashes in Flushing" and "7 Year old boy dies after goal post collapses on him in Hell's Kitchen." Jesus, he thought to himself. In one moment, the fun and frolic can go very, very far south. Alex stood on his stoop and fastened his neon-yellow helmet. His efforts to buy a hipper bike helmet had collapsed when he had imagined his mom as a cartoon character on his shoulder, citing statistics about bike fatalities and their relation to the visibility of the biker. Feeling like the same twelve year old who headed to his middle school's nature camp with an industrial package of bug spray and a spare flashlight for his spare flashlight, Alex went the way of caution and picked a color that could turn the stomach of a morning hangover.

Another factor that went against him was the fact that he did not ride his own bike. He used the city's bike share program-- joining the ranks of businessmen sweating through their suits and Dutch tourists perplexed by the city's dissimilarity to their homeland's gracious love of biking. After having two bikes stolen from outside the rabbinical school, he decided enough was enough. The citiBikes must have weighed about the same as those two dearly departed bikes combined, and a few citiBikes combined and stripped for their parts could provide proper armor for a military Humvee. They were clumsy, ugly things-- the gears skipped, the bell emitted a measly wisp, and the breaks required desperate squeezing to stop. The fact that there had not been more citiBike related casualties or injuries astounded Alex every time he almost rear-ended a car when his breaks were less effective than he had hoped.

Grabbing a bike from one of the ugly, Star Trek docks, Alex began his commute into the city. He headed down Bedford Avenue where the edges of Bed Stuy's historically black and rapidly gentrifying blocks met the expanding radius of Williamsburg's Satmars. He turned left onto Flushing Avenue and weaved in and out of the 18 wheelers and trucks, occasionally popping onto the sidewalk to get ahead of the logjam of cars. Alex always loved riding through this part of Brooklyn. There was something about seeing all of the Yiddish, the beit midrashes, shtreimels and sheitels that made him feel at home. He breathed in the Fiddler on the Roof nostalgia while acknowledging that much more divided him from the Hassidim than united them. Yet, there was something about their public and unambiguous Jewishness that helped him understand why secular, twice-a-year Jews tripped over their feet to donate to Chabad. The irony of the fact that his studies as a non-orthodox rabbinical student would appall them was not lost on him. He had read the recent statement from the Chief Ashkenazi Rabbi of Israel that put him in the same camp as Nazis. But didn't his grandfather used to call his own brother-- who had defied years of Jewish Democratic tradition by becoming a Republican-- a "fucking Nazi who deserved to have his foreskin stapled back on?" They still managed to break challah together and loved each other with a fierceness where a hug teetered on the edge of Greco-Roman wrestling. They ate together and sat at the same table. There was the ghost of their mother's insistence on family's importance to goad and guilt them. A common history was so recent-- and despite their diverging political views, they shared a common set of experiences rooted in the streets of their native Dayton. What did Alex really share with the Satmars? He could create a list of

textual and ritual commonalities-- though he was not sure if they would agree on the list. All of this filled him with a strange sadness and longing for intra-Jewish connection. Undoubtedly, the coke was still hard at work-- intensifying the neurons that fired in his head and heightening his sentimentality. Still to him, it felt that if he could just create some kind of connection with them, it would bring a bit of goodness into the world. He never liked the Kabbalistic idea of the shattered vessels that needed to be reunited to make the world whole-- but in his heightened state, Alex could sense the ripped seams in the world and enjoyed the thought that he could be the one to sew some of them back together. What if I am the messiah, he wondered to himself-- but before the question could summon an answer, a horn sounded and pierced his contemplation.

“Alright, alright,” he shouted and raised his left hand in a faint apology. He pedaled onward through Williamsburg’s factories and designer lofts and laughed at his messianic stalling of traffic. He made his way onto the Williamsburg bridge, an uphill climb on the kind of mountains only found in New York City. The East River laid out before him with the occasional cargo ship cutting through the water. Glancing over, he saw the shores of Williamsburg. This was no idyllic waterfront space. An old gutted factory stood proud amongst all of the high rise construction, a stark relic of the city’s industrial past. Everyone dated their time in New York in relation to specific changes that occurred within the city. Some still wept over the now vanquished Ebbet’s Field with the Dodgers having been banished West by Robert Moses’s recalcitrance; others recalled the blackout of ‘77-- the younger ones the blackout of ‘04. September 11 had of course left an indelible mark on the city and its residents. One only needed to pass by a fire station to

see the names-- Italian, Irish, Spanish mostly-- of those who never made it out of the Towers to know that that day left a decisive split of Before and After. Alex remembered watching from a classroom in Dayton with the rest of his stunned class. But he always knew that their sense of time's division paled in comparison to those who were in the City. His freshman roommate, Steven, usually a parody of a New York stoicism, would even get a distant look in his eyes whenever the anniversary came around. Alex never asked him any questions though his curiosity did burn around what happened to make his unflappable roommate's eyes fill with sadness.

And of course, everyone he knew divided time based on Williamsburg's before and after. Some recalled its middle class Jewish (though pre-Satmar) days, others its alleged desolation in the 80s, others its rise as a hipster paradise, others its transformation into some kind of hipster Disneyland. And those who had most recently made their way to the City now saw a suburb of Manhattan with impossibly expensive cocktails and condos. Alex loved his daily rides across the bridge that afforded him a view of this ever changing neighborhood. There was something about that last gutted factory building that made him feel grounded. No matter what kind of existential terror swept across him in the middle of the night about meaning or the future of the Jewish people, it was reassuring to know that some things did not change. The irony of all of this was that he knew that the factory was not long for this world. Its land was simply too valuable to just sit ugly and unused. The best case scenario was that it would be fully gutted and transformed into sleek lofts with the rustic shell still surrounding it (anyone with half a brain knew that its chances of being turned into affordable housing was as likely as Elvis'

return from the Bermuda Triangle). Probably though it would be knocked down and a garish building plucked right out of Miami Beach would take its place.

“Fuck!” Alex screamed as he almost ran over an old Hasid listening to a Walkman. “*Lundsman, bitte!*” The old Hasid had made his way over, like thousands of tourists and locals before him, onto the bike-only path of the bridge--and Alex, deep in his zonked out contemplation of New York City, had almost turned him into roadkill. Alex knew that it was technically his fault for not paying attention but was still annoyed that the sacred space of the bike path was so routinely profaned. The Hasid kept on walking, his gait slightly hunchbacked but with the occasional skip in his step. The near collision that so rattled Alex had left the Hasid fully undisturbed. Alex’s brain started weaving together thoughts about the danger of New York and the unflappability of the Jewish people, but then shook his head to make the thought fly away. He figured that for the rest of the ride he ought to focus more on the road and less on grandiose contemplations.

The effects of the coke were starting to fade away to his relief, regret and shame. The more that his brain returned to a place of normality, the more he had to deal with the plain fact that on an overcast Monday morning in the year 5778 in his 29th year on this green earth, he had willfully and with great purpose snorted coke off of a page of Talmud. It wasn’t the blasphemy that bothered him-- he got an extra kick out of using an Artscroll volume with, in the words of his curmudgeonly almost certainly atheistic bible professor, its decent footnotes but theology for Neanderthals. Plus, he now didn’t have to deal with the anxiety of the drug’s traces being in a place that his mother could easily

access. But it was just the sheer fact of doing a drug that ten years ago so greatly disturbed him when he saw it being snorted by bug-eyed lacrosse players from New Hampshire. And in the morning? What kind of rogue behavior was that? He always tried to remind himself that whatever his predilection for brown liquor, the fact that he never consumed it in the morning kept him out of the camp of alcoholism (the veracity of this he never sought to investigate). But coke? That was taking degeneracy to another level entirely. He shrugged to himself that he just needed a little extra oomph on this beginning of the end of rabbinical school--but couldn't he have just ordered one of those coffee drinks requested with extra whatever to impress fellow customers with one's gargantuan tolerance for caffeine?

"Whatever," he sputtered to himself as he sailed down the decline of the bridge. It was certainly not his strongest move. But hadn't David told him about his coworkers who would do a bump before a meeting? That was no special occasion. This, Alex considered, was a special occasion. Alex was beginning his final year of training before being catapulted out into the world to serve the long-suffering Jewish people. If that didn't require a bump of some sort, he did not know what would. So with that quick and flimsy self-justification, Alex, like countless Jews of innumerable varieties before him, crossed Delancey and tried to make his mark in the crowded, cavernous city.

The realities of Jewish life in 2016 made for a curious security situation. Often, synagogues would pay lip service to the need to protect congregants with increasing vigilance by hiring an over-the-hill retired cop who could sit at the entrance on a shul,

playing some mind-numbing cell phone game involving crushing zombie heads or blowing up ice cream cones while gracing enterers with a perfunctory nod and grunt. Hebrew Theological--which sat proudly on Houston along with gustatory compatriots like Russ and Daughters and Yona Schimmel's--had adopted a labyrinthine security structure. One had to scan his ID at the first door, the second door, and then at a subway turnstile-like contraption. Only at this point would one receive the nod-and-grunt from the disgruntled ex-cop. Alex occasionally wished for a more reliable security presence. After all, with all of the Terminator contraptions, couldn't they hire someone who at least appeared capable of taking down Arnold Schwarzenegger? Alex was convinced that one day some raving neo-Nazi would burst through the doors, hop over the turnstile and inevitably receive the ex-cop grunt-and-nod before lighting up the place with an AK. After that, Jewish institutions would be sure to install a third door or a second ex-cop to calm the nerves of embattled constituents. An earlier effort to arm the security guards had been stopped by a student-led protest. Dan Klein, a Shrek-sized and -looking social justice warrior from the Boston suburbs, had duct taped himself to the turnstile contraption with a sign on top of the duct tape: "No Guns in this HOLY Space." Having worked in some sketchy DC political marketing firm, he knew the right people to call. Before the administration had time to deal with it, reporters from all of the NYC Jewish papers along with eager NYU blogger journalists had shown up pens and recorders drawn.

Dan had orchestrated a ritual involving a few other students where they all wore Tallises and surrounded him. They then drew out lulavs and etrogs-- it was just after Sukkot-- and started pacing around the duct taped Dan.

“What do we want?” he bellowed out.

“A Sukkat Shalom!” they responded with eagerness that tapped into their college protest experience.

“What do we not want?” he cried.

“A Sukkot Milchama!” they responded.

Alex loathed Dan’s self-assurance and pomposity. Yet, he had to admit that this was a brilliant move. He had orchestrated a clever media event. He had created a perplexing Jewish ritual that the faculty would lap up like dehydrated dogs. It was a New York Jewish masterstroke.

“No Guns at Hebrew Theological! We are Jewish and Responsible!” they chanted. Goddammit, Alex thought. Even the slant rhyme was creative enough to get written up in adoringly in the *Forward*.

The next day, the administration issued a gushing press release where they spoke glowingly of the student body and made a few general references to Jewish responsibility and non-violence. They admitted that they were wrong to cave into fear and that their obligation was to be a light unto the nations and a positive representation of Jewish life in NYC. They didn’t want the more radical brigades of Jewish leftists to start calling them out for being “settlers” or anything that could bring more bad press to Hebrew Theological. The administration had discovered that their most sustainable route was the



milquetoast one. They spoke out when risks were low and consensus was high and sought to avoid any press that might give heart palpitations to their rapidly aging donor base. Needless to say, the plan to arm the ex-cops vanished overnight.

Alex entered the brutalist building that must have appeared cutting edge in the 70s but now had absorbed the city grime that glazed so many buildings. Making it past the security structure that depressed him, Alex walked in to see his only real friend in the school, Gabe, sitting nervously at a bench underneath the new art exhibit, *NotSi: Linguistic, Ritual, and Artist Creativity of Haim Ben Aretz*. Ben Aretz's signature move was to misspell key phrases on critical documents of Jewish history: Israel became YesRail, Amidah became UmMeDuh-- and Gabe sat under his masterstroke: a 14 by 24 foot portrait of Hitler exploding at a speech with his eyes directed at the viewer with the word "NotSi" written above in semi-Semitic script. The curator's explanatory description said something about how Ben Aretz connected the xenophobia of the current political climate to the hatred espoused by Nazis. She wrote, "if we can *Not* say *Si* to love and justice--then we will perish as a national project."

"Alex, Alex, Alex," Gabe chattered. "Is it not hard enough to be a Yid in 5778 that I must also sit at my own rabbinical school underneath a picture of fucking Adolph Hitler? I've said it before, but this time that psycho curator Linda has really lost it. What kind of stupid narishkeit is this?" Gabe, originally from Madison, Wisconsin, spoke a kind of Woody Allen based patois sprinkled with key Yiddishisms he had learned from one semester of college Yiddish. He even adopted Yiddish syntax for maximum effect. His Moscot glasses and sky blue Oxford shirt completed the picture of not the kind of

New Yorker who never got over the shuttering of CBGBs but the kind who never got over the fact that Cinema Village on 12th Street did nothing to acknowledge its glorious past as a Yiddish theatre. “It’s probably owned by fucking Jews, Alex. Fucking self-hating, leftist, Republican, Nazi fucks,” Gabe exclaimed whenever they passed by--exploding with his nonsensical slurs. Yet, Gabe occasionally fell into Midwesternisms in softer moments: his o’s would extend and everything would get a plural s. But Gabe had dreamed of being a New Yorker since he used to watch *West Side Story* as a seven year old.

“They’ve really outdone themselves this time,” Alex admitted. “How was your summer?”

“Terrible.”

“Why am I surprised?” Alex asked with a smile. “And nu, how was the Birthright trip you led?”

“Do I even need to answer that? The only highlight was jerking a guy off in one of those fake Bedouin tents.”

“You jerked off a participant??”

“No, Alex-- what do you think I am? Some kind of deviant? It was a soldier. *Dati Leumi* no less.”

“Very impressive--you’ve started your mass conversions?”

“He was a freak. Kept saying afterwards that he needed to do *Netillat Yedayim*, and we’re in the goddamn Negev. He stole some Scarsdale girl’s Nalgene. She couldn’t find it in the morning and then threw a real fucking fit. Uri--that’s the *Dati Leumi*

homo--started panicking and then screamed in the face of one of Bedouin camel guides. It was a real scene.”

“So all the kids are real Zionists now, no?”

“Who knows? They did all the normal shit: covered their bodies in mud at the Dead Sea, got sloshed in Tel Aviv, gave the DisKotel some wet kisses. The last night, they bawled their eyes out. Mission accomplished, you might say,” Gabe said with a sly smile and two comically overdone thumbs up.

“So, it’s our last year. Can you believe it?” Alex asked.

“I’m panicking, Alex. I don’t know how I can handle this. And with Hitler gracing us? I already hate being back here.”

“Yeah...Wish I had something reassuring to offer you-- other than the fact that we’re almost liberated from the esteemed Hebrew Theological.”

“Hebrew Thereisenstadt,” Gabe muttered under breath.

“Yo, Alex!” a voice called out. Alex glanced around and saw that it was Carlos-- one of the maintenance staff who all allegedly came from the same village in the DR. Like so many Jewish institutions, Hebrew Theological had a complex and occasionally fraught relationship with its maintenance staff. High on high fives and fist bumps but low on any kind of genuine friendship or engagement. Carlos always asked about Alex’s fantasy football team, forgetting Alex’s perpetual response that he had, to his surprising shame, never indulged his curiosity about fantasy sports. Carlos had a ragged package in his hands and tossed it to Alex.

“This has been waiting for you all summer.” Alex glanced at the mass mail package-- painstakingly addressed to him in the kind of script that one learned in a 1940s public school. In the center was his name and the address of Hebrew Theological; the top corner was his Great Aunt Mina’s name and Dayton address. He was puzzled to get something from her. Mina was the estranged aunt who lived like a hoarder in an old house in the formerly Jewish North Dayton. Something happened involving a family business in the 80s which made it so that the family feud outdated Alex, and he never thought to broach the subject with his parents. She came to the occasional family function. He remembered her sitting at the back of the congregation at his Bar Mitzvah with the kind of hat he now saw exclusively on the Brooklyn ladies on their way from church on Sundays. She was certainly an odd one.

“Thanks, Carlos-- sorry about the Mets,” Alex offered-- knowing the Carlos’ long-suffering Mets had another season of coming far short of expectations.

“Always next season,” Carlos offered as he walked away.

“This is so weird,” Alex began. “Aunt Mina is the like the crazy aunt everyone has who no one talks to. I’m not sure what she’s doing writing to me. I hope there’s no anthrax in here.”

“Sounds like my Aunt Rochelle. We call her “Bonebags” which I have to admit is not that nice. She’s 97 or something-- I’ve lost count-- and crushes a glass of vodka with ice daily. She picked that so everyone would think that she was staying well hydrated. Anyways, my dad doesn’t talk to her for some reason that’s lost on me.”

Alex pulled out his apartment keys and sawed open the package to find a blue file filled with typed pages. Outside of it was an envelope with his name written out and a law firm's name at the top, *Frier, Tarrafalo, Guttman, and Hultz*.

"Did the Dayton police department get tipped off to some of your youthful improprieties? They heard about the bottle of vodka in your parents' basement that's now mostly water? Or that your high school's band original songs secretly to you but unbeknownst to your six adoring fans all had the same chord progressions?" Gabe teased.

"What the..." Alex stumbled out in true wonderment. He massaged the envelope open and pulled out a typed letter.

Frier, Tarrafalo, Guttman, and Hultz

East 300 4th Street

Dayton, Ohio

July 14th, 2017

Dear Mr. Bernstein,

I send my deepest and most heartfelt condolences to you upon the passing of your great-aunt, Mina Schwartz. In my short time working with her, I saw that she was a truly remarkable woman who was deeply proud of you, your accomplishments, and your career choice.

She asked specifically that I send this to you and to you alone in the event of her death. I do apologize if her script on the outside of the envelope gave you a start-- she just had made it out several years ago and was adamant that I not alter a thing.

That being said, enclosed you will find the journals of her father, Theodore Tannenbaum, per her request. She seemed to think that you would get more pleasure from them than anyone else in your family.

At your earliest convenience, please confirm receipt of the package by calling me. They are some other things related to her will that Mina asked that I discuss with you only over the phone.

With Kindest Regards,

Rick Tarrafalo

enc. "Journals of Theodore Tannenbaum, 1899-1905"

Alex sat gobsmacked. He handed the letter over to Gabe to give himself a moment to collect his thoughts. Mina was dead? How had no one told me? Jesus, what a bad nephew I am, he thought to himself, I should have visited her the last time I was in town. Alex tried his best to digest all of the news. A belated wave of sadness hit him

accompanied by a trace of guilt that sadness had not been his first reaction. The sadness was intellectual-- he recognized that sadness was an emotion he ought to feel in light of the death of a family member, but it was not an organic sensation that emerged from his stomach. He remembered forcing himself to cry as an eight year old when his dad's father died suddenly. More distinctly, he recalled the terror that set upon him when he thought that he might not be able to summon the proper emotion. For weeks, guilt wracked him. He couldn't believe what a bad grandson he was. He kept his closet door open just in case some ghostly act of metaphysics brought his grandfather back from beyond and placed him puzzled in Alex's closet. For Alex, this was a tremendous act of repentance as most nights pre-sleep he was consumed by a terror of what might be beyond that closet door. Yet, this time he invited his grandfather in, leaving himself prey to whatever Freddy Kruegers or Jasons or horror villains he had caught glimpses of on VHS cases in Blockbuster might elect to come in.

"Why did she leave you a journal?" Gabe asked.

"I have no idea. I don't even know anything about her father. And Theodore?"

Alex pondered still shellshocked.

"Probably one of those highfalutin names that Jews thought made them more America: Seymore, Maurice, Bernard-- that now feel like they could only be names of Yids."

"So fucking typical of my family. Not telling anyone about a death. Keeping a journal secret. What's wrong with us? Total dysfunction."

“Alex--that’s nothing. Last year, my mom sent 27 texts before her plane took off with instructions about where she had hidden jewelry in the house in case the plane took off. She included precise burial instructions! Even what song she wanted to have played at the beginning of the funeral!”

“What was the song?”

“ ‘Dance With Somebody.’ ”

“The Whitney Houston song?”

“Yep.”

“Wow.”

“And she demanded that I be the one to sing it. Point is, Alex, our people’s families are chronically dysfunctional. Abraham almost murders Isaac without getting permission from Sarah to take him out for a hike. Rebecca conspires with one son to betray her husband and another son. Joseph’s brothers steal his dope ass coat, sell him into slavery, and trick his father who spends the rest of his life distraught. We are not normal. It goes back to the beginning.”

“Yeah, but...” Alex exhaled. “This feels like new territory for my family.”

“What do you think is in the journal?” Gabe wondered.

“No idea. I know nothing about this Royal guy.”

“So nu? Let’s take a look.”

Alex normally would have requested some privacy to look at what was a family heirloom of sorts. But the bizarreness of the day--and the coke still leaving its faint traces



on him--pushed normal reactions to the side. He opened the folder to find another letter inside.

“Another letter?!” Alex shouted. “What the fuck? Is this some kind of Umberto Eco novel?”

“Dude, chill. It’s probably your aunt explaining how you ended up with this folder. Maybe it will give you some clarity. Sometimes clarity can be the first step in our own healing,” Gabe said with a growing softness in his voice as he turned his head sympathetically toward Alex. Alex grimaced back at Gabe.

“Don’t try that hospital chaplain bullshit on me,” he demanded.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I just feel bad that I was a criminally bad chaplain. I’m trying to, you know, spread the spirit out in other parts of my life.”

“Gabe, you know that makes no sense.”

“Whatever, just open the letter.”

For the second time in one day, Alex was opening a mysterious letter whose contents he could not even predict. Occasionally, he lamented that all he received from the postal service was junk solicitations from charities he had given the occasional \$18 to. Today, he wished that he were just opening an offer to raise the credit limit for a credit card he didn’t own. This was more excitement than he needed on this last first day of rabbinical school.

Once again, he massaged open this envelope and pulled out a hand-written note that matched the writing on the outside of the package. With Gabe’s head virtually on his shoulder, the two of them read together.

*Dearest Alexander,*

*If you're reading this, I am as dead as a doorknob. If that stupid lawyer followed my instructions, I should also be cremated. If he had me buried, I need you to track down my grave, disinter me, and burn my body. Thank you kindly in advance.*

*Of all of the narcissists, manic depressives, and other disabled people in our family, you were the one who always gave me a little bit of hope. And for some reason, you care about being a Jew. I don't understand why you want to stick to our dusty, primitive, Levitical backwardness, but I admit that I respect your dedication. For those two reasons, I have bequeathed to you in the event of my timely and inevitable death the diaries of my father-- your great-grandfather's brother. I found them when I moved into the retirement home on Salem Avenue, glanced through them, thought they were trash but then figured out that your liberal arts brain might enjoy this.*

*Enjoy the diaries. Make sure to donate to the animal shelter on 5th Street. And if you see your Aunt Selma, tell her she still owes me \$85 for that kitchen table she bought from my house. Tell her she can give the money to you. Also, I still have some gift certificate credit at Mama Disalvo's. I know their eggplant parmesan upset your stomach when you were younger, but I would hate for it to go to waste.*

*With love from the grave (I always wanted to write something like that),*

*Mina*

“I have to admit,” Gabe started. “I always knew that all Jewish families were unhappy in their own unhappy way-- but maybe your family takes the cake? This is real dysfunction.”

“Tell me about it,” Alex replied. The strangeness of this package loomed over him with a stark physicality, he felt its claws coming to rest on him. He shook his head as if to dislodge the familiar spirit of Jewish familial madness that had begun to take shape. He opened the folder and began to read.

*December 12, 1899*

*Dayton, Ohio*

*When I am asked what drew me to Dayton, I supply that old American answer that so many gallant boys have supplied: the desire to go West. While I never made it as far as Colonel Custer, Dayton is further West than I or any of my predecessors have stood (excluding the possibility that our Hebrew ancestors were none other than this country's own Native Americans). I sought simply to move outside of the expectations of my family and head somewhere new. Thus, I have found myself in this "Gem City," as it is fondly labeled by its appreciators. Sitting on the banks of the Ohio River, we are no Cincinnati with its steamboats, nor are we a Chicago with its networks of trains that rival Vienna. We are a small but proud city. And I am happy to be counted as one of its residents.*

*Some of my friends from Kehillath Jeshurun looked at me askance when I explained my plans to depart. I explained simply that I had seen an ad for a doctor to join the faculty at the newly-opened Dayton Hospital and felt that this was a chance to see some of the greener pastures of America. They wondered, "Theodore, why don't you work with your father at Beth Israel?" I explained that I sought to be Huck Finn, not boxed in by Manhattan's grids. Few, of course, knew the strain that accompanied being the son of Simon Tannenbaum and following in his career footsteps. His accomplishments were celebrated by all part of civil society, Jewish and Gentile. I made the simple calculation that my skills were no match for his ingenuity. And to make a name*

*for myself, I had to leave the Gilded City. My father is a great man. But I could not stand to be the mediocre son of a great man. I needed to be my own man with my own name. So, I called out from the depths, as King David once did, and Dayton answered.*

*I miss my dear brother Adolph, whose ink stained hands continue to churn out daily papers and all sorts of political pamphlets. He has a genius for color that I admire. It is the magic of our Great Civilization that works that had to be arduously copied by hand can now be produced at the snap of the finger. I kid Adolph that his work seeks to put onto the street the pious scribes whose gnarled hands produce our sacred scrolls and our Holy Torah. He is less pious than our father-- I once caught him pacing outside of the Reformers' Temple, Emanu-El. So perhaps he will welcome the modernization of our ancient methods. That said, I do worry about the effect of all all those noxious fumes-- the paint and the smoke. I once walked the aisles of printshop with him and felt a grueling ache in my head after leaving.*

*And I of course miss our dear sister Stella, the Bohemian. She works as a secretary, but I know she is wont to head up to Harlem to dance with Negroes to their screaming jazz or downtown to listen to the ramble of the bums on the Bowery. What most enraged father was knowing that she occasionally joined radical Yiddishists to hear them speak poetry or politics. Father abhorred their corruption of good German and found alien their revolutionary aims. Life, after all, was much better for us than is Presov. Wasn't it all the more so for the Jews who had escaped the clutches of the Czar and his Cossacks?*

*I suppose we have all wounded father in our own way, though that may be the eternal role of children that we simply now hold up. His displeasure was silent but clear when I told him of my planned departure. Our dear mother Johanna might have helped soften the edge, but alas, she had been taken before her time and had left my father alone with his Germanic rigidity. We too have some of his qualities, but we had also breathed in American air at an early age, since we left Presov when all of us were younger than six. That air filled our lungs and changed us from the Tannenbaums that had preceded us. We were a new species, a new kind of Jew. Our father did not labor to understand us, just mostly scoffed at our departure from his ways.*

*Now, to the present question: why have I started this journal? I simply seek to preserve a legacy of what brought me from the East to the Middle West, so that future generations may have a chance to understand who I was, which in some ways informs who they will be. Will they be Jews in Dayton? Will they convert after being awed by the auspicious Church of St. Albert's on Brown Street? Will they migrate back to New York? Will they return to Palestine? The answer is as unclear to me as was the future of the stiff-necked Hebrews for Moses our Rabbi.*

*I also seek to keep a record because I feel that I am in the presence of the great sweep of History's right hand. As we prepare to turn into this next century, I stand in awe at all the auspicious changes that this moment brings. I have even heard from Tibor, a cousin in Presov, that the streets' gas lamps have been replaced with electric ones. Some of the doctors here in Dayton speak of the changes that will come with the telephone. So many of us are experiencing the grandiose developments of modernity-- yet, I feel*

*uniquely privileged to see the inching along of history happen just down the street from me. Since I moved to Hawthorn Street, I have been struck by the figures of two brothers-- not twins I am told-- who exist perfectly in sync: the Brothers Wright, Orville and Wilbur. The two own a bicycle shop on West Third Street. I confess that I have not gone yet, because I fear that I lack the coordination to keep such a contraption from crashing into the Ohio River. I know little about them, they are quiet and courteous, and yet I have started to hear murmurings that the two seek to build a flying machine. As a man of science, I cannot contain my curiosity. Many nights, I have laid awake as the ceiling fan rotates and wondered: how on earth could two-footed man manage to take on the movements of a bird? What are these two brothers building?*

*I have thus resolved to make their acquaintance and find out how these young men seek to build something that to me is simply unimaginable.*

*So I begin this diary, so that others may know who I was, and also, so that others may come to experience these Brothers, whether they fail or succeed. I see this as a record of human travails, an account of our God-given capacity to create something out of nothing and to defy limitations that most seek as unbreachable. Perhaps this is like the Book of Joshua. The old world, like that of Moses, is uncertain. A new generation stands at the forefront. Are we, like the children of Israel, prepared to enter into this perilous new land? Whereas their journey was physical, ours is scientific. I pledge to keep this diary as a testament to us modern Hebrew, by blood or by unknowing affiliation, who stand proudly at the Jordan.*

Alex and Gabe pulled their heads up from the journal in unison. A heavy silence sat between them-- a rare incident for the two loquacious Jews. Drawing in a deep breath, Alex ran his right hand through his thick brown hair and moved from the middle to the side, twirling his finger acrobatically and forming temporary *payes*. It was a nervous habit that he didn't seek to overanalyze but assumed dated back to his more pious predecessors.

"I'm speechless," Alex admitted.

"I understand. You know that I'm not one for thinking before speaking or processing or any of that *mishegas*, but this is...wild."

"This is my...family?" Alex questioned with a sigh in his voice.

"And here I was, talking about BoneBags as if she contributed to some great family epic. All that my family has is that my grandfather used to claim that we were distant cousins of the Rothschilds. Or if he'd had a few martinis that we were Rothschilds. Of course, it was bullshit, but he was insistent."

"I always thought that there were just no records of anyone in my family. No way of knowing what their lives were like or any of that business. All I have is that time at the Holocaust Museum that I searched in their databases for family members. I couldn't find anything, but I convinced my German girlfriend at the time that I did."

"What?"

"Gabe, come on. There were six million of us that bit the dust. It's not that we have a shortage of dead Jews to claim."

"So you picked some random Jew and said it was part of your family?"



“I also may have told her that we were related to Kafka’s lady friend who got sent to the gas chambers.”

“Considering that I make up quotes from the Talmud every other Hebrew school class I teach, I have to say that I am impressed by your manipulation of our people’s suffering.”

“I was, like, twenty! And I was the first Jew she’d ever met! What was I supposed to do?”

“Perhaps not invent dead Jewish relatives?”

“Fair. But I know from our family tree that some cousins were killed! Our family tree has symbols for countries and for if you were killed by Hitler.”

“Well, my family tree has lists of who was killed in the Chmielnicki massacres.”

“Give me a break, Gabe, I’m not bragging.”

“Well, my great-great-great-great-great Aunt was french kissed by Attila the Hun.”

“Gabe, come o--” Alex attempted to change the subject

“And her cousin’s cousin actually had his skin flailed on the same day as Rabbi Akiva!”

“Gabe. Shut the fuck up,” Alex demanded.

Gabe let a smile show and turned his head back toward the pages. He gently took them from Alex’s hands and started to leaf through. The jaundiced, curled pages reminded Alex of his 4th grade pioneer school day project where he dressed in a historically, inaccurate outfit and dipped white pages in a mysterious, sour smelling

liquid that coated his hands and crept under his fingernails. He pulled the page out, imitating the photo developers he saw working their magic transformations in his neighborhood grocery store and saw the page transformed: from a blindingly bright piece of computer paper into something heavier. It felt like he had put the page into a microwave time machine that converted objects into their ancient predecessors. The pages now in Gabe's hands seemed too old and wrinkled to be real.

"But seriously," Gabe started. "This is...remarkable. Like, really remarkable. I would give anything to find something like this. I would make a *neder* to the Kadosh Barchu that I would never ever ever jerk off a closeted Israeli soldier in the desert again. I would even promise to never try to sneak a peek at dicks in the bathrooms of 770."

"That's saying something."

"With Hitler behind us as our witness," Gabe said as he gestured to the garish art work behind him. "You really never knew that you had some Alfred Kazin wannabe in your family? Some poet-laureate, Yekke doctor from your beloved hometown who had some kind of gay thing for the Wright Brothers?"

"No-- and Gabe, it's not *totally* clear that he was gay. We haven't even seen the rest of it. I'll have to look at it later. We're going to be late to Levin's class."

"Ah, Meyer Levin. Kid hero of Williamsburg before it put on its big black shtrimel. Street fighter. Stick ball all-star of the 1963 Lee Avenue championship team that took down those bastards from Orchard Street. Teacher of Talmud. Hero among men. Always playing with marbles in his pockets."

"Yeah-- what's the deal with that sound? Is it really marbles?"

“It’s that-- or something *else* if you uh, catch my drift.”

“Jesus. Let’s go. But let’s go up the stairs, I need to tell you something.”

“Is it Tim? Did you see him naked?” Gabe asked excitedly.

“You’ve got some shit you need to work out with your therapist. It’s good that Yom Kippur is so early this year. I think you need a whole section of *Al Cheyts* for your sexual deviance.”

“*Al Cheyt SheChatanu L’fanacha*,” Gabe started in a chant. “For the sin,” he shifted to his solemn deep voiced impersonation of a dinosaur, classical Reform rabbi, “of sexual deviance. Yai bah bai bai bai bah bah bai bai bai,” he continued with the plaintive chant that would soon be on the tongues of all of his classmates in their manic, pre high holiday preparations.

“Okay, okay,” Gabe began with real earnestness in his voice. “*Vos macht a yid?*”

“Okay. You have to promise not to be weird or to judge me. I also need you to not do your bullshit CPE bullshit on me. I just want to have a good, non-hysterical conversation with you.”

“Jesus, what the fuck did you do??”

“I may have, uhm, snorted coke this morning.”

“COKE!?” Gabe howled.

“Shhhh!!!” Alex cried out.

“Relax, relax, we’re in the creepily abandoned stairwell. I think if it weren’t soundproof I would be sued for libel by that dickbag Dan or even in prison. But really, coke? In the morning?”

“I know, it was so fucked. I just had some extra from David, my friend from college, and I don’t know. I just felt, like, really freaked out about this morning.”

“Freaked out, Alex, it’s our last year. We are almost free of the shackles of this ideologically bankrupt shithole! We’ll never have to see rabbinic students weep because they can’t keep straight who the Meiri was or shouting about how Rashi script should fuck itself and become normal readable letters. Never again will we witness the indulgence of “Erev Rav” Shannon Kalin,” Gabe started with a grossly exaggerated Sabra accent, “perform one of her heart melting renditions of the Psalm 23. I think she literally did the splits in front of the Aron last year like she was Springsteen proving how dexterous he is. We’re almost free!” Gabe proclaimed with his arms spread toward the narrow ceiling above the stairs that they slowly ambled up. “Free!”

“I know, I know, look, I’m as happy to leave here as you. Well, maybe not as happy as you are but that’s not really a fair comparison. But, Gabe, come on. It means that we’re no longer in the protective bubble of this institution. Even if it was suffocating, it’s at least given us form and structure and a timeline. Now we’re heading to the end of that...I just find it so open and terrifying.” Gabe put his right hand on Alex’s left shoulder to give it a reassuring squeeze. For all of the nonsense and trash talk that passed between them, they could always move into a space of solemnity and seriousness like shifting a light switch. Gabe started to gently speak.

“Alex-- I get it. I really, really do. You know I hate it here. But I get it. We’ve been in school for 20 odd years now. Even when we finished college, there was the knowledge that it probably wasn’t the real end. But this, this is the real end. Not for Dan

Klein of course, who will be getting his seven PhDs at each Ivy League school, but for us, it's over. We're off into the world."

"It's a lot," Alex admitted.

"Yeah man, it really, really is."

"I know this is going to be hard for you to imagine. But I guarantee that a few years from now, you'll look back on this moment and think to yourself, 'man, that was really the beginning of something exciting.' I know that's hard to believe right now, but Alex, today is the last time we will be here for a first day. And for all the existential fear and career uncertainty that evokes in both of us-- I really think you're going to reflect back on today and think about how it gave the first shapings to a new chapter in your life."

"Gabe--do you really believe that?"

"You know, I acknowledge this comes as a surprise, but I do. For all the times I skipped work at the hospital, I think that working with all of those sick, depressed, *depressing* people gave me some perspective. And it did something even more shocking."

"What's that?"

"It actually gave me some hope."

"Do you hear that, Gabe?"

"Hear what?"

"That rumbling? That can only be the birthpangs before the coming of the Messiah if something managed to make your hopeful," Alex said with a smirk.

“Fuck you, Alex. Excuse me for trying to inject a little bit of positivity into a cruel and meaningless universe.”

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Seriously, I appreciate it. I just still can’t believe that I snorted fucking coke this morning.”

“I’ll admit that’s extreme. But after all, I was drunk for most of last year.”

“Christ. We’re supposed to be the servants of the Jewish people?” Alex asked honestly.

“Come on, Al, if not us, who? These other clowns? Let’s learn some fucking Talmud,” Gabe shouted as he kicked open the door to the fifth floor and the two of them entered with the slightest trace of triumph on their heels.

Meyer Levin paced in front of the silent class as though he were lost in thought. The soon-to-be rabbi students managed to overcome their angst at still being in school with ease that surprised all of them. They all silently felt that it should be they, not Meyer, walking silently in front of a group of people--rousing their curiosity with what brilliant, transformative thoughts were gestating. Yet, their recalcitrance peeled away with ease as Meyer’s rhythmic pacing hypnotized them. For all the diverse shit the students talked about how the school had let them down in each’s unique way, they still entered his classroom with that youthful hope for education’s transformative capacity. And for so many who had grown up without much Jewish learning, this had evolved into an almost mania for how a piece of text, whether from Yehuda HaNasi or Mendele Mocher Seforim, could call out to them from the cavernous Jewish past and rattle their

kishkes with its prescience and eternal relevance. Even Gabe, who assumed that most of his professors were conspiring against him or silently chuckling at his idiocy, took an almost luxurious pleasure from the class. Sure, Meyer's Brooklynese accent and Yiddish inflected syntax had automatically endeared him to Gabe. But his appreciation for Meyer's class was remarkable considering that in most other classes he was answering e-mails from hysterical congregants convinced that their blue blooded Manhattan sons would fail to rise to the occasion as Bar Mitzvahs and that such stumbling could somehow doom their uninterrupted march towards social success. Here, he only occasionally grimaced at an email from the likes of Richard Zuckerman, a board member who worried that in the light of Trump's election there was not sufficient space at the left-leaning synagogue for "counter-narratives." Even Dan paid close attention. Alex and Gabe chalked it up to pure sycophancy. Dan, they assumed, probably wanted an introduction to some of Meyer's connections in the larger academic world-- or just wanted to continue being the star pupil of Hebrew Theological.

"As many of you know, I grew up a few train stops away from here in the old country of Williamsburg. I hear some of you live there now? When I was a kid, I couldn't wait to get the hell out of dodge. You couldn't have paid me to stick around! And now you all want to live there and pay exorbitant rent to live under the grime of the Williamsburg Bridge? I guess the world can change in unpredictable ways. The things my generation took for granted about the Jewish people-- all of those assumptions are out the window. What we took for granted as normal technological advancement? I thought I was in heaven at Columbia when their library's card catalogue system was more

sophisticated than the library on Division Avenue! Well, if you go out there, you can see a sign of the old New York. Everyone knows how Williamsburg is spelled, no?” he asked. The class nodded shyly-- they reflected the kind of shallow confidence where they desperately hoped not to be singled out to provide the answer. It seemed obvious, but no one wanted to embarrass herself in front of Meyer especially when it came to trivia about his shtetl.

“Williamsburg-- W-I-L-L-I-A-M-S-B-U-R-G. G-- full stop. But if you take a stroll around my old world, you’ll often find a lonely “H” at the end. You can find at the library on Division Avenue and a few other places-- maybe the old bank building? So which is it: Williamsburg with or without an “H?” Both lurk in the city. One is more prevalent on the maps that tourists and neophytes use to navigate the city; another left traces on the front of buildings, only to be noticed by spelling wizards or old timers like me. Can there be a correct spelling if both exist? I think this...multiplicity should sensitize us to how truths can exist on multiple levels. It can be here,” he offered quietly as he moved his right pointer finger to the side of his brain. “And it can also be here,” he gestured toward the army of Apple laptops that guarded the students from his Inquisition. “Reality can both be in how I remember-- how I remember the feeling of that stickbat connecting with our only ragged baseball or the burnt smell of my bubbe’s chulent. And it can also be in all of the records, maps, and “accurate” data that modern technology has preserved for posterity. I hope that framing can serve us for our study this year of stories in the Talmud. To what extent ought we try to find the historical truth of the story-- the historicity of the rabbi’s biographies and the real textures of their lives-- and to what



extent should we be looking for how the story answers the question of how to make meaning in our own lives?”

Alex turned to Gabe and Gabe smiled back. For their endless kvetching about Hebrew Theological-- which they had to admit also included the occasional complaints about Meyer’s plaintive openings-- it felt, just, *good* to be here. To be temporarily in a place where the only relevant questions were to be found in the world of the text. They recognized the luxury of being a student at a time when instability consumed most of their lives. This sentiment was not shared by all of their classmates. A quick glance could see their classmates exploring a variety of Web offerings-- Dan was undoubtedly exercising his uncanny ability to maintain eye contact with professors while scrolling through the graduate offerings at a variety of Ivy League Schools; Shannon, her eyes encircled with sleeplessness despite being only the first day, was most likely perusing the job offerings for next year, mentally listing which of her contacts would be advantageous in getting her dream job; the rest of the class engaged in whatever digital world they wanted. In his third year of school, Alex had decided he could no longer sit in a place where he could see his classmates take BuzzFeed quizzes about their Harry Potter house or fire off e-mails to angry congregants. It filled him with a range of emotions-- it usually began with anger about the social impropriety of such behavior, which then transformed into guilt for being consumed with angst about etiquette, then often transforming into fear for the future of the Jewish people if its leaders only possessed the ephemeral ability to focus, and finally into confusion about why he was so worried about the Jewish people-- why didn’t he just go to law school where he could have happily hated his classmates?

He decided that this mental rabbithole had to be more distracting than if he just looked at the New Yorker on his computer. So he went with a new option: sitting near the front so he could be prevented from being a digital eavesdropper.

“This year,” Meyer continued, “is your last at Hebrew Theological. Believe it or not, but I also remember when my time here was winding down and I too faced an uncertain future. I have faith that the school had adequately prepared you for the logistics of what lies ahead-- I know that you will be strong leaders in the vein of Aaron and Moses.” Gabe snorted, and Shannon shot him a vicious glance.

“Sorry,” he silently mouthed to her. “I’m allergic to...the end of summer pollen.” She rolled her eyes and turned back to her computer.

“It is my hope that this class can act like the verbal instruction Joshua offered the Hebrews as they prepared to enter the land of Israel. *Hazak v’amatz*, Joshua said,-- Be strong and be courageous as you prepare to cross over the Jordan of your own lives. I hope that the texts can entwine with the texts of our lives to create a rich tapestry full of meaning. So with that, let’s say the *bracha* for Torah studying and do a little bit of learning.”

The class lazily recited the blessing together as they had done so for many years. Meyer punctuated with a strong “amen” and a few more words of encouragement or consolation-- Alex couldn’t decide how to read them. Meyer passed out copies of a page of Talmud to the class.

“Sanhedrin 68b. The death of Rabbi Eliezer. The last time we saw him, he had been placed under *herem*-- don’t say that he was excommunicated, because why the hell

would Rabbi Eliezer have wanted to take communion?!—he was in *herem* for his dispute with the Rabbis over a famous issue of ritual impurity. Anyone remember what that was?” he asked with eager eyes.

“*Tanur shel Akhnai!*” Dan announced in his bombastic voice.

“Very nice, Dan. Very, very nice. Can you give us a rundown of what happens in that great, great story?”

“Well, there’s uncertainty about the purity of an oven, the *tanur* of Akhnai. Eliezer says one thing, the rest of the rabbis say something else. Eliezer is so convinced that he is right that he starts calling for all these miracles to happen to prove him right. The miracles happen, but the rabbis still don’t side with him. Finally, he calls out to God to intervene, and a voice comes from the heavens to proclaim that Eliezer is right. But the rabbis reject it! And they say that they are ones who decide halakha!” Dan concluded with a satisfied smile that was sure to generate weeks of snarky comments from Gabe.

“Exactly! Thank you, Danny!” Meyer responded. He had an affinity for giving students nicknames when they went by a more standard version of their name or using that standard version when they had a nickname or sometimes just going with a different name altogether.

“The rabbis successfully confront God. They are so confident in their own powers of analysis and halakhic decision making that they reject what God has clearly pronounced for them-- because the law is decided on the earth and not in the heavens. All things considered, God reacts pretty well to it! He laughs it off! One imagines that the Rabbis may have had some skin in the game of telling a story where God is happy to be

overpowered by their intellect. But it's a magnificent story! A student once told me that the genius of the story was what convinced him to start exploring Judaism and ultimately led him to convert! An old friend of mine told me that it was what convinced *him* to stop being a Jew! If God was so powerless, he suggested, what was the point of getting anxious about finding more than 1/60th of a serving of dairy in your *fleishik* meal? I tried to tell him about the kind of stuff we teach at Hebrew Theological, but he wouldn't have it. His grandkids now go to Chabad-- you can imagine how crazy that drives him! And it's a story that's told over and over again.

“But the way the story is popularly told often ignores the central figure of the story: Rabbi Eliezer. We get so wrapped up in the splendor of the story that we miss out on the human element of the story: the pain, the utter anguish that Eliezer must have experienced at his friends casting out of him. I don't think I can properly imagine it. I don't think any of us can imagine the experience of being cast out of your intellectual home and all that is familiar to you. Even if you see the story as a triumph of human intellect, you can't but see it as well as a story of human tragedy. The most galling scene comes after it all-- when Akiva, his old friend, must come give him the news that he's been booted out. Wham, bam, that's it! A lifetime in this *beis medrish*, and he's kicked out like some *amharatzim* with nothing to contribute. The human stakes rise here-- as Akiva must be the deliverer of the bad news! Now, even more so than what it's like to be Eliezer, I cannot come close to imagining what it would have been like to be Akiva! To have to give such crushing, existentially devastating news to a friend. Unimaginable. It reminds me of a little story that I'll tell you and then you're free to go.”

The class prepared itself for a classic Meyer Levin story. They often involved a significant degree of oversharing and had a marginal connection to the text itself. Yet, the stories were often touching. Alex found some of Meyer's stories returning to him at strange moments. His colorful experiences in Williamsburg as a kid or in the burnt out New York of the 1970s or just the daily vicissitudes of family life-- all of these did in fact lead to good storytelling.

“In 1969, the Vietnam war was moving at full speed and the draft lottery came out December 1st. It was for kids born in 1950 which was the year I was born. The way it worked, there were 366 blue capsules, one for every day of the year. And the order in which they were drawn, that was the order in which you were called up. I sat in my dorm room, nervously listening to the radio. Since I was at Columbia already, so I knew that I could get a draft exemption-- but so many of the kids I had grown up with, davened with, fought with, fought against-- not all of them were lucky enough to attend Brooklyn Tech and have a chance get out of the old neighborhood. The first date they call...September 14th. My heart stops. I know that is the birthdate of my cousin Murray. Murray was a bit of beatnik if you will, and I know that he is at a Grateful Dead concert that very night! He had told me he had wanted to dance his way into oblivion or something like that. And here I was, I had the knowledge that Murray was about to be ripped away from everything familiar to him and get shipped off to the humid jungles of Vietnam. And Murray, I knew because he had invited me to join him that night but I couldn't tear myself away from the radio-- he didn't know! I sat in my room, head in my hands. I think that must have been how Akiva sat. I knew that I had to find him and tell him before

someone else did-- before he heard it from the unsympathetic radio or a cruel blue-blooded reveler whose Daddy would purchase him endless deferments-- but, I couldn't imagine the conversation. I couldn't imagine being the one to see the shock and horror on his face. So, I," he let out a heavy sigh that contrasted with the class' collective constriction of breath, "I sat in my room awake all night and didn't leave. At the end of the day, I couldn't be Akiva. I, just, didn't have it in me. It haunts me to this day. He was killed at the Fire Support Base Mary Ann in Quang Tin on March 28th, 1971, so I never got to apologize to him for keeping the truth from him. The text we'll learn will look at Eliezer on his deathbed, where the rabbis get the chance for one more moment with him-- something I never got with Murray. May we all have the strength to be like Akiva-- to have those impossible conversations, to push ourselves, to bear bad news. Okay, Gut shabbes," he concluded class as he always did regardless of the day of the week. The students silently gathered their books and computers, nodded at Meyer, and solemnly made their way out.

Alex and Gabe walked out together. A small smile crept across both of their faces.

"Another Levin classic," Gabe whispered.

"A true Levin legend."

"The critics were skeptical, but reports are streaming in from across the nation: Levin does it again."

They laughed, and it was clear that Alex was beginning to settle into the year.

*December 25 1899*

*One may reasonably wonder what it is about this idea of “flight” that intrigues me on such a deep level. Some might ask, are you not a scientist of the body rather than one of tengineering? It is true. When I was able to spot a few cars in Manhattan, I was not so curious. Despite the dramatic shift from beast to axle and gears, it felt to me more of a continuation than a separation. These cars are the logical inheritors of horses. Everywhere around us we see the shift from that of the hand to that of the machine. I shall never forget my dear father’s alarm when one could purchase matzah manufactured in a factory. ‘How,’ he plaintively asked, ‘can a series of levers and gauges create something with the spirit of yetzias mitzrayim? The mitzvah is to see ourselves as if we were the ones who left Egypt! A machine is incapable of self-reflection! It lacks consciousness.’ He, like many of our friends and neighbors, was ultimately swayed by the convenience and taste of what Dov Ber Manischewitz could produce and changed his course. Still, I know that often he would trek down to the Lower East Side, a place he often hesitated to visit for fear of infection from cholera or anarchism, just so that he could purchase shmura matzah. He understood the appeal of convenience and enjoyed its benefits--yet he craved the kavanah with which those Russian Jews kneaded with their bare knuckles into that misshapen and ill-tasting food.*

*I am not from this Luddite school of thought when it comes to my interest in cars. It is not that I reject them. They just fail to arouse my curiosity. If our caveman ancestors could have progressed from grunts and groans into words and symbols, why should not the wheels of a chariot go from the power of the horse to the power of the machine? I admire the elegance of machines, without a doubt. I first heard of these Wright Brothers*

*when one of my fellow doctors, Dr. Roberts, a kind gentile who has taken a liking to me, showed me the bicycle that he had purchased at their shop. The beauty of that human-powered machine took me aback. It was so simple-- the pedals, the gears, the chain, the wheels-- yet oddly majestic. Yet, what really struck me most of all is to me the enduring mystery of the bicycle: that one can stand and balance and move forward without falling. Without the stand, the contraption of course collapses to the ground. Even with a man sitting on it! But when it gains forward motion, all this changes, unless of course ridden by a child or an amateur such a myself. I am still convinced that an attempt on one of the Wright Brothers' contraptions would transform me from doctor to patient in my own hospital. To me, it feels nothing short of a small miracle. I understand the physics and the mechanics. But when I see a young woman riding down Main Street, the scientific voice in my head hushes and a sense of wonderment takes over. In the morning service, we admit to the Almighty that we as humans are nothing and that our fate is simply dust to dust. Seeing the genius of man through this machine raises an objection to that line of our prayers. I do not dispute dust as our origin or our ultimate destiny. Yet, what we do in the meantime seems so remarkable that I think the line diminishes the capacity of human genius. I will continue to utter these verses when I remember and wait for a new understanding to arise-- or perhaps it can just be a beis din with the Almighty and I as the two witnesses offering conflicting testimony.*

*Here, I return to the question and marvel of flight. I am not unimpressed or unamused by the works of human hands. They are for me a source of significant pleasure, a sign of the brilliance of the human mind and the cleverness of the human hand. Some of*



*our earliest ancestors, as Mr. Darwin claims, crawled out of the sea, half-beast, half-fish. These monsters transformed into beasts that ambled along on four who became our bi-pedaled predecessors. And then from riding horses, we have simply progressed to today's point: where a few swift pedals bring a man to a speed faster than an athlete or pressure on the car's pedals competes with beasts of burden.*

*All of this, however, is on the ground. They represent a development to me, not a radical break. The prospect of a human taking to the sky, moving through the clouds and approaching the heavens? That to me suggests the most remarkable development since God expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden and forced them to become common human laborers instead of semi-divine beings. It transforms the world and utterly alters the fabric of man. The shackles of gravity become instantly undone. Flight has the possibility of being the great liberator of man's flesh and spirit.*

*At the same time, I would be remiss if I did not mention the fear that this strikes in my heart. What does it mean to have humans who can be moving in the sky and gazing down at the rest of us? Father always loved to tell us about the story of the Tower of Babel. He spoke of how the efforts of humans to become like gods through the work of their hands resulted in a punishment almost as dramatic as the expulsion from Eden. His favorite interpretation was that of the Netziv who suggested that it was not actually human hubris that made the construction of the tower such a dastardly act. It was that they sought to use the tower as a watchtower of sorts-- a place where they could monitor the behavior of the rest of humanity and ensure uniformity in their behavior. For him, the sin of the Tower of Babel was not that it was an unrivaled expression of man's possibility*

*but that it sought to crush the human spirit into conformity. So, what of these men who will take to the sky? Might they monitor us while we sit in the shade under our own tree? Perhaps this shows off fear at innovation. Yet, I do not think it is entirely worth dismissing.*

*The world becomes unrecognizable with the passing of each new day. I do not mourn the passing of the old, I just am anxious at what the new might bring.*

*Now feels as appropriate of a time as any to provide clarification about a topic of which I was not entirely honest. This being my departure from Manhattan Island to Dayton, Ohio. Without the need to go into all of its humiliating details, there was a certain Mrs. Cohen who had taken a personal and financial investment into my father's hospital and department. Her husband, a nameless Mr. Cohen, is one of these department store magnets. Our Jewish gilded class. Mrs. Cohen and I began a relationship under cover of darkness. Things proceeded smoothly-- or as smoothly as the violation of one of Moses's commandments to the Israelites can go. I am ashamed to admit that I attempted to visit their townhouse on Fifth Avenue one night when I could not sleep, kept awake by thoughts of romance that would have put Goethe's Young Werther to shame. I knew that Mr. Cohen was in Chicago on business, but since their two young children were at their home with their army of servants, it was a plan of pure idiocy. I threw rocks at Mrs. Cohen's window like a possessed schoolboy. She rushed outside in a nightgown with a lantern and face that one tends to only wear on the Ninth of Av when we mourn the desecration and destruction of our Temple. I offered words of love that now make me shudder with embarrassment. Mrs. Cohen told me that I must be drunk with stupidity and*

*that she would never see me again. I pleaded, horrified, as this was the opposite of what I had hoped. In all earnestness, I must confess that I suggested to her that we run off together to Cuba of all places. I think I spoke about rum and cigars on the beach and staying out all night galavanting and dancing. The sheer lunacy of this ask will distress me forever. How could I have so badly miscalculated our tryst as something of meaning and romantic significance? Further pleading resulted in her telling me that if I ever tried to visit her again, she would tell her husband that after a misinterpreted display of interest in my medical work I had been a zealot in my lust for her. Mr. Cohen, I had gathered, had a variety of contacts in the New York City underworld. And he could find some Italian anarchist looking for money for his cause to murder me. I left her townhouse with a veil of shame so thick that I felt myself to be invisible. I returned home and was struck by the flu or heartbreak or some conflagration of the two and did not leave bed for days.*

*I knew that I could no longer live in New York with reminders of her presence and her rejection of my love, so I began immediately to look for something new. This is where Dayton comes in.*

*Yet, though I am in Dayton, my heart, as that poet once said, is still in the East though I am very much in the Midwest. Thus, my interest in the Wright Brothers and their attempts to fly emerges from a need to have a new object of focus, so that Mrs. Cohen might stop haunting my dreams and waking days. I hope that these admissions do not make me lower in the eyes of whomever reads this in the future-- but that they might have sympathy for my lovesick foolishness. Alas, we all engage in acts that bring us shame as*

*we become older. My hope is that in Dayton I will bring a sufficient amount of credit to my name to outweigh my past misdeeds. And I hope that the spirit of God that seems to have infused these two brothers will come into me as well.*

Gabe and Alex made their way up Broadway, passing the eternal construction and group of bums who hung out near the McDonalds by Astor Place. For a street with such a famed reputation, it was a bleak walk.

“Meyer really opened things up full guns blazing today, no?” Gabe said as he furtively smoked an American Spirit cigarette. He had been in the process of quitting smoking for the five years that Alex had known him. Alex had fond memories of Gabe smoking on Shabbat as they walked down King David Street in Jerusalem where they had lived for their first year of rabbinical school. Gabe would attract constant stares from religious and secular alike through his exaggerated gesticulations and small orange yarmulke favored by Israelis with political views that made Gabe seem like a Trotskyite. His smoking had turned secret when they returned to the States where he feared being spotted by a judgmental classmate or congregant from the synagogue where he worked. Yet, against the proddings of boyfriends and parents, Gabe could not kick the habit.

“Yeah,” Alex responded. “You know I don’t think we’ve even heard the story before.” Meyer had a reputation for his stock footage collection of anecdotes-- mostly involving lessons he had learned on the fierce streets of mid-century Williamsburg-- and

as tended to happen with the onset of old age, he could repeat himself. Yet, this one was a story that no one in the class had heard.

“Look, I gotta be honest,” Gabe began. “I don’t think I could tell someone that they had been drafted. Like, what’s the difference between him finding out now and finding out the next day? It’s not that Meyer’s reluctance to tell that story lead to his cousin’s death or anything.”

“Of course, but don’t you think it would have been better to hear from someone you loved or cared about? And I don’t think Meyer thinks that he caused his cousin to be killed in some swamp in Vietnam.”

“Right, right. It’s just his way of making meaning around events that are otherwise terrible. From my substantial experience appearing on the rounds of Bellevue at least...three out of five days a week, I know, expertly what he’s talking about. People have all kinds of ways of making sense of the awful shit that they’re experiencing.”

“And nu, you don’t think that it would be better to hear bad news from someone close to you?”

“Well, most of my cousins are total pricks. So I would assume that they would relish the opportunity to pass on bad news. If they were to tell me I was about to have to fight for our country, I know they would say it with glee.”

“Fine, fine-- but what about someone you were close to? Or you actually liked?”

“You know, I think some things are best dealt with privately. I think I would rather go home with total ignorance, open the letter, and then drink heavily by myself.

What good could another person do? Pat me on the shoulder? Look at me with eyes like a hound dog? I'm still going to get my guts blown out for a war that has no meaning."

"I suppose that's fair. But look, I'm not trying to claim that I would be some kind of hero in this situation. I just think there is something good about being physically there for someone. You know, in case they have ways of coping with tragedy that doesn't involve filling a water bottle with gin so people won't know what's inside."

"Um, fuck you. Gin in a plastic water bottle will be my genius start-up that will bring me riches and celebrity if this whole rabbinical thing goes asunder. But enough about this Vietnam mishegas, how about that celebrity journal your wacko aunt has sent you?"

"It is crazy."

"I would kill for something like that. It's like you're on that *Finding Your Roots* show, except you won't orchestrate a massive cover-up about your family being slave owners. Or *will* you?? But, seriously! It's amazing. I'm dying to know what happens next. Does he meet the Wright Brothers? Does he not? Does he ever stick it to Mrs. Cohen again? When he realizes he doesn't want to stick it to Mrs. Cohen, which Wright Brother will he stick it to?"

Alex laughed and reached his right hand to Gabe's mouth and plucked the cigarette from his lips. He inhaled and exhaled deeply as if participating in some kind of mindfulness activity. There was something remarkable about this journal. For his whole life, his family's lack of a story frustrated him. There was no building that he could point to on the Lower East Side where someone had owned a tailoring shop. His family had a

whole culture of disinterested silence around their background. For everyone, there was a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. It was not born out of fear of what might be uncovered but out of a lack of curiosity. And now, there was something that could point somewhere.

Alex had every Dayton boy or girl’s passing interest in the Wright Brothers and reactive hatred to a North Carolina license plate that claimed their state as the true provenance of flight. He appreciated that this diary could have some kind of broader historical value if it turns out that his uncle-author did have any interaction with Orville and Wilbur. But what Alex appreciated most was that it allowed him to feel geographically centered. Now there could be a “why” found in his family’s place in Dayton. He had an irrepressible pride in being a Daytonian that came out whenever he found himself with his friends from Alter, Dayton’s suburban Catholic school, who had migrated to either of the coasts, and they drunk themselves silly in a dimly lit bar in New York or Los Angeles. They would drink toasts to the University’s middling basketball team or flat, square style pizza that one could only find in Dayton. But much of it was done with a wink and a nod. For all of their nostalgia, only a hurricane could make them vacate their Williamsburg apartments or a crippling earthquake could end their Silver Lake residences and head back to Dayton.

For the first time, Alex could put meaning into being from Dayton. It did not just have to be the geographical accident he had always felt it to be. Instead, when he went home for Thanksgiving, he could identify landmarks that had importance for him and his family. He could feel like he truly had a place in Dayton that existed well before him and would continue to be for years to come.

“Also, who knew your family were such tight assed yekkes? I mean it makes sense to me in way, though. You’re basically the least chill person I know. Naturally your ancestors wore those really long white gloves and had country homes I’m sure. Of course, only where they would let Jews live-- but I’m sure there was some disgusting part of Long Island with typhoid where German Jews could build shacks and talk about how horrifying Russian Jews are.”

“No wonder I’m so disgusted by you.”

“Whatever,” Gabe muttered with a roll of his eyes as he extinguished his cigarette with a grind of his right heel. “Look, what you’ve found is amazing. I wish I could talk more about it and how you don’t need 23andme to prove that you come from a family of total douches. I’m sure you have a *bissel* Yiddish buried in your uptight soul, but I can see the results: 23% Eastern European, 2% Navajo, 75% total dick Jew.”

“Navajo?”

“Doesn’t everyone find out that they’re a little Navajo from these tests?”

“You’re an idiot.”

“You may be right. Anyways, I gotta run to teach the next generation of total dick Jews. I’ll see you tonight?”

“Tonight? What’s tonight?”

“Umm, earth to Alex? Are you not on social media? Rachel is having a party.”

“WHAT?” Alex exclaimed with exasperation. He was looking forward to a quiet night at home, with a glass of bourbon and another chance to dive into this journal.



Instead, coked up Pratt kids would be discussing what you *really* needed to listen for in John Cage's '4'33.'

"Glad to hear you were key in the planning process. See you tonight!" Gabe shouted as he descended the stairs to the subway at Union Square. Alex sighed, unlocked a hulking CitiBike, and began to pedal uptown to Jagger, his newest Bar Mitzvah student.

Alex docked his bike into the CitiBike Station on 78th and West End. When he first moved to New York, he joined the long line of neighborhood elitists who would not deign to go North of a certain horizontal street. He had heard 14th Street and 23rd tossed around as boundaries that some of his Brooklyn peers stuck to (though things had become significantly scrambled with the increasing gentrification of all parts of Harlem). For Alex, all of this had to change when he threw his hat into the Bar Mitzvah tutoring business. He had heard from friends in school and in the New York Jewish world that the out of synagogue Bar Mitzvah game was where money was to be made. No doubt, he had heard administrators at Hebrew Theological and Rabbis more broadly rail against this industry which they were convinced posed an existential threat to the future of the synagogue. They complained about a disconnected generation or a kind of supermarket Judaism with commodified rituals and vacuous ceremonies. Alex assumed that economics were at the heart of their arguments, but he knew his tendency was to assume the worst of rabbis, an irony not lost on him.

So many New York kids grew up without a family connection to a synagogue. Their often intermarried parents felt no need to subject their children to the horrors of

secondary religious school that they had been exposed to. Every Jewish parent of a kid Alex tutored had some scarring story about an old Mr. Levin with nose hairs descending like alien tentacles, standing over them with nicotined coffee breath and stained fingernails, howling at them about the *aleph-beis*. Even the non-Jewish parents had bad memories to share-- whether it was stories they'd heard from Jewish friends or their own fear of how a nun wielded a ruler like a sanctimonious gladiator. For them, the calculation was simple. Thousands of dollars a year for what? For their kid to feel just as estranged from religious life as they did. And other competing scheduling event? Chess, violin, Chinese, math, volunteering or vocoder packed the week to the brim. No need to resurrect old Mr. Levin for another generation of boredom.

But then something peculiar tended to happen: the child of parents who used to sneak cigarettes behind the dumpster of Temple Israel or press a thermometer against a bedside lamp to feign sickness before Sunday school actually wanted to have a Bar Mitzvah. Alex assumed it had to do with the Jewishness that permeated New York City. Like Lenny Bruce claimed, a New Yorker was often a Jew just by osmosis. So these non-Jewish Jewish preteens saw their friends at Temple Emanuel or Park Avenue Synagogue descend into the thrilling mania of Bar Mitzvah prep--listening to recordings of their Torah portion or scoping out the options in an *Oriental Trading Company* catalogue for garish party favors-- and they began to think a simple thought to themselves: aren't I Jewish or something? They then would bring this question to their parents along with others that the parents never expected to hear: why don't we belong to a synagogue, what is Shabbat, and then the inevitable request: can I have a Bar Mitzvah?

The question sent parents into shock and grandparents (not even just the Jewish ones) into wordless euphoria. So the parents knowing that a double or triple booked Bar Mitzvah at Central Synagogue had to be arranged years ago scrambled for other options. This is where they often found Alex. Usually from a friend or a friend of a friend or a guest of a guest who had experienced a similar process. Alex was only too happy to partake. The pay was great and the expectations were low. He discovered quickly that as long as a) the kid ascended the *bima* and did at least a few recognizably Jewish moves (he taught a few to wrap the tallis around their head after reciting the blessing-- a move that parents had only seen in *Fiddler on the Roof* and grandparents had only seen their own grandparents do-- which evoked either sentimental sobs or quiet kvelling at what a true Jew their kid had turned into) and b) did not hate him or the experience, he was not just in the clear-- he was some kind of Vilna Gaon who had cracked the enigma of Jewishness for the future generation. When parents thanked him, Alex would pass on the credit to the genius of Jewish ritual, which only made him seem more enlightened in their eyes.

He also preferred the tutoring business to schlepping from Hebrew school to Hebrew school where he dealt with kids on sugar highs who had come from pressure soaked middle schools for a few more hours. In the tutoring world, he did not have to sit in sterile Temple classrooms with outdated Zionist posters or student artwork still tacked up on the walls from the early 1990s. Instead, he sat in lofts in Soho or elegant whole floor apartments, like Jagger's family's on the Upper West Side. They treated him to organic snacks and French pressed coffee. Often, there was a beautiful Danish au pair

who ran the household with a firm but loving grip, like the Marianne of Jager's household.

"You know," Alex once remarked with play-acted suaveness, "there's a Leonard Cohen song that shares your name."

"Of course, of course. I love Leonard Cohen," she responded in impeccable English with her sonorous accent coating the words with a confident melody.

"I actually was in a band in college, Undiscovered Country, and we wrote some killer originals, but I have to see that whenever we covered 'Marianne' the crowd would really lose it," Alex fondly said. The story was mostly true. Covers performed by Undiscovered Country evoked a much more positive reaction than the songs he had written, but they had never played any Leonard Cohen. In fact, it was Taylor Swift that brought the college crowd into rapturous applause. Alex knew on some level that whenever he began to speak about any part of his time in bands to women, there was a spark of hope in his stomach these facts might act aphrodisiacally. He knew that his longest college relationship was coming to an ignominious close when he leaned over to a female classmate (he was ashamed that he could no longer recall her name) and quietly announced in their class on prophetic traditions in American religious life that he once played bass in an MC Solaar cover band. She smiled, nodded her head, mouthed 'cool,' and then turned back to taking notes.

"Ah, so you're a guitar playing, rock star Rabbi?" she asked playfully.

"Oh no, I'm not like one of those summer camp kids who worships--" he stopped himself mid-sentence as he realized this diatribe against the 60s folk music that still

preoccupied Jewish musicians would make no sense to Marianne. “More in my younger days. Back when I wasn’t worried about a job.” This sentence made him nauseous. His “younger days?” Who was he? Some Roger Daltrey lamenting lost youth? Marianne was at most five years younger than him.

“You had long hair back then of course,” she said with a lilt in her voice at the end.

“I actually did! Funny you should ask.” He reached into his wallet to pull out his almost expired Ohio license where he appeared with a smug grin and Beatles hair. It was his preferred party trick. He looked absurd in the picture, and it always brought out a laugh. Plus, he figured, it showed whomever he was speaking with that he didn’t take himself *too* seriously. He knew it was a lame gambit to talk derisively about yourself at a younger age-- most mature people could do it with ease. Yet, it seemed to bring down the guard of a girl he was trying to charm. The whole thing made him feel stupid, but he continued to do it out of some reflex to impress. He pulled out the license as he had done many times before and slipped it into Marianne’s hands. She looked and cupped her hands around her mouth and let out a quick laugh as her eyes widened.

“Rabbi! You were such a rock star! What happened? How did you become so, eh, buttoned up?” She asked.

“Ah, to be young,” he said wispily.

As he started to walk into the apartment building on 77th and Broadway, Alex ran his fingers through his hair that his bike helmet had matted down. He tried to give it some life so that he might look rugged but not carelessly disheveled in Marianne’s eyes. The

doorman pointed him to the elevator, and Alex headed up to the penthouse on the 7th floor.

The door opened to a lavish scene of empty space. Though he had grown up in Suburban Ohio where everyone had a yard the size of two city parks, he had transformed into a New Yorker when it came to appreciation of space. The Bed-Stuy apartment that he shared was decent enough-- though he kept it secret from his roommates that when he sat on the toilet he had to put his right foot into their bathtub in order to not feel the walls collapsing in on him. The Fineburg's 7th floor penthouse opened with a stark white corridor with some Rothkoesque paintings on the wall. He wiggled his shoes off his feet to diminish the chances that he could cause any damage or track in any specks of dirt.

"Shalom, Rabbi!" Marianne greeted him with a self-satisfied grin.

"Wow, Marianne-- you're really acculturating to New York. Is it...turning you Jewish?" he asked with a physician's concern.

"Hey! I've been to a Bar Mitzvah or two before. You must know about our Danish Jews?"

"The 17 of them you mean?" he responded playfully.

"Give me a break. Copenhagen is not New York, of course. But we're quite proud as a country of our conduct during the war. You know, we had more Jews at the war's end than at its beginning?"

Alex was certain that this fact was true for Albania but not for Denmark. But he was never one to let precision get in the way of making a good impression.

"Amazing, isn't it? But really, I appreciate it, Marianne. *Toosen tak.*"

Her eye lit up with glee.

“How do you know Danish?”

“I don’t *know* Danish. My roommate Tim studied abroad there. I was supposed to visit him, but I got stuck in Paris-- yes, tough life, long story. Anyways, he taught me a few words.

“Anything else you remember?”

“Something about a cup of coffee? It sounds like *coova kaaafe*?”

“*Kop kaffe*! But not bad at all, Rabbi. I’m impressed. The only Danish I have heard in this apartment is when Mr. Fineburg showed me a pint of Haagen Daaz ice cream, and that’s not exactly Danish-- but I applaud his effort!” Alex smiled at her, and she grinned back at him. The last thing that he needed to complicate his already disheveled life was a love affair with Marianne, Danish Queen of Goys. He knew he was getting ahead of himself-- he was certain that men much taller, richer and blonder than he must have pursued Marianne whenever she had time away from her au pair responsibilities.

“Well, we could blab on all day, couldn’t we? Let me take you to Jagger. He is in his room. He’s having a bit of a mood.”

What a surprise, Alex thought to himself, that a Upper West Side pre-teen named after that enormously lipped Brit should be having a bit of a mood. Jagger always seemed wrapped up in his iPhone X as he leapt from one social media platform to another, whichever was in vogue at Dalton. Jagger was not of the normal class of self-elected New York Jews who convinced their parents to have a Bar Mitzvah. His family had been long

time members of Temple Emanu El, going back generations upon generations of stiff necked German Jews. His travel soccer schedule, however, bumped up against Hebrew School-- and New York Cosmos youth league won out. It was not an easy decision, Mr. Fineburg explained to him. But he and Mrs. Fineburg made the honest calculation that the four generation chain of Fineburgs at Williams College stood less of a chance of interruption if Jagger possessed athletic asset.

“You know, Dan,” Mr. Fineburg said to Alex (the Jewish name he identified him as, changed whenever the two saw each other), “they just don’t give out medals for Judaism now, do they? It’s a tough one.” Alex smiled, nodded and offered a limp affirmation. He did not want to ideologically quarrel with the Fineburgs nor did he really care that much. Their cash was as green as anyone’s, and their abandonment of Temple Emanu El let Alex pay his share of the rent.

Marianne lightly knocked on Jagger’s door.

“Jagger? Josh is here,” she cooed. There was no response.

“Jagger?”

“GOD. Just send him in, okay?” his voice erupted from behind the door.

Marianne lifted her shoulders and silently sighed.

“Are you still glad you guys saved all of your Jews?” he asked with faux seriousness.

“You, Mr. Rabbi, are a real piece of work. I will see you in an hour,” she said with a smile as she opened the door to let him in. Alex walked in to see all of Jagger’s 5 foot frame splayed out on his bed with his iPhone clutched inches from his face.



“Jagger! What’s up my man?” Alex said enthusiastically.

“Nothing.”

“Awesome, awesome. Whacha doing on your phone? Snapchat?”

“Fuck Snapchat. Snapchat is over.”

“Got it, got it. So, what’s the new thing?”

“I’m on Reddit.”

“Whoa! Reddit. That’s interesting. What are you reading about?”

“The US soccer team. They fucking lost. To fucking Costa Rica. How could they fucking lose to a place that is basically another state in the US??”

“Ah, I think that’s Puerto Rico you’re thinking of, but yes, it is crazy. Even with that young kid, they couldn’t do it. What’s his name?”

“Christian Pulisic. Everyone here is saying that he’s overrated.”

“And what do you think?”

Jagger put his phone down for a second and stared at the ceiling. Alex could see that he was being slowly coaxed from his shell.

“Good first touch. Great speed. But not a lot of strength. If he’s going to be anyone, he needs to start some kind of insane weight training regiment. That’s what my Dad said about me.”

“Your Dad said that Pulisic needs to start weight training?”

“No, that I do.”

“Really?”

“Yeah-- you know, I’m smaller than most of the kids on the Cosmos. If I want to stand out, I need to be stronger.”

“I see. You know, I was pretty short when I was your age as well.”

“Really?” Jagger said with surprise as he sat up abruptly.

“You should see my Bar Mitzvah pictures. Maybe I’ll bring them next time.

There I am, in a group of the girls from my class, in a red argyle sweater, arms crossed like I’m in *Grease* and I’m barely up to the shoulder of the shortest girl.”

“Wow. It sounds like you were, like, really short.”

“Yeah, I guess I was.”

“I mean, no offense.”

“No, no, none taken. I really was quite short.”

“And did you hate it?” Jagger asked with a note of repressed plaintiveness slipping through.

“At the time sure. But I think that I hated anything that made me different from my friends. That’s one of the things I like about you, Jagger. You’re proud of the ways that you’re different.”

“You really think so?”

“Yeah, I do. And look, I get it. Being short sucks. I can’t argue with you on that account. But, just don’t worry about it.” Alex said with a sigh. The conversation had become more earnest than he had anticipated. For all of the skepticism he brought to this work of tutoring the upper crust of Manhattan’s disconnected Jews, he found something refreshing in connecting with the innocence and surprising sadness of the preteens. For

even the best place in the world to come, Alex would not have returned to that age. Yet, he felt moved by the changes these kids underwent.

“The truth of the matter,” Alex continued, “is that you are more than your height. You are your mind and your heart.” Alex felt the bile rising in his throat as cliché after cliché poured out. But the words were getting through to Jagger. Jagger looked impressed which caught Alex off guard.

“I guess,” Jagger said with a shrug as he laid back down and continued texting or Redditing or whatever kids these days were doing.

“Okay, Lionel Messi. Let’s get to work.”

“Ughhhhhhhh,” Jagger moaned.

“Don’t worry, we’re going to talk about...Reddit.” Alex hardly planned these tutoring sessions and relied on whatever random thoughts came to mind. It dawned on him that there might be connections between Reddit and Judaism. He wasn’t sure what, but he had begun to perfect the art of connecting the vapid interests of preteens into some lesson on Jewish life. Some, of course, were more successful than others. His comparison of Lil Peep and other emo rappers to Hasidism in their emphasis on emotion over technique may have been a bit of a stretch.

“Do you know what the Talmud is?” Alex asked hopefully to which Jagger dolefully shook his head and offered a shrug.

“Is it, like, the interpretation of the Torah?”

“It is the Rabbis trying to understand what things in the Torah mean. But it is also the Rabbis trying to figure out what their predecessors who wrote something called the

Mishna were talking about. If I told you there was a law that said, let's say, every goalie on your team has to be 150 pounds, you might have some questions. Does he have to be a certain height? Are there exceptions? Where this law come from? So, the Talmud asks a lot of questions about the laws set out in the Mishna." Alex paused as he collected his thoughts. He knew that he was offering Jagger the *Judaism for Dummies* explanation but that would have to suffice. Now came the moment where he would try to pivot to make the topic have more relevance to Jagger. He knew he wanted to compare the Talmud to Reddit, but all of the pieces were not yet aligned in his head.

"So, it sort of seems like Reddit," Alex started hopefully. Jagger's eyes perked up as he cocked his head to the left out of interest.

"Reddit?" Jagger asked.

"Yeah! So, in Reddit, as far as my geezer brain, can understand it, a thread begins with a comment or a question. Then people debate about it. They'll bring outside sources, maybe they'll quote studies. Sometimes they'll just insult the intelligence of others. And the most popular comments get voted to the top and preserved. The less popular ones, no one remembers. Am I getting this right?"

"Not exactly, but you definitely know more than my parents or babysitter do."

"Great. So we see something similar in the Talmud. It began as a kind of discussion between the Rabbis. They argued about different questions, ritual or ethical and more. They would bring in other opinions from other famous Rabbis and use lines from the Torah as proof of what they were saying, and at some point, it was all recorded. The most well-known and persuading opinions were kept, but even the unpopular beliefs

were preserved too. You can see the thread of how arguments work. And like Reddit, for the most part, it is not always clear who is right-- and it's not even always clear what it means to be right. We're learning this story right now, where a Rabbi, Rabbi Yohanan, has an opinion that goes against what all of the other rabbis believe. And he's correct! He's so correct that a voice comes down from heaven and hollers, 'dudes! Rabbi Yohanan is right! WTF is wrong with you guys?' and yet, the other rabbis reject it, claiming that they are the ones who get to make the decisions, not so booming voice from the sky. So Rabbi Yohanan is somehow right and wrong-- but it's like how people vote on Reddit for comments that they support, that's the one that has some kind of label as being right. At the end of the day, what we have is a record of a conversation. And we are the ones who get to make sense of it as readers. Just like you get to view whatever thread on whether the US national team should have fired what's his name--"

"Jurgen Klinsmann."

"Sure, Jurgen Klinsman-- and you get to decide who is a freaking moron and who might be sort of right."

Jagger nodded with his lips pursed as if to convey his modicum of surprised interest. Alex knew that this was not his best analogy but that it was certainly better than his last rant about Lil Peep and Hasidism. He still thought there might be something there but could not nail it down. The prize for best analogy went to any time he successfully compared anything to the musical *Hamilton*. Regardless of the kid, it was dynamite as long as there was some credibility that the kid could follow.

“So can we look at Reddit for the rest of the time today?” Jagger asked with a cautious smile.

Alex knew that his lesson was not on the mark but not entirely off it. Unfortunately, he raised more interest in Jagger than in the Talmud.

“For five minutes, but then we have to work on some of the prayers.”

“Ten minutes?”

“Five.”

“Seven minutes.”

“Fine.” Alex felt a little defeated but also relieved that now the time would pass more quickly. Jagger pulled out his phone, and the two of them descended down some black hole of questions about whether the new Adidas line of soccer cleats was all it was cracked up to be. For the rest of the hour, they went over some of the blessings that Jagger would have to recite. Alex tried to insert moments of relevance or meaning for the first few minutes but then resigned himself to the rote recitation. He acknowledged that this was the kind of education that alienated him from Jewish life as a teen and at the same time, that he just didn’t have the energy to make improvements on its archaic model. There was only so much space in his brain that he dedicated to creative, albeit reaching, analogies. For the rest of the time, he sank into a resigned autopilot. Sadness crept in occasionally but he blocked it at the door with protestations. Despite all of his and Gabe’s fantasizing about turning the Jewish world upside down, did it really need to start here with Jagger? What could he really do to make a kid who came from a culture of total disinterest start to care? What was Alex other than just an obligatory stop on

Jagger's quest toward a soccer themed Bar Mitzvah party-- just as his own tutor was a means toward an inexplicably England themed party. Sure, it was lame to shrug off responsibility, but it was also honest.

Alex knew in his heart of hearts that he was not an innovator or disrupter or overturner. He was a man of systems and structure. Perhaps this reality pushed his face toward his own Talmud of coke this morning-- that his time as a student was rapidly coming to an end. That it was time to "put up or shut up" as Dan stated in his TED talk styled Senior sermon. For all of their collegiate theorizing, this was the time to enter the world with rhetorical guns blazing and put their money where their mouth was. Alex and Gabe of course loathed his sermon, for which Dan demanded to be the first student to ever be mic'd for a sermon so that he could have maximum mobility. Gabe went on for weeks in mean but hilarious interpretations of Dan's opening lines (where he requested that all of the lights in the school's synagogue be turned off):

"What if the world were not as you assumed it to be? But in fact, the opposite." Piano had then begun to be played in the background and the lights came up to Dan doing push-ups right in front of the *bima*. The school was rapturous in their reception of his pseudo-sermon, pseudo-performance. After all, he had once hidden in the Aron, and when the Torah service began and the Aron was opened, he cried out,

"Stop the music! This too is Torah!"

So, starting out with feats of minor physical strength and then tying it into his own personal story with a few vague references to the Parsha-- well, that was enough to set the place on fire. Alex looked down upon Dan's "innovation"-- but he secretly also

respected his desire to push things outside of the box, even if the point was only to push with no other discernible meaning. As he and Jagger scanned through Reddit comment after Reddit comment, Alex sighed with strange admiration and loathing for Dan, and some sadness that looking at a glorified message board was all that he could manage when it came to innovation.

After the hour had passed, Alex saw himself out of the apartment. He usually bantered with Marianne on his way out, but today he was not in the mood. He and Jagger exchanged a complex handshake at the door, as Alex had learned that this ingratiated him with almost all of his students, and Alex made the lonely walk to the nearest CitiBike station.

*It is with much excitement that I write that I have finally seen the two brothers. Often our anticipation leaves us disappointed, but today, the reality left me breathless. It only takes one look to tell that these are men of significance and seriousness. I am reminded of the way that men's faces change when they make hakafot with the Torah. Whether the man perceives himself unlearned, insignificant, insufficiently successful, his comportment changes when he holds the Torah and marches. Pride does not alone fill the man's steps. Purpose does. The man feels that he is responsible for something impossibly large and important. Though this could cause a rise in hubris, the hakafot transform a regular Jew into a worthy inheritor of Moses and Ezra-- and this change illuminates the*



*Jew. And this is precisely how I wish to describe Orville and Wilbur. They are men illuminated.*

*I took a stroll after work with Dr. Roberts. Dr. Roberts is of the class of Daytonians who trace their roots back countless generations. He and his family live in a beautiful brick home in the Oregon District. There is a white fence that surrounds his manicured lawn with an elegantly maintained garden. If that is not the American dream, I am unsure what is. For all my father's criticism of my decision to head West, I can't but assume that he would admire how life can be lived here so spaciouly and happily. I know a brick house would not change his mind, but perhaps the feeling of life's calm expansiveness that one gets from standing in front of their home would shift his opinion.*

*Dr. Roberts is also an avid bicyclist. I confessed my fear to him of actually riding one of these contraptions, and he said that if his children were capable, then surely a physician could manage. I was not thrilled by the prospect of this. I imagined my hands becoming mangled in the gears or my face disfigured by a crash caused by my carelessness. A broken nose I could manage-- but my trade is my hands. Damage to them would be disastrous. And yet, his elegant descriptions of being on the bike began to affect my imagination for the better. Instead of seeing catastrophe, I imagined myself sailing down Main Street with the fresh air entering my nostrils and adrenaline pumping through my body. I also found myself further amazed by the beauty of this machine and the mystery of its functioning.*

*"Dr. Roberts-- I wonder if you wouldn't mind going with me to the bicycle shop?"*

*“Ah, Dr. Tannenbaum-- my incessant rambling has started to affect you?”*

*“Well, I suppose one must get with the times.”*

*“Turns out that you aren’t a Luddite after all!”*

*“Never a Luddite, Dr. Roberts. Just fearful of donating my teeth to the pavement.”*

*“You’ll be fine, Dr. Tannenbaum. If Tommy and Helen can manage without any permanent damage (besides the fright they cause their mother), I think that a man of your intellect will suffice.”*

*“It is not intellect that worries me but my balance.”*

*“Dr. Tannenbaum-- this graceful machine will allow you to waltz on two wheels through the streets of Dayton. I assure you that your balance won’t be a problem. Let’s go to the Wright’s shop.”*

*I hesitated when he mentioned this. I had never spoken of my fascination with the Wrights, and I felt a twinge of nervousness. It is what one might feel before meeting a celebrated author or notable politician. That one has heard so much about this individual and imagined them incessantly-- but that the prospect of encountering them in the flesh still comes a shock. Dr. Roberts, after all, was the one who first started speaking to me about the Wright Brothers and their aspiration for flight. Occasionally, I would ask whether there was a new development with the brothers and their flying machine. I did not want to betray an obsession with them lest Dr. Roberts find there to be anything peculiar. But I confess in the safety and privacy of this journal that the opportunity to meet the Wrights encouraged my desire to buy a bicycle. My fear remained and remains,*

*I must admit-- though it has thawed a bit. Most importantly, this purchasing venture would give me my first chance to see these two young men who had aroused such curiosity in me. I told Dr. Roberts that sounded splendid, and we walked to their bike shop on West Third Street.*

*I first caught a glimpse of the two of them from outside their shop (or who I assumed them to be). They were walking in-- Orville at a regular pace while his brother Wilbur gesticulated wildly and moved quickly ahead of him-- and Dr. Roberts identified each of them to me.*

*"You see, that's Orville on the left and Wilbur on the right." Orville looked down as he walked. A shyness emanated from his calm pace, as if he did not wish to disturb the ground beneath his feet. He listened calmly as his brother spoke. And at the same time, a sly smile turned the corner of his mouth up. He seemed a kind soul, one who could take life's punches on the chin and continue with a spirit of positivity. Wilbur, his brother, seemed almost the exact opposite. He spoke with a wildness and used his hands to sketch out plans in the air. While his brother kept his eyes glued to the ground, Wilbur looked around hungrily like a bird of prey.*

*As I wrote at the beginning of this entry, the significance of these men is apparent to even the most casual of viewers. Like the men doing their hakafot, the Wright Brothers are possessed with purpose. I understand that this is all speculation, but my initial observation overwhelmed me. I knew that whatever these men set their minds to, they would be successful.*

*“Orville! Wilbur!” Dr. Roberts cried out. The men paused and turned to him. Their movements are uncanny-- it is as if they are puppets controlled by the same master. Despite their different dispositions, they move as if one creature. A full smile spread out on both of their faces at the same time. Without speaking, they both gestured us toward them.*

*“May I introduce our most recent transplant from New York City, Dr. Tannenbaum. He just started at our hospital and is in the market for a bicycle.”*

*“Well, Dr. Tannenbaum,” Orville began, “welcome to our Gem City. I hope that we can help you.” Wilbur stood to the right of him and leaned in to whisper something. “Ah yes, I am Orville Wright. This is my brother and occasional etiquette instructor, Wilbur.”*

*“Much obliged. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. Dr. Roberts knows some of my fears when it comes to bicycling. He has tried to assuage them. I imagine you might be able to put all my fears to rest.”*

*“Easier than a car,” Wilbur said barely audible.*

*“Yes, I agree with my brother. But riding a bike is a bit like love, Dr. Tannenbaum. One can provide words of guidance-- but it is only the act itself that truly instructs,” Orville added on.*

*We walked into their shop. There were tools all over. I was surprised that it reminded me of an operation room, their operating subject, of course, being mechanical rather than anatomic. They used the same sort of expertise to construct their machines that I used to keep the human body in good, working order.*

*“This is the Van Cleve. It is our signature bicycle,” Orville said as he pointed to a shiny new bicycle. I admired its elegance as Orville put his hands on the handlebars.*

*“I’m not sure what Manhattan is like, but in Dayton, we only have 12 miles of paved streets. The rest creates a world of pain and dust for bicycles. You’re a physician, yes, Dr. Tannenbaum?”*

*“I am.”*

*“Imagine if walking on dirt roads not only sullied your shoes but managed to get grime into your joints. After a little use, your body would not work so well. So, to prevent our bicycles from being wrecked by our little city, we built a self-oiling hub so that the machine stays well-lubricated and high functioning.”*

*I stood in wonderment. Would this machine really keep me aloft?*

*“So, give it a test run, Dr. Tannenbaum,” Wilbur said softly.*

*“You know, sirs. Sometimes a man knows, even before a test run, that he has found a match. I think that I and the Van Cleve are just meant to be. I’ll take it.”*

*Wilbur and I walked over to the cash register, as Orville and Dr. Roberts continued to talk.*

*“Mr. Wright?” I asked.*

*“Please, Wilbur.”*

*“Wilbur, do you mind if I pry?”*

*“Sure, ask whatever interests you.”*

*“I have heard rumors that you and your brother are in the process of trying to build a flying machine.”*

*"The rumors are correct. Though we still have a long, long way to go. What makes you ask?"*

*"Nothing, nothing. I am just...impressed, is all. I wish you luck in that endeavor. I think it is very noble."*

*"Thank you, sir. I hope we do not disappoint. Though the city ignores us at best. And on most days, they scorn us."*

*"Invention arouses all kinds of fear and anxiety," I suggested.*

*"I suppose," he said with a smile as he handed me my change. Dr. Roberts and I walked to the exit-- I with my brand new bicycle and a feeling of terror and pride. He held the door open for me as I clumsily wheeled the Van Cleve out.*

*"Oh, Dr. Tannenbaum?" I heard a voice call out. I turned around to see Wilbur's shy, earnest face looking at me from behind the cash register.*

*"My brother and I are heading out for a ride this Sunday morning-- would you like to join us? It could be a chance to see more of our area," he asked.*

*"We know that Dr. Roberts is predisposed with church," Orville added.*

*"Yes-- and shouldn't the sons of ministers be similarly engaged?"*

*Orville smirked back.*

*"From your last name, Dr. Tannenbaum, I assume that Sunday poses no problems?" Orville asked.*

*"You're correct. It would be my pleasure."*

*"Splendid. Meet us outside our home. 7 Hawthorn Street. It's on the corner of Hawthorn and 4th. Shall we say 7 AM? I'm afraid my brother and I are early risers."*

*“Perfect. I look forward to it.”*

*We bid our goodbyes a second time. I walked Dr. Roberts to his home and then turned toward my home. I gave riding the bicycle a few attempts-- and after five minutes, I found myself cautiously moving. It was not the terror filled experience that I had imagined, and it was also not as easy as Dr. Roberts had implied. But I understood that there was a seamless quality to it. Once one gained momentum, one continue to move. It appears that Mr. Isaac Newton was correct-- though the consistency did require forward pedaling. Braking and stopping were a whole other matter. But I was convinced that by Sunday, I would be ready. I brought my bicycle into my home and parked it in front of my unused fireplace. I smiled, heading to bed with the thrill of all this new city has brought me.*

By the time Alex walked in front of his building, there was party raging in his apartment. On the long bike ride home from the Upper West Side, he had spent the time mostly feeling sorry for himself and guilty for the “service” that Jagger’s parents were paying him for. Rachel had planned a party unbeknownst to him and managed to let Tim know but keep Alex in the dark. She probably, rightly, assumed that he would throw a fit and wrangle out a compromise where she agreed to clean the bathroom for the rest of the month in exchange for the havoc that would ensue. Alex walked into the mid-century apartment building on Clifton Place. The details on the lobby ceiling had the elegance of moviestar out of his prime-- the beauty that once existed could be seen but the years of

wear and tear were noticeable. When Alex moved into the building four years ago, it was in the midst of the changes that were affecting all of Brooklyn. The residents mirrored the demographic divide-- it was split between elderly, longtime black residents and mostly white newcomers. Now, the building was all mostly white newcomers. The management company had used all kinds of tricks and gambits to get rid of the old guard-- offering buyouts for those still in rent controlled apartments, stalling on service repairs for those who held out, and other kinds of nefarious neglect and interference. Alex felt distressed by what was happening in the building-- but as part of this glut of gentrifying whiteness, he didn't know what to do. He ignored emails from activist friends from college about protesting or setting up a separate account where they could deposit their rent-- a technique that allowed one to show good faith in rent payments but dissatisfaction with the management. But like so many people with good intentions, he kept his head down and allowed other things to distract him. Occasionally, he would see some of the former residents congregated around the bodega on the corner of Nostrand and Clifton. He would keep his eyes down when he passed by out of shame that they might recognize him and fault him for his complicity.

His legs wobbled from the long bike ride, and he had to hold on to the handrail as he walked up to their third floor apartment. "This Must be the Place" pulsed through their door, and Alex felt relieved that at least the DJ had good taste and wasn't playing the kind of EDM music that gave him a bruising headache. He opened the door and hung up his backpack and tilted his head back and forth to the Talking Heads' Afro-pop guitar grooves.



“*Hooooooooome*,” Alex mouthed along with David Byrne, “*pick me up and turn me round*.” He spun around along with the rhythm and allowed the song to improve his dour mood. Sure, he could be annoyed with Rachel for planning a fucking party on a fucking Monday-- but maybe he might enjoy himself for once in a while. He poked his head into Tim’s room who sat in his natural state-- at his table, shoulders hunched over his computer. There was the odd edition of a PBR to the right of him.

“Tim--I gotta say. Thrilled that you’re enjoying the genius beverage selection of our wonderful roommate. But why don’t you leave the goddamn computer for a moment and try to meet one of Pratt’s most insufferable bachelorettes?”

Tim turned and smiled and raised his beer to Alex.

“I’m just an animal looking for a home and share the....something or other,” Tim said.

“...the same space for a minute or two, but who’s counting.”

“Love me ‘til my heart stops, Alex.”

“As if that was ever in question, Tim. Just, try to leave the computer for a moment.”

“I’ll come out later. L’Chaim.” Tim took a sip of his beer and turned back to his computer. Alex closed the door and immediately bumped into Jerome, Rachel’s business partner.

“Jerome! Who knew you had such a Yiddish soul!”

“Hell yeah man. I just throw on some Carlebach or plug “niggun” into youtube and see what happens. I’m going out for some beers, any requests?”

“I dunno. Something local? Sixpoint? Bronx Brewery?”

“Ah, quite the locavore.”

“Fuck off. Buy whatever you want.” Alex smiled and Jerome headed out the front door. Alex walked further into the party. He looked for familiar faces but to no avail. Making his way into the kitchen, he opened their once sparsely supplied fridge to find it full of assorted beers. He grabbed a PBR, opened it, and took a refreshing first gulp. Something of the tension of the day began to slide off of his shoulders. This is just the beginning, he thought to himself. He was not sure what this would be the beginning of per se, but he wanted this to be some kind of transformational moment. The day had been rocky. His own behavior had baffled him. It was not that he was averse to casual drug use, but the idea of coke in the morning felt a step too far. Whenever he fretted over his alcohol consumption, he reassured himself with the fact that he never drank alone and in the morning. Such behavior would land him firmly in the camp of alcoholism, and he was far from that. This of course left out some notable exceptions-- perhaps most shameful was his first time working a High Holiday pulpit in Jackson Heights, Wyoming. To quell his nerves in the morning, he found a bottle of warm Manischewitz in the building’s kitchen cabinet-- they borrowed the local Masonic lodge for their services-- and poured it into a water bottle. Unbeknownst to the Jews of Jackson Heights, Alex spent the morning of Rosh Hashanah quenching his parched lips with their saccharine wine. Only afterwards did he discover on a trip to the bathroom that the wine had died his teeth a blinding shade of purple. He tried to reassure himself that the shul goers were mostly elderly or asleep during the morning prayers, so they couldn’t have seen *too* much. Or

they just figured that he was another kid in a long line of rabbinical students shipped to their far Western community who was so young that he could barely take care of himself. After appraising the state of his teeth, he did remember a peculiar look that the lone college student home for the holidays had given him when she came up to read Torah. At the time, he assumed she struggled with the stage fright that often afflicted even the most impious of Jews. He had tried to give her a reassuring smile and whisper something uplifting. Only afterwards did he realize that this only exposed her further to his kosher wine soaked breath. He considered this event to be an embarrassing exception to a general rule. And whenever shame rose up in his chest at this memory, he contextualized his bad behavior within the context of the moment. After all, high holidays were notoriously stressful for rabbis, weren't they? And for first timers? He had heard again and again the bemoaned fact that these sanctified days were the rare opportunity for rabbis to actually have an effect because they were the rare days that shul was even partially full. And the poor Jews of Jackson Heights! Would this not be their rare taste of Judaism other than an occasional visit from an overeager Chabad Shaliach? Alex felt the pressure intensely. This justification helped him push his shame back into the pit of his stomach.

So, the morning started with a real aberration, he considered. But the real strangeness came from the sudden arrival of this diary. He had always been jealous of the Jews who knew their ancestral towns or could correctly identify the ancient Jews in daguerreotype style photographs that hung in so many Jewish homes. His family had few photographs, and most of the people in the photographs had no fixed identity. He was

certain that every time he asked his father to identify someone in the decaying pictures his father selected a different name. 'I think that's your great uncle Shmulik? Or no, maybe your second cousin's second wife?' his father would offer with uncertainty, and then usually shrug his head and offer up something along the lines of, just another dead Jew from a place that probably killed all its Jews and turned the shul into a public swimming pool. His father was not prone to the nostalgia of roots tourism. It did not interest him, and he found it be meaningless. What could one really learn, he would ask, if you found out where exactly our family came from? Sure one could find that place on Google Maps and smile and nod at modern technology's capabilities-- but what could that actually tell you about their life?

Now, Alex had something in his hands which was not just a name or a photo or coordinates on a map-- he had the real life of one of his predecessors. He did not have to look at a photograph of Theodore and his siblings and their parents and imagine a story for them. He had the story! Straight from Royal's mouth. It was the kind of primary source that historians salivated over the thought of discovering at a garage sale or stuffed into an attic. The diary was a way for Alex to ground himself. He was no longer just an aimless rabbinical student, but he was the relative of someone who knew the Wright Brothers! In addition to the story's ability to situate himself as a Jew, the diary filled him with warmth for his hometown. Alex had always joked that Jews from Dayton were doubly chosen. Even in drunken gatherings with non-Jewish Daytonians who had fled to New York, he would try to crack the code of what defined their experience growing up. Either they could never put their finger on it or the nostalgia pushed them to order

whiskey shot after whiskey shot which melted the conversation into inanity. So much of Dayton's self-conception was rooted in the Wright Brothers. It was, after all, the birthplace of flight-- not an insignificant title. And thus, shouldn't its denizens inherit some of that magic? It was a city of builders, but just a city that had not built much in the last fifty years. Its decline paralleled that of so many rust belt cities. And the fall felt all the more poignant for the heights from which they had come. To be a Daytonian, Alex was convinced, was to have a past of gold, a present of shit, and a future of unwarranted confidence. Not so dissimilar to the Jewish people, he would explain to his friends from Alter and the Catholic school system.

Now, Alex had a real tie to Dayton's native sons, not just the imagined one that he shared with other Daytonians. But he had a Theodore-- a philanderer doctor who had made a trip inverse to Alex, from New York City to Dayton, possessed a frontier sense of optimism, and bought a bike from the fucking Wright Brothers. He felt grounded in a way that surprised him. And he felt a surge of optimism about his own future. Despite today's degenerate start, the school year was off to a brilliant beginning, he told himself. My last year, he smiled to himself as he shrugged and took a gulp of his beer, I'm going to own this year.

"You want some Molly?"

Alex jerked his head around and realized that someone was speaking to him. She was on the shorter side with short brown hair with bangs that touched her eyelids. Her wire rimmed glasses sat at the edge of her nose, and she glanced up at him with a look of disinterest.

“Me?”

“No, the other young Arthur Miller deep in thought.”

“Maybe buying glasses from Moscot wasn’t the right choice,” he wondered out loud.

“They fit your thoughtful, pained thousand year stare.”

“I’m sorry-- have we met or do you always label strangers as various playwrights?”

“We have, and I only do that when the spirit moves me.”

“Ah-- let me guess. We have some Quaker college connection?”

“What gave it away?” she asked.

“Well, not every young Susan Sontag talks about spirits being moved when they offer a pseudo-stranger hard drugs.”

“I don’t think Susan Sontag had glasses like these?” she said wryly.

“I guess my knowledge of cultural critics and their glasses selection is not what it once was.”

“But yes, we do have a Quaker college connection. I went to Swarthmore-- I think we met at a Hold Steady show?”

“Is that the traditional Swarthmorian greeting? To ask something if they want to have Molly?”

“We don’t dance around the subject like you space cadet Haverfordians.”

“Touche. A Hold Steady show....Ah! At that weird smelly basement venue at Swat?”

“You’re of course speaking about the venerable Olde Club.”

“It’s all coming back to me. We were at the front right of the stage, yeah?”

“We were.”

“And the guitarist came up and said--”

-- ‘I have the flu. I haven’t seen my family in six weeks. This is our last show.

Can you please make sure no one touches my pedals?’”

“He really rocked the fuck out for having the flu and confessing his deepest thoughts to drunk 19 year olds. Remind me of your name?”

“Sarah. Sarah Roberts. And you’re Alex...”

“Bernstein.”

“Ah yes, I think you tried to use a pick up line on me that was some convoluted Berenstein Bears reference?”

“Shit, Sarah, I thought we were friends! You had to go and spoil our great Hold Steady memory with a reminder of my bad behavior.”

“You’re right-- I forgot! It was my fault for standing there and waiting for them to play their set that you came up and embarrassingly hit on me.”

“Fair enough. Though maybe it will bring you comfort to know that I’ve reformed my ways.”

“What? No more Berenstein Bears references when you’re trying to seduce women?”

“No. Well, yes. I just mean, you know, trying to be more aware in this whole post-Weinstein world. You know, hashtag me too?” As soon as it left his mouth, Alex knew that it was at best incomprehensible, at worse boorish.

“You know what,” he started as her face hovered between befuddlement and disgust, “I’ve had a long day, and I probably should not speak about anything that requires a modicum of sensitivity. Can we forget most of this conversation ever happened, and will you accept my apology for Berenstein-Bears-Gate?”

“Only because of your Tricky Dick reference.”

“Just trying to keep up with you.”

“But maybe you should get a new pair of glasses then? Your current pair scream, ‘I love a good chat about subjects that require significant thoughtfulness and planning in advance.’”

“I think I missed the return deadline for the glasses. I suppose I’ll have to go around deceiving the nation?”

“It seems so. So, how about that Molly?” she said with a smile.

“Well, you know, what they say-- when a Ford and a Swattie make peace...hard drugs they must...eat.”

“Clever one, Haverford. Let’s go find my friends. I think they’re in this bedroom?” She pointed to Rachel’s room, and he followed her in.

“Holy shit!” Rachel cried out when she saw Alex walk in. “Cokehead Rabbi? You’re joining the festivities. I just expected an earful about hosting an unannounced party. Now, it seems like you’re going to get another nostril-full of powder! Buh dum



ch!” She said gleefully as she mimed a drumroll. Sarah turned to Alex with a puzzled expression.

“Like, I said-- it’s been long day,” he admitted with a shrug.

“I guess this is a pill and not powder, but I couldn’t resist. Your day is about to become that much longer! Don’t you have shit to do tomorrow? Don’t you need to, like, lead the Jewish people? Will you really be in tip top shape to do that, Cokehead Rabbi?”

“Okay, Rachel. You’re very funny. I was just invited by my old friend...fuck,” he stumbled as he forgot Sarah’s name.

“Sarah,” she said with clear annoyance.

“Shit, sorry. Yes, Sarah invited me. And we were reminiscing about our old college days?”

“Oh, that’s right. You both went to those schools with like sixteen people. There’s some kind of absurd rivalry that only three of the sixteen people care about?”

“Yep,” Sarah and Alex said in unison.

“How do you guys know each other?” Alex asked.

Sarah and Rachel exchanged a furtive glance.

“Birthright,” they said.

“No shit! Sarah-- don’t worry, I won’t tell all the Swatties that you took a free trip to colonized land!” he said with an air of theatricality.

“Whatever, Alex,” Rachel started. “No need to be rude to our guests and hog the conversation with talk about Episcopalians or whatever your schools were and Zionism. People came to get away from their Monday doldrums.” Alex took note of the usual

crowd of Pratt students with their artfully disheveled hair and elegant thrift store clothes. They looked either lost in thought or just like they were trying to feign patience for when the drugs would come out.

“Without furtherado , let’s get fucked,” Rachel said gleefully as she reached into her desk drawer and pulled out a tin of Altoids. She opened the tin and hands shot out like synchronized swimmers performing a routine. She place a small pill in each hand.

“Ah my favorite part,” Rachel started, “it’s just like communion. But less wafers and more drugs? Less Catholicism and more degeneracy?”

“Less transubstantiation and more personal transformation,” a serious eyed guy in the corner said with the confidence of someone saying something truly profound. The Pratt students around him nodded their heads as if continuing their synchronized swimming routine. Alex managed to hold his laughter in.

“Okay, Cokehead Rabbi,” Rachel started. “As the resident rebbe of Bed Stuy, why don’t you say some consecrating words?”

Alex grimaced at her.

“Fine. There’s a Hasidic story about a boy who is working in the field. He should be watching his flock of sheep but he sees beautiful plant. He kneels down and stares at for hours. Suddenly, he realizes that it’s dark, he’s alone and the sheep are nowhere to be found. He becomes terrified when a man on a cart appears. It’s the local rabbi who asks what is he doing at such a late hour alone and without his sheep? He tearfully admits what happens. And the Rabbi smiles and says, ‘son, your sheep will always find a way home-- but tomorrow that plant might be gone or you might be unable to find it. You

chose correctly to admire it rather than guard your sheep. Now, see what's underneath that plant.' So he uproots the plant and underneath it, he finds a bag of golden coins. They return back to the town, and the boy uses the money to build a beautiful garden in the village so that the townspeople never have to choose between watching their sheep or admiring the beauty of nature. The garden will always be there for them. May you find your own plant to admire in the middle of the field." The Pratt contingent nodded silently and glumly, until one of them raised her hand with the pill between her forefingers and cried out,

"L'chaim!"

For the second time in one day, Alex got high.

*Though I consider myself to be of healthy mind and body, I did not realize how physically taxing the ride with the Brothers would be. I have acquainted myself briefly with Max Nordau and his muskel-Judenthum, and I approve. I think that for too long our Hebrew bodies have languished in the filth and constriction of cities. In order for us to rise to the heights that this new century and world invite us to, our bodies must be able to meet the task. In Manhattan, I would join friends in rowing down the Hudson and found this to be of immense pleasure. To feel our bodies glide across the water in defiance of*

*our earthly forms thrilled me. I suppose this helps explain my fascination with the Brothers' attempts to push the human form airborne. Whether it is the technological advances of our past century or the social strides that Jews have made in the West, I find it all nothing less than a miracle. Who would have thought two hundred years ago that our country men could walk on streets illuminated by electric light into a university that for time immemorial had locked its doors to us?*

*Alas, my attempts at being a true disciple of Mr. Nordau have a ways to go, as now that I write this curled up by my fireplace in the warmth of my own home. I know that it's scientifically inaccurate to call my legs 'dead.' However, dead they feel. I did not realize that the invitation for a day of cycling would be so punishing on my body. And yet! What a marvelous day.*

*I walked my bicycle over to their home on Hawthorn Street. I of course gave it a few trial runs. And perhaps all of this muskel-Judenthum has paid off! I found myself able to move not rapidly but at least with some ease. Relief filled me when I realized that I would not shame myself (entirely) today. We greeted each other affably. Wilbur walked around powerfully and excitedly, though a somberness filled Orville.*

*"You'll have to excuse my brother. He's having one of his 'peculiar spells.'"*  
*Orville glared at Wilbur.*

*"What, Orville? I'm just trying to alert our kind guest to your predispositions. Not to worry. Once we start moving, the blood will begin to circulate and knock those dastardly thoughts out. Isn't that right, Doctor?"*

*"Theodore, please."*

*“You will have to excuse my Midwestern formality. Isn’t that right, Theodore?”*

*“Well, I am no scientist of the mind. But in my experience, exercise does appear to be conducive to the well-functioning of the brain.”*

*“Yes, yes, you see, Orville? A little movement will knock these demons right out your ears. You need to stop reading so much damned fiction. What’s that damned book you’re reading again? House of Green Goblins?”*

*“House of Seven Gables. Theodore you must excuse my brother’s philistine feelings toward art. He’s too much a mechanic of the hands to appreciate the fine work of authors,” Orville retorted with a smile that moved aside some of his gloom.*

*“Gables, goblins-- no difference. I hope we’re not boring you, Theodore. May I call you Theor?”*

*“Of course, and not at all. Just making me miss my own siblings.”*

*“They still live in New York?”*

*“Yes, Adolph is a printer, and Stella a...bon-vivant, if you will.”*

*“A bon vivant? Our sister Katharine shames us with her maturity.”*

*“My sister shames me with her happiness.”*

*“Well, Theo,” Wilbur started. “I suppose we offer to the world what we can. Enough chitter-chatter. Let’s head South. Thirty miles sound okay to you?”*

*I tried to hide my shock but it slipped through.*

*“Ah, you anticipated something shorter? Nothing to worry. The views will make up for the ache in your legs,” Wilbur said as he hopped on his bicycle and started pedaling. Orville followed right after, and I began my own journey. We made our way*

*down the Cincinnati Pike and stopped at the County Fair Grounds. Though I could have used a rest, Wilbur insisted on a few laps around the track. It was remarkable to watch the two brothers move. It was as if they carried some kind of secrets about bicycling. At times, I thought they were levitating off the ground, but I knew that was only a trick on my eye from the dust that their tires spun up. They move with their bicycles as if they were some kind of mechanized being. I lagged by own, occasionally coughing up the dust they had kicked up, but I was happy. It wasn't until this moment that I realized how much I had needed stimulation and excitement in my new life. I carry no regrets about coming to Dayton-- but I hadn't realized that the lack of friends or familiarity with this town would carry such sadness. I am not a zealot of Mr. Nordau, but his work has influenced me and given me the sense that the last thing a free Jew needed was to wallow in self-pity or pain. Instead, I had buried myself in my work. And yet, as the dust coated my face and turned my black suit beige, I felt myself emerging from a kind of fog that had haunted me since the collapse of my dalliance with Mrs. Cohen. Just as Wilbur had hoped that the ride would help his brother's mood, I found a similar effect on me. I let out a soft laugh and playful yawp, as I stood up to pedal to catch up with the Brothers. They peered at me in unison-- Orville turning across his left shoulder and Wilbur his right-- both smiled and echoed by yawp and we pedaled together. They were no replacement for Adolph and Stella of course. But it was a nice reminder of life when I had been flanked by my two siblings.*

*After these laps and too short of a break, we continued on to Miamisburg, a small village (unsure if that is the correct technical term) on the outskirts of the city. Here, I*

*wished I had not tried to keep pace with the Wrights around the track, as we biked over endless hills that set the muscles in my legs aflame with pain and exhaustion. The brothers continued on undeterred, and I had no wish to interrupt their momentum. And then, the destination of our ride came into sight. Massive mounds of dirt, almost like Pharaoh's pyramids, yet emerging right out of the earth and continuing skyward. Their magnificence left me short of words. After this moment of silence, I felt my lips move.*

*"Baruch atah adonai eloheinu melech ha'olam shekahcha lo baolamo."*

*Blessed art thou, God, King of the Universe, who has such things like this in his world.*

*It was the traditional blessing for seeing something beautiful. And before my brain had fully digested the site, this prayer came to my lips.*

*"Sorry, Theo, did you say something?" Orville asked.*

*"It's nothing. Just something that we say when we see something beautiful in the world. Thanking God for making such a majestic world."*

*"Ha! Dear fellow. This is not the work of God but the work of the long banished Indians. The Adema. They built these structures as a way to house their dead. God knows where the descendants are. Maybe in some arid stretch of the Southwest, poor bastards. And their ancestors left behind in old Ohio. Alas. Wilbur and I enjoy coming here. To remember what existed before us. The White man has not held Dayton for all of eternity. What a civilization that existed here!"*

*I looked at the mound in amazement. It was indeed like the pyramids! Only not made by slaves, but by people who wished to honor their own deceased. And then only to*

*be kicked out. I had of course heard the rumors that the Indians were a lost tribe of Hebrew-- like those poor Jews in Ethiopia or Yemen, cut off from the rest of the world. And the Indians did not need to be part of the seed of Israel to share commonalities with us. A people on the move, expelled from their homeland, attempting to make a life in a new place. Perhaps one day there might be a kind of Indian Zionism. That they'll come back to Ohio and rebuild what was lost. I would wish them luck in this endeavor, just like I wish our brothers in Palestine luck in rebuilding there. It may be foolish, but it does have the air of the heroic.*

*We sat and stared in silence for many minutes. Occasionally, I would heard Orville and Wilbur whisper to each other. Word like "wings" and "wind-tunnels" and "elevation" were used. Wilbur would use his hand to mimic the movement of a bird in demonstration to his brother. I did not wish to disturb them but just to enjoy being in their presence. Every week, it feels that in the Parsha we read about a new set of disastrous brothers. From Cain and Abel to Moses and Aaron-- there are improvements over time. But it never becomes easy. However, with these two, an easiness rests upon them. They move differently but they move as one. I don't know how they propose to create a flying machine. But I have faith that they will. For no other reason than just the grace with which they move. I believe they will do it.*

*We rode home mostly in silence. Pain ricocheted through my legs. But the happiness did not fade. I wished them adieu as I made my way into my home, set up the fire, and began to write.*



Alex could feel that the drugs were kicking in. Or could he? He spent the first thirty minutes after ingesting the pill in that questioning state familiar to all who remember smoking a joint for the first time: am I high? Despite his day's illicit indulgences, Molly was something new and foreign to him. Hard drugs appeared the bread and butter of the Pratt diet-- but for his friends at Haverford, marijuana was about as dangerous as they pushed it. There were of course the kids whose affinity for coke and other sniffables or ingestibles defined them. They covered their dorm ceilings with glow-in-the-dark stars that Alex assumed had peaked in the early 90s and appeared to have an endless supply of glow sticks stuffed in their pockets. It was a peculiar melange of philosophy majors from LA and lacrosse players from Westchester along with a sprinkling of disheveled but elegant Europeans. They radiated an aura of danger, as if the moment at 2 AM Saturday when your head was grateful to be hitting the pillow, their night was just on the cusp of something new and electric. Alex's attempts to befriend some of the key players in this crew were persistently undermined by his own self doubt. What did some Jew from Dayton really have to contribute to them? He assumed they looked down their aquiline noses at him-- but he realized later, after the assistance of some therapy and medication, that this was most likely his own anxiety speaking.

He continued to sort through these memories as the party swirled around him. Sarah and Rachel's foreheads touched as smiles transformed their faces. The drugs must

be working for them, he thought. They just seemed so at ease. No chance they were thinking about social insecurities that wracked them ten years ago. He looked around to see the others giggling and erupting into brief euphoric moments. And then, like a plow clearing a snow saturated street-- in an instant opening a pathway, the drugs kicked in. He felt a calming sense of clarity flood throughout his body. The semi-nostalgic, semi-painful reminiscences about a college life not daringly enough led washed away leaving in their wake some blissed out state. He exhaled and cracked the smile of someone finally in on the inside joke. Calmness overcame him, but his fingers felt electric, as if he were holding some kind of charge that could electrocute the next person he touched. He felt an inexplicable desire to dance. He made his way over to Rachel's laptop connected to the speakers and started barking at the person controlling the music.

"Excuse me! Do you mind if I put something on?" A guy with a shaved head but a beard that would have given Herzl pause eyed him suspiciously.

"What's Cokehead Rabbi know about music?" he asked unironically.

"Jesus, I'm not going to put on Debbie Friedman."

"Who?"

"Nevermind. Look-- I read Pitchfork like you. I'm up on the new shit. I went to Coachella in 2009. I saw Prince cover Radiohead. I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Smiths cover bands in Manchester. I watched Joe Strummer glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain. Time to let me play some fucking music."

Herzl beard gave Alex a look of piteous confusion.

“Whatever you say, Rabbi,” he said as he peeled away from the computer and disappeared into the party. He had been playing some kind of pulsing electronic music that Alex could not identify if his life depended on it. He entered a few different searches on Spotify as he tried to find the song that matched the moment. His brain imagined all the different scenarios. Would Taylor Swift’s “Welcome to New York” be greeted with ironic enthusiasm or annoyed yawns? Were the Dirty Projectors too known of an entity to this group? What about a little Dayton love with Guided By Voices or would their lo-fi recording just get lost in the raucous mix? Then, like lightning illuminating a dessicated landscape, he knew what to play.

“Ahhhhhhh, Ahhhhhhhh, Ahhhh, Ahhhhhh...” the harmonizing voices began supported by a triumphant but consistent drum beat. Alex sang along as he gazed out to the group in Rachel’s room who were struck by the shift in rhythm and melody as they started to recognize the familiar beginning of David Bowie’s “Let’s Dance.” Immediately, he knew that he had selected correctly as faces lit up around the room and heads started to bob in motion. Someone had even picked up the Banagrams off of Rachel’s bookshelf and started to shake it like a maraca. He waltzed his way over to Rachel and Sarah with comic dance moves.

“Wow, Rabbi,” Sarah began, “I think you’re going to change a whole generation of young Jews. Will they be singing Bowie around the campfire instead of ‘The Circle Game?’”

“You know, the first time I heard Bowie was at some summer camp Beit Cafe. These two kids played “Major Tom.” Even the private school kids from Cincinnati seemed moved!”

“What the fuck are we supposed to know about private schoolers from Cincinnati?” Rachel asked to snorts of laughter from Sarah.

“Yeah...does that just mean they farmed a higher grade of pig than the lowly public schoolers?” Sarah asked.

“Or, or, or,” Rachel began eagerly, “or did they actually have access to pens and paper while the rest of the poor schmos had to use a chisel to write?”

“No! Ah, I’ve got it,” Sarah piped in, “they just knew what music was while the rest of the summer camp was like, ‘what are these strange noises being produced by the human throat and coming from these alarming wood contraptions. This must be some kind of sorcery!’” Rachel howled in laughter, and Alex even cracked a smile.

“You New Yorkers are real fucking hilarious,” he said.

“Oh shit, Sarah, we shouldn’t make fun of Alex. He’s still scarred by the girl from Queens who asked him during freshman year French whether Ohio had a big population of Buffalos.”

“Well, don’t they?” Sarah asked with a smile.

“The hilarity grows by the minute,” Alex said.

“The best part is that his fucking roommates-- also landmen of us (though one was from Long Island)-- edited the Wikipedia article on Buffalo to make it look like there was a population in Ohio. When they showed Alex, oh my God, you should have seen the

confusion in his eyes. It was like telling one of these Pratt kids that Warhol's Campbell soup piece was actually a marketing scheme for them. Oh, Alex-- you do know who Warhol is? Or has word of him not made it to Ohio yet?" Rachel asked. Sarah bowed over with laughter.

"Yes, yes, yes. All very funny. I'm just a simple, dumb mid-Westerner-- ever so grateful for the civilizing effects of you genius New Yorkers."

Rachel reached over and grabbed Alex's hands.

"Alex, it is our privilege to bring you poor illiterate, unenlightened Ohio Jews into the light and warmth of culture and indoor plumbing."

Sarah snorted again with laughter.

"No, but seriously, Alex," Sarah started, "great choice. If you're able to play something that pleases this whole crowd of art snobs, that's not nothing."

Rachel pantomimed a sigh and started to speak.

"I guess you're right, Sarah. Great job, Alex! Maybe you will be the heroic saviour of the Jewish people after all."

"So, tell us, Rav. What did you learn in school today?" Sarah asked.

Alex started to think about the Talmud story they had started to discuss in Levin's class today, but then realized that he had to talk about the diary.

"Actually, today was strange. I got a diary in the mail from my great-aunt from our...uncle? Her uncle? Her father's brother. So, my great-grandfather's brother. Not sure what that makes him to me exactly."

"Oh shit," Rachel started, "is it a Holocaust diary?"

“No, it’s from the early 1900s, and he was in America at this point. Dayton, actually. And, it’s kind of crazy, but he knew the Wright Brothers.” It sounded absurd as the words left his mouth, and he immediately regretted sharing this piece of information with such a skeptical audience. But it was almost as if the drugs had forced the words out. The Molly had identified the words, decided that they needed to be spoken, and then brought them into the world.

“Wait,” Sarah said. “Like the Wright Brothers who were first in flight?”

“Yeah,” Alex said with a nod of his head that conveyed that even he found this information to be shocking.

“I thought they were from North Carolina?” Rachel asked.

“That’s what North Carolinians want you to think! They did their first flight there-- but no, they were good old Midwestern boys like yours truly,” Alex said.

“That’s...fucking crazy,” Rachel said.

“I know, I know. I’m trying to wrap my mind around the whole thing. I’ve only read the first pages-- but it really is fucking crazy. The last thing I read is about him going on a bike ride with them! Like, a literal bike ride with the fucking Wright Brothers. It’s...just...crazy.”

Rachel and Sarah nodded with clear assent.

“Do you know what happened to him?” Rachel asked.

“No-- I had no idea about him. All I knew was that my great-grandfather never spoke about his brother. I assumed it was some kind of weird business fall out or dispute.

Honestly, I kind of assumed that he was a fuck up of sorts-- or that he had done something to shame the family.”

“And did he?” Rachel asked.

“No, nothing. Well, wait. Yes, I guess. Wait, I don’t know. He writes in the beginning part about having an affair with a married woman in New York before he moved to Dayton-- but I got the sense that was secret from the rest of the family. Or who knows? Maybe everyone knew and that was why he moved to Dayton?”

“Damn,” Rachel said.

“Yeah, damn. That’s some crazy shit,” Sarah added. “Also, I didn’t realize your family was from here. Maybe that’s why you’re not such a total idiot after all? Kidding! Kidding! Sorry. How did you get this crazy *Everything is Illuminated* journal?”

“My great-aunt mailed it. Oh, Jesus, I also found out that she’s dead.”

“Shit, sorry, Alex,” Sarah said and Rachel echoed her.

“Thanks. She was a little disconnected from the rest of the family, and I didn’t know her so well. But yeah, somehow my parents forget to mention this to me. Her lawyer mailed it to me.”

“That’s dramatic,” Rachel said.

“Yeah. The whole thing is kind of bizarre. Like, really bizarre. Like really, really bizarre. I can’t think about this anymore. Why don’t we join the artsy farts over there and dance to David Bowie?” Before checking for agreement, he stood up quickly, turned on his heel, slid over to the dancing kids and manically joined them. He felt aligned with the music and comforted by that. He didn’t have to think about his connection to some past

ancestor or figure out what to do with his life in the Jewish world at this moment. He could just unrhythmically dance and indulge in the waves of dopamine that that drugs were flooding into his brain.

*The morning after my ride with the Brothers, my legs had reached a level of soreness I never thought possible. For all of my aspirations toward being a muscular Jew, I don't know if I have succeeded at all. Maybe it should not be such a point of shame that a bicycle ride with two bicycle builders should leave me with some pain. More than the soreness though, I was left with the thrill of what had transpired. I am convinced that there is something remarkable about these men. The way they seem to be thinking or dreaming at every moment feels prophetic. I wonder had Isaiah been born in a different century and on a different continent, perhaps his feverous mind might have pushed him to the world of invention. To build requires a constant stream of passion and a vision for what you want to bring into the world. Our cantankerous prophet was lacking in neither passion nor vision. The Brothers may not have the anger that radiated from Isaiah-- but they do have the ceaseless motion that propelled him to excoriate countrymen and king. Isaiah comes to mind, I suppose, for a simple reason. I think of the verse, "For thus my Lord said to me: "Go, set up a watchman; Let him announce what he sees. He will see mounted men, Horsemen in pairs— Riders on asses, Riders on camels— And he will*



*listen closely, Most attentively.” What would flight allow us if not for a new kind of watchman?*

*The watchman sees what is on the horizon and calls out. He is able to cry out because he has the advantage of height-- he stands on some kind of tower or elevated space and looks out. Yet, is it a real place? Ibn Ezra thinks it only happens in the form of a vision. Does the watchman see through a vision alone? The whole scene could transpire in the form of prophecy-- the watchman imagines himself climbing the stairs, footstep by footstep, as he reaches the top to see hoards of warriors on horses. Or he must actually do the climbing to the top of this tower in order to have the vision. I think of our Brothers here. They seem to be of the later kind. They are not just dreamers, but they are men of gears and axles. They don't just dream of machines moving through the air like some poet dreaming up in a Chinese opium den. Instead, their work instigates their dreams. The grease on their hands allows the mysterious machine of their souls to move. Wilbur and Orville are able to perceive a future like the watchman can see what lays on the horizon. Whether the future they envision will come to pass remains to be seen. After all, we only know that the watchman is correct when what he has predicted becomes visible for us. Yet, I have faith in them. They embody the creative American spirit that makes my father shiver with tears when he laments his brothers and sisters who did not emigrate here and still live in the backwaters of the Hapsburgs. It has been a while since I've written to him. I have been trailed still by his feeling of disappointment when I left-- so I imagine that the story of those remarkable Brothers will make him feel that my Exodus to the Middle West was not for naught.*

*The miracles that flight could allow are too numerous to speak. The kind of sight enjoyed by those soaring in the air would be unprecedented. It would put the vision of the watchman to shame. Those who have enjoyed hot air balloons have had a taste of all of this. Yet, their vehicle soars above and mostly remains stationary, occasionally drifting and dipping based on the whims of the wind. But some kind of flying machine could allow for mobility in the air. One would not remain glued to a single spot but could move freely through the sky to see the landscape unfold. I hesitate to imagine the kind of perfect maps that could be drawn, the Indians living undisturbed and unruffled who could be seen. The watchman may have seen the horses on the horizon. The Wrights might be able to see a world we have yet dreamed of.*

*What is also notable about the watchman is that his view of the future can diminish his understanding or experience of the present. For better or worse, I suppose. For me, this has been for the better. It is not that I claim to share Orville and Wilbur's creative genius or even close. I accept that I am a man of science who relies on the textbooks and guidance of my teachers. But the proximity to them has thrilled me and reminded me of what remarkable things the future might hold. All of this is to say that Mrs. Cohen has been, for the first time since relocating here, far from my thoughts. I would lie if I claimed she had been wholly absent. Occasionally, I would still lapse into absurd visions of a world in which we start a new life together. Maybe in Paris or Berlin. This possibility still can flood me with a lustful joy. But these fantasies are not as frequent as they once were. It is as if the Wright's pursuit of a more brilliant future has pushed me to dream of what the years could have in store for me. I am not the kind of*

*watchman they are, but I am starting to make out the shape of a future in Dayton where I am not so dogged by the dalliances of my past.*

*After doing some of Nordau's stretches and exercises, my legs began to recover. Maybe I might yet be this strong kind Jew? I wished I could have gone to one of the public bathhouses in Manhattan that Adolph and I used to frequent in the winter when the temperatures aimed to freeze our bones. But those bathhouses I knew were frequented by our crowd. Always you would see a few other types-- Italians or Russians-- but it was a mostly Hebrew place. I am ashamed to say but I hesitated to go the bathhouse here on North Main Street for fear of my anatomical difference from the other men becoming the object of curiosity or ridicule. I do not mean to assume that I am surrounded by Barbarians here, as my father would certainly have you think. But I remain cautious about making my religion so public. The bathhouse turns the most private into the utterly public, so I elected to avoid it for now. Maybe in time I'll feel confident to go- but I had no wish to sour my exalted mood. Alas, the challenge of the watchman is that not only does he see the good on the horizon but he might also imagine the evil. We Jews could try to have a little more faith in what the future holds for us. History seems to teach us otherwise-- but if our new world has telegrams, street lamps, and maybe even flying machine, we can afford to be more confident about what the age of science portends. If the Wrights succeed, the geographical distances that separate nations will shrink from the size of elephants to mice. I must assume that this smaller, more connected world will have less blood hate and misunderstanding. I am afraid to assume otherwise lest it lead to a path of pure gloom. After writing this, I have now resolved that I will not hold all*

*Daytonians in such a fearful light. This is America, after all. I will not be held back by my shame at my mark of the covenant. And I will have faith in the enlightened capacities of my fellow man.*

*This week, I have made repeat visits to the Wright's bicycle shop after work. It is a true and simple delight to see them working on their machines. They relate to the bicycles as if they have a heart and a soul and need to be properly understood in order to be successfully built. It is an inspiring thing to behold. In the downstairs of their building is where they conduct their normal business, but it upstairs where they do their work on flight. I have not yet gained the confidence to ask them to see what transpires on the upper level, as I'm happy to remain on the ground floor with them. In due time. Perhaps this rise in my confidence will inspire me to ask them to let me see their other work. The Brothers continue to charm me. Orville is quiet and gentle. I have come to understand that his dourness should not be interpreted so as offend me but is just his occasional disposition. He simply prefers to work in silence. This in great opposition to his loquacious brother. Wilbur's mouth moves as if powered by the gears that make their bicycles come alive. He is quick with a joke and his opinion and often teases his relentlessly severe brother. Yet, they move as one. It is odd that two people so different could be like one creature-- but it seems that something connects them. What that something is? It is outside for me either as a man of science or a man of faith to say. Needless to say, it is remarkable. I wonder if future innovations might allow us to study the biology of them and find out whether there is a particular pattern of neurons or a*

*unique layout to the soul that leads to genius. This might just have to be an eternal mystery. But what a mystery to behold.*

*Another interesting change has come about me. I have begun again to lay tefillin in the morning before leaving for work. Since I had moved to Dayton, they lay on a bookshelf gloomily staring down at me. Occasionally they would stir up a feeling of guilt at their neglect. But I have generally ignored them to some success. The compulsion to put them on rose up out of another, and I thought it not the worst kind of impulse to obey. The strange but familiar feel of the leather was soothing. It reminded me of walking into father's office in the early hours when he was praying. I would peek in as he swayed back and forth. Inevitably, he would catch my gaze and gesture me in (with the implicit promise that I be quiet). I would tip toe in and stand next to him as he let his tallis fall off his shoulders, so the excess fabric could wrap around me like a blanket. He would continue to pray and I could feel the rumble of his chest as the holy words moved out of him. I have found myself reciting those same holy words in the darkness of my Dayton house. Their level of comfort has not changed, as I felt them sooth my soul in the early hours. With so much change swirling about me, it was grounding to do something so ancient.*

Alex woke up without warning to a slight headache and sweaty palms. His legs, draped over the couch in the living room, are still in last night's jeans and his breath reeks

of last night's beers. *Why am I so sore?* He wonders to himself. And then the memory of dancing to the collected works of David Bowie comes flooding back to him. The Pratt kids took particular joy in seeing this soon-to-be-Rabbi moving so wildly. Alex's college girlfriend Emily had tried to coach him in how to dance in a "non-grandpa, humiliating, weird ass way" in her own words. Her teaching mostly involved trying to dissuade Alex from keeping his pointer fingers flexed and pointing around the room. She felt that if he could just stop doing that, he might embarrass her a little less at parties. Despite her better efforts, her teaching failed to stick-- and last night's dancing had been a showcase in what horrified her. He wiped his forehead and pressed his fingers into his eyes as if he could jolt energy back into them and bring himself back from his hangover. His phone buzzed in his pocket, and he pulled it out. He squinted to brace himself for the blinding technicolor of its screen and saw that it was Gabe calling.

"Hello?" Alex said meekly.

"Chaver! Landsman! *Vos macht a yid?* How you feeling?" Gabe exploded in a flurry of excitement.

"I'm alive so that's something."

"Baruch Atah HaShem *mechayay ha'maytim!*" Gabe said-- quoting the traditional prayer of the Amidah that proclaims God's capacity to resurrect the dead.

"That feels about right." Alex said.

"I suppose it is a marvel that you are alive and kicking. You were a psycho on the dance floor last night.

"I didn't see you there last night. Where were you?"

“I wasn’t there for long. I brought my friend-- you know the Satmar one who’s a little off-the-derech? He wanted me to bring him to a real American party.”

“What did he think?” Alex asked.

“To be honest, I think he was kind of horrified by all of it. Like, horrified in a good way.”

“I’m not sure what that means...”

“Well he was pretty stunned by your dancing. I guess the drugs help you overcome your amazing lack of coordination. Or maybe it’s just that drugs bring your lack of coordination to life?”

“Oh, Jesus. I forgot about that.

“The grandma at the Bat Mitzvah shortly before her death dancing?”

“No. The-- first off, fuck you. I’m an *excellent* dancer. And second, no, Jesus, I forgot about the Molly,” Alex said with a sigh.

“Three Jews, two opinions,” Gabe began in a sing-song voice. “One day, one Jew, two incidents of doing hard drugs!”

“Oh my God,” Alex said.

“You’re sewing some major wild oats or something. Anyways. Put on a new flannel shirt, hop on your bike and meet me at Tom’s,” Gabe commanded.

“Ughhhhhhh, I feel like shit though. I just want to lie on this couch and drink 4,000 glasses of cold water,” Alex moaned theatrically.

“Wah, wah, wah. Come on-- we have to be at school by eleven. We have class with Levin again. You need some of their world famous pancakes in your system to

prepare yourself for all of his Yiddishkeit. Their food is not exactly good for my diet, but it's certainly good for your ailing body."

"What diet is this now?"

"It's my all white diet: eggs whites, whitefish salad, and white wine."

"It is amazing that I am alive this morning-- but it's really amazing that you don't have scurvy," Alex said with a note of relief.

"Our people have eaten much, much worse," Gabe said morosely.

"Jesus, fine, fine, I'll hop on my bike and head over."

"That's the correct response," Gabe said.

Alex threw his legs off the side of the couch to propel himself forward. He walked into the kitchen, turned on the faucet and stuck his head under to get some cold water into his system. The water rushed into his mouth, and he moved his face around to wet his face and wake up. Yesterday was a shit show. With the drugs and the diary, it was not how he envisioned starting his final year in rabbinical school. He was hoping for a healthy, relaxed ease into the year. This was a peculiar mix of the degenerate and the weighty that he had no anticipated. He moved his hands underneath the water and quietly said the blessing for washing hands. *Blessed are you, God, ruler the universe, who has commanded us in the act of washing hands.* For the early rabbis, there was a religious obligation to wash one's hands in the morning. They claimed that sleep was 1/60th of death-- plus it carried threats of all kinds of impurity. To cleanse oneself upon waking, washing hands was one of the first acts that needed to be performed. Alex rarely followed this commandment. In fact, when it came to most ritual commandments, he had a lax



relationship-- though he turned his nose up at his fellow students who brazenly indulged in shrimp fried rice or demanded extra bacon on their cheeseburgers. Occasionally though, a compulsion to observe would come over him. Last summer, he would lay tefillin every morning upon waking. He thought it would help provide him with structure and be some kind of empowering way to start his day. For the first few days of muggy June, he succeeded. Waking before his roommates, he would creep into the living room and stand at the eastern facing wall. He fumbled his way through the traditional morning prayers-- starting with enthusiasm and often ending with a bored, abbreviated dash through what remained. The practice only stuck for a few days. In order to get to his summer job of visiting homebound elderly on the Upper West Side, he needed to be out of the apartment at 8, and his efforts to rise early, earnest though they were, collapsed into lazily pressing snooze on his alarm until about 7:57. His efforts to strictly observe Shabbat and Kashrut hit similar bumps in the road. He tried to remind himself that *halacha*, the word traditionally used to refer to the body of prescribed Jewish behavior, translated not as law but as “way,” and that he was simply finding his own pathway of Jewish life. But more often than not, he just felt like a bad Jew.

As he washed his hands, a sense of calm came over him. Yesterday had not been the most ideal start. But today was a brand new day. He imagined washing away the misdeeds of yesterday and tried to focus on the good that lay ahead of him: it’s my last year, and I just got this journal from my crazy, estranged aunt. Those are good things, he reassured himself. They could help ground him and level out his behavior. He could be a better version of the shitshow he had been yesterday. Sure, he could continue to be a little

clumsy and hapless, but he could do that without, or at least with less, drugs. After drying his hands, he realized he had done the blessing out of order. One washed hands and then said the blessing after drying them. He shrugged. The thought had to count for something, he consoled himself. He put on a new flannel shirt-- only after he put its armpits up to his nose and breathed in deeply to inspect. He shrugged again and put the relatively clean shirt over his head. Heading toward the door, he put his bike helmet on his head and took his bike down from the precarious rack that held it on the wall near the entrance. He opened the door, kissed the mezuzah, and headed out to meet Gabe.

Alex locked up his bike on a “No Standing” sign outside of the restaurant. Tom’s was a diner that had been on Washington Avenue in Prospect Heights for almost seventy years. It had withstood all of the changes that the neighborhood had gone through. While the rest of Washington saw gentrifying restaurants come and go, Tom’s continued to serve its luscious, gut-busting pancakes to all sorts of Brooklynites. He walked in, and Gabe waved him over to his table. It was 8:35 on a Tuesday, so there was no crowd to contend with-- the weekend saw a line that even in the most frigid of months would wrap around the corner.

“Well,” Gabe started with a note of concern in his voice. “You have looked worse. That I can say.”

“You sure know how to charm them.”

“Ah, yes, many, many years of practice, my friend. I would say that I’m the...Artful Dodger of compliments,” Gabe said satisfied.

“The Artful Dodger of compliments?”

“I don’t know. I was watching clips from that musical this morning. I couldn’t find any good Holocaust documentaries that I haven’t seen already, so I thought of that for some reason.”

“Good start to the morning?”

“Well, Dickens was a fucking anti-Semite, but otherwise yes, thank you for asking. It was a nice start to my morning,” Gabe said with a smile.

“Well, my morning had the most electric start with your phone call.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“I wasn’t thanking you.”

“You should. You might have slept forever based on how much that dancing wore you out.”

“What’s with you and critiquing my dancing?” Alex asked.

“Nothing, nothing. It’s just that your college girlfriend wasn’t wrong per say about the finger pointing.”

“You know. Emily was perhaps legitimately insane, but maybe she was right about the dancing. I’ll need to do some real soul searching. Dig deep. Figure out if I have the spiritual resources to stop pointing my fingers while dancing. Wait. No, I don’t. I fucking love how I dance. Fuck you. And fuck you for bringing up Emily! You know I hate talking about her. And over breakfast no less!”

“Why are you so sensitive about your breakfast? Daniel Day Lewis from that movie where he’s a Jewish tailor?”

“Gabe. We’ve been over this many times. He’s definitely not Jewish in that terrible, plotless movie.”

“It’s only terrible and plotless because you’re not considering his Jewishness! All the Saville Row tailors were Yids!” Gabe said enthusiastically hitting the table. “It explains how he and his sister are a part but not really a part of higher society in London.”

“Shhhhh! Don’t make a scene about this!”

“What? About your continued denial of our people’s place in arts and culture?”

“Oh come on, you’re the denier! You won’t accept that baseball is the most Jewish sport.”

“All sports are goyish.”

“Tennis is goyish-- except for that Argentine Jew. Football is goyish. Cricket is *mamesh* goyish. But baseball is Jewish.”

“I stand my ground on this one,” Gabe said proudly with a flick of his head.

“You’re an idiot.”

“You’re a fucking idiot!”

“Okay, you’re right, you’re right. I’m the idiot. Anyways. I still hate that you brought up Emily.”

“Fair, that wasn’t nice. But why are you so sensitive about this?”

“She and her husband just moved to Washington Heights, and I can’t stand the thought of running into them.”

“Washington Heights is goyish.”

“I think that might make no sense.”

“Trust me. YU is goyish. They’re all Trump voters.”

“But you know her husband isn’t a Jew, right?” Alex asked.

“Yes, apparently you scared her off from consorting with her own people.”

“Damn!”

“Sorry, sorry, very not nice. Look, Emily is a psycho and that guy is an idiot,” Gabe said.

“He is one of those people who posts on Facebook how much he runs everyday and how fast.”

“Exercise is goyish.”

“You’re a broken record this morning.”

“And advertising exercise? That’s high Goyish. That’s like white bread smeared with mayonnaise eaten while watching reruns of the Westminster Kennel Club dog show from the last 80s goyish. Fuck that guy. And good riddance to Emily! The ocean is full of lots of trout?”

“There are plenty of fish in the sea?” Alex offered with a smile.

“Sure. Whatever. Expressions are goyish.”

“I think you’ve short circuited or something. Let’s order.” Alex waved over the waiter, a middle aged Mexican with a Yankees hat pulled tightly over his head. “I’ll have the banana walnut pancakes. With lots of that strawberry butter on the side.”

“You got it boss. And you?” He turned to Gabe.

“I’ll have the Western omelette, egg whites of course. And a side of pancakes. And a side of bacon. The bacon is low fat, right?” Gabe asked.

“Ummm, I’m not sure?” The waiter offered with a smile.

“Whatever. Side of bacon. And a coffee for me and---”

“I’ll have a glass of OJ,” Alex said as he folded his menu.

“Sir, this man is an idiot. Please get him a cup of coffee,” Gabe said.

“Fine. Coffee and OJ please.”

“You got it,” the waiter said as he scribbled down their order.

Alex had thought that he would try today without any stimulants of any kind, but Gabe was probably right. To cut out coffee would be an act of madness.

“So, is this some kind of new you? Are you trying to become the Hunter S. Thompson of Rabbis?” Gabe asked.

“No...no! Of course not. Shit. Yesterday was just a series of strange event.”

“You mean the journal from your gay uncle?”

“Gabe, look, I just don’t think he was gay. He talks about his affair with some Mrs. Cohen.”

“Sure. More like a Mr. Cohen. *Kohain gadol*, am I right? Heyyyyyyyyyy!” Gabe said.

“You’re sick.”

“You’re a homophobe!”

“You’re talking about my uncle’s genitals!”

“It’s 2018, baby,” Gabe said smugly.

“I don’t understand you.”

“You mean the gays.”

“No! I mean literally and only just fucking you.”

“Whatever. We don’t need to dive into your self-hatred.”

“I won’t take that bait.”

“Alex, accept it. Jews are gay. All Jews. Whether they’re practicing or not. We’re all one big gay family.”

Alex laughed and shook his head. The waiter brought their coffees and his orange juice, and both of them greedily slurped down the coffee as soon as it left his hands. The warm rush of stale dinner coffee coated Alex’s throat, and he felt his brain start to organize itself. Last night’s fog began to lift, and he felt relieved. Ever since had first smoked weed on the hill beside his high school’s tennis court with his high school crush, the time after doing drugs was one of paranoia. He was always struck by the question: will I feel like this forever? What if this doesn’t fade away? Baruch Hashem for coffee, he thought to himself.

“Coffee, you know,” Gabe started.

“Let me guess, very Jewish.” A shock of theatrical surprise crossed Gabe’s face.  
“I know, I know. I’m a genius. No idea how I possibly could have guessed you would say that.”

“It’s true though. All the coffee houses in Vienna and Berlin. Plus coffee is what allowed the Hasidim to stay up all night during Shavuot. Not to mention Greenwich Village and the Beats. The list goes on. And now, my friend, it includes us,” Gabe said with a smile.

“How do you switch from insane to saccharine so quickly?”

“Much practice, my young disciple.”

“It was very nice of you though, Gabe-- connecting us through coffee to our predecessors.”

“Look, I think the mistake of the last generation of Jewish leaders was to try to make Jews more *Jewish*. More Jewish of course according to however they defined it. But almost no one changes their behavior so easily. People stick to their old habits-- and particularly if someone is trying to dissuade them from whatever they’re doing. And usually that shit backfires! Every screed from summer camp rabbis about how teens would need to defend Israel on college campuses and always assume that Israel was right just converted another kid into a poster child for Jewish Voice for Peace.”

“So, what do you propose? Do we remove ourselves entirely from the conversation and just back off and leave the persuasion to the Lubavitchers?” Alex asked as he slide down on the vinyl red chair.



“No, of course not. But their mistake was in trying to offer prescriptions. What we need to do instead of telling young Jews how to be Jewish is tell young Jews how they’re already being Jewish. Like this. Here you are, just having a normal post-heavy-drug-use-on-a-Monday brunch drinking coffee. And you might assume that your actions have no historical connection or no Jewish meaning. But they do! It connects you to all the coffee drinking Jews before you! All the Jews who just needed a little extra oomph.”

“I’m not sure I buy it, Gabe. I mean, you do know that non-Jews as well drink coffee, right? You do know that non-Jews are...also human beings?”

“Of course, of course. Look, I’m not trying to say that coffee consumption has a solely Jewish meaning. I might be a Jewish supremacist, but I’m not an idiot. Drinking coffee can be a Muslim act, or a black act, or a black Muslim act. It could even be a Mormon act like me eating this low-fat bacon is Jewish. Look, my sense is that most of the Jews we’ll be working with are not going to radically change their ways. But I think that we have the capacity to change their perception of themselves. So the more that we can help Jews understand themselves to be living in Jewish time and in relation to Jewish history, the more we have a chance of having a sustainable future.”

“This feels like some kind of bait and switch. Like telling someone you think you’re doing one thing, but really it’s something else entirely.”

“Of course there’s something a little fictitious about it. It’s almost a language game. But look. At the heart of it is an attempt to give Jews more meaning. And if we are

able to give more meaning to people, I have a hard time understanding how that's a bad thing," Gabe said.

"Definitely food for thought."

"And speaking of the devil..." Gabe said enthusiastically. Their waiter brought their plates to the table. Alex hadn't realized how hungry he was until he saw his heaping plate of pancakes.

"I feel like we should say a bracha or something," Alex said.

"God, thank you for allowing us to live during a time when you can even get a good cup of coffee near Grand Central, shows like *Transparent* are on TV, and restaurants like Tom's serve a breakfast that King David could have only dreamt of."

"Amen," Alex said with a smile, and the two began feverishly to eat.