

HOPE:
A TRAGEDY
A NOVEL

Shalom Auslander

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

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New York

2012

ALSO BY SHALOM AUSLANDER

Foreskin's Lament

Beware of God: Stories

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ALWAYS LEARNING

PEARSON

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We were liberated from death,
from the fear of death;
but the fear of life started.

—*H. Rosensaft, Yesterday: My Story*

Hide in the sky,
hide in the sky,
who wants to come with me
and hide in the sky?

—*Serj Tankian*

1.

IT'S FUNNY: it isn't the fire that kills you, it's the smoke.

There you are, pounding on the windows, climbing higher and higher through your burning home, trying to get away, to get out, hoping that if you can just avoid the flames, perhaps you'll survive the fire, but all the time you're suffocating slowly, your lungs filling with smoke. There you are, waiting for the horrors to come from some *there*, from some *other*, from without, and all the while you're dying, bit by airless bit, from within.

You buy a handgun—for protection, you say—and drop dead that night from a heart attack.

You put locks on your doors. You put bars on your windows. You put gates around your house. The doctor phones: It's cancer, he says.

Swimming frantically up to the surface to escape from a menacing shark, you get the bends and drown.

You resolve, one sunny New Year's Day, to get back into shape. This is the year, you insist. A new beginning. A new start. A stronger you, a tougher you. At the health club the following morning, just as you're beginning your third set of bench presses, your muscles cramp and the barbell collapses on your neck, crushing your windpipe. You can't cry out. Your face turns blue. Your arms go limp. Then on a poster on the wall beside you, are the last words you see before your eyes close and darkness envelopes you for eternity:

Feel the Burn.

It's funny.

2.

SOLOMON KUGEL WAS LYING IN BED, thinking about suffocating to death in a house fire, because he was an optimist. This was according to his trusted guide and adviser, Professor Jove. So desperate was Kugel for things to turn out for the best, proclaimed Professor Jove, that he couldn't stop worrying about the worst. Hope, said Professor Jove, was Solomon Kugel's greatest failing.

Kugel was trying to change. It wouldn't be easy. He hoped that he could.

Kugel stared silently at the ceiling above his bed and listened.

He heard something.

He was certain of it.

Up there.

In the attic.

What is that? he wondered.

A scratching?

A rapping?

A tap-tap-tapping.

The other reason Solomon Kugel was lying in bed, thinking about suffocating to death in a house fire, was that someone was burning down farmhouses, just like the one he and his wife had recently purchased. The arson began soon after the Kugels moved in; three farmhouses had been torched in the six weeks since. The Stockton chief of police vowed he would catch whoever was responsible. Kugel was hopeful that he would, but hadn't slept since the first farmhouse lit up and burned down.

There it was again.

That sound.

Maybe it was mice.

It was probably mice.

There are a hundred farms around here, jackass. Why would he target you? It's *farm* country.

You're frightening yourself.

You're torturing yourself.

It's narcissistic.

It's delusions of grandeur.

It's optimism.

It's mice.

Didn't sound like mice, though.

Kugel thought frequently about death and even more frequently about dying. Was this, too, he wondered, because he was an optimist? Precisely, Professor Jove had declared. Kugel loved life, observed Professor Jove, and so he expected far too much of it; hell-bent on life, he was terrified that someone would cause, by violence or accident, his untimely death. Kugel, in his own defense, pointed out that he didn't think anyone was actually trying to kill him, he simply thought it well within the

realm of possibility that somebody, unbeknownst to him and for reasons yet to be revealed, might be there is a line, he argued, thin as it may be, between paranoia and pragmatism.

Kugel's mother, for her part, worried less about death than she did about life. Her own life, sadly, had gone too well, too smoothly; above average in comfort and security, below average in suffering and pain; better than anyone had a right to expect and callously lasting far longer than anyone could rightly demand. Alive, and happy, she cried.

Kugel thought specifically about the experience of dying. He thought about the pain, about the fear. Most of all, he thought about what he would say at the final moment; his *ultima verba*; his last words. They should be wise, he decided, which is not to say morose or obtuse; simply that they should mean something, amount to something. They should reveal, illuminate. He didn't want to be caught by surprise, speechless, gasping, not knowing at the very last moment what to say.

No, wait, I *oof*.

I haven't really given it much *splat*.

If I could just *ka-blammo*.

We are all mankind a story, collectively and individually, and Kugel didn't want his individual story to end in an ellipsis. A period, sure, if you're lucky. An exclamation mark, okay. A question mark, probably; that seemed the punctuation all stories, collectively and individually, should end with after all.

Not an ellipsis, though.

Anything but an ellipsis.

Don't end it like this, said Pancho Villa, at a loss for words after being shot nine times in the chest and head. Tell them, he said before dying, I said something.

Kugel kept a small notebook and pen with him at all times for just these thoughts; now and then, when a fitting last sentiment or final set of words occurred to him, he would quickly write them down. Over the years he had filled many such notebooks but had yet to arrive at the precise right notion. The difference between the right word and the wrong word, said Mark Twain, is the difference between lightning and the lightning bug.

Twain's last words, to his daughter, were: If we meet . . .

Then he died.

So timing's important, too.

Kugel hoped, when the time came, that whatever he said would someday be re-said; would be heard and retold, for however many generations remained before The End. He hoped it would be something his beloved son, Jonah, could remember; something the boy could look to in times of trouble long after his father had passed, and find within those few carefully chosen words some light, some guidance, some wisdom (assuming, of course, that Jonah didn't predecease him, or that they didn't die together, father and son, in some tragic accident; were that to be the case, Kugel knew exactly what he would say to Jonah as the plane, for example, was plunging toward earth: he would say, I'm sorry. I'm sorry, but at least it's over. Or something to that effect: Well, son, that was the rough part. The living's over. After this, kid, it's all gravy . . .).

This, ultimately, is what Kugel hoped: that his last words would somehow make all this amount to something, all this . . . this life, this effort, this toil and time and terror. This unintentioned, unrelenting existence. That it wasn't just a stage, that we weren't merely players. Kugel could never believe in God, but he could never not believe in him, either; there should be a God, felt Kugel, even there probably wasn't.

According to Luke, author of the Gospel of the same name, Jesus, dying on the cross, said this:

Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit.

Eh.

A little obvious. A little self-congratulatory. A little smug. Where else was your spirit going to go but to God? The moment before you meet your Maker is probably not the best time to be acting like you're doing Him some big favor by commending Him your soul.

Kugel was approaching forty, and though he hadn't yet decided for certain what he wanted his last words to be, he had long known for certain what he didn't want them to be: he didn't want them to be begging. More than anything, he didn't want to beg. No pleases. Or nos. Or waits. Or please, nos; or no, waits; or wait, pleases. Or no, no, nos. Or please, please, pleases. Or wait, wait, waits.

Please don't hurt me, Louis XV's mistress begged her executioner as he led her to the guillotine. He hurt her.

Let's cool it, brothers, said Malcolm X to his assassins.

They shot him sixteen times.

Perhaps they had cooled it, thought Kugel. Perhaps they'd been planning on shooting him twenty times. It behooves the victim, in these matters, to be specific.

Kugel's dread of begging was due to neither a sense of pride nor a surfeit of courage; he simply hoped that he wouldn't be in a situation where begging might help. You can't beg old age. You can't beg cancer. He could live with those deaths. You can't beg a car not to hit you, a piano not to fall on your head. You can only beg people. Any situation where begging might be of some assistance had to be one in which your life was in the hands of another human being, a woefully precarious place for your life to be in. Kugel was determined not to die at the hands of another, if only to disprove his mother, who insisted that her last words, and her son's last words, and her son's son's last words, whatever they might be, would be said in a gas chamber.

Or in an oven.

Or at the bottom of a mass grave.

Or at the top of a mass grave.

There it was again. That tapping sound.

Placement in the mass grave mattered, Kugel supposed, only if you were still alive; if they shot you somehow in the leg or arm, and your wounds weren't fatal. In that case, it would be a far, far better thing to be at the bottom of the mass grave, where the weight of the corpses piled above would crush you to death and end your life quickly, mercifully, rather than dying slowly and painfully at the top of the corpse pile, perhaps even being alive when they buried you.

Tap. Tap-tap-tap.

He was sure of it.

In the attic.

Unless they shot into the corpse pile a second time. Then, of course, top of the corpse pile might be better.

This is what Samuel Beckett's father said right before he died: What a morning.

A bit of irony, thought Kugel. A smile. The laugh that laughs at that which is unhappy.

Or dropping dead.

He might use that:

What a day.

Looks like rain, suckers.

Kugel wondered what his own father's last words were, or if he had last words, or if he was dead or if he was alive.

Mistakes were made?

Kugel had a theory. Kugel was certain that whatever last *words* a person chose to utter in his final moments, everyone shared the same final *thought*, and this was it: the bewildered, dumbfounded statement of his own disappointing cause of death.

Shark?

Train? Really? I get hit by a *train*?

Malaria? Fuck off. *Malaria*?

Regardless of what was *spoken*, this and only this was a human's last *thought*, the last pure cognition that passed through a human being's mind, every human being's mind, before that mind ceased to function evermore. Not *Shema yisroel adonai elohainu adonai echad*. Not Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. Only the ludicrous, laughable cause of its own unfathomable demise.

Cancer?

Tuberculosis?

Benito Mussolini's last words, as he faced his executioner were these:

Shoot me in the chest!

His last *thought*, though, Kugel was certain, was this:

Shot in the chest?

There it was again—that sound.

A scurrying of sorts. A sliding.

Kugel sat up.

It was something.

There was something up there.

No death, after all, does any life any justice. Our endings are always a letdown, an insult, a surprise dumber than we thought and less than we'd hoped for.

Crucifixion? thought Jesus. Get out.

Hemlock? thought Socrates.

Wrapped in a Torah scroll and burned alive? thought Rabbi Akiva. You have got to be shitting me.

That sound again.

What did an arsonist sound like, anyway?

Kugel listened.

Beside him, he could hear his Brianna, his Bree, his hero, his love, deep in her wonderful Prozacian slumber. He could hear Jonah, across the hall, bedsprings creaking as he shifted in his own deep sleep Tylenolian.

It's a tough place to get some sleep.

Earth, that is.

Of course they didn't always shoot a second time into the mass graves. That's life for you: a colossal inescapable corpse pile—and no second shooting.

Kugel crept quietly from the bed and knelt on the floor beside the heating vent at the side of his nightstand. The wooden floor was hard against his knees, but he put his hands on either side of the vent, bent over, and pressed his ear against the cold metal register.

Through the vent, he could hear the tenant moving about in his bedroom downstairs (he'd moved in two weeks before, and Kugel still couldn't recall his name; it was Isaac, or Ishmael, or Esau—something biblical); he could hear the buzz of applause and laughter coming from the tenant's TV, which the tenant left on all night long. Below that he could hear Mother, in her bedroom beside the tenant's, moaning in agony and pain. Mother was alive if she sounded like she was dying; if she

sounded like she was peacefully sleeping, then she was probably dead.

And he could definitely hear tapping.

Upstairs.

In the attic.

A ticking?

A tapping.

As if some mouse were gently crapping, crapping on his attic floor.

Like little mouse feet.

Like typing, almost.

Marsupial Proust, he joked. Jules Vermin. Franz Krapper.

It was probably just mice.

Quietly, so as not to wake Bree, Kugel stood, pulled on his robe, took the tall metal flashlight from beside his bed, tiptoed as best he could across the old, creaky floorboards, and stepped out into the coolness of the dark hallway.

Would an arsonist start a fire in the attic?

Don't they start them outside? Around the foundation?

It's not an arsonist.

You're being ridiculous.

He grabbed the rope that hung from the attic door, and pulled it slowly toward him, hoping not to find an arsonist, hoping to find a mouse, hoping, at the very least, to find some mouse droppings; if he found mouse droppings he would know it had been a mouse making the noise, and then perhaps he could at last get some sleep.

Such is life, he thought as he unfolded the wooden attic stairs: you get to a point, one day, where you are hoping to find crap; where the best possible outcome of all possible outcomes would be the discovery, praise Jesus, of a pile of shit.

Kugel climbed the creaky stairs as quietly as he could.

Maybe it was a mouse.

He reached the top of the stairs. The attic felt hot, hotter than the rest of the house. The tapping suddenly ceased.

Hello? whispered Kugel.

Probably just a mouse.

Hello?

And, hearing no reply, Kugel crawled into the dank, damnable darkness above.

3.

THE RURAL VILLAGE OF STOCKTON, population twenty-four hundred, was famous for nothing. No one famous had lived there, no famous battles had been waged there, no famous movements arose there, no famous concerts had been held there. A popular local bumper sticker read: Nobody Slept Here. Birthplace of Nothing, read another. Recently, a local artist had placed mock historical markers around town; On This Spot, read one, the Framers of the Constitution of the United States of America Never Met. This Is Not the Place, read another, Where George Washington Battled the British; That Place Is Elsewhere.

Stockton's non-history was a matter of pride for the townspeople, and had, of late, begun to attract many former city dwellers, urban professional families, and young couples looking for a home unburdened by the past, unencumbered by history.

Like many other newcomers, the Kugels had chosen Stockton because history had not. They purchased an old wooden farmhouse where no Founding Fathers had spent their childhood, on twenty pristine acres of land the Lord never promised to anyone, overlooking a rolling, non-famous valley where nobody had ever done anything of much consequence to anyone. The Kugels wanted a new start for each other, for themselves, for Jonah. After the past year, they all needed one.

Three years before, when Jonah was born, the midwife took him, wrapped him in a blanket, and handed him to Kugel. Kugel held the child in his arms, looked down into his big blue eyes, and whispered:

I'm sorry.

Lovely, Bree had said.

Jonah was beautiful and innocent and pure, so Kugel felt terrible guilt for bringing him into this world. To father a child was a horribly selfish act, a felony, in fact—everyone here in this world is a kidnap victim from some better place, or from no place at all, and Jonah had been dragged here, by Kugel and Bree, against his will, without provocation, without consent, without any good goddamned reason whatsoever beyond their own selfish desires.

Kugel looked down at the tiny person in his arms, pink and cold and furious, and shook his head.

He oughta sue, said Kugel.

It's a joyous moment for us all, said Bree. I'll tell him about it when he grows up.

If, said Kugel. *If* he grows up.

And then, last year, they'd almost lost him.

Jonah had always been a sickly child; he was spiritually gorgeous and physically a mess. Kind and generous and giving, and sneezing and coughing and diarrheic. He was fair, like Bree, and slight, like Kugel. Kugel gave him multivitamins, extra C, chewable zinc, probiotics, antibiotics, and something called Liquid Garden, a vile powdered nutritional drink, every glass of which was a killing field filled with the tortured remains of thirty vegetables and "over seventeen fruits" (the lack of manufacturer's specificity on this issue made Kugel concerned about giving it to Jonah—they should know exactly

how many fruits, shouldn't they?—but not as much as the idea of Jonah's dying of malnutrition if he didn't give it to him).

Bree was not as hopeful as Kugel that these pricey pills and costly concoctions would have much positive effect.

This child, she said, is going to have the most expensive pee in the Northeast.

Despite all Kugel's precautions, though, last winter, Jonah became terribly ill. One cold December night, there being no other symptoms besides a slight cough, Jonah's temperature suddenly spiked. And it was not uncommon for Jonah to be ill, or for his temperature to spike, Kugel and Bree didn't take too much notice, but over the next two days, Jonah's lungs quietly filled with fluid, he lost weight, and finally, after being rushed through the night to the nearest hospital, he was placed in an isolation unit for almost three weeks.

Do you see now? Kugel had said to Bree.

Do *I* see?

Do you?

Do *you*?

Do *I*?

There had never been a conclusive diagnosis. It was probably, they were told, just a bug, but bugs these days were getting stronger, becoming more resistant. A cold today, said the nurse, is like flu ten years ago; a flu today is like pneumonia twenty years ago.

What's pneumonia today like? Kugel asked.

Like that, she said, pointing to Jonah in his bed, an oxygen mask strapped to his face, monitors monitoring, beepers beeping, tubes running from the tubes running from his skeletal arms.

We almost lost you there, little buddy, Kugel whispered to Jonah the morning of their discharge, gently smoothing the boy's hair with his hand. We almost lost you.

Lost me where? Jonah had asked Kugel.

It means you almost died, Bree had answered. It's an expression.

Jonah was focused on the television, where SpongeBob was doing his best to pacify a furious Squidward. At last the nurse brought their papers and Bree turned off the TV.

I'd rather be dead than lost, Jonah said to Bree.

Why? asked Bree.

Because if I'm dead I won't know it.

Well you're neither, said Bree. Let's get out of here.

The experience had taken its toll on their marriage. Kugel sensed that something bad had grown between himself and Bree, or, worse, that something good between them had diminished. He was upset with himself: Why hadn't he pressed the pediatrician more? Why hadn't he taken Jonah to the hospital sooner? Why hadn't he trusted his instincts? And he was upset with her, too—why couldn't she see how sick Jonah was? Where were her maternal instincts? Why didn't she get him immunized sooner (against what? against everything, goddamn it)?—and he suspected she felt the same about him, that they were mutually disappointed in the other's inability to save their child, to protect him, to keep the monsters from the house. The ark of their marriage, charged with delivering Jonah from the tumultuous storm of life, had been shown to be rickety, ramshackle, rheumatic; it had been nearly sunk by the tiniest of bugs. And so they decided to move, to flee. The city seemed filled with danger and disease, and every room of their apartment carried a memory of some disagreement, some argument between them, or, worse, some memory of Jonah's illness—the couch upon which he lay unmoving, the blanket they had wrapped him in as they dashed to the hospital. Early that spring, a

friend told them about Stockton. They visited, stayed for a while and, one fine spring morning, met with a real estate agent named Eve, who showed them a farmhouse for sale just five miles out of town. Kugel hoped the country would be safer; Bree hoped it would simply calm her husband's nerves. Both hoped it would give them all a fresh start.

It was a small but charming farmhouse, built in the mid-1800s. It had originally sat on a plot of land over two hundred acres in size, but in recent years parcels of the land had been sold off to builders and developers. Still, the farmhouse came with twenty proud acres of dense woodland, and was in excellent structural condition for a home its age. A few minor upgrades had been done about twenty years earlier—the most significant of which were the installation of a modern forced-air heating system and the addition of four dormer windows to the attic—but it was otherwise original, from its period silver doorknobs to its period oak trim. Out front, two large bluestone slabs led up to a charming veranda with wide plank floors, turned columns, and a small metal chime that was never without a soft breeze to encourage its gentle song. There were two original stone fireplaces, one in the living room and one in what was now one of the two downstairs bedrooms; both of the hearths had been sealed when the forced-air system was put in, but they were charming, despite their lack of utility. There were two bedrooms upstairs, as well as the two downstairs; originally, the southern half of the downstairs had been a dining room, but as part of the remodel it was converted into two small bedrooms, which the Kugels decided could be rented out to help cover the mortgage; once they settle in, Bree could use the attic as her writing studio; it wasn't clean, she remarked, but it was reasonably well lit. Best of all, Eve informed them, Mr. Messerschmidt, the elderly owner who lived there with his middle-aged son, was asking far below market value.

Why? asked Kugel. Is there something wrong with it?

Of course there's something wrong with it, Eve had said. I'll tell you what's wrong with it, Mr. Kugel: The stairs creak when you step on them. There are flies in the summer and mice in the winter. Some of the windows stick, some don't open at all, and there's a funky smell in the spring that gets replaced by an even funkier smell in the fall. It's old, Mr. Kugel, that's what's wrong with it, just like I'm old, and you are going to become old. It's imperfect in a world that demands perfection, its flaw that it has flaws. Full disclosure, Mr. Kugel: it's real. You want fake, I can show you fake. I've got a fake version of this farmhouse five miles up the road, costs ten times as much. The stairs are new, the windows are double-glazed, and the natural swimming hole was drained, dried, dug up, and turned into an unnatural swimming pool—heated, chlorinated, backwashed, and skimmed. The soil in the backyard was trucked in from up north, the grass came in great green rolls on the back of a flatbed truck from down south. There's a patio made of concrete that was made to look like stone, a deck made of plastic that's made to look like wood. There's a chef's kitchen that's never used because the couple that built it never cooked. It's insulated so well that you won't know if it's winter or summer without looking out the window, which you wouldn't do because it's precisely what's outside that window that the house is insulated from: reality. Fake's going to cost you these days, Mr. Kugel. Reality's on the block for cheap.

Kugel looked to Bree, squeezed her hand and smiled.

What about that smell? asked Bree.

What smell? asked Eve.

You don't smell something? asked Bree.

Kugel sniffed.

I smell something, said Kugel.

It smells, said Bree, like something died.

Eve smiled.

~~That, said Eve, is the smell of honesty, Mrs. Kugel. That's the smell of someone not trying to pull the wool over your eyes. That's what truth smells like, folks, which is why you don't recognize it. Suck it up, Mrs. Kugel, fill your lungs. The way the world out there is going, this may be the last time you smell it.~~

Mm-hmm, said Bree.

Kugel looked to Bree, squeezed her hand again, and smiled. They moved in four weeks later. Kugel's elderly mother joined them soon after.

You're kidding, said Bree.

She's dying, said Kugel.

We can't afford it, said Bree, vacillating between shock and rage. We need that rent to make the mortgage. What's the point of moving to a place with no past if you're going to bring your mother along?

They've given her two weeks, said Kugel.

But that, they both knew, had been well over six months before.

4.

IT WAS HOT in the attic when Kugel climbed up into it, stiflingly so.

Kugel didn't like attics, he never had. The roofing nails overhead like fangs, waiting to sink into his skull; the cardboard boxes and plastic crates and leather trunks—tombs, sarcophagi—full of ghosts and regret and longing and loss; worse yet was the implication in all this emotional hoarding that the past was preferable to the present, that what came before bests whatever comes next, so clutch it to your chests in mourning and dread as you head into the unknowable but probably lousy future. Old hats, misshapen sweaters (always too small now, never too big), outdated electronics that seemed so impressive at the time and now seem so feeble and useless (was that the best we could do?), gift wrap for gifts never given, dirty magazines that outlived the dirty men who bought them, photos of people whose names one can no longer recall, letters from the long-since dead, stray keys to locks long since forgotten, locks whose keys were long since lost, things once deemed so important they required protection now no longer even remembered.

Kugel was a chucker.

Kugel chucked.

Mother was a hoarder.

She kept everything.

Ever since the war, she said with a sigh as she packed for the move to Kugel's new home, putting yet another torn, fading scrap of paper into yet another straining, overfilled box.

Most of Kugel's boxes were filled with books. Science, philosophy, art, literature; the philosophy of science, the science of literature, the art of philosophy, the science of art, books about other books and the books about those books about other books; Gogol on Pushkin, Nabokov on Gogol, Wilson on Nabokov on Gogol. Joyce on *The Odyssey*, Beckett on Joyce, everyone on Beckett. Kugel had grown weary of them, ashamed of them, in fact—of the hope he had placed in them, of the answers he had sought from them—but he still couldn't bring himself to throw them away, like old medicine bottles full of remedies that never worked but that you didn't dare throw away on the off chance they would someday do what they promised, that you'd be stricken by chance with the one disease only they could cure, two weeks after they'd been pulled off the market. Kugel had taken a week's leave from work after moving in, and spent his days heaving box after box up into the attic when he would have rather thrown them all in the trash. They say you can't take it with you, but good luck trying to leave it behind.

Something reeked. Kugel winced, held his breath.

The stench in the house had gotten worse since Eve first showed it to them. Immediately after signing the mortgage, and before even phoning the movers, Kugel had spent thousands of dollars on a professional vent cleaning service, but the putrid smell returned almost immediately after they settled in. Up here in the attic, noticed Kugel, it smelled worse than it did downstairs. Like sewage. Like rot.

God, he hated attics.

He tugged on the white string that hung from the overhead bulb.

Hello? he whispered as the light came on.

Mother must have been up here at some point, or Bree, perhaps, anxious to get her office going, because the boxes he had so haphazardly tossed up here weeks before now lined three sides of the attic in neat, uniform walls, four boxes high, and in some places five. The walls were arranged in a wide square U shape, the base of which stood against the southern wall, the two legs traveling half the length of the western and eastern sides of the attic, respectively, and blocking two of the four dormer windows, leaving just one window clear on either side of the attic. An old chair, a pair of old end tables, and a rolled-up carpet were carefully stacked at the far end of the attic, where a headless sewing mannequin stood silent guard against possible intruders.

Kugel—begin-againer, starterer-anew—got down on his hands and knees in his attic and began looking, hopefully, for shit. He wasn't about to start crawling around behind those walls of boxes, but he checked along the base of the two dormer windows, and along the northern gable side of the house too. He found a few stray droppings here and there, but they were old.

He wiped his hands and sat back on his heels.

There's life for you, Kugel thought. Shit everywhere until you need some; then there is none.

Last words?

Not bad.

He'd have to remember to write those down once he got back to bed.

Kugel wiped his brow. The oppressive heat and suffocating stench were making him dizzy.

Kugel stood, as best he could, to leave, but as he did, noticed an orange extension cord running off the secondary outlet in the overhead light fixture. He followed it along the rafter to which it had been tacked, down to where it departed the roof and dropped to the end of the westernmost wall of boxes, where it met up with a dangerously overloaded power strip lying on the attic floor; each port of the strip had a double outlet expander, some had triples, and each of those expanders were fully loaded themselves, spilling over in an entrail-like mess of yellow, black, and orange cords that snaked around behind the wall of boxes. Electrical systems in old houses were notoriously dangerous, and even a small spark in a house built as this one was, of dry, century-old wood, could very quickly become an inferno.

Won't need an arsonist with this going on, muttered Kugel.

Kugel went to the wall of boxes and, from the top of the center stack, pulled away a cardboard box labeled JONAH-CLOTHES-WINTER, and another, beneath it, marked PHOTOS/MOTHER/1 OF 6. He leaned over and looked behind the wall—and suddenly felt as if the blood had drained from his body, as if it had run out through holes bored through the soles of his feet; his whole body felt leaden, stiff, nailed into place. He wanted to scream but found that he couldn't breathe.

At last he forced himself backward, falling to the floor as he did. He fumbled for his flashlight, scrambled to his feet, and stepped cautiously toward the wall; hands shaking, heart pounding, he aimed the beam of light into the darkness behind.

No, he hadn't imagined it.

He hoped he had, but he hadn't.

There, on the floor behind the boxes, lay the huddled blanket-wrapped body of an elderly woman. He tapped the flashlight against the rafter overhead, trying to rouse her.

Hey, he whispered.

Nothing.

He stood on his toes, leaned farther over the wall. She stank like decay, like death. Was she dead?

Hey, he said.

~~Was she dead? Who was she? Was she the arsonist? Was she dead? How was he going to get a dead body out of here without Jonah knowing?~~

Keeping the light on her with one hand, Kugel pulled down another couple of boxes from the wall with the other, and though the boxes dropped heavily to the attic floor, she didn't stir. She was on her side, curled in a fetal position on top of a small mound of worn quilts and tattered blankets. Her face was buried in her arms, but Kugel could see her sparse, unkempt silver hair, the blue fallen veins of her lower arms, the gnarled bones of her withered, skeletal hands.

The more boxes Kugel cleared away from the wall, the worse the woman's stench became, and Kugel had to fight the urge to turn his head; the smell seemed to engulf him, to pass right through him, foul and putrid, and he gagged. He covered his nose and mouth with his free hand, but the thought of breathing her in, of drawing her within him, caused him to gag again.

He stepped back, swinging the beam of light around the attic, hoping to find a quilt or a tarp; perhaps he could wrap her body in it and drag it down the stairs without waking up Jonah, perhaps it would reduce the smell.

And then what, genius? Leave her in your car? You're going to leave a dead body in your car?

He had no idea how much time had passed since he'd first left his bed. An hour? More? He returned to the wall, leaning over even farther this time, his heart pounding so furiously that he wondered if Bree could hear it downstairs; a bead of sweat ran down his forehead, another streaked down his neck as he stretched out his arm toward the old woman and reached out with his flashlight, slowly, slowly, until at last, with its end, he nudged her shoulder.

Nothing.

He nudged her again.

Dead. She was dead.

Okay, that was better than alive.

Or maybe it was worse.

He reached out one more time, but just as he did, that ancient bony hand, as if rising unbidden from the grave, swatted angrily at the end of the flashlight.

Jesus Christ, Kugel hissed, darting back from the boxes and raising the flashlight overhead as if to strike.

Jesus fucking Christ, he said.

The old woman coughed—a sickly, terrible cough—and pulled the tattered blanket over her exposed shoulder.

Close, she muttered.

Her voice was raspy and dry, and she coughed again as she pushed herself up onto her hip.

You're alive, said Kugel.

She wiped the spittle from her lips.

I won't tell if you won't, she replied.

Who are you? Kugel asked, aiming the light at her face. What do you want? Are you the arsonist? How long have you been here? Do you need help? Should I call an ambulance? Are you the arsonist? Are you okay? Who are you?

She coughed again, and cleared her throat.

I'm Anne Frank, she grumbled.

She's mad, thought Kugel. She's alive, yes, I suppose that's a relief, alive is better than dead, it must be better than dead, and yet she's very obviously mad. Should I run? Should I lock the attic

door? How could I lock the attic door? I could get a long two-by-four; I could jam it underneath, between the hallway floor and the attic door, yes, so she couldn't open it, so she couldn't get out. What says she wants to get out? Where am I going to get a two-by-four? The barn? The cellar? I should have a two-by-four, a man should have a two-by-four in the house, he should, a man should, a man would.

She turned her back to him, shielding her eyes from the light and shuffling farther back into the dark eaves, but before she disappeared he could see that she was hideous, horribly disfigured, and terribly old—Kugel thought he'd never seen anyone so old—the white of her right eye yellowed with age, the left eye clouded with cataracts, dead, unseeing. Her skin, sallow and gray, was thin, almost transparent; the hair on her head, what there was of it, was sparse in some places, bare in others. Her shoulders hunched up around her ears, and a massive hump on her back forced her skull forward so that she faced the ground, head bowed, even when looking straight ahead.

What are you doing here? Kugel whispered, his terror beginning to give way to anger. What do you want?

I want you, she croaked, to turn off that goddamned light.

Who are you? he quickly replied, pointing the flashlight at her. How did you get in here?

She scurried farther back into the eaves, holding up a hand, trying to get away from the harsh beam of light.

I told you, she growled. I'm Anne Frank. Now, turn off that goddamned light.

Fear is not an end state; it is a precursor, a catalyst, it becomes something—occasionally submission, more often violence or rage. Kugel yanked another box from the wall and threw it to the floor with a crash, then another box followed, and another after that.

Who are you? he asked, his voice rising as he tore down the wall of boxes, forgetting Bree and Jonah and Mother downstairs. What are you doing here? Who let you in? How did you get into my house?

By the time he finished, half a dozen boxes lay strewn about, upended, their contents spilled across the floor. Kugel, breathing heavily, flashed the light at her again.

Who are you? he demanded.

He wanted to see fear, he wanted to watch her cower; instead, with an insouciant air of annoyance and bother, the old woman pulled her cardigan around herself with one hand and fixed her hair with the other.

Oh, she said with a derisive sigh, how I do adore meeting the homeowners.

Kugel tore another box down from the wall. Old textbooks spilled out, postcards, a badge of some childhood honor. Four more boxes followed the first to the floor, and when it was over, Kugel had revealed, behind the remaining boxes and to the left of her bed, what seemed like a small table—a two-foot-long scrap of splintered floorboard lay across a pair of Bree's old shoeboxes—on top of which sat a small lamp, a laptop computer, and a small laser printer.

He aimed the flashlight at the makeshift office.

What the hell? he said softly, reaching out toward the pile of neatly stacked papers sitting facedown beside the printer.

The old lady moved very quickly, though, much more quickly than he would have guessed she could, and shouted No! as she slammed down her hand on top of the papers.

Kugel reared back.

You can read it, she growled, when I'm done.

Kugel looked at her, trying to decide if she was real or if this was something else, a dream, a nightmare, maybe a hallucination. He hadn't slept well in a while. The stench, though, convinced him

it was real.

I'm calling the police, he said.

He snapped off his flashlight and backed toward the stairs, afraid to turn away from her. She waved in annoyance again, shuffled forward out of the eaves, settled in front of the computer and, as if nothing at all out of the ordinary had occurred, began to type.

That was the sound. The tapping of the keyboard. He'd been hearing it for days.

Kugel stopped at the head of the attic stairs.

And let me tell you something else, he said.

She continued to type, paying him no attention.

I don't know who you are, he said, or how you got up here. But I'll tell you what I do know: I know Anne Frank died in Auschwitz. And I know that she died along with many others, some of whom were my relatives. And I know that making light of that, by claiming to be Anne Frank, not only is not funny and abhorrent but it also insults the memory of millions of victims of Nazi brutality.

The old woman stopped typing and turned to him, fixing that hideous yellow eye upon his.

It was Bergen-Belsen, jackass, she said.

Kugel continued to glare at her, even as he felt a flush of shame color his face. He turned and began climbing down the stairs.

And as for the relatives you lost in the Holocaust? she continued.

Kugel stopped and looked at her, and when he did, she yanked up her shirtsleeve, revealing the fading blue-black concentration camp numbers tattooed on the inside of her pale forearm.

Blow me, said Anne Frank.

5.

YOU EXPECT CERTAIN THINGS when you move to the country. You just do. You expect these things because you've seen the films, you've watched the TV episodes. You expect dishonest carpenters and creepy locals. You expect deer eating your petunias and raccoons toppling your garbage. You expect poison ivy and power outages and colorful neighbors and mice.

You don't expect arson.

And you sure as hell don't expect Anne Frank.

Kugel sat on the edge of his bed, staring down at the telephone in his hand. Behind him, Bree snored softly in her blissful, oblivious slumber.

The numbers on her arm.

They were a problem.

A big fucking problem.

If she didn't have numbers on her arm, he would have phoned the police immediately. Maybe not immediately—he would wait until morning for Bree to take Jonah to day care, no need to frighten the child—and then, when they had gone, phone the police without delay. But she had numbers, didn't she, he had seen them, those damned numbers, and the numbers meant that Anne Frank or not, consumed by madness or not, half-dead or not, rotting like a hundred-year-old corpse or not, the old woman was a goddamned Holocaust survivor.

Which was a problem.

Was he really going to throw an elderly, half-mad Holocaust survivor out of his house? Speak of madness! He could never do it, he knew that, even if she was old and emotionally damaged enough to think she was Anne Frank. Pity was a funny thing: it would be easier to throw out the real Anne Frank than it would be to throw out a Holocaust survivor so fucked up by the Holocaust that she thought she was Anne Frank. Can you imagine the headlines? Can you imagine the outrage?

Local Man Evicts Anne Frank.

Jew Drops Dime on Holocaust Survivor.

Brutalized by Nazis, Tossed Out by a Jew: One Survivor's Tragic Story of Something.

If he'd heard the story, he would join in the outcry himself; if he were watching TV one night and the news came on and they reported, with all their practiced shock and disgust, that a man had thrown an elderly, broken Holocaust survivor out of his home, would he not share in the outrage? And wouldn't he be right to do so?

The story gets weirder, the smiley anchorwoman would say: the homeowner was a Jew.

Boy, oh, boy, the smiling anchorman would add. Now I've heard everything. Now I have heard everything.

This was a hell of a way to start anew. He'd never received any love from his mother; it would have been nice to be accepted, even if only for a while, by a community. But if he turned her in, they would never forgive him. And why should they? Hi, we're from the community welcome wagon; here's a

flaming bag of dog shit. They would have to move yet again.

But what could he do? Let this crazy old woman live in his attic? It was absurd. For how long? A week? A month? A year? Until whatever Holocaust she thought she was hiding from came to whatever end she thought it would come to? Until she dropped dead?

And what if she really was Anne Frank? It wasn't impossible—they'd found former Nazi officers in Rio, hadn't they, ex-camp commandants in New Jersey. Why not a famous survivor in Stockton? Could he take that chance? What if he called the police, and they came over and cuffed her and dragged her out of his house and discovered that, my goodness, my God, she really is Anne Frank. She's alive. He would forever be known as the person—the *Jewish* person—that reported Anne Frank to the authorities. Even if he could survive the shame, even if he could weather the ignominy of it all, he could never survive the look on Mother's face when she found out. He had a better chance of surviving the Holocaust itself.

My own son, she would say, ratting out Anne Frank.

You had to call the police, she would say. What's the matter, you didn't have Dr. Mengele's number? He doesn't make house calls?

You want Elie Wiesel's address? Maybe you could turn him in, too?

No. No, no. Hell no. There would be no police, of that much Kugel was certain. He would find another way. The old lady would die soon, from the looks of it, maybe he could wait it out. But then what? *Hello, police? There's a dead woman in my attic. Her name? Well, uh, funny story . . .*

Kugel gently placed the phone back in its cradle and, sliding quietly from bed, knelt down beside the vent on the floor.

He listened.

Maybe he'd dreamt it.

Maybe she'd gone.

The forced-air heating system the Messerschmidts had retrofitted into the farmhouse had been usual in design for the times, but unusually poor in construction. The system pulled in fresh air through a large duct that ran from the attic to the heater in the cellar; from there, a network of secondary ducts carried the heated air through the walls, to every room in the house, where it emerged through metal vents in the floor. The better systems employed fiberglass-insulated ducts to carry the air through the walls; the Messerschmidts had gone with the cheaper steel materials, and as a result, the ducts carried sound at least as well as they did heat. It wasn't long after settling into the new home that Kugel realized he could hear every sound, from every room, of every floor in the house, clear as a bell, through the vents in the floor, a ghostly intercom system he didn't want and could never silence.

He pressed his ear against the vent.

Mother moaning.

The television laughing.

And the typing.

From the attic.

Ceaseless.

Desperate.

If only I'd found shit, thought Kugel. If only I'd found an arsonist.

It dawned on Kugel as he knelt on the cold floor of his bedroom that the very thing he'd feared the past month and a half—a house fire—might, as it turned out, have been the best thing that could have possibly happened. Combing through the smoldering wreckage, the police would find the body of some old lady, but at least she would be gone, out of his hair, and the insurance on the house would

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