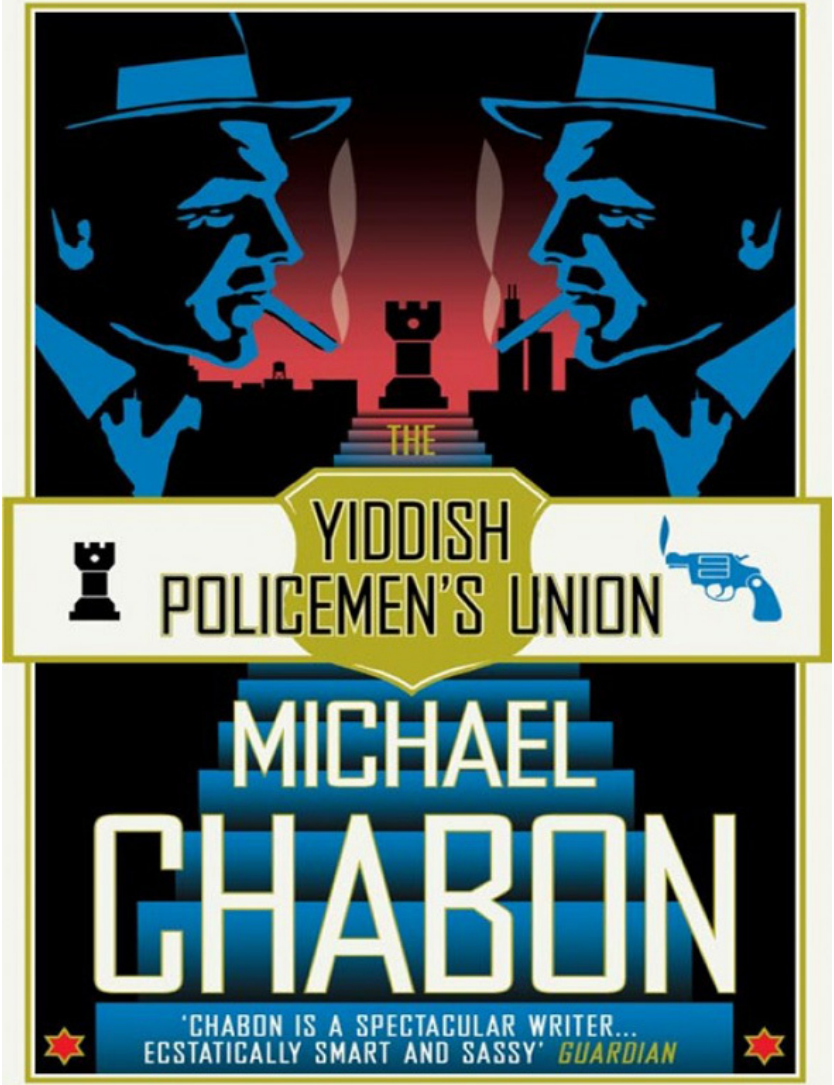
THE
YIDDISH
POLICEMEN'S UNION
MICHAEL
CHABON
'CHABON IS A SPECTACULAR WRITER...
ECSTATICALLY SMART AND SASSY' GUARDIAN

Michael Chabon
The Yiddish Policemen's Union

Аннотация

Set in the Jewish homeland of … Alaska, this is a brilliantly original novel from Michael Chabon, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of 'The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay'.What if, as Franklin Roosevelt once proposed, Alaska – and not Israel – had become the homeland for the Jews after the Second World War? In Michael Chabon's Yiddish-speaking 'Alyeska', Orthodox gangs in side-curls and knee breeches roam the streets of Sitka, where Detective Meyer Landsman discovers the corpse of a heroin-addled chess prodigy in the flophouse Meyer calls home. Marionette strings stretch back to the hands of charismatic Rebbe Gold, leader of a sect that seems to have drawn its mission statement from the Cosa Nostra. Meyer is determined to unsnarl the meaning behind the murder. Even if that means surrendering his badge and his dignity to the chief of Sitka's homicide unit – his fearsome ex-wife Bina.THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION interweaves a homage to the stylish menace of 1940s film noir with a bittersweet fable of identity, home and faith. It is a novel of colossal ambition and heart from one of the most important and beloved writers working today.

Содержание

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MICHAEL CHABON

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Dedication

To Ayelet,
bashert

Epigraph

And they went to sea in a Sieve.
—EDWARD LEAR

Contents

1

Nine months Landsman's been flopping at the Hotel Zamenhof without any of his fellow residents managing to get themselves murdered. Now somebody has put a bullet in the brain of the occupant of 208, a yid who was calling himself Emanuel Lasker.

"He didn't answer the phone, he wouldn't open his door," says Tenenboym the night manager when he comes to roust Landsman. Landsman lives in 505, with a view of the neon sign on the hotel across Max Nordau Street. That one is called the Blackpool, a word that figures in Landsman's nightmares. "I had to let myself into his room."

The night manager is a former U.S. Marine who kicked a heroin habit of his own back in the sixties, after coming home from the shambles of the Cuban war. He takes a motherly interest in the user population of the Zamenhof. He extends credit to them and sees that they are left alone when that is what they need.

"Did you touch anything in the room?" Landsman says.

Tenenboym says, "Only the cash and jewelry."

Landsman puts on his trousers and shoes and hitches up his suspenders. Then he and Tenenboym turn to look at the doorknob, where a necktie hangs, red with a fat maroon stripe, already knotted to save time. Landsman has eight hours to go until his next shift. Eight rat hours, sucking at his bottle, in his

glass tank lined with wood shavings. Landsman sighs and goes for the tie. He slides it over his head and pushes up the knot to his collar. He puts on his jacket, feels for the wallet and shield in the breast pocket, pats the sholem he wears in a holster under his arm, a chopped Smith & Wesson Model 39.

"I hate to wake you, Detective," Tenenboym says. "Only I noticed that you don't really sleep."

"I sleep," Landsman says. He picks up the shot glass that he is currently dating, a souvenir of the World's Fair of 1977. "It's just I do it in my underpants and shirt." He lifts the glass and toasts the thirty years gone since the Sitka World's Fair. A pinnacle of Jewish civilization in the north, people say, and who is he to argue? Meyer Landsman was fourteen that summer, and just discovering the glories of Jewish women, for whom 1977 must have been some kind of a pinnacle. "Sitting up in a chair." He drains the glass. "Wearing a sholem."

According to doctors, therapists, and his ex-wife, Landsman drinks to medicate himself, tuning the tubes and crystals of his moods with a crude hammer of hundred-proof plum brandy. But the truth is that Landsman has only two moods: working and dead. Meyer Landsman is the most decorated shammes in the District of Sitka, the man who solved the murder of the beautiful Froma Lefkowitz by her furrier husband, and caught Podolsky the Hospital Killer. His testimony sent Hyman Tsharny to federal prison for life, the first and last time that criminal charges against a Verbover wiseguy have ever been made to stick. He has the

memory of a convict, the balls of a fireman, and the eyesight of a housebreaker. When there is crime to fight, Landsman tears around Sitka like a man with his pant leg caught on a rocket. It's like there's a film score playing behind him, heavy on the castanets. The problem comes in the hours when he isn't working, when his thoughts start blowing out the open window of his brain like pages from a blotter. Sometimes it takes a heavy paperweight to pin them down.

"I hate to make more work for you," Tenenboym says.

During his days working Narcotics, Landsman arrested Tenenboym five times. That is all the basis for what passes for friendship between them. It is almost enough.

"It's not work, Tenenboym," Landsman says. "I do it for love."

"It's the same for me," the night manager says. "With being a night manager of a crap-ass hotel."

Landsman puts his hand on Tenenboym's shoulder, and they go down to take stock of the deceased, squeezing into the Zamenhof's lone elevator, or ELEVATORO, as a small brass plate over the door would have it. When the hotel was built fifty years ago, all of its directional signs, labels, notices, and warnings were printed on brass plates in Esperanto. Most of them are long gone, victims of neglect, vandalism, or the fire code.

The door and door frame of 208 do not exhibit signs of forced entry. Landsman covers the knob with his handkerchief and nudges the door open with the toe of his loafer.

"I got this funny feeling," Tenenboym says as he follows

Landsman into the room. “First time I ever saw the guy. You know the expression ‘a broken man’?”

Landsman allows that the phrase rings a bell.

“Most of the people it gets applied to don’t really deserve it,” Tenenboym says. “Most men, in my opinion, they have nothing there to break in the first place. But this Lasker. He was like one of those sticks you snap, it lights up. You know? For a few hours. And you can hear broken glass rattling inside of it. I don’t know, forget it. It was just a funny feeling.”

“Everybody has a funny feeling these days,” Landsman says, making a few notes in his little black pad about the situation of the room, even though such notes are superfluous, because he rarely forgets a detail of physical description. Landsman has been told, by the same loose confederacy of physicians, psychologists, and his former spouse, that alcohol will kill his gift for recollection, but so far, to his regret, this claim has proved false. His vision of the past remains unimpaired. “We had to open a separate phone line just to handle the calls.”

“These are strange times to be a Jew,” Tenenboym agrees. “No doubt about it.”

A small pile of paperback books sits atop the laminate dresser. On the bedside table Lasker kept a chessboard. It looks like he had a game going, a messy-looking middle game with Black’s king under attack at the center of the board and White having the advantage of a couple of pieces. It’s a cheap set, the board a square of card that folds down the middle, the pieces hollow,

with plastic nubs where they were extruded.

One light burns in a three-shade floor lamp by the television. Every other bulb in the room apart from the bathroom tube has been removed or allowed to burn out. On the windowsill sits a package of a popular brand of over-the-counter laxative. The window is cranked open its possible inch, and every few seconds the metal blinds bang in the stiff wind blowing in off the Gulf of Alaska. The wind carries a sour tang of pulped lumber, the smell of boat diesel and the slaughter and canning of salmon. According to "Nokh Amol," a song that Landsman and every other Alaskan Jew of his generation learned in grade school, the smell of the wind from the Gulf fills a Jewish nose with a sense of promise, opportunity, the chance to start again. "Nokh Amol" dates from the Polar Bear days, the early forties, and it's supposed to be an expression of gratitude for another miraculous deliverance: Once Again. Nowadays the Jews of the Sitka District tend to hear the ironic edge that was there all along.

"Seems like I've known a lot of chess-playing yids who used smack," Tenenboym says.

"Same here," Landsman says, looking down at the deceased, realizing he has seen the yid around the Zamenhof. Little bird of a man. Bright eye, snub beak. Bit of a flush in the cheeks and throat that might have been rosacea. Not a hard case, not a scumbag, not quite a lost soul. A yid not too different from Landsman, maybe, apart from his choice of drug. Clean fingernails. Always a tie and hat. Read a book with footnotes

once. Now Lasker lies on his belly, on the pull-down bed, face to the wall, wearing only a pair of regulation white underpants. Ginger hair and ginger freckles and three days of golden stubble on his cheek. A trace of a double chin that Landsman puts down to a vanished life as a fat boy. Eyes swollen in their blood-dark orbits. At the back of his head is a small, burnt hole, a bead of blood. No sign of a struggle. Nothing to indicate that Lasker saw it coming or even knew the instant when it came. The pillow, Landsman notices, is missing from the bed. "If I'd known, maybe I would have proposed a game or two."

"I didn't know you play."

"I'm weak," Landsman says. By the closet, on plush carpet the medicated yellow-green of a throat lozenge, he spots a tiny white feather. Landsman jerks open the closet door, and there on the floor is the pillow, shot through the heart to silence the concussion of bursting gases in a shell. "I have no feel for the middle game."

"In my experience," Detective, Tenenboym says, "it's all middle game."

"Don't I know it," Landsman says.

He calls to wake his partner, Berko Shemets.

"Detective Shemets," Landsman says into his mobile phone, a department-issue Shoyfer AT. "This is your partner."

"I begged you not to do this anymore, Meyer," Berko says. Needless to say, he also has eight hours to go until his next shift.

"You have a right to be angry," Landsman says. "Only I

thought maybe you might still be awake."

"I *was* awake."

Unlike Landsman, Berko Shemets has not made a mess of his marriage or his personal life. Every night he sleeps in the arms of his excellent wife, whose love for him is merited, requited, and appreciated by her husband, a steadfast man who never gives her any cause for sorrow or alarm.

"A curse on your head, Meyer," Berko says, and then, in American, "God damn it."

"I have an apparent homicide here at my hotel," Landsman says. "A resident. A single shot to the back of the head. Silenced with a pillow. Very tidy."

"A hit."

"That's the only reason I'm bothering you. The unusual nature of the killing."

Sitka, with a population in the long jagged strip of the metro area of three point two million, averages about seventy-five homicides a year. Some of these are gang-related: Russian shtarkers whacking one another freestyle. The rest of Sitka's homicides are so-called crimes of passion, which is a shorthand way of expressing the mathematical product of alcohol and firearms. Cold-blooded executions are as rare as they are tough to clear from the big whiteboard in the squad room, where the tally of open cases is kept.

"You're off duty, Meyer. Call it in. Give it to Tabatchnik and Karpas."

Tabatchnik and Karpas, the other two detectives who make up B Squad in the Homicide Section of the District Police, Sitka Headquarters, are holding down the night shift this month. Landsman has to acknowledge a certain appeal in the idea of letting this pigeon shit on their fedoras.

"Well, I would," Landsman says. "Except for this is my place of residence."

"You knew him?" Berko says, his tone softening.

"No," Landsman says. "I did not know the yid."

He looks away from the pale freckled expanse of the dead man stretched out on the pull-down bed. Sometimes he can't help feeling sorry for them, but it's better not to get into the habit.

"Look," Landsman says, "you go back to bed. We can talk about it tomorrow. I'm sorry I bothered you. Good night. Tell Ester-Malke I'm sorry."

"You sound a little off, Meyer," Berko says. "You okay?"

In recent months Landsman has placed a number of calls to his partner at questionable hours of the night, ranting and rambling in an alcoholic dialect of grief. Landsman bailed out on his marriage two years ago, and last April his younger sister crashed her Piper Super Cub into the side of Mount Dunkelblum, up in the bush. But Landsman is not thinking of Naomi's death now, nor of the shame of his divorce. He has been sandbagged by a vision of sitting in the grimy lounge of the Hotel Zamenhof, on a couch that was once white, playing chess with Emanuel Lasker, or whatever his real name was. Shedding the last of their fading

glow on each other and listening to the sweet chiming of broken glass inside. That Landsman loathes the game of chess does not make the picture any less touching.

"The guy played chess, Berko. I never knew. That's all."

"Please," Berko says, "please, Meyer, I beg you, don't start with the crying."

"I'm fine," Landsman says. "Good night."

Landsman calls the dispatcher to make himself the primary detective on the Lasker case. Another piece-of-shit homicide is not going to put any special hurt on his clearance rate as primary. Not that it really matters. On the first of January, sovereignty over the whole Federal District of Sitka, a crooked parenthesis of rocky shoreline running along the western edges of Baranof and Chichagof islands, will revert to the state of Alaska. The District Police, to which Landsman has devoted his hide, head, and soul for twenty years, will be dissolved. It is far from clear that Landsman or Berko Shemets or anybody else will be keeping his job. Nothing is clear about the upcoming Reversion, and that is why these are strange times to be a Jew.

2

While he waits for the beat latke to show, Landsman knocks on doors. Most of the occupants of the Zamenhof are out for the night, in body or mind, and for all that he gets out of the rest of them, he might as well be knocking on doors at the Hirshkovits School for the Deaf. They are a twitchy, half-addled, rank, and cranky bunch of yids, the residents of the Hotel Zamenhof, but none of them seems any more disturbed than usual tonight. And none of them strikes Landsman as the type to jam a large-caliber handgun against the base of a man's skull and kill him in stone-cold blood.

"I'm wasting my time with these buffaloes," Landsman tells Tenenboym. "And you, you're sure you didn't see anybody or anything out of the ordinary?"

"I'm sorry, Detective."

"You're a buffalo, too, Tenenboym."

"I don't dispute the charge."

"The service door?"

"Dealers were using it," Tenenboym says. "We had to put in an alarm. I would have heard."

Landsman gets Tenenboym to telephone the day manager and the weekend man, snug at home in their beds. These gentlemen agree with Tenenboym that, as far as they know, no one has called for the dead man or asked after him. Ever. Not during the

entire course of his stay at the Zamenhof. No visitors, no friends, not even the delivery boy from Pearl of Manila. So, Landsman thinks, there's a difference between him and Lasker: Landsman has occasional visits from Romel, bearing a brown paper bag of *lumpia.*

"I'm going to go check out the roof," Landsman says. "Don't let anybody leave, and call me when the latke decides to show up."

Landsman rides the elevatoro to the eighth floor and then bangs his way up a flight of steel-edged concrete steps to the roof of the Zamenhof. He walks the perimeter, looking across Max Nordau Street to the roof of the Blackpool. He peers over the north, east, and south cornices to the surrounding low structures six or seven stories down. Night is an orange smear over Sitka, a compound of fog and the light of sodium-vapor streetlamps. It has the translucence of onions cooked in chicken fat. The lamps of the Jews stretch from the slope of Mount Edgecumbe in the west, over the seventy-two infilled islands of the Sound, across the Shvartsn-Yam, Halibut Point, South Sitka, and the Nachtasyl, across Harkavy and the Untershtat, before they are snuffed in the east by the Baranof range. On Oysshtelung Island, the beacon at the tip of the Safety Pin—sole remnant of the World's Fair—blinks out its warning to airplanes or yids. Landsman can smell fish offal from the canneries, grease from the fry pits at Pearl of Manila, the spew of taxis, an intoxicating bouquet of fresh hat from Grinspoon's Felting two blocks away.

"It's nice up there," Landsman says when he gets back down to the lobby, with its ashtray charm, the yellowing sofas, the scarred chairs and tables at which you sometimes see a couple of hotel residents killing an hour with a game of pinochle. "I should go up more often."

"What about the basement?" Tenenboym says. "You going to look down there?"

"The basement," Landsman says, and his heart describes a sudden knight move in his chest. "I guess I'd better."

Landsman is a tough guy, in his way, given to the taking of wild chances. He has been called hard-boiled and foolhardy, a momzer, a crazy son of a bitch. He has faced down shtarkers and psychopaths, has been shot at, beaten, frozen, burned. He has pursued suspects between the flashing walls of urban firefights and deep into bear country. Heights, crowds, snakes, burning houses, dogs schooled to hate the smell of a policeman, he has shrugged them all off or functioned in spite of them. But when he finds himself in lightless or confined spaces, something in the animal core of Meyer Landsman convulses. No one but his ex-wife knows it, but Detective Meyer Landsman is afraid of the dark.

"Want me to go with you?" Tenenboym says, sounding offhand, but you never know with a sensitive old fishwife like Tenenboym.

Landsman affects to scorn the offer. "Just give me a damn flashlight," he says.

The basement exhales its breath of camphor, heating oil, and cold dust. Landsman jerks a string that lights a naked bulb, holds his breath, and goes under.

At the bottom of the steps, he passes through the lost-articles room, lined with pegboard, furnished with shelves and cubbyholes that hold the thousand objects abandoned or forgotten in the hotel. Unmated shoes, fur hats, a trumpet, a windup zeppelin. A collection of wax gramophone cylinders featuring the entire recorded output of the Orchestra Orfeon of Istanbul. A logger's ax, two bicycles, a partial bridge in a hotel glass. Wigs, canes, a glass eye, display hands left behind by a mannequin salesman. Prayer books, prayer shawls in their velvet zipper pouches, an outlandish idol with the body of a fat baby and the head of an elephant. There is a wooden soft-drink crate filled with keys, another with the entire range and breadth of hairstyling tools, from irons to eyelash crimpers. Framed photographs of families in better days. A cryptic twist of rubber that might be a sex toy, or a contraceptive device, or the patented secret of a foundation garment. Some yid even left behind a taxidermy marten, sleek and leering, its glass eye a hard bead of ink.

Landsman probes the box of keys with a pencil. He looks inside each hat, gropes along the shelves behind the abandoned paperback books. He can hear his own heart and smell his own aldehyde breath, and after a few minutes in the silence, the sound of blood in his ears begins to remind him of somebody talking.

He checks behind the hot-water tanks, lashed to one another with straps of steel like comrades in a doomed adventure.

The laundry is next. When he pulls the string for the light, nothing happens. It's ten degrees darker in here, and there's nothing to see but blank walls, severed hookups, drain holes in the floor. The Zamenhof has not done its own wash in years. Landsman looks into the drain holes, and the darkness in them is oily and thick. Landsman feels a flutter, a worm, in his belly. He flexes his fingers and cracks the bones of his neck. At the far end of the laundry room, a door that is three planks nailed together by a diagonal fourth seals a low doorway. The wooden door has a loop of rope for a latch and a peg to hook it on.

A crawl space. Landsman half dreads the phrase alone.

He calculates the chance that a certain style of killer, not a professional, not a true amateur, not even a normal maniac, might be hiding in that crawl space. Possible; but it would be pretty tough for the freak to have hooked the loop over the peg from inside. That logic alone is almost enough to persuade him not to bother with the crawl space. In the end Landsman switches on the flash and notches it between his teeth. He hikes up his pants legs and gets down on his knees. Just to spite himself, because spiting himself, spiting others, spiting the world is the pastime and only patrimony of Landsman and his people. With one hand he unholsters his big little S&W, and with the other he fingers the loop of rope. He yanks open the door of the crawl space.

"Come out," he says, lips dry, rasping like a scared old fart.

The elation he experienced on the roof has cooled like blown filament. His nights are wasted, his life and career a series of mistakes, his city itself a bulb that is about to go black.

He thrusts his upper body into the crawl space. The air is cold, with a bitter smell of mouse shit. The beam of the pocket flash dribbles over everything, shadowing as much as it reveals. Walls of cinder block, an earthen floor, the ceiling a loathsome tangle of wires and foam insulation. In the middle of the dirt floor, at the back, a disk of raw plywood lies set in a circular metal frame, flush with the floor. Landsman holds his breath and swims through his panic to the hole in the floor, determined to stay under for as long as he can. The dirt around the frame is undisturbed. An even layer of dust lies over wood and metal alike, no marks, no streaks. There is no reason to think anyone has been fooling with it. Landsman fits his fingernails between the plywood and the frame and pries off the crude hatch. The flashlight reveals a threaded tube of aluminum screwed into the earth, laddered with steel cleats. The frame turns out to be the edge of the tube itself. Just wide enough to admit a full-grown psychopath. Or a Jewish policeman with fewer phobias than Landsman. He clings to the sholem as to a handle, wrestling with a crazy need to fire it into the throat of the darkness. He drops the plywood disk back into its frame with a clatter. No way is he going down there.

The darkness follows him all the way back up the stairs to the lobby, reaching for his collar, tugging at his sleeve.

"Nothing," he tells Tenenboym, pulling himself together. He gives the word a cheery ring. It might be a prediction of what his investigation into the murder of Emanuel Lasker is bound to reveal, a statement of what he believes Lasker lived for and died for, a realization of what will remain, after the Reversion, of Landsman's hometown. "Nothing."

"You know what Kohn says," says Tenenboym. "Kohn says we got a ghost in the house." Kohn is the day manager. "Taking shit, moving shit around. Kohn figures it for the ghost of Professor Zamenhof."

"If they named a dump like this after me," Landsman says, "I'd haunt it, too."

"You never know," Tenenboym observes. "Especially nowadays."

Nowadays one never knows. Out at Povorotny, a cat mated with a rabbit and produced adorable freaks whose photos graced the front page of the *Sitka Tog*. Last February five hundred witnesses all up and down the District swore that in the shimmer of the aurora borealis, for two nights running, they observed the outlines of a human face, with beard and sidelocks. Violent arguments broke out over the identity of the bearded sage in the sky, whether or not the face was smiling (or merely suffering from a mild attack of gas), and the meaning of the weird manifestation. And just last week, amid the panic and feathers of a kosher slaughterhouse on Zhitlovsky Avenue, a chicken turned on the shochet as he raised his ritual knife and announced, in

Aramaic, the imminent advent of Messiah. According to the *Tog*, the miraculous chicken offered a number of startling predictions, though it neglected to mention the soup in which, having once more fallen silent as God Himself, it afterward featured. Even the most casual study of the record, Landsman thinks, would show that strange times to be a Jew have almost always been, as well, strange times to be a chicken.

3

In the street the wind shakes rain from the flaps of its overcoat. Landsman tucks himself into the hotel doorway. Two men, one with a cello case strapped to his back, the other cradling a violin or viola, struggle against the weather toward the door of Pearl of Manila across the street. The symphony hall is ten blocks and a world away from this end of Max Nordau Street, but the craving of a Jew for pork, in particular when it has been deep-fried, is a force greater than night or distance or a cold blast off the Gulf of Alaska. Landsman himself is fighting the urge to return to room 505, and his bottle of slivovitz, and his World's Fair souvenir glass.

Instead, he lights a papiros. After a decade of abstinence, Landsman took up smoking again not quite three years ago. His then-wife was pregnant at the time. It was a much-discussed and in some quarters a long-desired pregnancy—her first—but not a planned one. As with many pregnancies that are discussed too long there was a history of ambivalence in the prospective father. At seventeen weeks and a day—the day Landsman bought his first package of Broadways in ten years—they got a bad result. Some but not all of the cells that made up the fetus, code-named Django, had an extra chromosome on the twentieth pair. A mosaicism, it was called. It might cause grave abnormalities. It might have no effect at all. In the available literature, a faithful

person could find encouragement, and a faithless one ample reason to despond. Landsman's view of things—ambivalent, despondent, and with no faith in anything—prevailed. A doctor with half a dozen laminaria dilators broke the seal on the life of Django Landsman. Three months later, Landsman and his cigarettes moved out of the house on Tshernovits Island that he and Bina had shared for nearly all the fifteen years of their marriage. It was not that he couldn't live with the guilt. He just couldn't live with it and Bina, too.

An old man, pushing himself like a rickety handcart, weaves a course toward the door of the hotel. A short man, under five feet, dragging a large valise. Landsman observes the long white coat, worn open over a white suit with a waistcoat, and the wide-brimmed white hat pulled down over his ears. A white beard and sidelocks, wispy and thick at the same time. The valise an ancient chimera of stained brocade and scratched hide. The whole right side of the man's body sags five degrees lower than the left, where the suitcase, which must contain the old boy's entire collection of lead ingots, weighs it down. The man stops and raises a finger, as if he has a question to pose of Landsman. The wind toys with the man's whiskers and with the brim of his hat. From his beard, armpits, breath, and skin, the wind plucks a rich smell of stale tobacco and wet flannel and the sweat of a man who lives in the street. Landsman notes the color of the man's antiquated boots, yellowish ivory, like his beard, with sharp toes and buttons running up the sides.

Landsman recalls that he used to see this nut a lot, back when he was arresting Tenenboym for petty theft and possession. The yid was no younger then and is no older now. People used to call him Elijah, because he turned up in all kinds of unlikely spots, with his pushke box and his indefinable air of having something important to say.

"Darling," he says to Landsman now. "This is the Hotel Zamenhof, no?"

His Yiddish sounds a bit exotic to Landsman, flavored with Dutch maybe. He is bent and frail, but his face, apart from crow's-feet around the blue eyes, looks youthful and unlined. The eyes themselves hold a match flame of eagerness that puzzles Landsman. The prospect of a night at the Zamenhof does not often give rise to such anticipation.

"That's right." Landsman offers Elijah the Prophet a Broadway, and the little man takes two and tucks one into the reliquary of his breast pocket. "Hot and cold water. Licensed shammes right on the premises."

"Are you the manager, sweetness?"

Landsman can't help smiling at that. He steps aside, gesturing toward the door. "The manager's inside," he says.

But the little man just stands there getting rained on, his beard fluttering like a flag of truce. He gazes up at the faceless face of the Zamenhof, gray in the murky streetlight. A narrow pile of dirty white brick and slit windows, three or four blocks off the tawdriest stretch of Monastir Street, the place has all the allure

of a dehumidifier. Its neon sign blinks on and off, tormenting the dreams of the losers across the street at the Blackpool.

"The Zamenhof," the old man says, echoing the intermittent letters on the neon sign. "Not the Zamenhof. The Zamenhof."

Now the latke, a rookie named Netsky, comes jogging up, holding on to his round, flat, wide-brimmed patrolman's hat.

"Detective," the latke says, out of breath, and then gives the old man a squint and a nod. "Evening, Grandpa. Right, uh, Detective, sorry, I just got the call, I was hung up for a minute there." Netsky has coffee on his breath and powdered sugar on the right cuff of his blue coat. "Where's the dead yid?"

"In two-oh-eight," Landsman says, opening the door for the latke, then turning back to the old man. "Coming in, Grandpa?"

"No," Elijah says, with a hint of mild emotion that Landsman can't quite read. It might be regret, or relief, or the grim satisfaction of a man with a taste for disappointment. The flicker trapped in the old man's eyes has given way to a film of tears. "I was only curious. Thank you, Officer Landsman."

"It's Detective now," Landsman says, startled that the old man has retrieved his name. "You *remember* me, Grandpa?"

"I remember everything, darling." Elijah reaches into a hip pocket of his bleach yellow coat and takes out his pushke, a wooden casket, about the size of a box meant for index cards, painted black. On the front of the box, Hebrew words are painted: L'ERETZ YISROEL. Cut into the top of the box is a narrow slit for coins or a folded dollar bill. "A small donation?"

Elijah says.

The Holy Land has never seemed more remote or unattainable than it does to a Jew of Sitka. It is on the far side of the planet, a wretched place ruled by men united only in their resolve to keep out all but a worn fistful of small-change Jews. For half a century, Arab strongmen and Muslim partisans, Persians and Egyptians, socialists and nationalists and monarchists, pan-Arabists and pan-Islamists, traditionalists and the Party of Ali, have all sunk their teeth into Eretz Yisroel and worried it down to bone and gristle. Jerusalem is a city of blood and slogans painted on the wall, severed heads on telephone poles. Observant Jews around the world have not abandoned their hope to dwell one day in the land of Zion. But Jews have been tossed out of the joint three times now—in 586 BCE, in 70 CE and with savage finality in 1948. It's hard even for the faithful not to feel a sense of discouragement about their chances of once again getting a foot in the door.

Landsman gets out his wallet and pokes a folded twenty into Elijah's pushke. 'Lots of luck," he says.

The little man hoists his heavy valise and starts to shuffle away. Landsman reaches out and pulls at Elijah's sleeve, a question formulating in his heart, a child's question about the old wish of his people for a home. Elijah turns with a look of practiced wariness. Maybe Landsman is some kind of troublemaker. Landsman feels the question ebb away like the nicotine in his bloodstream.

"What you got in the bag, Grandpa?" Landsman says. "Looks heavy."

"It's a book."

"One book?"

"It's very big."

"Long story?"

"Very long."

"What's it about?"

"It's about Messiah," Elijah says. "Now please take your hand off of me."

Landsman lets go. The old man straightens his back and raises his head. The clouds on his eyes blow over, and he looks angry, disdainful, and not in the least old.

"Messiah is coming," he says. It isn't quite a warning and yet somehow as a promise of redemption, it lacks a certain warmth.

"That works out well," Landsman says, jerking his thumb toward the hotel lobby. "As of tonight we have a vacancy."

Elijah looks hurt, or maybe just disgusted. He opens the black box and looks inside. He takes out the twenty-dollar bill that Landsman gave him and hands it back. Then he picks up his suitcase, settles his floppy white hat down over his head, and trudges off into the rain.

Landsman crumples the twenty and drops it into his hip pocket. He grinds his papiros under his shoe and goes into the hotel.

"Who's the nut?" Netsky says.

"They call him Elijah. He's harmless," says Tenenboym from behind the steel mesh of the reception window. "You used to see him around sometimes. Always pimping for Messiah." Tenenboym clacks a gold toothpick against his molars. "Listen, Detective, I'm not supposed to say anything. But I might as well tell you. Management is sending out a letter tomorrow."

"I can't wait to hear this," Landsman says.

"The owners sold out to a Kansas City concern."

"They're tossing us."

"Maybe," Tenenboym says. "Maybe not. Nobody's status is clear. But it's not out of the question that you might have to move out."

"Is that what it's going to say in the letter?"

Tenenboym shrugs. "The letter's all written in lawyer."

Landsman puts Netsky the latke on the front door. "Don't tell them what they heard or saw," he reminds him. "And don't give them a hard time, even if they look like they could use one."

Menashe Shpringer, the criminalist working the graveyard shift, blows into the lobby in a black coat and fur hat, with a rattling of rain. In one hand Shpringer carries a dripping umbrella. With the other he tows a chrome caddy to which his black vinyl toolbox and a plastic bin, with holes for handles, are strapped with bungee cord. Shpringer is a fireplug, his bowed legs and simian arms affixed to his neck without apparent benefit of shoulders. His face is mostly jowl and his ridged forehead looks like one of those domed beehives you see representing

Industry in medieval woodcuts. The bin is blazoned with the single word EVIDENCE in blue letters.

"Are you leaving town?" Shpringer says. It's not an uncommon greeting these days. A lot of people have left town in the past couple of years, fled the District for the short roster of places that will welcome them, or that have tired of hearing about pogroms secondhand and are hoping to throw one for themselves. Landsman says that as far as he knows, he is not going anywhere. Most of the places that will take Jews require that you have a near relative living there. All of Landsman's nearest relatives are dead or facing Reversion themselves.

"Then let me say goodbye to you now, forever," Shpringer says. "Tomorrow night at this time I will be basking in the warm Saskatchewan sun."

"Saskatoon?" Landsman guesses.

"Thirty below they had today," Shpringer says. "That was the high."

"Look at it this way," Landsman says. "You could be living in this dump."

"The Zamenhof." In his memory, Shpringer pulls Landsman's file, and frowns at its contents. "That's right. Home sweet home, eh?"

"It suits me in my current style of life."

Shpringer smiles a thin smile from which almost every trace of pity has been erased.

"Which way to the dead man?" he says.

4

First thing Shpringer screws in all the lightbulbs that Lasker loosened. Then he lowers his safety glasses and goes to work.

He gives Lasker a manicure and pedicure and looks inside his mouth for a severed finger or a bronze doubloon. He lifts prints with his dust and brush. He takes 317 Polaroids. He takes pictures of the corpse, the room, the perforated pillow, the fingerprints he has raised. He takes a picture of the chessboard.

"One for me," Landsman says.

Shpringer snaps a second shot of the board that the murder obliged Lasker to abandon. Then he hands it to Landsman, an eyebrow raised.

"Valuable clue," Landsman says.

One piece at a time, Shpringer undoes the dead man's Nimzo-Croatian Defense or whatever it is he had going, zipping each chessman into its own baggie.

"How'd you get so dirty?" he says without looking at Landsman.

Landsman notices the bright brown dust clinging to his shoe tops, his cuffs, the knees of his pants. "I was looking in the basement. There's a huge, I don't know, service pipe down there." He feels the blood flow into his cheeks. "I had to check it out."

"A Warsaw tunnel," Shpringer says. "They go all through this part of the Untershtat."

"You don't believe that."

"When the greeners got here after the war. The ones who had been in the ghetto at Warsaw. At Bialystok. The ex-partisans. I guess some of them didn't trust the Americans very much. So they dug tunnels. Just in case they had to fight again. That's the real reason it's called the Untershtat."

"A rumor, Shpringer. An urban myth. It's just a utility pipe."

Shpringer grunts. He bags the bath towel, the hand towel, and a worn tile of soap. He counts the ginger pubic hairs pasted to the toilet seat and then bags each one. "Speaking of rumors," he says, "what do you hear from Felsenfeld?"

Felsenfeld is Inspector Felsenfeld, the squad commander. "What do you mean, what do I hear from him? I just saw him this afternoon," Landsman says. "I didn't *hear* anything from him, the man hasn't uttered three words together in ten years. What kind of question is that? What rumors?"

"Just wondering."

Shpringer is running his fingers in their latex glove across the freckled skin of Lasker's left arm. It bears needle tracks and faint marks where the deceased tied himself off.

"Felsenfeld's hand was on his belly all day," Landsman says, reflecting. "Maybe I heard him say 'reflux.'" Then: "What do you see?"

Shpringer frowns at the flesh above Lasker's elbow, where the tourniquet marks are bunched. "Looks like he used a belt," he says. "Only his belt is too wide to have made these marks."

He has already put Lasker's belt, along with two pairs of gray trousers and two blue blazers, into a brown paper bag.

"His works are in the drawer, in a black zip," Landsman says. "I didn't look too close."

Shpringer opens the drawer in Lasker's bedside table and takes out the black toilet kit. He unzips it and then makes a funny sound in his throat. The cover of the kit opens toward Landsman. At first Landsman can't see what has caught Shpringer's interest.

"What do you know about this Lasker?" Shpringer says.

"I'm willing to venture that on occasion he played chess," Landsman says. One of the three books in the room is a creased and broken-backed paperback edition of *Three Hundred Chess Games* by Siegbert Tarrasch. It has a manila pocket pasted to its inside back cover, with a return card that shows it was last borrowed from the central branch of the Sitka Public Library in July 1986. Landsman can't help thinking that he first made love to his future ex-wife in July 1986. Bina was twenty at the time, and Landsman was twenty-three, and it was the height of the northern summer. July 1986 is the date stamped onto the card in the pocket of Landsman's illusions. The other two books are cheap Yiddish thrillers. "Beyond that I know goat shit."

As Shpringer has inferred from the marks on Lasker's arm, the deceased's apparent tourniquet of choice was a leather strap, black, about half an inch wide. Shpringer pulls it out of the zip and holds it up between two fingers as if it might bite. Halfway along the strap hangs a small leather box designed to hold a slip of

paper on which a scribe, with ink and a feather, has written four passages from the Torah. Each morning the pious Jew twines one of these doodads along his left arm, ties another to his forehead, and prays for understanding of the kind of God Who obliges somebody to do something like that every damn day of his life. But there is nothing inside the box on Emanuel Lasker's prayer strap. It's just the thing he chose to use to dilate the vein in his arm.

"That's a new one," Shpringer says. "Tying off with tefillin."

"Now that I think about it," Landsman says, "he had the look. Like maybe he used to be black hat. They take on a kind of a—I don't know. They look shorn."

Landsman pulls on a glove and, gripping Lasker's chin, tilts from side to side the dead man's head with its swollen mask of blood vessels. "If he used to wear a beard, then it was a while ago," he says. "Skin tone on his face is even."

He lets go of Lasker's face and steps away from the body. It would not be quite accurate to say that he pegged Lasker for a former black hat. But with the chin of a fat boy, and the air of ruination, Landsman figured Lasker for having once been something more than a sockless junkie in a cheap hotel. He sighs. "What I wouldn't give to be lying on the sunny beaches of Saskatoon."

There are noises in the hallway, and the rattle of metal and straps, and the next moment two workers from the morgue come in with a collapsible gurney. Shpringer tells them to bring the

evidence bin and the bags he has filled, and then lumbers out, one wheel of his trolley squeaking as he goes.

"Piece of shit," Landsman informs the morgue boys, meaning the case, not the victim. This judgment does not appear to surprise or come to them as news. Landsman goes back up to his room to rejoin his bottle of slivovitz and the World's Fair shot glass that has captured his affections. He sits down in the chair by the pressboard desk, with a dirty shirt for a seat cushion. He takes the Polaroid out of his pocket and studies the game that Lasker left behind, trying to decide whether the next move was to be White's or Black's, and what would be the next move after that. But there are too many pieces, and it is too difficult to hold the moves in his head, and Landsman doesn't own anything like a chess set on which to lay it all out. After a few minutes he feels himself drifting off to sleep. But no, he isn't going to do that, not when he knows that what awaits him are trite Escher dreams, woozy checkerboards, giant rooks casting phallic shadows.

He takes off his clothes, and steps under the shower, and lies down for half an hour with his eyes wide open, taking memories —of his little sister in her Super Cub, of Bina in the summer of 1986—out of their plastic bags. He studies them as if they are transcriptions, in a dusty book stolen from the library, of bygone checkmates and brilliancies. After half an hour of that useful pursuit, he gets up and puts on a clean shirt and tie, and goes down to Sitka Central to file his report.

5

Landsman learned to hate the game of chess at the hands of his father and his uncle Hertz. The brothers-in-law were boyhood friends back in Lodz, fellow members of the Makkabi Youth Chess Club. Landsman remembers how they used to talk about the day, in the summer of 1939, when the great Tartakower dropped by to put on a demonstration for the boys of the Makkabi. Savielly Tartakower was a Polish citizen, a grandmaster, and a character famous for having said "The blunders are all there on the board, waiting to be made." He came from Paris to report on a tournament for a French chess journal and to visit with the director of the Makkabi Youth Chess Club, an old comrade from his days on the Russian front in the army of Franz Josef. At the director's urging, Tartakower now proposed a game against the club's best young player, Isidor Landsman.

They sat down together, the strapping war veteran in his bespoke suit and harsh good humor, and the stammering fifteen-year-old with a wall eye, a receding hairline, and a mustache that was often mistaken for a sooty thumbprint. Tartakower drew Black, and Landsman's father chose the English Opening. For the first hour, Tartakower's play was inattentive, even autonomic. He left his great chess engine idling and played by the book. Thirty-four moves in, with genial scorn, he offered Landsman's father a draw. Landsman's father needed to piss, his ears were ringing, he

was only staving off the inevitable. But he declined. His game by now was based on nothing but feel and desperation. He reacted, he refused exchanges, his sole assets a stubborn nature and a wild sense of the board. After seventy moves and four hours and ten minutes of play, Tartakower, not so genial anymore, repeated his earlier offer. Landsman's father, plagued by tinnitus, about to wet his pants, accepted. In later years Landsman's father sometimes let on that his mind, that queer organ, never quite recovered from the ordeal of this game. But of course there were worse ordeals to come.

"That was not in the least enjoyable," Tartakower is supposed to have told Landsman's father, rising from his chair. Young Hertz Shemets, with his unfailing eye for weakness, spotted a tremor in Tartakower's hand, holding a hastily fetched glass of Tokay. Then Tartakower pointed to Isidor Landsman's skull. "But I'm sure it was preferable to being obliged to live in there."

Not quite two years later, Hertz Shemets, his mother, and his kid sister, Freydl, arrived on Baranof Island, Alaska, with the first wave of Galitzer settlers. He came on the notorious *Diamond*, a World War I – era troop transport that Secretary Ickes ordered taken out of mothballs and rechristened as a left-handed memorial, or so legend has it, to the late Anthony Dimond, the Alaska Territory's nonvoting delegate to the House of Representatives. (Until the fatal intervention on a Washington, D.C., street corner of a drunken, taxi-driving schlemiel named Denny Lanning—eternal hero of the Sitka Jews—Delegate

Dimond had been on the verge of getting the Alaskan Settlement Act killed in committee.) Thin, pale, bewildered, Hertz Shemets stepped from the *Diamond*, from the dark and the reek of soup and rusty puddles, to the clean cold spice of Sitka pine. With his family and his people he was numbered, inoculated, deloused, tagged like a migrant bird by the stipulations of the Alaskan Settlement Act of 1940. In a cardboard pocketbook he carried an "Ickes passport," a special emergency visa printed on special flimsy paper with special smeary ink.

There was nowhere else for him to go. It said so, in large type, on the front of an Ickes passport. He would not be permitted to travel to Seattle, or San Francisco, or even Juneau or Ketchikan. All the normal quotas on Jewish immigration to the United States remained in force. Even with the timely death of Dimond, the Act could not be forced up the American body politic without a certain amount of muscle and grease, and restrictions on Jewish movement were part of the deal.

On the heels of Jews from Germany and Austria, the Shemets family was dumped with their fellow Galitzers at Camp Slattery, in a muskeg swamp ten miles from the hard-bitten, half-decrepit town of Sitka, capital of the old Russian Alaska colony. In drafty, tin-roofed huts and barracks, they underwent six months of intensive acclimatization by a crack team of fifteen billion mosquitoes working under contract with the U.S. Interior Department. Hertz was conscripted for a road gang, then assigned to the crew that built the Sitka airfield. He lost two

molars when he was smacked by a shovel, working a muck detail deep in a caisson sunk in the mud of Sitka harbor. In later years, whenever you drove with him over the Tshernovits Bridge, he would rub at his jaw, and his hard eyes in his sharp face would take on a wistful air. Freydl was sent to school in a chilly barn whose roof rang with steady rain. Their mother was taught the rudiments of agriculture, the use of plow, fertilizer, and irrigation hose. Brochures and posters held up the short Alaskan growing season as an allegory of the brief duration of her stay. Mrs. Shemets ought to think of the Sitka Settlement as a cellar or potting shed in which, like flower bulbs, she and her children could be put up for the winter, until their home soil thawed enough to allow them to be replanted there. No one imagined that the soil of Europe would be sowed so deeply with salt and ash.

Despite the agricultural palaver, the modest homesteads and farm cooperatives proposed by the Sitka Settlement Corporation never materialized. Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. The Interior Department's attention wandered toward more pressing strategic concerns, such as oil reserves and mining. At the conclusion of their term at "Ickes College," the Shemets family, like most of their fellow refugees, were kicked loose to fend for themselves. Just as Delegate Dimond had predicted, they drifted up to the raw, newly booming town of Sitka. Hertz studied criminal justice at the new Sitka Technical Institute and, on graduating in 1948, was hired as a paralegal by the first big U.S. law firm to open a branch office here. His sister, Freydl, Landsman's mother, was

among the earliest Girl Scouts in the settlement.

Nineteen forty-eight: Strange times to be a Jew. In August the defense of Jerusalem collapsed and the outnumbered Jews of the three-month-old republic of Israel were routed, massacred, and driven into the sea. As Hertz was starting his job at Foehn Harmattan & Buran, the House Committee on Territories and Insular Affairs began a long-delayed review of status called for by the Sitka Settlement Act. Like the rest of Congress, like most Americans, the House Committee was sobered by grim revelations of the slaughter of two million Jews in Europe, by the barbarity of the rout of Zionism, by the plight of the refugees of Palestine and Europe. At the same time, they were practical souls. The population of Sitka Settlement had already swollen to two million. In direct violation of the act, Jews had spread up and down the western shore of Baranof Island, out to Kruzof, all the way up to West Chichagof Island. The economy was booming. American Jews were lobbying hard. In the end, Congress granted the Sitka Settlement "interim status" as a federal district. But candidacy for separate statehood was explicitly ruled out. NO JEWLASKA, LAWMAKERS PROMISE, ran the headline in the *Daily Times.* The emphasis was always on the word "interim." In sixty years that status would revert, and the Sitka Jews would be left once again to shift for themselves.

One warm September afternoon not long after, Hertz Shemets was walking down Seward Street, prolonging his lunch break, when he bumped into his old chum from Lodz, Isidor Landsman.

Landsman's father had just arrived in Sitka, alone, aboard the *Williwaw*, fresh from a tour of the death and DP camps of Europe. He was twenty-five, bald, and missing most of his teeth. He was six feet tall and weighed 125 pounds. He smelled funny, talked crazy, and had outlived his entire family. He was oblivious to the raucous frontier energy of downtown Sitka, the work crews of young Jewesses in their blue head scarves, singing Negro spirituals with Yiddish lyrics that paraphrased Lincoln and Marx. The lively stench of fish flesh and felled tree and turned earth, the rumble of the dredgers and steam shovels grading mountains and filling in Sitka Sound, none of it seemed to touch him. He walked with his head down, a hunch in his shoulders, as if only burrowing through this world on his inexplicable way from one strange dimension to the next. Nothing penetrated or illuminated the dark tunnel of his passage. But when Isidor Landsman realized that the grinning man, hair slicked, shoes like a couple of Kaiser automobiles, smelling of the grilled-onion cheeseburger he had just consumed at the lunch counter of Woolworth's, was his old friend Hertz Shemets from the Makkabi Youth Chess Club, he lifted his eyes. The eternal kink went out of his shoulder. He opened his mouth and closed it again, speechless with outrage, joy, and wonder. Then he burst into tears.

Hertz took Landsman's father back to Woolworth's, bought him lunch (an egg sandwich, his first milk shake, a decent pickle) and then led him down to Lincoln Street, to the new Hotel Einstein, in whose café the great exiles of Jewish chess met every

day to demolish one another without pity or heart. Landsman's father, half demented at this point by fat, sugar, and the lingering ill effects of typhus, mopped up the room. He took on all comers and sent them out of the Einstein so soundly thrashed that one or two of them never forgave him.

Even then he displayed the mournful, agonized style of play that helped ruin the game for Landsman as a child. "Your father played chess," Hertz Shemets once said, "like a man with a toothache, a hemorrhoid, and gas." He sighed, he moaned. He tugged in fits at the patchy remnant of his brown hair, or chased it with his fingers back and forth across his pate like a pastry chef scattering flour on a marble slab. The blunders of his opponents were each a separate cramp in the abdomen. His own moves, however daring, however startling and original and strong, struck him like successive pieces of terrible news, so that he covered his mouth and rolled his eyes at the sight of them.

Uncle Hertz's style was nothing like that. He played calmly, with an air of unconcern, keeping his body at a slight angle to the board, as if expecting very shortly to be served a meal or to take a pretty girl onto his lap. But his eyes saw everything, the way they'd seen the telltale tremor in Tartakower's hand that day at the Makkabi Youth Chess Club. He took in his reversals without alarm and his chances with a faint air of amusement. Smoking Broadways end on end, he watched his old friend squirm and mutter his way through the assembled geniuses of the Einstein. Then, when the room was laid to waste, Hertz made the necessary

move. He invited Isidor Landsman home.

In the summer of 1948, the Shemets family lived in a two-room apartment in a brand-new building on a brand-new island. The building was home to two dozen families, all of them Polar Bears, as the first-wave refugees called themselves. The mother slept in the bedroom, Freydl got the sofa, and Hertz made his bed on the floor. By now they were all staunch Alaskan Jews, which meant they were utopians, which meant they saw imperfection everywhere they looked. A barb-tongued and quarrelsome family, in particular Freydl Shemets, who at fourteen already stood five feet eight inches tall and weighed 110 kilograms. She took one look at Landsman's father, hovering uncertainly in the doorway of the apartment, and correctly diagnosed him to be as unreclaimable and inaccessible as the wilderness that she had come to regard as her home. It was love at first sight.

In later years it was tough for Landsman to get much out of his father about what if anything he had seen in Freydl Shemets. She was not a bad-looking girl. Egyptian-eyed, olive-skinned, in her short pants, hiking boots, and the rolled sleeves of her Pendleton shirt, she exuded the old Makkabi movement spirit of *mens sana in corpore sano.* She pitied Isidor Landsman deeply for the loss of his family, for the suffering he had endured in the camps. But she was one of those Polar Bear kids who handled their own feelings of guilt at having escaped the filth, the starvation, the ditches and killing factories by offering survivors a constant stream of advice,

information, and criticism disguised as morale boosting. As if the choking, low-hanging black pall of the Destruction could be lifted by one determined kibitzer.

That first night Landsman's father slept, with Hertz, on the floor of the Shemets apartment. The next day Freydl took him shopping for clothes, paying for them out of her own bat mitzvah nest egg. She helped him rent a room from a recent widower who lived in the building. She massaged his scalp with an onion, in the belief that this would cause his hair to renew itself. She fed him calf liver for his tired blood. For the next five years, she nudged and badgered and bullied him until he sat up straight, made eye contact when speaking, learned American, and wore dentures. She married him the day after she turned eighteen, and got a job at the *Sitka Tog*, working her way up through the women's page to features editor. She worked sixty to seventy-five hours a week, five days a week, until her death from cancer, when Landsman was in college. During that time Hertz Shemets impressed the American lawyers at Foehn Harmattan so much that they took up a subscription and pulled the strings they needed to pull to send him to law school in Seattle. He later became the first Jew hired by the Sitka detail of the FBI, its first district director, and eventually, having caught Hoover's eye, ran the Bureau's regional counterintelligence program.

Landsman's father played chess.

Every morning, in rain, snow, or fog, he walked two miles to the Hotel Einstein coffee shop, sat down at an aluminum-topped

table in the back, facing the door, and took out a small set of maple and cherry chessmen that had been a present from his brother-in-law. Every night he sat at his bench in the back of the little house on Adler Street where Landsman grew up, in Halibut Point, looking over the eight or nine correspondence games he had going at any one time. He wrote notes for *Chess Review*. He revised a biography of Tartakower that he never quite finished or abandoned. He drew a pension from the German government. And, with the help of his brother-in-law, he taught his son to hate the game he himself loved.

"You don't want to do that," Landsman's father would plead after Landsman released, with bloodless fingers, his knight or pawn to meet the fate that always came as a surprise to Landsman, no matter how much he studied, practiced, or played the game of chess. "Take it from me."

"I do."

"You don't."

But in the service of his own small misery, Landsman could be stubborn, too. Satisfied, burning with shame, he would watch unfold the grim destiny that he had been unable to foresee. And Landsman's father would demolish him, flay him, vivisect him, gazing at his son all the while from behind the sagging porch of his face.

After some years of this sport, Landsman sat down at his mother's typewriter to write his father a letter in which he confessed his loathing for the game of chess, and begged his

father not to force him to play anymore. Landsman carried this letter in his satchel for a week, enduring three more bloody defeats, and then mailed it from the Untershtat post office. Two days later, Isidor Landsman killed himself, in room 21 of the Hotel Einstein, by an overdose of Nembutal.

After that Landsman started to have some problems. He wet the bed, got fat, stopped talking. His mother put him in therapy with a remarkably gentle and ineffectual doctor named Melamed. It was not until twenty-three years after his father's death that Landsman rediscovered the fatal letter, in a box that also held a fair copy of the unfinished biography of Tartakower. It turned out that Landsman's father had never even opened the letter from his son, let alone read it. By the time the mailman delivered it, Landsman's father was already dead.

6

Landsman is tripping on the memory of those old chess-playing yids, hunched at the back of the Café Einstein, as he drives out to pick up Berko. It is six-fifteen in the morning, by his watch. By the sky, the empty boulevard, and the stone of dread lying in his belly, it is the dead of night. Sunrise, this close to the arctic circle and the winter solstice, is still at least two hours off.

Landsman is at the wheel of a 1971 Chevrolet Chevelle Super Sport, which he bought ten years ago in an access of nostalgic optimism and has driven until all its secret flaws seem indistinguishable from his own. In the ’71 model year, the Chevelle went from two pairs of headlight bulbs to a single pair. Right now one of these bulbs is blown. Landsman gropes his way cyclops-style along the promenade. Ahead of him rise the tower blocks of the Shvartsn-Yam, on their artificial spit of land in the middle of Sitka Sound, huddled in the darkness like prisoners rounded up with a powerful hose.

Russian shtarkers developed the Shvartsn-Yam during the mid-eighties, on purest quake-bait landfill, in the first heady days of legalized casino gambling. Time-shares, vacation homes, and bachelor pads, that was the idea, with the Grand Yalta casino and its jumping tables at the center of the action. But legal gambling is out now, banned by the Traditional Values Act, and the casino building houses a KosherMart, a Walgreens, and a Big Macher

outlet store. The shtarkers went back to bankrolling illegal policy rackets, betting mills, and floating craps games. The swingers and vacationers gave way to a population of upper-lowlifes, Russian immigrants, a smattering of ultra-orthodox Jews, and a bunch of bohemian semiprofessionals who like the atmosphere of ruined festivity that lingers in the neighborhood like a strand of tinsel on the branch of a bare tree.

The Taytsh-Shemets family lives in the Dnyeper, on the twenty-fourth floor. The Dnyeper is round as a stack of pie tins. Many of its residents, spurning fine views of Mount Edgecumbe's collapsed cone, the gleaming Safety Pin, or the lights of the Untershtat, have enclosed their curving balconies with storm windows and louvers in order to gain an extra room. The Taytsh-Shemetses did that when the baby came along: the first baby. Now both little Taytsh-Shemetses sleep out there, stashed away on the balcony like disused skis.

Landsman parks the Super Sport in the spot behind the Dumpsters that he has come to view as his own, though he supposes a man should not come to cherish tender feelings toward a parking place. Simply having a place to put his car that is twenty-four stories down from a standing invitation to breakfast should never pass, in a man's heart, for a homecoming.

He's a few minutes ahead of six-thirty, and though he's pretty sure that everybody is awake in the Taytsh-Shemets household, he decides to take the stairs. The Dnyeper stairwell reeks of sea air, cabbage, cold cement. When he gets to the top, he lights a

papiros to reward himself for industry and stands on the Taytsh-Shemets doormat, keeping the mezuzah company. He has one lung coughed up and the other on its way when Ester-Malke Taytsh opens the door. She holds a home pregnancy test stick with a bead, on its business end, of what must be urine. When she notices Landsman noticing it, she coolly makes it disappear into a pocket of her bathrobe.

"You know there's a doorbell, right?" she says through a tangled curtain of hair, brick-brown and too fine for the bob she always sports. It has a way of spilling across her face, especially when she is cracking wise. "I mean, coughing works, too."

She leaves the door open and Landsman standing there on the thick coir mat that says GET LOST. Landsman touches two fingers to the mezuzah on his way in and then gives them a perfunctory kiss. That is what you do if you are a believer, like Berko, or a mocking asshole, like Landsman. He hangs his hat and overcoat on an elk-antler rack by the front door. He follows Ester-Malke's skinny ass, wrapped in her white cotton robe, down the hall and into the kitchen. The kitchen is narrow, laid out galley-style, the stove, sink, and refrigerator down one side, cabinets down the other. At the end a breakfast bar, with two stools, overlooks the living-dining room. Steam curls out of a waffle iron on the counter in cartoon-locomotive puffs. The drip-filter coffee maker hawks and spits like a decrepit Jewish policeman after ten flights of steps.

Landsman sidles up to the stool he favors and stands beside

it. From the hip pocket of his tweed blazer he takes a pocket chess set and unwraps it. He bought it at the all-night drugstore on Korczak Platz. “Fat man still in his pajamas?” he says.

“Getting dressed.”

“Fat baby?”

“Picking the necktie.”

“And the other one, what’s his name?” In fact, his name, thanks to a recent vogue for crafting given names from family names, is Feingold Taytsh-Shemets. They call him Goldy. Four years ago Landsman had the honor to hold down Goldy’s scrawny legs while an ancient Jew with a knife came after his foreskin. “His Majesty.”

In answer, she nods her head toward the living-dining.

“Still sick?” Landsman says.

“Better today.”

Landsman goes around the breakfast bar, past the glass-topped dining table, and over to the big white sectional sofa to get a look at what the television is doing to his godson. “Look who it is,” he says.

Goldy is wearing his polar-bear jammies, the height of retrospective chic for an Alaskan Jewish kid. Polar bears, snowflakes, igloos, the northern imagery that was so ubiquitous when Landsman was a boy, it’s all back in style again. Only this time it seems to be meant ironically. Snowflakes, yes, the Jews found them here, though, thanks to greenhouse gases, there are measurably fewer than in the old days. But no polar bears. No

igloos. No reindeer. Mostly just a lot of angry Indians, fog, and rain, and half a century of a sense of mistakenness so keen, worked so deep into the systems of the Jews, that it emerges everywhere, even on their children's pajamas.

"You ready to work today, Goldele?" Landsman says. He lays the back of his hand against the boy's forehead. It feels nice and cool. Goldy's Shnapish the Dog yarmulke hangs crooked, and Landsman smooths it and adjusts the bobby pin that holds it in place. "Ready to fight crime?"

"Sure thing, Uncle."

Landsman reaches out to shake the boy's hand, and without even looking, Goldy slides his dry paw into Landsman's. A minute blue rectangle of light swims on the tear layer of the boy's dark brown eyes. Landsman has watched this program with his godson before, on the educational channel. Like 90 percent of the television they watch, it comes from the south and is shown dubbed into Yiddish. It concerns the adventures of a pair of children with Jewish names who look like they might be part Indian and have no visible parents. They do have a crystalline magical dragon scale that they wish on in order to travel to a land of pastel dragons, each distinguished by its color and its particular brand of imbecility. Little by little, the children spend more and more time with their magical dragon scale until one day they travel off to the land of rainbow idiocy and never return; their bodies are found by the night manager of their cheap flop, each with a bullet in the back of the head. Maybe, Landsman

thinks, something gets lost in the translation.

"Still want to be a noz when you grow up?" Landsman says. "Like your dad and your uncle Meyer?"

"Yes," Goldy says without enthusiasm. "You bet I do."

"That's the boy."

They shake hands again. This conversation is the equivalent of Landsman's kissing the mezuzah, the kind of thing that starts out as a joke and ends up as a strap to hang on to.

"You taking up chess?" Ester-Malke says when he walks back into the kitchen.

"God forbid," says Landsman. He climbs up onto his stool and struggles with the tiny pawns and knights and kings of the travel set, setting them up to reflect the board left behind by the so-called Emanuel Lasker. He has a hard time telling the pieces apart, but every time he holds one up to his face to get a good look at it, he drops it.

"Stop looking at me that way," he says to Ester-Malke, just guessing. "I don't like it."

"Damn it, Meyer," she says, watching his hands. "You have the shakes."

"I didn't sleep all night."

"Uh-huh."

The thing about Ester-Malke Taytsh is that before she went back to school, became a social worker, and married Berko, she enjoyed a brief but distinguished career as a South Sitka fuckup. She has a couple of small-bore criminals in her past, a regretted

tattoo on her belly, and a bridge in her jaw, a souvenir of the last man to mistreat her. Landsman has known her longer than Berko has, having busted her on a vandalism charge when she was still in high school. Ester-Malke understands how to handle a loser, by intuition and habit, and without any of the reproach she brings to bear on her own wasted youth. She goes to the refrigerator and takes out a bottle of Bruner Adler, pops the top, and hands it to Landsman. He rolls it against his sleepless temples, then takes a long swallow.

"So," he says, feeling better in an instant. "You're late?"

She puts on a half-theatrical expression of guilt, goes for the pregnancy-test stick, then leaves her hand in the pocket, clutching the stick without taking it out. Landsman knows, because she has broached the subject once or twice, that Ester-Malke worries he might envy her and Berko their successful program of breeding and their two fine sons. Landsman does, at times, with bitterness. But when she brings it up, he generally bothers to deny it.

"Shit," he says as a bishop goes skittering across the floor and disappears under the bar counter.

"Was it a black one or a white?"

"Black. A bishop. Shit. It's gone."

Ester-Malke goes to the spice rack, tightens the waistband of her robe, studies her options. "Here," she says. She takes out a jar of chocolate sprinkles, unscrews it, tips one into her palm, and hands it to Landsman. "Use that."

Landsman is kneeling on the ground under the counter. He

finds the missing bishop and manages to poke it into its hole at h6. Ester-Malke puts the jar back in the cabinet and returns her right hand to the mystery of her bathrobe pocket.

Landsman eats the chocolate sprinkle. "Berko knows?" he says.

Ester-Malke shakes her head, hiding behind her hair. "It's nothing," she says.

"Officially nothing?"

She shrugs.

"Didn't you look at the test?"

"I'm afraid to."

"You're afraid to what?" says Berko, appearing at the door to the kitchen with young Pinchas Taytsh-Shemets—inevitably, Pinky—tucked into the crook of his right arm. A month ago they made a party for the kid, with a cake and a candle. So, Landsman reckons, that will bring in the third Taytsh-Shemets, if any, at around twenty-one, twenty-two months after the second. And seven months after Reversion. Seven months into the unknown world to come. Another diminutive prisoner of history and fate, another potential Messiah—for Messiah, say the experts, is born into every generation—to fill the sails of Elijah the Prophet's demented caravel of dreams. Ester-Malke's hand emerges from her pocket without the pregnancy test, and she gives Landsman a South Sitka high sign with one arched eyebrow.

"Afraid to hear what I had to eat yesterday," Landsman says. By way of creating a diversion, he takes Lasker's copy of *Three*

Hundred Chess Games out of the other hip pocket of his jacket and lays it on the bar beside the chessboard.

"This is about your dead junkie?" Berko says, eyeing the board.

"Emanuel Lasker," Landsman says. "But that was just a name in the registration. We found no kind of ID on him at all. We don't know who he was yet."

"Emanuel Lasker. I feel I know the name." Berko squeezes sideways into the kitchen in his suit pants and shirtsleeves. The pants are heather-gray merino with double pleats, the shirt white on white. At his throat, tied with a handsome knot, hangs a navy necktie patterned with orange blobs. The tie is extra long, the trousers capacious and held up by navy suspenders taxed by the span and the arc of his belly. Under the shirt he wears the fringed four-corner, and a trim blue yarmulke perches on the glossy black furze at the back of his head, but no beard will grow on his chin. There is not a beard to be found on the chins of any of the men in his maternal family, reaching back all the way, no doubt, to the time when Raven created everything (apart from the sun, which he stole). Berko Shemets is observant, but in his own way and for his own reasons. He is a minotaur, and the world of Jews is his labyrinth.

He came to live with the Landsmans in the house on Adler Street on a day in late spring 1981, a shambling giant boy known, in the Sea Monster House of the Raven Moiety of the Longhair Tribe, as Johnny "the Jew" Bear. He stood five feet nine inches

in his mukluks that afternoon, thirteen years old and only an inch shorter than Landsman at eighteen. Until that moment no one had ever mentioned this boy to Landsman or his little sister. Now the kid was going to be sleeping in the bedroom that had once served Meyer and Naomi's father as Klein bottle for the infinite loop of his insomnia.

"Who the hell are you?" Landsman asked him as the kid stole sideways into the living room. Twisting a billed cap in his hands, taking everything in with his dark, all-consuming gaze. Hertz and Freydl were standing out on the front walk, screaming at each other. Apparently, Landsman's uncle had neglected to mention to his sister that his son was coming to live at her house.

"My name is Johnny Bear," Berko said. "I'm part of the Shemets Collection."

Hertz Shemets remains a noted expert on Tlingit art and artifacts. At one time this hobby or pastime sent him wandering deeper and farther into the Indianer-Lands than any other Jew of his generation. So, yes, his study of Native culture and his trips into the Indianer-Lands were a beard for his COINTELPRO work during the sixties. But they were not *only* a beard. Hertz Shemets was drawn to the Indian way of life. He learned to gaff a seal with a steel hook, through the eye, and to slaughter and put up a bear, and to enjoy the flavor of candlefish grease as much as that of schmaltz. And he fathered a child on Miss Laurie Jo Bear of Hoonah. When she was killed during the so-called Synagogue Riots, her half-Jew son, an object of torment and scorn among

the Raven Moiety, appealed for rescue to the father he barely knew. It was a *zwischenzug*, an unexpected move in the orderly unfolding of a game. It caught Uncle Hertz off guard.

"What are you going to do, turn him away?" he yelled at Landsman's mother. "They're making his life a living hell up there. His mother is dead. Murdered by Jews."

In fact, eleven Native Alaskans were killed in the rioting that followed the bombing of a prayer house that a group of Jews had built on disputed land. There are pockets in these islands where the map drawn by Harold Ickes falters and gives way, dotted stretches of the Line. Most of them are too remote or mountainous to be inhabited, frozen or flooded year-round. But some of these crosshatched patches, choice and level and temperate, have proved irresistible over the years to the Jews in their millions. Jews want livable space. In the seventies some of them, mostly members of small Orthodox sects, began to take it.

The construction of a prayer house at St. Cyril by the splinter from a splinter of a sect from Lisianski was the final outrage for many Natives. It was met with demonstrations, rallies, lawyers, and dark rumblings from Congress over yet another affront to peace and parity by the overweening Jews of the north. Two days before its consecration, somebody—no one ever came forward or was charged—threw a double Molotov through a window, burning the prayer house to its concrete pad. The congregants and their supporters swarmed into the town of St. Cyril, smashing crab traps, breaking the windows of the Alaska

Native Brotherhood hall, and setting spectacular fire to a shedful of Roman candles and cherry bombs. The driver of a truckload of angry yids lost control of the wheel and plowed into the grocery store where Laurie Jo worked as a checker, killing her instantly. The Synagogue Riots remain the lowest moment in the bitter and inglorious history of Tlingit-Jewish relations.

"Is that my fault? Is that my problem?" Landsman's mother yelled back. "An Indian living in my house, that is something I do not need!"

The children listened to them for a while, Johnny Bear standing in the doorway, kicking at his duffel bag with the toe of his sneaker.

"Good thing you don't speak Yiddish," Landsman told the younger boy.

"I don't need to, dickwad," said Johnny the Jew. "I been hearing this shit all my life."

After the thing was settled—and it had been settled before Landsman's mother ever started with the yelling—Hertz came in to say goodbye. His son had two inches on him. When he took the boy in his arms for a quick stiff hug, it looked like the side chair was embracing the couch. Then he stepped away.

"I'm sorry, John," he said. He gripped his son by the ears and held on tight. He scanned the boy's face like a telegram. "I want you to know that. I don't want you ever to look at me and think that I'm feeling anything but sorry."

"I want to live with you," said the boy tonelessly.

"So you have mentioned." The words were harsh and the manner callous, but all at once—it shocked the hell out of Landsman—there was a shine of tears in Uncle Hertz's eyes. "I'm well-known, John, as a complete son of a bitch. You'd be worse off with me than living in the street." He looked around his sister's living room, the plastic slipcovers on the furniture, the art like barbed wire, the abstract menorah. "God knows what they'll make of you here."

"A Jew," said Johnny Bear, and it was hard to tell whether he meant it as a boast or a prediction of ruin. "Like you."

"That seems unlikely," Hertz said. "I'd like to see them manage that. Goodbye, John."

He gave Naomi a pat on the head. Just before he went out, he stopped to shake hands with Landsman. "Help your cousin, Meyerle, he's going to need it."

"He looks like he can help himself."

"He does, doesn't he?" said Uncle Hertz. "That at least he gets from me."

Now Ber Shemets, as he came in time to style himself, lives like a Jew, wears a skullcap and four-corner like a Jew. He reasons as a Jew, worships as a Jew, fathers and loves his wife and serves the public as a Jew. He spins theory with his hands, keeps kosher, and sports a penis cut (his father saw to it before abandoning the infant Bear) on the bias. But to look at, he's pure Tlingit. Tartar eyes, dense black hair, broad face built for joy but trained in the craft of sorrow. The Bears are a big people,

and Berko stands two meters tall in his socks and weighs in at 110 kilograms. He has a big head, big feet, big belly and hands. Everything about Berko is big except for the baby in his arms, smiling shyly at Landsman with his thatch of black horsehair standing up like magnetized iron filings. Cute as a button, Landsman would be the first to acknowledge, but even after a year, the sight of Pinky still puts a dent in the soft place behind Landsman's sternum. Pinky was born exactly two years after Django's due date—September 22.

"Emanuel Lasker was a famous chess player," Landsman informs Berko, who takes a mug of coffee from Ester-Malke and frowns into the steam. "A German Jew. In the teens and twenties." He spent the hour between five and six at his computer in the desolate squad room, seeing what he could turn up. "A mathematician. Lost to Capablanca, like everybody else back then. The book was in the room. And a chessboard, set up that way."

Berko has heavy eyelids, soulful, bruised-looking, but when he drops them down over those pop eyes, it's like the beam of a flashlight bleeding through a slit, a look so cold and skeptical it can lead innocent men to doubt their own alibis.

"And you feel," he says, with a significant glance at the bottle of beer in Landsman's hand, "that the configuration of pieces on the board, what?" The slit draws narrower, the beam flares brighter. "Encodes the name of his killer?"

"In the alphabet of Atlantis," Landsman says.

"Uh-huh."

"The Jew played chess. And he tied off with tefillin. And somebody killed him with a great deal of care and discretion. I don't know. Maybe there's nothing in the chess angle. I can't get anything out of it. I went through the whole book, but I couldn't figure out which game he was playing. If any. Those diagrams, I don't know, I get a headache looking at them. I get a headache just looking at the board, a curse on it."

Landsman's voice comes out sounding every bit as hollow and hopeless as he feels, which was not his intention at all. Berko looks over the top of Pinky's head at his wife, to see if he really needs to worry about Landsman.

"Tell you what, Meyer. If you put down that beer," Berko says, trying and failing not to sound like a policeman, "I'll let you hold this nice baby. How about that? Look at him. Look at those thighs, come on. You have to squeeze them. Put down the beer, all right? And hold this nice baby for a minute."

"He is a nice baby," Landsman says. He removes another inch of beer from the bottle. Then he puts it down, and shuts up, and takes the baby, and smells him, and does the usual injury to his heart. Pinky smells like yogurt and laundry soap. A hint of his father's bay rum. Landsman carries the baby to the doorway of the kitchen, and tries not to inhale, and watches as Ester-Malke peels a sheet of waffles from the iron. She is using an old Westinghouse with Bakelite handles in the shape of leaves. It can blast out four crisp waffles at a time.

"Buttermilk?" Berko says, studying the chessboard now, stroking a finger along his heavy upper lip.

"What else?" Ester-Malke says.

"Real, or milk with vinegar?"

"We did a double-blind test, Berko." Ester-Malke hands Landsman a plate of waffles in exchange for her younger son, and even though he doesn't feel like eating, Landsman is happy to make the trade. "You can't tell the difference, remember?"

"Well, he can't play chess, either," Landsman says. "But look at him pretending."

"Fuck you, Meyer," Berko says. "Okay, now, seriously, which piece is the battleship?"

The family chess madness had burned out or redirected its energies by the time Berko came to live with Landsman and his mother. Isidor Landsman had been dead for six years, and Hertz Shemets had transferred his skills at feinting and attack to a much larger chessboard. That meant there was no one to teach Berko the game but Landsman, a duty that Landsman carefully neglected.

"Butter?" Ester-Malke says. She ladles fresh batter into the cells of the waffle iron while Pinky sits on her hip and offers his unsolicited advice.

"No butter."

"Syrup?"

"No syrup."

"You don't really want a waffle, do you, Meyer?" Berko says.

He abandons the pretense of studying the board and moves on to the volume by Siegbert Tarrasch as if he will be able to make heads or tails of that.

"Not in all honesty," Landsman says. "But I know that I should."

Ester-Malke eases the lid of the iron down onto the grids of batter. "I'm pregnant," she says in a mild tone.

"What?" Berko says, looking up from the book of orderly surprises. "Fuck!" This word is spoken in American, Berko's preferred language for swearing and harsh talk. He starts working over the stick of imaginary chewing gum that seems to appear in his mouth whenever he's getting ready to blow. "That's great, Es. That's just great. You know? Because there's still one fucking desk drawer in this shit-ass apartment that doesn't have a motherfucking baby in it!"

Then he raises *Three Hundred Chess Games* over his head and prepares, showily, to hurl it across the breakfast bar and into the living-diningroom. This is the Shemets in him coming out. Landsman's mother was also a big one for the hurling of objects in anger, and the histrionic displays of Uncle Hertz, that cool customer, are rare but legendary.

"Evidence," Landsman reminds him. Berko raises the book higher, and Landsman says, "Evidence, God damn it!" and then Berko throws it. The book struggles through the air, pages fluttering, and strikes something jingly, probably the silver spice box on the glass-topped dining table. The baby sticks out his

lower lip, then sticks it out a little farther, then hesitates, looking from his mother to his father and back. Then he bursts into desolate sobs. Berko glares at Pinky as if betrayed. He goes around the bar to retrieve the mishandled evidence.

"What did Tateh do?" Ester-Malke says to the baby, kissing his cheek and scowling at the large black-edged hole in the air that Berko has left behind. "Did bad Detective Super-sperm throw the silly old book?"

"Good waffle!" Landsman says, setting down his plate untouched. He raises his voice. "Hey, Berko, I'm, uh, I think I'm going to wait down in the car." He swipes Ester-Malke's cheek with his lips. "Tell what's-his-name Uncle Meyerle says goodbye."

Landsman goes out to the elevators, where the wind whistles down the shafts. The neighbor, Fried, comes out in his long black coat, his white hair combed back and curling at his collar. Fried is an opera singer, and the Taytsh-Shemetses feel he looks down on them. But that is only because Fried has told them he is better than they are. Sitkaniks generally take care to maintain this view of their neighbors, in particular of the Natives and all those who dwell in the south. Fried and Landsman get into the elevator together. Fried asks Landsman if he has found any dead bodies lately, and Landsman asks Fried if he has made any dead composers turn over in their graves lately, and after that, they don't say anything much. Landsman goes back out to his parking place and gets into the car. He runs the engine and sits in the

heat blowing in off the engine. With the smell of Pinky on his collar and the cool dry ghost of Goldy's hand in his, he plays goalkeeper as a squad of unprofitable regrets mounts a steady attack on his ability to get through a day without feeling anything. He climbs out and smokes a papiros in the rain. He turns his eyes north, across the marina, to the looping aluminum spike on its windswept island. Once more he feels a sharp nostalgia for the fair, for the heroic Jewish engineering of the Safety Pin (officially the Promise of Sanctuary Tower, but nobody calls it that), and for the cleavage of the uniformed lady who used to tear your ticket on the elevator ride to the restaurant at the Safety Pin's tip. Then he gets back in the car. A few minutes later, Berko comes out of the building and rolls like a bass drum into the Super Sport. He has the book and the pocket chess set in one hand, balancing them atop his left thigh.

"Sorry about all that," he says. "What a jerk, huh?"

"No big deal."

"We'll just have to find a bigger place."

"Right."

"Somewhere."

"That's the trick."

"It's a blessing."

"You bet. Mazel tov, Berko."

Landsman's congratulations are so ironic that they are heartfelt, and they are so heartfelt that they can only come off as insincere, and he and his partner sit there for a while, not going

anywhere, listening to them congeal.

"Ester-Malke says she's so tired, she doesn't even remember having sex with me," Berko says with a deep sigh.

"Maybe you didn't."

"It's a miracle, you're saying. Like the talking chicken in the butcher shop."

"Uh-huh."

"A sign and a portent."

"One way of looking at it."

"Speaking of signs," Berko says. He opens the Sitka Public Library's long-missing copy of *Three Hundred Chess Games* to its inside back cover and slides the return card from its pasted pocket. Behind the card lies a photograph, a three-by-five color snapshot, glossy with a white border. It is the picture of a literal sign, a rectangle of black plastic into which are stamped three white roman letters, with a stamped white arrow underneath, pointing to the left. The sign dangles on two lengths of slender chain from a dirty white square of acoustic tile.

"PIE," Landsman reads.

"It seems to have fallen out in the course of my vigorous examination of the evidence," Berko says. "I figure it must have been wedged into the card pocket, or with your keen shammes vision, you would have noticed it. Recognize it?"

"Yes," Landsman says. "I know it."

At the airport that serves the raw northern city of Yakovy—the terminus from which you set off, if you are a Jew looking for

modest adventure, into the modest bush of the District—tucked away at the far end of the main building, a modest operation offers pie, and only pie, American-style. The place is nothing more than a window that opens onto a kitchen equipped with five gleaming ovens. Next to the window hangs a whiteboard, and every day the proprietors—a couple of hostile Klondikes and their mysterious daughter—write out a list of the day's wares: blackberry, apple rhubarb, peach, banana cream. The pie is good, even famous in a modest way. Anybody who has passed through the Yakovy airfield knows it, and there are rumors of people who will fly in from Juneau or Fairbanks or farther away to eat it. Landsman's late sister was a devotee of the coconut cream in particular.

"So, nu," Berko says. "So what do you think?"

"I knew it," Landsman says. "The minute I walked into the room and saw Lasker lying there, I said to myself, Landsman, this whole case is going to turn on a question of pie."

"So you think it means nothing."

"Nothing means nothing," Landsman says, and all of a sudden he feels choked up, throat swollen, eyes burning with tears. Maybe it's lack of sleep, or too much time spent in the company of his shot glass. Or maybe it's the sudden image of Naomi, leaning against a wall outside that nameless and inexplicable pie shop, scarfing up a slice of coconut cream pie from a paper plate with a plastic fork, eyes closed, lips pursed and streaked with white, grooving on a mouthful of cream, crust and custard in a

profound and animal way. “God damn it, Berko. I wish I had some of that pie right now.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Berko says.

7

For twenty-seven years Sitka Central has been temporarily housed in eleven modular buildings in a vacant lot behind the old Russian orphanage. Rumor holds that the modulars began life as a Bible college in Slidell, Louisiana. They are windowless, low-ceilinged, flimsy, and cramped. The visitor finds, packed into the Homicide modular, a reception area, an office for each of the two detective inspectors, a shower stall with a toilet and sink, a squad room (four cubicles, four chairs, four telephones, a chalkboard, and a row of mail slots), an interrogation hotbox, and a break room. The break room comes equipped with a coffee brewer and a small refrigerator. The break room has also long housed a thriving colony of spores that, at a point in the remote past, spontaneously evolved the form and appearance of a love seat. But when Landsman and Berko pull into the gravel lot by the Homicide modular, a pair of Filipino custodians are lugging out the monstrous fungus.

"It's moving," Berko says.

People have been threatening for years to get rid of the sofa, but it is a shock to Landsman to see it finally on its way. Enough of a shock that it takes him a second or two to register the woman standing alongside the steps. She is holding a black umbrella and wearing a bright orange parka with a blazing dyed-green ruff of synthetic fur. Her right arm is raised, index finger extended

toward the trash bins, like a painting of the angel Michael casting Adam and Eve from the Garden. A lock of corkscrewing red hair has sprung free of the green fur ruff and dangles down over her face. This is a chronic problem for her. When she is kneeling to examine a doubtful stain on the floor of a crime scene, or studying a photograph under a loupe, she has to blow that lock of hair out of the way with a sharp, irritated puff of breath.

Now she is scowling at the Super Sport as Landsman cuts the engine. She lowers her all-banishing hand. From this distance, it looks to Landsman as if the lady is three or four cups the worse for strong coffee, and somebody has already pissed her off once this morning, maybe twice. Landsman was married to her for twelve years, working the same Homicide squad for five. He is sensitive to her moods.

"Tell me you didn't know about this," he says to Berko, cutting the engine.

"I still don't know about it," Berko says. "I'm hoping if I close my eyes for a second and then open them again, it's going to turn out not to be true."

Landsman tries it. "No dice," he says with regret, and gets out of the car. "Give us a minute."

"Please, take all the time you want."

Landsman requires ten seconds to cross the gravel lot. Bina looks happy to see him for a count of three, followed by a two-count of looking anxious and lovely. She plays out the last five seconds by looking ready to mix it up with Landsman, if that's

how he wants things to go.

"What the fuck?" Landsman says, hating to disappoint her.

"Two months of ex-wife," Bina says. "After that, it's anybody's guess."

Just after their divorce came through, Bina headed south for a year, enrolling in some kind of leadership training program for women police detectives. On her return, she accepted the lofty post of detective inspector at the Yakovy Homicide Section. There she found stimulus and fulfillment leading investigations into the hypothermia deaths of unemployed salmon fishermen amid the drainage channels of the Venice of Northwest Chichagof Island. Landsman hasn't seen her since his sister's funeral, and he gathers from the pitying look she gives his old chassis that he has gone further downhill in the months since then.

"Aren't you happy to see me, Meyer?" she says. "You don't say anything about my parka?"

"It's extremely orange," Landsman says.

"You need to be visible up there," she says. "In the woods. Or they'll think you're a bear and shoot you."

"It's a nice color on you," Landsman hears himself manage. "Goes with your eyes."

Bina accepts a compliment as if it's a can of soda that she suspects him of having shaken. "So you're saying you're surprised," she says.

"I'm surprised."

"You didn't hear about Felsenfeld?"

"It's Felsenfeld. What would I hear?" He recalls Shpringer having asked him the same question the night before, and now the insight comes to him with a keenness worthy of the man who caught Podolsky the Hospital Killer. "Felsenfeld skipped."

"Turned in his badge two nights ago. Left for Melbourne, Australia, last night. His wife's sister lives there."

"And now I have to work for you?" He knows it can't have been Bina's idea; and the move, even if it's only for two months, is unquestionably a promotion for her. But he can't quite believe that she could permit such a thing—that she would be able to stand it. "That's impossible."

"Anything is possible nowadays," Bina says. "I read it in the newspaper."

All at once the lines of her face are smoothed over, and he sees what a strain it is for her still to be around him, how relieved she is when Berko Shemets walks up.

"Everyone is here!" she says.

When Landsman turns around he finds his partner standing right behind him. Berko owns considerable powers of stealth that, naturally, he attributes to his Indian forebears. Landsman likes to ascribe them to powerful forces of surface tension, the way Berko's enormous snowshoe feet warp the earth.

"Well, well, well," Berko says genially. From the first time that Landsman brought Bina home, she and Berko seemed to share an understanding of, an angle on, a laugh at the expense of

Landsman, the funny little sorehead in the last panel of a comic strip with the black lily of an exploded cigar wilting in his puss. She holds out her hand, and they shake.

"Welcome back, Detective Landsman," he says sheepishly.

"Inspector," she says, "and it's Gelbfish. Again."

Berko shuffles carefully through the hand of facts she has just dealt him. "My mistake," he says. "How'd you like Yakovy?"

"It was all right."

"Fun town?"

"I really wouldn't know."

"Meet anybody?"

Bina shakes her head, blushing, then blushing more deeply at the thought that she was blushing. "I just worked," she says. "You know me."

The sodden pink mass of the old sofa disappears around the corner of the modular, and Landsman experiences another moment of insight.

"The Burial Society is coming," he says. He means the transition task force from the U.S. Interior Department, the advance men for Reversion, come to watch over and prepare the corpse for interment in the grave of history. For the past year or so, they have been murmuring their bureaucratic kaddish over every part of the District bureaucracy, making inventories and recommendations. Laying the foundation, Landsman imagines, so that when anything subsequently goes awry or turns sour, blame can plausibly be laid at the feet of the Jews.

"Gentleman named Spade," she says. "Showing up sometime Monday, Tuesday at the latest."

"*Felsenfeld*," Landsman says with disgust. Typical that the man would slink out three days before a shomer from the Burial Society is due to come calling. "A black year on him."

Two more custodians come banging out of the trailer, carrying off the divisional pornography library and a life-size cardboard cutout photograph of the president of America, with his cleft chin, his golfer's tan, his air of self-importance, worn lightly, quarterback-style. The detectives like to dress the cardboard president in lacy underpants and pelt him with wadded clots of wet toilet paper.

"Time to measure Sitka Central for a shroud," Berko says, watching it go.

"You don't even begin to understand," Bina says, and Landsman understands at once, from the dark seam in her voice, that she is trying to contain, with effort, a quantum of very bad news. Then Bina says, "Inside, boys," sounding like every other commanding officer Landsman has been obliged to obey. A moment ago the idea of having to serve under his ex-wife even for two months did not seem imaginable, but seeing the way she jerks her head toward the modular and orders them inside gives him reason to hope that his feelings about her, not that he still has any, of course, might turn to the universal gray of discipline.

Following classic refugee tradition the office is as Felsenfeld left it, photographs, half-dead houseplants, bottles of seltzer on

the file cabinet next to a family-size tub of antacid chews.

"Sit," Bina says, going around to the rubberized steel desk chair and settling herself into it with careless resolve. She throws off the orange parka, revealing a dust-brown wool pantsuit worn over a white oxford-cloth shirt, an outfit much more in keeping with Landsman's idea of how Bina thinks about clothes. He tries and fails not to observe the way her heavy breasts, each of whose moles and freckles he can still project like constellations against the planetarium dome of his imagination, strain against the placket and pockets of her shirt. He and Berko hang their coats on the hooks behind the door and carry their hats in their hands. They each take one of the remaining chairs. Felsenfeld's wife in her photograph and his children in theirs have not grown any less homely since the last time Landsman looked at them. The salmon and halibut are still astonished to find themselves hanging dead at the end of Felsenfeld's lines.

"Okay, listen, boys," Bina says. She is a woman for belling cats and taking bulls by the horns. "We're all aware of the awkwardness of the situation here. It could be weird enough if I just used to squad with you both. The fact that one of you used to be my husband, and the other one my, uh, cousin, well, shit." The last word is spoken in flawless American, as are the next four. "Know what I'm saying?"

She pauses, seeming to await a response. Landsman turns to Berko. "You were the cousin, right?"

Bina smiles to show Landsman that she doesn't think he's

particularly funny. She reaches around behind her and drags over from their place on the file cabinet a pile of pale blue file folders, each of them at least half an inch thick and all of them flagged with a tab of cough-syrup-red plastic. At the sight of it, Landsman's heart sinks, just as it does when by ill chance he happens to meet his own regard in a mirror.

"See these?"

"Yes, Inspector Gelbfish," Berko says, sounding strangely insincere. "I see them."

"Know what they are?"

"I know they can't be our open cases," Landsman says. "All piled up together on your desk."

"One good thing about Yakovy?" Bina says.

They await their chief's report on her travels.

She says, "The rain. Two hundred inches a year. Rains the smart ass right out of people. Even yids."

"That's a lot of rain," Berko says.

"Now, just listen to me. And listen carefully, please, because I will be speaking bullshit. In two months a U.S. Marshal is going to stride into this godforsaken modular with his cut-rate suit and his Sunday-school way of talking and request that I turn over the keys to the freak show that is the B Squad file cabinets, over which, as of this morning, it is my honor to preside." They are talkers, the Gelbfishes, speech makers and reasoners and aces of wheedling. Bina's father nearly talked Landsman out of marrying her. On the night before the wedding. "And really, I say that

sincerely. You both know that I have been working my ass off my whole adult life, hoping that one day I'd be fortunate enough to park it in this chair, behind this desk, and try to maintain the grand Sitka Central tradition that every once in a while we catch a murderer and put him in jail. And now here I am. Until the first of January."

"We feel the same way, Bina," Berko says, sounding more sincere this time. "Freak show and all."

Landsman says that it goes double for him.

"I appreciate that," she says. "And I know how bad you feel about … this."

She rests her long, freckled hand on the stack of files. If accurately gathered, it will comprise eleven folders, the oldest dating back over two years. There are three other pairs of detectives in the Homicide section, and none of them could boast of such a fine, tall stack of unsolved cases.

"We're close on the Feytel," Berko says. "We're just waiting on the district attorney there. And Pinsky. And the Zilberblat thing. Zilberblat's mother—"

Bina holds up her hand, cutting Berko off. Landsman says nothing. He is too ashamed to speak. As far as he is concerned, that pile of folders is a monument to his recent decline. That it's not another ten inches taller testifies to the steadfastness his big little cousin Berko has shown in carrying him.

"Stop," Bina says. "Just stop right there. And pay attention, because this is the part where I flash my fluent grasp of bullshit."

She reaches behind her back and takes a sheet of paper from her in-box, as well as another, much thinner blue file that Landsman recognizes at once, since he created it himself at four-thirty that morning. She reaches into the breast pocket of her suit jacket and takes out a pair of half-glasses that Landsman has never seen before. She is getting old, and he is getting old, right on schedule, and yet as time ruins them, they are not, strangely enough, married to each other.

"A policy has been formulated by the wise Jews who oversee our destiny as police officers of the Sitka District," Bina begins. She scans the sheet of paper with an air of agitation, even dismay. "It takes off from the admirable principle that when authority is turned over to the U.S. Marshal for Sitka, it would be a nice thing for everyone, not to mention providing adequate posterior coverage, if there were no active cases outstanding."

"Give me a fucking break, Bina," Berko says in American. He has grasped from the start what Inspector Gelbfish is getting at. It takes Landsman another minute to catch on.

"No cases outstanding," he repeats with idiotic calm.

"This policy," Bina says, "has been given the catchy name of 'effective resolution.' Essentially, what that means is, you are to devote exactly as much time to resolving your outstanding cases as there remain days in your tenure as homicide detectives carrying the District shield. Say roughly nine weeks. You have eleven cases outstanding. You can, you know, divvy it up however you want. However you want to work it, that's fine with me."

"Wrap up?" Berko says. "You mean—"

"You know what I mean, Detective," Bina says. There is no emotion in her voice and no readable expression on her face. "Stick them to whatever sticky people you can find. If they won't stick, use a little glue. The rest of them"—a hint of a catch in her voice—"just black-flag and file in cabinet nine."

Nine is where they keep the cold cases. Filing a case in cabinet nine saves less space but is otherwise the same as lighting it on fire and taking the ashes out for a walk in a gale-force wind.

"Bury them?" Berko says, hoisting it into a question right at the end.

"Put in a good-faith effort, within the limits of this new policy with the musical name, and then, if that fails, put in a bad-faith effort." Bina stares at the domed paperweight on Felsenfeld's desk. Inside the paperweight is a tiny model, a cartoon in cheap plastic, of the Sitka skyline. A jumble of high-rises clustered around the Safety Pin, that lonely digit pointed at the sky as if in accusation. "And then slap a black flag on them."

"You said eleven," Landsman says.

"You noticed that."

"After last night, though, with all due respect, Inspector, and as embarrassing as it is. Well. It's twelve. Not eleven. Twelve open cases for Shemets and Landsman."

Bina picks up the slim blue folder that Landsman gave birth to the night before. "This one?" She opens it and studies, or pretends to study, Landsman's report on the apparent gun murder, at point

blank, of the man who called himself Emanuel Lasker. “Yes. Okay. Now I want you to watch how this is done.”

She opens the top drawer of Felsenfeld’s desk, which, for the next two months, at least, will be hers. She rummages around inside it, grimacing as if the drawer contains a pile of used foam-rubber earplugs, which, last time Landsman looked, was indeed the case. She pulls out a plastic tab for marking a case folder. A black one. She pries loose the red tab that Landsman attached to the Lasker file early that morning, and substitutes the black one in its place, breathing shallowly the way you do when you clean a nasty wound or sponge up something awful from the rug. She ages ten years, it seems to Landsman, in the ten seconds it takes her to make the switch. Then she holds the newly cold case away from her body, tweezing it between two fingers of one hand.

“Effective resolution,” she says.

8

The Noz, as the name implies, is the law enforcement bar, owned by a couple of ex-nozzes, choked with the smoke of noz grievance and gossip. It never closes, and it never runs short of off-duty law enforcement officers to prop up its big oak bar. Just the place, the Noz, if you want to give voice to your outrage over the latest masterwork of bullshit to be handed down by the departmental bigs. So Landsman and Berko steer well clear of the Noz. They walk past the Pearl of Manila, though its Filipino-style Chinese donuts beckon like glittering sugar-dusted tokens of a better existence. They avoid Feter Shnayer, and Karlinsky's, and the Inside Passage, and the Nyu-Yorker Grill. This early in the morning, most of them are closed anyway, and the joints that are open tend to service cops, firefighters, paramedics.

They hunch up their shoulders against the cold and hurry, the big man and the little one, bumping against each other. The breath comes out of their bodies in billows that twine and are absorbed into the greater fog lying over the Untershtat. Fat streamers of fog twist along the streets, smearing headlights and neon, blotting out the harbor, leaving a track of oily silver beads on the lapels of coats and the crowns of hats.

"Nobody goes to the Nyu-Yorker," Berko says. "We ought to be fine there."

"I saw Tabatchnik in there one time."

"I'm pretty sure Tabatchnik would never steal the plans for your secret weapon, Meyer."

Landsman only wishes he were in possession of the plans for some kind of death ray, or mind-control beam, something to shake the corridors of power. Put some genuine fear of God into the Americans. Stave off, just for a year, a decade, a century, the tide of Jewish exile.

They are about to brave the grim Front Page, with its clotted milk and its coffee fresh from a stint as a barium enema at Sitka General, when Landsman sees old Dennis Brennan's khaki ass taking up a tottering stool at the counter. The press pretty well abandoned the Front Page years ago, when the *Blat* went under and the *Tog* moved its offices to a new building out by the airport. But Brennan left Sitka for fortune and glory a while back. He must have just blown back into town pretty recently. It's a safe bet nobody's told him the Front Page is dead.

"Too late," Berko says. "Bastard saw us."

For a moment Landsman isn't sure the bastard did. Brennan's back is to the door, and he's studying the stocks page of the prominent American newspaper whose Sitka bureau he constituted before he got his big break. Landsman takes hold of Berko's coat and starts to tow his partner down the street. He has thought of the perfect place for them to talk, maybe get a bite, without being overheard.

"Detective Shemets. A moment."

"Too late," Landsman concedes.

He turns, and Brennan's there, that large-headed man, hatless and coatless, necktie blown over his shoulder, a penny in his left loafer, bankrupt in the right. Patches on the elbows of his tweed jacket, its color a practical shade of gravy stain. His cheek could use a shave and his pate a fresh coat of wax. Maybe things didn't go so well for Dennis Brennan out in the big time.

"Look at the head on that sheygets, the thing has its own atmosphere," Landsman says. "Thing has ice caps."

"Indeed the man has a very big head."

"Every time I see it, I feel sorry for necks."

"Maybe I should get my hands around his. Give it some support."

Brennan puts up his larval white fingers and blinks his little eyes, the colorless blue of skimmed milk. He works up a practiced rueful smile, but Landsman notes that he keeps a good four feet of Ben Maymon Street between him and Berko.

"A need to repeat the rash threats of yore does not, I assure you, exist, Detective Shemets," the reporter says in his swift and preposterous Yiddish. "Evergreen and ripe with the sap of their original violence they remain."

Brennan studied German in college and learned his Yiddish from some pompous old German at the Institute, and he talks, somebody once remarked, "like a sausage recipe with footnotes." A heavy drinker, unsuited by temperament to long twilight and rain. Throws off a false scent of being stolid and slow on the uptake, in a way common among detectives and reporters. But a

shlemiel all the same. No one ever seemed more astonished by the splash Dennis Brennan made in Sitka than Brennan himself.

"That I fear your wrath let us agree beforehand, Detective. And that just now I pretended not to see you walking past this desolate hole whose sole recommendation, apart from the fact that the management has forgotten, in my long absence, the state of my credit, is a total lack of newspaper reporters. I knew, however, that with my luck, such a strategy was likely to return at a later time and bite me upon the ass."

"Nothing is that hungry, Brennan," Landsman says. "You were probably safe."

Brennan looks hurt. A sensitive soul, this macrocephalic gentile, a nurser of slights, resistant to banter and irony. His convoluted style of talking makes everything he says sound like a joke, a fact that only compounds the man's need to be taken seriously.

"Dennis J. Brennan," Berko says. "Working the Sitka beat again?"

"For my sins, Detective Shemets, for my sins."

This goes without saying. Assignment to the Sitka bureau of any of the stateside newspapers or networks that bother to maintain one is a proverbial punishment for incompetence or failure. Brennan's reassignment here must be the mark of some kind of colossal cock-up.

"I thought that was why they sent you *away*, Brennan," Berko says, and now he's the one who isn't joking. His eyes go dead,

and he chews that imaginary piece of Doublemint or seal fat or the gristly knob of Brennan's heart. "For your sins."

"The motivation, Detective, for my leaving a cup of terrible coffee and a broken appointment with an informant who, in any case, lacks anything resembling information, to come out here and risk your possible anger."

"Brennan, please, I beg you to speak American," Berko says. "What the fuck do you want?"

"I want a story," Brennan says. "What else? And I know I'll never get one from you unless I try to clear the air. So. For the record." Once again he lashes himself to the tiller of his Flying Dutchman version of the mother tongue. "I lack the intention to undo or to take back anything. Inflict suffering on this grossly enlarged head of mine, please, but I stand behind what I wrote, every word of it, to this day. It was accurate and supported and sourced. And yet I do not mind telling you that the whole sorry affair left a bad taste in my mouth—"

"Was it the taste of your ass?" Landsman suggests brightly. "Maybe you've been biting upon yourself."

Brennan sails madly on. Landsman gets the feeling that the goy has been saving up this spiel for a while now. That maybe he's looking for something more from Berko than a story.

"Certainly it was a good thing for my career, so-called. For a few years. It propelled me out of the boondocks, you should pardon the expression, to L.A., Salt Lake, Kansas City." As he names the stations of his decline, Brennan's voice gets lower and

softer. “Spokane. But I know that it was a painful thing for you and your family, Detective. And so, if you would allow me, I would like to offer my apology for the hurt that I caused.”

Just after the elections that carried the current administration to its first term in power, Dennis J. Brennan wrote a series of articles for his paper. He presented, in careful and dogged detail, the sordid history of corruption, malfeasance, and unconstitutional skullduggery engaged in by Hertz Shemets, over the course of forty years at the FBI. The COINTELPRO program was shut down, its business was farmed out to other departments, and Uncle Hertz was driven into retirement and disgrace. Landsman, who was shocked by nothing, found it tough to get out of bed for a couple of days after the first article ran. He’d known as well as anyone and better than almost everyone that his uncle was badly flawed both as a man and as an officer of the law. But if you wanted to go looking for the reasons that a kid became a noz, it almost never paid to search anywhere but a branch or two up the family tree. Flaws and all, Uncle Hertz was a hero to Landsman. Smart, tough, unremitting, patient, methodical, sure of his actions. If his willingness to cut corners, his bad temper, his secretiveness did not make him a hero, they definitely made him a noz.

“I’m going to put this very gently, Dennis,” Berko says, “because you’re all right. You work hard, you’re a decent writer, and you’re the only guy I know who makes my partner look like a clotheshorse: Fuck you.”

Brennan nods. “I figured you might say that,” he replies, sadly and in American.

“My father’s a fucking hermit,” Berko says. “He’s a mushroom, he lives under a log with the earwigs and the crawly things. Whatever nefarious shit he was up to, he was only doing what he thought was good for the Jews, and you know what’s fucked up about that? He was *right*, because now look at the motherfucking mess we’re in without him.”

“Jesus, Shemets, I hate to hear that. And I hate to think that a story I wrote had anything to do with—that it led to, in any way—the predicament you yids now find yourself in…. Ah, fuck it. Forget it.”

“Okay,” Landsman says. He grabs hold of Berko’s sleeve again. “Come.”

“Hey, uh, yeah. So where you guys going? What’s up?”

“Just fighting crime,” Landsman says. “Same as last time you blew through here.”

But now that he’s unburdened himself, the hound inside Brennan can smell it on Berko and Landsman. Maybe he could smell it on them from a block away, could see it through the glass, a hitch in Berko’s rolling gait, an extra kilo of stoop in Landsman’s shoulder. Maybe the whole apology routine has been building to the question he drags up, in his native tongue, naked and plain:

“Who died?”

“A yid in a predicament,” Berko tells him. “Dog bites man.”

9

They leave Brennan standing outside the Front Page, with his necktie smacking him on the forehead like a remorseful palm, and walk to the corner of Seward and down Peretz, then turn in just past the Palatz Theater, in the lee of Baranof Castle Hill, to a black door, in a black marble facade, with a big picture window painted black.

"You are not serious," Berko says.

"In fifteen years I never saw another shammes at the Vorsht."

"It's nine-thirty in the morning on a Friday, Meyer. There's nobody in there but the rats."

"Not true," Landsman says. He leads Berko around to the side door and lays his knuckles against it, two taps. "I always figured this was the place to plan my misdeeds, if I ever found myself with misdeeds that needed planning."

The heavy steel door swings open with a groan, revealing Mrs. Kalushiner, dressed to go to shul or a job at the bank, in a gray skirt suit and black pumps, with her hair done up in pink foam rollers. In her hand she carries a paper cup filled with a liquid that looks like coffee or maybe prune juice. Mrs. Kalushiner chews tobacco. The cup is her constant if not sole companion.

"You," she says, making a face like she just tasted earwax on her fingertip. Then, in her refined way, she spits into the cup. From force of wise habit, she takes a long look up and

down the alley to see what style of trouble they have brought along. She makes a rapid and brutal study of the giant yarmulke-wearing Indian who wants to come into her place of business. In the past, the people Landsman has brought here, at this hour of the day, have all been twitchy, mouse-eyed shtinkers like Benny "Shpilkes" Plotner and Zigmund Landau, the Heifetz of Informers. Nobody ever looked less like a shtinker than Berko Shemets. And with all due respect to the beanie and the fringes, no way would this be a middleman or even a low-echelon street wiseguy, not with that Indian puss. When, after careful consideration, she can't fit Berko into her taxonomy of lowlifes, Mrs. Kalushiner spits into her cup. Then she returns her gaze to Landsman and sighs. By one kind of reckoning, she owes Landsman seventeen favors; by another, she ought to give him a punch in the belly. She steps aside and lets them pass.

The place is as empty as an off-duty downtown bus and smells twice as bad. Somebody came through recently with a bucket of bleach to paint in some high notes over the Vorsht's steady bass line of sweat and urinals. The keen nose can also detect, above or beneath it all, the coat-lining smell of worn dollar bills.

"Sit there," Mrs. Kalushiner says, without indicating where she would like them to sit. The round tables that crowd the stage wear overturned chairs like sets of antlers. Landsman flips two of them, and he and Berko take their seats away from the stage, by the heavily bolted front door. Mrs. Kalushiner wanders into the back room, and the beaded curtain clatters behind her with

the sound of loose teeth in a bucket.

"What a doll," Berko says.

"A sweetheart," Landsman agrees. "She only comes in here in the mornings. That way she never has to look at the clientele." The Vorsht is the place where the musicians of Sitka do their drinking, after the theaters and the other clubs close down. Long after midnight they come huddling in, snow on their hats, rain in their cuffs, and pack the little stage, and kill one another with clarinets and fiddles. As usual when angels gather, they draw a following of devils: gangsters, ganefs, and hard-luck women. "She doesn't care for musicians."

"But her husband was a—Oh. I get it."

Nathan Kalushiner, until his death, was the owner of the Vorsht and the king of the C-soprano clarinet. He was a gambler, and a junkie, and a very bad man in many respects, but he could play like there was a dybbuk inside him. Landsman, a music lover, used to look out for the crazy little shkotz and try to extricate him from the ugly situations in which Kalushiner's poor judgment and gnawed-at soul landed him. Then one day Kalushiner disappeared, along with the wife of a well-known Russian shtarker, leaving Mrs. Kalushiner nothing but the Vorsht and the goodwill of its creditors. Parts of Nathan Kalushiner, but not his C-soprano clarinet, later washed up under the docks up at Yakovy.

"And that's the guy's dog?" Berko says, pointing to the stage. At the spot where Kalushiner used to stand and blow every night

sits a curly half-terrier mutt, white with brown spots and a black patch around one eye. He's just sitting, ears raised, as if listening to some echoed voice or music in his brain. A length of slack chain connects him to a steel loop mounted on the wall.

"That's Hershel," Landsman says. There's something painful to him about the dog's patient mien, his canine air of calm endurance. Landsman looks away. "Five years he's been standing there."

"Touching."

"I guess. The animal, to be honest, he gives me the willies."

Mrs. Kalushiner reappears, carrying a metal bowl filled with pickled tomatoes and cucumbers, a basket of poppy-seed rolls, and a bowl of sour cream. That's all balanced along her left arm. The right hand, of course, carries the paper spittoon.

"Beautiful pickles," Berko suggests, and when that gets him nowhere, he tries, "Cute dog."

What's touching, thinks Landsman, is the effort that Berko Shemets is always willing to put into starting a conversation with somebody. The tighter people clam up, the more determined old Berko becomes. That was true of him even as a boy. He had that eagerness to engage with people, especially with his vacuum-packed cousin Meyer.

"A dog is a dog," Mrs. Kalushiner says. She slams down the pickles and sour cream, drops the basket of rolls, and then retreats to the back room with another clash of beads.

"So I need to ask you a favor," Landsman says, his gaze on

the dog, who has lowered himself to the stage on his arthritic knees and lies with his head on his forepaws. “And I’m hoping very much that you’ll say no.”

“Does this favor have anything to do with ‘effective resolution’?”

“Are you mocking the concept?”

“Not necessary,” Berko says. “The concept mocks itself.” He plucks a pickled tomato from the dish, dabs it in the sour cream, then pokes it neatly into his mouth with a forefinger. He screws up his face with pleasure at the resultant sour squirt of pulp and brine. “Bina looks good.”

“I thought she looked good.”

“A little butch.”

“So you always said.”

“Bina, Bina.” Berko gives his head a bleak shake, one that somehow manages at the same time to look fond. “In her last life, she must have been a weather vane.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Landsman says. “You’re right, but you’re wrong.”

“You’re saying Bina is not a careerist.”

“I’m not saying that.”

“She is, Meyer, and she always has been. That’s one of the things I have always most liked about her. Bina is a smart cookie. She is tough. She is political. She is viewed as loyal, and in two directions, up and down, and that is a hard trick to pull off. She is inspector material all around. In any police force, in any country

in the world."

"She was first in her class," Landsman says. "At the academy."

"But you scored higher on the entrance exam."

"Why, yes," Landsman says. "I did. Have I mentioned that before?"

"Even U.S. Marshals are smart enough to notice Bina Gelbfish," Berko says. "If she is trying to make sure there's a place for her in Sitka law enforcement after Reversion, I'm not going to blame her for that."

"You make your point," Landsman says. "Only I don't buy it. That isn't why she took this job. Or it's not the only reason."

"Why did she, then?"

Landsman shrugs. "I don't know," he admits. "Maybe she ran out of things to do that make sense."

"I hope not. Or the next thing you know, she'll be getting back together with you."

"God forbid."

"Horrors."

Landsman pretends to spit three times over his shoulder. Then, right as he's wondering if this custom has anything to do with the habit of chewing tobacco, Mrs. Kalushiner comes back, dragging the great leg iron of her life.

"I have hard-boiled eggs," she says menacingly. "I have bagel. I have jellied leg."

"Just a little something to drink, Mrs. K.," Landsman says. "Berko?"

"Burp water," Berko says. "With a twist of lime."

"You want to eat," she tells him. It isn't a guess.

"Why not?" Berko says. "All right, bring me a couple of eggs."

Mrs. Kalushiner turns to Landsman, and he feels Berko's eyes on his, daring him and expecting him to order a slivovitz. Landsman can feel Berko's fatigue, his impatience and irritation with Landsman and his problems. It's about time he pulled himself together, isn't it? Find something worth living his life for, and get on it with it.

"Coca-Cola," Landsman says. "If you please."

This may be the first thing that Landsman or anyone has ever done to surprise the widow of Nathan Kalushiner. She raises one steel-gray eyebrow, then turns away. Berko reaches for one of the pickled cucumbers, shaking off the peppercorns and cloves that stud its freckled green skin. He crunches it between his teeth and frowns happily.

"It takes a sour woman to make a good pickle," he says, and then, as if offhand, teasing, "Sure you don't want another beer?"

Landsman would love a beer. He can taste the bitter caramel of it on the back of his tongue. In the meantime, the one that Ester-Malke gave him has yet to leave his body, but Landsman is getting indications that it has its bags packed and is ready to go. The proposition or appeal that he has determined to make to his partner now strikes him as perhaps the stupidest idea he has ever had, certainly not worth living for. But it will have to do.

"Fuck you," he says, getting up from the table. "I need to take

a leak."

In the men's room, Landsman discovers the body of an electric guitarist. From a table at the back of the Vorsht, Landsman has often admired this yid and his playing. He was among the first to import the techniques and attitudes of American and British rock guitarists to the Bulgars and freylekhs of Jewish dance music. He is roughly the same age and background as Landsman, grew up in Halibut Point, and in moments of vainglory, Landsman has compared himself, or rather his detective work, to the intuitive and flashy playing of this man who appears to be dead or passed out in the stall with his money hand in the toilet bowl. The man is wearing a black leather three-piece suit and a red ribbon necktie. His celebrated fingers have been denuded of their rings, leaving ghostly indentations. A wallet lies on the tiled floor, looking empty and distended.

The musician snores once. Landsman employs those intuitive and flashy skills in feeling at the man's carotid for a pulse. It's steady. The air around the musician hums almost to burning with the radiance of alcohol. The wallet seems to have been rifled of its cash and identification. Landsman pats down the musician and finds a fifth of Canadian vodka in the left hip pocket of his leather blazer. They got his cash but not his booze. Landsman doesn't want a drink. In fact, he feels a lurch inside him at the idea of pouring this garbage into his belly, some kind of moral muscle that recoils. He chances a quick peek into the cobwebby root cellar of his soul. He can't help noticing that this pulse of

revulsion for what is, after all, a popular brand of Canadian vodka seems to have something to do with his ex-wife, with her being back in the Sitka again and looking so strong and juicy and Bina. The daily sight of her is going to be torment, like God torturing Moses with a glimpse of Zion from the top of Mount Pisgah every single day of his life.

Landsman uncaps the bottle of vodka and takes a long stiff pull. It burns like a compound of solvent and lye. Several inches remain in the bottle when he is through, but Landsman himself is filled top to bottom with nothing but the burn of remorse. All the old parallels it once pleased him to draw between the guitarist and himself are turned against him. After a brief but vigorous debate, Landsman decides not to throw the bottle in the trash, where it will be of no use to anyone. He transfers it to the snug hip pocket of his own decline. He drags the musician out of the stall and carefully dries his right hand. Last he takes the piss he came in here to take. The music of Landsman's urine against porcelain and water lures the musician into opening his eyes.

"I'm fine," he tells Landsman from the floor.

"Sure you are, sweetness," Landsman says.

"Just don't call my wife."

"I won't," Landsman assures him, but the yid is already out again. Landsman drags the musician out into the back hallway and leaves him on the floor with a phone book under his head for a pillow. Then he goes back to the table and Berko Shemets and takes a well-behaved sip from his glass of bubbles and syrup.

"Mmm," he says. "Coke."

"So," says Berko. "This favor of yours."

"Yeah," Landsman says. His resurgent confidence in himself and his intentions, the sense of well-being, is clearly an illusion produced by a snort of lousy vodka. He rationalizes this with the thought that from the point of view of, say, God, all human confidence is an illusion and every intention a joke. "Kind of a big one."

Berko knows where Landsman is heading. But Landsman isn't quite ready to go there yet.

"You and Ester-Malke," Landsman says. "You guys applied for residency."

"Is that your big question?"

"No, this is just the buildup."

"We applied for green cards. Everybody in the District has applied for a residency card, unless they're going to Canada or Argentina or wherever. Jesus, Meyer, didn't you?"

"I know I meant to," Landsman says. "Maybe I did. I can't remember."

This is too shocking for Berko to process, and not what Landsman has led them here to say.

"I did, all right?" Landsman says. "I remember now. Sure. Filled out my I-999 and everything."

Berko nods as if he believes Landsman's lie.

"So," Landsman says. "You guys are planning to stick around, then. Stay in Sitka."

"Assuming we can get documented."

"Any reason to think you won't?"

"Just the numbers. They're saying it's going to be under forty percent." Berko shakes his head, which is pretty much the national gesture at the moment when it comes to the question of where the other Sitka Jews are going to go, or what they are going to do, after Reversion. Actually, no guarantees have been made at all—the 40 percent figure is just another rumor at the end of time—and there are some wild-eyed radicals claiming that the actual number of Jews who will be permitted to remain as legal residents of the newly enlarged state of Alaska when Reversion is finally enforced will be closer to 10 or even 5 percent. These are the same people going around calling for armed resistance, secession, a declaration of independence, and so forth. Landsman has paid very little attention to the controversies and rumors, to the most important question in his local universe.

"The old man?" Landsman says. "Doesn't he have any juice left?"

For forty years—as Denny Brennan's series revealed—Hertz Shemets used his position as local director of the FBI's domestic surveillance program to run his own private game on the Americans. The Bureau first recruited him in the fifties to fight Communists and the Yiddish Left, which, though fractious, was strong, hardened, embittered, suspicious of the Americans, and, in the case of the former Israelis, not especially grateful to be

here. Hertz Shemets's brief was to monitor and infiltrate the local Red population; Hertz wiped them out. He fed the socialists to the Communists, and the Stalinists to the Trotskyites, and the Hebrew Zionists to the Yiddish Zionists, and when feeding time was over, he wiped the mouths of those still standing and fed them to each other. Starting in the late sixties, Hertz was turned loose on the nascent radical movement among the Tlingit, and in time he pulled its teeth and claws, too.

But those activities were a front, as Brennan showed, for Hertz's real agenda: to obtain Permanent Status for the District: P.S., or even, in his wildest dreams, statehood. "Enough wandering," Landsman can remember his uncle saying to his father, whose soul retained to the day he died a tinge of romantic Zionism. "Enough with expulsions and migrations and dreaming about next year in the camel lands. It's time for us to take what we can get and stay put."

So every year, it turned out, Uncle Hertz diverted up to half his operating budget to corrupt the people who had authorized it. He bought senators, baited congressional honeypots, and above all romanced rich American Jews whose influence he saw as critical to his plan. Three times Permanent Status bills came up and died, twice in committee, once in a bitter and close battle on the floor. A year after that floor fight, the current president of America ran and won on a platform that showcased the long-overdue enforcement of Reversion, pledging to restore "Alaska for Alaskans, wild and clean." And Dennis Brennan chased Hertz

under a log.

"The old man?" Berko says. "Down there on his vest-pocket Indian reservation? With his goat? And a freezer full of moose meat? Yeah, he's a fucking gray eminence in the corridors of power. But anyway, it's looking all right."

"Is it?"

"Ester-Malke and I both already got three-year work permits."

"That's a good sign."

"So they say."

"Naturally, you wouldn't want to do anything to endanger your status."

"No."

"Disobey orders. Piss somebody off. Neglect your express duty."

"Never."

"That's settled, then." Landsman reaches into the pocket of his blazer and takes out the chess set. "Did I ever tell you about the note my father left when he killed himself?"

"I heard it was a poem."

"Call it doggerel," Landsman says. "Six lines of Yiddish verse addressed to an unnamed female."

"Oho."

"No, no. Nothing racy. It was, what, it was an expression of regret for his inadequacy. Chagrin at his failure. An avowal of devotion and respect. A touching statement of gratitude for the comfort she had given him, and above all, for the measure of

forgetfulness that her company had brought to him over the long, bitter course of the years."

"You have it memorized."

"I did. But I noticed something about it that bothered me. So then I made myself forget it."

"What did you notice?"

Landsman ignores the question as Mrs. Kalushiner arrives with the eggs, six of them, peeled and arranged on a dish with six round indentations, each the size of an egg's fat bottom. Salt. Pepper. A jar of mustard.

"Maybe if they took the leash off him," Berko says, pointing to Hershel with his thumb, "he would go out for a sandwich or something."

"He likes the leash," Mrs. Kalushiner says. "Without it, he doesn't sleep." She leaves them again.

"That bothers me," Berko says, watching Hershel.

"I know what you mean."

Berko salts an egg and bites it. His teeth leave castellations in the boiled white. "So this poem, then," he says. "The verse."

"So, naturally," Landsman says, "everyone assumed the addressee of my father's verse to be my mother. Starting with my mother."

"She fit the description."

"So it was generally agreed. That is why I never told anybody what I had deduced. In my first official case as a junior shammes."

"Which was?"

"Which was that if you put together the first letters of each of the six lines of the poem, they spelled out a name. Caissa."

"Caissa? What kind of name is that?"

"I believe it is Latin," Landsman says. "Caissa is the goddess of chess players."

He opens the lid of the pocket chess set that he bought at the drugstore on Korczak Platz. The pieces in play remain as he arranged them at the Taytsh-Shemets apartment earlier that morning, as left behind by the man who called himself Emanuel Lasker. Or by his killer, or by pale Caissa, the goddess of chess players, dropping in to bid farewell to another one of her hapless worshippers. Black down to three pawns, a pair of knights, a bishop, and a rook. White holding on to all of his major and minor pieces and a pair of pawns, one of them a move away from promotion. A strange disordered aspect to the situation, as if the game that led up to this move had been a chaotic one.

"If it was anything else, Berko," Landsman says, apologizing with upturned palms. "A deck of cards. A crossword puzzle. A bingo card."

"I get it," Berko says.

"It had to be an unfinished goddamned game of chess."

Berko turns the board around and studies it for a moment or two, then looks up at Landsman. *Now is the time for you to ask me*, he says with those great dark eyes of his.

"So. Like I said. I need to ask you a favor."

"No," Berko says, "you don't."

"You heard the lady. You saw her black-flag it. The thing was a piece of shit to begin with. Bina made it official."

"You don't think so."

"Please, Berko, don't start having respect for my judgment now," Landsman says. "Not after all this work I've put into undermining it."

Berko has been staring at the dog with increasing fixity. Abruptly, he gets up and goes over to the stage. He clomps up the three wooden steps and stands looking down at Hershel. Then he holds out his hand to be sniffed. The dog clambers back into a sitting position and reads with his nose the transcript of the back of Berko's hand, babies and waffles and the interior of a 1971 Super Sport. Berko crouches heavily beside the dog and unhooks the clasp of the leash from the collar. He takes hold of the dog's head in his massive hands and looks into the dog's eyes. "Enough already," he says. "He isn't coming."

The dog regards Berko as if sincerely interested in this bit of news. Then he lurches to his hind legs and hobbles over to the steps and tumbles carefully down them. Toenails clacking, he crosses the concrete floor to the table where Landsman sits and looks up as if for confirmation.

"That's the straight emes, Hershel," Landsman tells the dog. "They used dental records."

The dog appears to consider this; then, much to Landsman's surprise, he walks over to the front door. Berko gives Landsman a

look of reprimand: *What did I tell you?* He darts a glance toward the beaded curtain, then slides back the bolt, turns the key, and opens the door. The dog trots right out as if he has pressing business elsewhere.

Berko comes back to the table, looking like he has just liberated a soul from the wheel of karma. "You heard the lady. We have nine weeks," he says. "Give or take. We can afford to waste a day or two looking busy while we poke around into this dead junkie from your flop."

"You are going to have a baby," Landsman says. "There will be five of you."

"I hear what you're saying."

"I'm saying, that's five Taytsh-Shemetses we are going to fuck over if somebody is looking for reasons to deny people their residency cards, as widely reported, and one of those reasons is a recent citation for acting in direct contradiction of orders from a superior officer, not to mention egregious flouting of departmental policy, however idiotic and craven."

Berko blinks and pops another pickled tomato into his mouth. He chews it, and sighs. "I never had a brother or a sister," he says. "All I ever had was cousins. Most of them were Indians, and they didn't want to know me. Two were Jews. One of those Jews, may her name be a blessing, is dead. That leaves me with you."

"I appreciate this, Berko," Landsman says. "I want you to know that."

"Fuck that shit," Berko says in American. "We're going to the

Einstein, aren't we?"

"Yeah," Landsman says. "That's where I figured we ought to start."

Before they can stand up or try to settle things with Mrs. Kalushiner, there is a scratching at the front door and then a long, low moan. The sound is human and forlorn, and it makes the hair on Landsman's nape stand erect. He goes to the front door and lets in the dog, who climbs back up onto the stage to the place where he has worn away the paint on the floorboards, and sits, ears raised to catch the sound of a vanished horn, waiting patiently for the leash to be restored.

10

The north end of Peretz Street is all slab concrete, steel pillars, aluminum-rimmed windows double-glazed against the cold.

The buildings in this part of the Untershtat went up in the early fifties, rapidly assembled shelter machines built by survivors, with a kind of noble ugliness. Now they have only the ugliness of age and vacancy. Empty storefronts, papered-over glass. In the windows of 1911, where Landsman's father used to attend meetings of the Edelshtat Society before the storefront gave way to a beauty-supply outlet, a plush kangaroo with a sardonic leer holds a cardboard sign: AUSTRALIA OR BUST. At 1906 the Hotel Einstein looks, as some wag remarked on its opening to the public, like a rat cage stored in a fish tank. It is a favorite venue for the suicides of Sitka. It is also, by custom and charter, the home of the Einstein Chess Club.

A member of the Einstein Chess Club named Melekh Gaystik won the world championship title over the Dutchman Jan Timman at St. Petersburg in 1980. The World's Fair fresh in their memory, Sitkaniks viewed Gaystik's triumph as further proof of their merit and identity as a people. Gaystik was subject to fits of rage, black moods, and bouts of incoherence, but these flaws were overlooked in the general celebration.

One fruit of Gaystik's victory was the gift of the hotel ballroom by the Einstein management, free of rent, to the chess

club. Hotel weddings were out of vogue, and management had been trying for years to clear the patzers, with their mutterings and smoke, from the coffee shop. Gaystik provided management the excuse they needed. They sealed off the main doors of the ballroom so that you could enter only through the back, off an alley. They pulled up the fine ashwood parquetry and laid down a demented checkerboard of linoleum in shades of soot, bile, and surgical-scrub green. The modernist chandelier was replaced by banks of fluorescent tubes bolted to the high concrete ceiling. Two months later, the young world champion wandered into the old coffee shop where Landsman's father had once made his mark, sat down in a booth at the back, took out a Colt .38 Detective Special, and shot himself in the mouth. There was a note in his pocket. It said only *I liked things better the way they were before.*

"Emanuel Lasker," the Russian says to the two detectives, looking up from the chessboard, under an old neon clock that advertises the defunct newspaper, the *Blat.* He is a skeletal man, his skin thin, pink, and peeling. He wears a pointed black beard. His eyes are close-set and the color of cold seawater. "Emanuel Lasker." The Russian's shoulders hunch, and he ducks his head, and his rib cage swells and narrows. It looks like laughter, but no sound comes out. "I wish that he does come around here." Like that of most Russian immigrants, the man's Yiddish is experimental and brusque. He reminds Landsman of somebody, though Landsman can't say whom. "I give him such a kick to his

ass for him."

"You ever look at his games?" the Russian's opponent wants to know. He is a young man with pudding cheeks and rimless glasses and a complexion tinged with green, like the white of a dollar bill. The lenses of his glasses ice over as he aims them at Landsman. "You ever look at his games, Detective?"

"Just to make this clear," Landsman says, "that isn't the Lasker we have in mind."

"This man was only using the name as an alias," Berko says. "Otherwise we'd be looking for a man who's already been dead sixty years."

"You look at Lasker's games today," the young man continues, "there's too much complexity. He makes everything too hard."

"Only it seems complexity to you, Velvel," says the Russian, "for the reason of how much you are simple."

The shammeses have interrupted their game in its dense middle stages with the Russian, playing White, holding an unassailable knight outpost. The men are still caught up in their game, the way a pair of mountains gets caught up in a whiteout. Their natural impulse is to treat the detectives with the abstract contempt they reserve for all kibitzers. Landsman wonders if he and Berko ought to wait until the players have finished and then try again. But there are other games in progress, other players to question. Around the old ballroom, legs scratch the linoleum like fingernails on a chalkboard. Chessmen click like the cylinder turning in Melekh Gaystik's .38. The men—there are no women

here—play by means of steadily hectoring their opponents with self-aspersions, chilly laughter, whistling, harumphs.

"As long as we're making things clear," Berko says, "this man who called himself Emanuel Lasker, but was not the noted world champion born in Prussia in 1868, has died, and we are investigating that death. In our capacity as homicide detectives, which we mentioned but without, it seems, making much of an impression."

"A Jew with blond hair," the Russian says.

"And freckles," Velvel says.

"You see," the Russian says. "We pay close attention." He snatches up one of his rooks the way you pluck at a stray hair on somebody's collar. Together his fingers and the rook take their trip down the file and break the bad news to the Black's remaining bishop with a tap.

Velvel speaks Russian now, with a Yiddish accent, offering his wishes for the resumption of friendly relations between his opponent's mother and a well-endowed stallion.

"I am orphan," the Russian says.

He sits back in his chair as if expecting his opponent to require some time to recover from the loss of his bishop. He knots his arms around his chest and jams his hands into his armpits. It is the gesture of a man who wants to smoke a papiros in a room where the habit has been forbidden. Landsman wonders what his father would have done with himself if the Einstein Chess Club had banned smoking while he was alive. The man could go

through a whole pack of Broadways in a single game.

"Blond," the Russian says, the very soul of helpfulness. "Freckles. What else, please?"

Landsman shuffles through his scanty hand of details, trying to decide which one to play. "A student of the game, we're guessing. Up on his chess history. He had a book by Siegbert Tarrasch in his room. And then there's the alias he was using."

"So astute," the Russian says without bothering to sound sincere. "A couple of top-dollar shammeses."

The remark does not so much rankle Landsman as nudge him half a wisecrack closer to remembering this bony Russian with the peeling skin. "At one time, possibly," he continues more slowly, groping for the memory, watching the Russian, "the deceased was a pious Jew. A black hat."

The Russian tugs his hands out from under his arms. He sits forward in his chair. The ice on his Baltic eyes seems to thaw all at once. "He was smack addict?" His tone barely qualifies as a question, and when Landsman doesn't immediately deny the charge, he says, "Frank." He pronounces the name American-style, with a long, sharp vowel and a shadowless *R*. "Ah, no."

"Frank," Velvel agrees.

"I—" The Russian slumps, knees spread, hands dangling at his sides. "Detectives, can I tell you one thing?" he says. "Truly, sometimes I hate this lamentable excuse for a world."

"Tell us about Frank," Berko says. "You liked him."

The Russian hoists his shoulders, his eyes iced over again. "I

do not like anyone," he says. "But when Frank comes in here, at least I do not run screaming out the door. He is funny. Not handsome man. But handsome voice. Serious voice. Like the man who plays serious music on the radio. At three o'clock in the morning, you know, talking about Shostakovich. He says things in serious voice, it's funny. Everything he says, always it's a little bit criticism. Cut of your hair, how ugly your pants, how Velvel jumps every time a person mentions his wife."

"True enough," Velvel says. "I do."

"Always teasing you, but, I don't know why, it don't piss you off."

"It was—You felt like he was harder on himself," Velvel says.

"When you play him, even though he wins every time, you feel you play better against him than with the assholes in this club," the Russian says. "Frank is never asshole."

"Meyer," says Berko, soft. He flies the flags of his eyebrows in the direction of the next table. They have an audience.

Landsman turns. Two men confront each other over a game in its early stages. One wears the modern jacket and pants and full beard of a Lubavitcher Jew. His beard is dense and black as if shaded in with a soft pencil. A steady hand has pinned a black velour skullcap trimmed with black silk to the black tangle of his hair. His navy overcoat and blue fedora hang from a hook set into the mirrored wall behind him. The lining of his coat and the label of his hat are reflected in the glass. Exhaustion stains the underlids of his eyes: fervent eyes, bovine and sad. His opponent

is a Bobover in a long robe, britches, white hose, and slippers. His skin is as pale as a page of commentary. His hat perches on his lap, a black cake on a black dish. His skullcap lies flat as a sewn pocket against the back of his cropped head. To the eye not disillusioned by police work, they might appear to be as lost as any pair of Einstein patzers in the diffused radiance of their game. Landsman would be willing to bet a hundred dollars, however, that neither of them even knows whose move it is. They have been listening to every word at the neighboring table; they are listening now.

Berko walks over to the table on the other side of the Russian and Velvel. It's unoccupied. He picks up a bentwood chair with a ripped cane seat and swings it around to a spot between the table of the black hats and the table where the Russian is breaking Velvel down. He sits down in that grand fat-man way he has, spreading his legs, tossing the flaps of his overcoat behind him, as if he is going to make a fine meal of them all. He takes off his own homburg, palming it by the crown. His Indian hair stands thick and lustrous, threaded lately with silver. Gray hair makes Berko look wiser and kinder, an effect that, though he is relatively wise and fairly kind, he will not hesitate to abuse. The bentwood chair grows alarmed at the scope and contour of Berko's buttocks.

"Hi!" Berko says to the black hats. He rubs his palms together, then spreads them across his thighs. All the man needs is a napkin to tuck into his collar, a fork, and a knife. "How are you?"

With the art and determination of the very worst actors, the black hats look up, surprised.

"We don't want any trouble," the Lubavitcher says.

"My favorite phrase in the Yiddish language," Berko says sincerely. "Now, how about we get you in on this discussion? Tell us about Frank."

"We did not know him," the Lubavitcher says. "Frank who?"

The Bobover says nothing.

"Friend Bobover," Landsman says gently. "Your name."

"My name is Saltiel Lapidus," the Bobover says. His eyes are girlish and shy. He folds his fingers in his lap, on top of his hat. "And I know nothing about anything."

"You played with this Frank? You knew him?"

Saltiel Lapidus gives his head a hasty shake. "No."

"Yes," the Lubavitcher says. "He was known to us."

Lapidus glares at his friend, and the Lubavitcher looks away. Landsman reads the story. Chess is permitted to the pious Jew, even—alone among games—on the Sabbath. But the Einstein Chess Club is a resolutely secular institution. The Lubavitcher dragged the Bobover into this profane temple on a Friday morning with Sabbath coming and both of them having better things to do. He said everything would be fine, what harm could come of it? And now see.

Landsman is curious, even touched. A friendship across sectarian lines is not a common phenomenon, in his experience. In the past, it has struck him that, apart from homosexuals, only

chess players have found a reliable way to bridge, intensely but without fatal violence, the gulf that separates any given pair of men.

"I have seen him here," the Lubavitcher declares, his eyes on his friend, as if to show him they have nothing to fear. "This so-called Frank. Maybe I played him one or two times. In my opinion, he was a highly talented player."

"Compared to you, Fishkin," the Russian says, "a monkey is Raúl Capablanca."

"You," Landsman says to the Russian, his voice level, playing a hunch. "You knew he was a heroin addict. How?"

"Detective Landsman," the Russian says, half reproachful. "You do not recognize me?"

It felt like a hunch. But it was only a mislaid memory.

"Vassily Shitnovitzer," Landsman says. It has not been so long—a dozen years—since he arrested a young Russian of that name for conspiracy to sell heroin. A recent immigrant, a former convict swept clear of the chaos that followed the collapse of the Third Russian Republic. A man with broken Yiddish, this heroin dealer, and pale eyes set too close together. "And you knew me all this time."

"You are handsome fellow. Hard to forget," Shitnovitzer says. "Also snappy dresser."

"Shitnovitzer spent a long time in Butyrka," Landsman tells Berko, meaning the notorious Moscow prison. "Nice guy. Use to sell junk from the kitchen of the coffee shop here."

"You sold heroin to Frank?" Berko says to Shitnovitzer.

"I am retired," Vassily Shitnovitzer says, shaking his head. "Sixty-four federal months in Ellensburg, Washington. Worse than Butyrka. Never again I don't touch that stuff, Detectives, and even if I do, believe me, I don't go near Frank. I am crazy, but I am not lunatic."

Landsman feels the bump and the skid as the tires lock. They have just hit something.

"Why not?" Berko says, kindly and wise. "Why does selling smack to Frank make you not just a criminal but a lunatic, Mr. Shitnovitzer?"

There is a small, decisive clink, a bit hollow, like false teeth clapping together. Velvel tips over his king.

"I resign," says Velvel. He takes off his glasses, slips them into his pocket, and stands up. He forgot an appointment. He's late for work. His mother is calling him on the ultrasonic frequency reserved by the government for Jewish mothers in the event of lunch.

"Sit down," Berko says without turning around. The kid sits down.

A cramp has seized Shitnovitzer's intestines; that's how it looks to Landsman.

"Bad mazel," he says finally.

"Bad mazel," Landsman repeats, letting his doubt and his disappointment show.

"Like a coat. A hat of bad mazel on his head. So much bad

mazel, you don't want to touch him or share oxygen nearby."

"I saw him playing five games at once," Velvel offers. "For a hundred dollars. He won them all. Then I saw him vomiting in the alley."

"Detectives, please," Saltiel Lapidus says in a pained voice. "We have nothing to do with this. We know nothing about this man. Heroin. Vomiting in alleys. Please, we're already uncomfortable enough."

"Embarrassed," the Lubavitcher suggests.

"*Sorry*," Lapidus concludes. "And we have nothing to say. So, please, may we go?"

"Sure thing," Berko says. "Take off. Just write down your names and contact information for us before you go."

He takes out his so-called notebook, a small, fat sheaf of paper held together with an extra-large paper clip. At any given moment it might be found to contain business cards, tides tables, to-do lists, chronological listings of English kings, theories scrawled at three in the morning, five-dollar bills, jotted recipes, folded cocktail napkins with the layout of a South Sitka alley in which a hooker was killed. He shuffles through his notebook until he arrives at a blank scrap of index card, which he hands to Fishkin the Lubavitcher. He holds out his stub of pencil, but, no thank you, Fishkin has a pen of his own. He writes down his name and address and the number of his Shoyfer, then passes it to Lapidus, who does the same.

"Only," Fishkin says, "don't call us. Don't come to our homes.

I beg you. We don't have anything to say. There's nothing about that Jew that we can tell you."

Every noz in the District learns to respect the silence of the black hat. It is a refusal to answer that can spread and gather and deepen until, like a fog, it fills the streets of an entire black-hat neighborhood. Black hats wield skillful attorneys, and political clout, and boisterous newspapers, and can enfold a hapless inspector or even a commissioner in a great black-hatted stink that doesn't go away until the witness or suspect is kicked loose or the charges are dropped. Landsman would need the full weight of the department behind him, and at the very least his skipper's approval, before he could invite Lapidus and Fishkin into the hotbox of the homicide modular.

He risks a glance at Berko, who risks a slight shake of the head.

"Go," Landsman says.

Lapidus lurches to his feet like a man defeated by his bowels. The business of coat and galoshes is undertaken with a show of battered dignity. He returns the iron lid of his hat by half-inches to his head, the way you ease down a manhole cover. With a grieving eye, he watches Fishkin sweep his unplayed morning into a hinged wooden box. Side by side, the black hats conduct themselves among the tables, past the other players, who look up to watch them go. Just before they reach the doors, the left leg of Saltiel Lapidus comes unstrung at its tuning key. He sags, gives way, and reaches to steady himself with a hand on the shoulder of his friend. The floor under his feet is bare and smooth. As far

as Landsman can tell, there is nothing to catch the toe.

"I never saw such a sad Bobover," he observes. "Jew was on the verge of tears."

"You want to push him again?"

"Just an inch or two."

"That's all you get with them anyway," Berko says.

They hurry past the patzers: a seedy violinist from the Sitka Odeon; a chiropodist, you see his picture on bus benches. Berko bursts through the doors after Lapidus and Fishkin. Landsman is about to follow when something wistful tugs at his memory, a whiff of some brand of aftershave that nobody wears anymore, the jangling chorus of a song that was moderately popular one August twenty-five summers ago. Landsman turns to the table nearest the door.

An old man sits clenched like a fist around a chessboard, facing an empty chair. He has the pieces set up on their opening squares and has drawn or assigned himself White. Waiting for his opponent to show. Shining skull edged with tufts of grayish hair like pocket lint. The lower part of his face hidden by the cant of his head. Visible to Landsman are the hollows of his temples, his halo of dandruff, the bony bridge of his nose, the grooves on his brow like a grid left in raw pie crust by the tines of a fork. And the furious hunch of his shoulders, gripping the problem of the chessboard, planning his brilliant campaign. They were broad shoulders at one time, the shoulders of a hero or a mover of pianos.

"Mr. Litvak," Landsman says.

Litvak selects his king's knight the way a painter chooses a brush. His hands remain agile and ropy. He daubs an arcing stroke toward the center of the board; he always favored the hypermodern style of play. At the sight of the Réti Opening and Litvak's hands, Landsman is flooded, almost knocked down, by the old dread of chess, by the tedium, the irritation, the shame of those days spent breaking his father's heart over the chessboards in the Einstein coffee shop.

He says louder, "Alter Litvak."

Litvak looks up, puzzled and myopic. He was a man for a fistfight, barrel-chested, a hunter, a fisherman, a soldier. When he reached for a chessman, you saw the flash of the lightning bolt on his big gold Army Ranger ring. Now he looks shrunken, depleted, the king in the story reduced by the curse of eternal life to a cricket in the ashes of the hearth. Only the vaulting nose remains as testament to the former grandeur of his face. Looking at the wreckage of the man, Landsman thinks that if his father had not taken his own life, he would in all likelihood be dead nevertheless.

Litvak makes an impatient or petitioning gesture with his hand. He takes from his breast pocket a marbled black notepad and a fat fountain pen. He wears his beard neatly trimmed, as ever. A houndstooth blazer, tasseled boat shoes, a display handkerchief, a scarf strung through his lapels. The man has not lost his sporting air. In the pleats of his throat is a shining scar,

a whitish comma tinged with pink. As he writes in the pad with his big Waterman, Litvak's breath comes through his great fleshy nose in patient gusts. The scratch of the nib is all that remains to him for a voice. He passes the pad to Landsman. His script is steady and clear.

Do I know you

His gaze sharpens, and he cocks his head to one side, sizing Landsman up, reading the wrinkled suit, the porkpie hat, the face like Hershel the dog's, knowing Landsman without recognizing him. He takes back the pad and appends one word to his question.

Do I know you Detective

"Meyer Landsman," Landsman says, handing the old man a business card. "You knew my father. I used to come here with him from time to time. Back when the club was in the coffee shop."

The red-rimmed eyes widen. Wonder mingles with horror as Mr. Litvak intensifies his study of Landsman, searching for some proof of this unlikely claim. He turns a page in his pad and pronounces his findings in the matter.

Impossible No way Meyerle Landsman could be such a lumpy old sack of onions

"Afraid so," Landsman says.

What are you doing here terrible chess player

"I was only a kid," Landsman says, horrified to detect a creak of self-pity in his tone. What an awful place, what wretched men, what a cruel and pointless game. "Mr. Litvak, you don't happen

to know a man, I gather he plays here sometimes, a Jew maybe they call him Frank?"

Yes I know him has he done something wrong

"How well do you know him?"

Not as well as I would like

"Do you know where he lives, Mr. Litvak? Have you seen him recently?"

Months pls say you are not a homicide det.

"Again," Landsman says, "I'm afraid so."

The old man blinks. If he is shocked or saddened by the inference, you can't read it anywhere in his face or body language. But then a man not in control of his emotions would never get very far with the Réti Opening. Maybe there is a hint of shakiness in the word he writes next in his pad.

Overdose?

"Gunshot," Landsman says.

The door to the club creaks open, and a couple of patzers come in from the alley looking gray and cold. A gaunt scarecrow barely out of his teens, with a trimmed golden beard and a suit that's too small for him, and a short, chubby man, dark and curly-bearded, in a suit that's much too large. Their crew cuts look patchy, as if self-inflicted, and they wear matching black crocheted yarmulkes. They hesitate a moment in the doorway, abashed, looking at Mr. Litvak as if they expect to be scolded.

The old man speaks then, inhaling the words, his voice a dinosaurian ghost. It's an awful sound, a malfunction of the

windpipe. A moment after it fades, Landsman realizes that he said, "My grandnephews."

Litvak waves them in and passes Landsman's card to the chubby one.

"Nice to meet you, Detective," the chubby one says with the hint of an accent, maybe Australian. He takes the empty chair, glances at the board, and smartly brings out his own king's knight. "Sorry, Uncle Alter. That one was late, as usual."

The skinny one hangs back with his hand on the open door of the club.

"Landsman!" Berko calls from the alley, where he has Fishkin and Lapidus corralled beside the Dumpster. It appears to Landsman that Lapidus is bawling like a child. "What the hell?"

"Right there," Landsman says. "I have to go, Mr. Litvak." For an instant he handles the bones, horn, and leather of the old man's hand. "Where can I reach you if I need to talk to you some more?"

Litvak writes out an address and tears the leaf from his pad.

"Madagascar?" Landsman says, reading the name of some unimaginable street in Tananarive. "That's a new one." At the sight of that faraway address, at the thought of that house on rue Jean Bart, Landsman feels a profound ebb in his will to pursue the matter of the dead yid in 208. What difference will it make if he catches the killer? A year from now, Jews will be Africans, and this old ballroom will be filled with tea-dancing gentiles, and every case that ever was opened or closed by a Sitka policeman

will have been filed in cabinet nine. “When are you leaving?”

“Next week,” says the chubby great-nephew, sounding doubtful.

The old man emits another horrible reptilian croak, one that nobody understands. He writes, then slides the notepad across to his great-nephew.

“‘Man makes plans,’” the kid reads. “‘And God laughs.’”

11

Sometimes when the younger black hats are caught by the police, they turn haughty and angry and demand their rights as American subjects. And sometimes they break down and cry. Men tend to cry, in Landsman's experience, when they have been living for a long time with a sense of rightness and safety, and then they realize that all along, just under their boots, lay the abyss. That is part of the policeman's job, to jerk back the pretty carpet that covers over the deep jagged hole in the floor. Landsman wonders if that's how it is with Saltiel Lapidus. Tears stream down his cheeks. A glinting thread of mucus dangles from his right nostril.

"Mr. Lapidus is feeling a little sad," Berko says. "But he won't say why."

Landsman feels around in the pocket of his overcoat for a package of Kleenex and finds one miraculous sheet. Lapidus hesitates, then takes it and blows his nose with feeling.

"I swear to you, I didn't know the man," Lapidus says. "I don't know where he lived, who he was. I don't know anything. I swear on my life. We played chess a few times. He always won."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.