

FORTY-TWO

“Sal, leeetle Sal, Surrogate Sal, the Salt of the Earth.”

Arnold lay on his bunker bed and lifted the small white cat onto his chest. Evelyn had assured him that Sal had a secret forehead gland to mark her territory, and sure enough, she inched her head forward to claim the bottom of Arnold's chin as her own.

Sal had been a gift from Evelyn to Arnold—to snuggle with him while she worked. To catch rats should they appear. Surrogate Sal, Evelyn's pal, whose real name was *Schiksal*, Evelyn's pun on goyish women and universal fate.

Arnold lay for a long while with eyes closed, corpse pose, kitty on chest, listening to autumnal rain beating in fierce waves against the mirror film. He laid his right hand at the back of Sal's neck and felt around front with his thumb for her almost silent purr. The slight vibration passed down thumb, up arm, and directly to his own purring center at the fifth chakra. He breathed with the cat, three of her breaths to his one, a slow, loving, intraspecies waltz.

Suddenly a fierce crackling shattered the night—the room light went out—and the darkness was attacked with a brutal explosion of thunder. Sal spun her frightened head around and sank her teeth into Arnold's lightly caressing hand, adding the insult of puncture to the injury of burn. Then she scampered for the floor, tiny, fluffy, feral. The room was dark; the street and track lamps that normally cut through the mirror film were out as well. A transformer must be down. Sal shifted herself among the protective books. The rain lashed in waves. It could have been the beginning of the forty nights and days.

It was ridiculous, of course, but Arnold could already feel the microbes celebrating deep in the puncture wounds. Life forms of stature, ancient carousers,

checking out the new digs. He knew he should express some blood, wash the wounds, but in his largeness, he felt silly worrying about four tiny punctures from a frightened, loving cat.

Something more, though: some planetary view from cosmic distance, looking down—scientifically—at himself and the likes of himself, all part of some larger infestation soon to be swept away. He was pinned to the bed by the rain and the lightning and the thunder outside, by the manifest ferocity of nature—including his own—misanthropic, vast, self-devouringly bleak. He could not move because there was no place to move to, there was no “out” from the martinet spacetime that contained him. He felt a structural part of an immense web of cruelty that defined and enclosed all being, dividing super- and sub-human. He normally imagined himself “a nice guy,” “a sweet man.” Yet now the Lear-like storm, the flash, the noise, the bite, the darkness had driven him forth into some no man’s land between realities, most corrosive of character. Bleakness and bacteria out there, the wasteland of the city, the progress of decay, a mangle of rust and crumbling concrete, the threat of walls and fences built to protect. He felt age-old, ancient as the *Pasteurella* lustfully dividing in the web of his right hand.

Komm, süßer Tod, Brother Death.

Corpse pose, long breathing, hand tingling. But it wasn’t Death that came. It was Raskolnikov, Brother Bright-Eyes whispering: “An hour before his death, a man condemned thinks that if he had to live on a high rock, if he had to remain standing on a square yard of space all his life, a thousand years, eternity, it were better to live so than to die at once.”

There was a knock at the door. Tentative, questioning at first, then loud like thunder. Louder than Evelyn would knock. Sal hissed and fled from the bookshelf to behind the laundry bag. Arnold decided to play dead. There was another flash, and a clap of thunder.

“Open up, Herr Hitler. I know you’re in there.”

It was Keith and his British accent. Arnold went to the door, took a deep breath, and opened it as sky tymps rolled on.

“What have I done to deserve this?”

“What? The visit? Or the thunder?”

“Either or both.”

“How about some light?” Keith lit a match. Arnold leaned back from the fire directly under his nose.

“You going to stand here lighting matches?”

“Better to light one candle than curse the darkness,” Keith said as he pulled the small glass of a Yahrzeit candle from his Burberry, lit the wick, and handed it to Arnold.

“Clever, these Jews.”

Arnold inspected the small glass in his hand, now lighting the whole room.

“What does it say here, this Jewish writing?”

“*N'er Adonai nish mat adam*. Proverbs 20:27: ‘The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord.’”

“You read Hebrew?”

“Middle Eastern Studies, Magdalen College. Know thine enemy.”

“Why enemy?”

“I thought you were a genius Harvard student.”

“What’s the real reason, Keith? Is it Evelyn?”

Keith invited himself into the room and began a casual candlelight exploration.

“For one thing,” he said, examining with candle a nude of Evelyn he himself had photographed, “there’s the arrogance of thinking you people have to be a light unto God—not to mention the nations. But don’t get me wrong. I have nothing against individual Jews. I kind of like them. Or why would I live in New York, the Jewish capital of the world? It’s paradise for an antisemite. One of the great merits of New York is that

it leads me to a deeper knowledge of my Aryan self and warns me continually against any tendencies I have to be Jewish.”

“You?” Arnold sat down on the bed. Keith continued his art tour.

“Of course me—and you, too, our fair demoiselle tells me. Jewish grandpa? No wonder you’re thinking of returning home.”

“She told you that?”

“Jewish is a tendency of the mind, Arnold, a psychological set possible for anyone, you especially, but actualized most conspicuously in actual Jews. Not the rabbis, mind you; I have nothing but respect for the rabbis, hats off to the rabbis—or hats on—whatever you do. Disliking Jews doesn’t stop you from liking them. I like *you*, for instance.”

“What tendency of the mind?”

“Ah, there’s the beauty of the Jew for the anti-Semite. One can invent any kind of Jew for oneself in order to hate him. Selfish? Communist? Too godly? Too worldly? Too rational? Too mystical? Asexual? Too sexual? Take your pick. Then study those qualities, and nourish the hatred.”

His colorless eyes gleamed candle flame as he turned to Arnold. The sky lit up outside and performed yet another thunderclap, and Sal hissed back.

“Ah. I almost forgot why I came. Thor is angry with you. Can you tell?”

“I thought it was atmospheric electrostatics.”

“That’s what you all say, you Jewish science Jews, analyzing and decomposing reality instead of trying to understand and respect it. If you’d look up from your talmudic journals, you’d notice the drawing down of Thor’s angry brows in the black clouds, you’d see the fiery hammer flung from his hand, you’d hear the peal of his chariot over the skyscrapers. You think this stuff is mere electricity? You think that cat is scared of—electricity?”

“Why do you think I’m Jewish?”

"Your girlfriend has been explicating. You know, you don't look Jewish, you're not the type—submissive, your eyes like ponds dark with the sadness of many thousand years. It ain't you, babe. But I know what you've got in your pants."

"What do you mean?"

Keith took his candle on an Evelyn tour.

"This is one sexy broad, wouldn't you say?"

"She's very beautiful."

"Kind of makes your penis stand on end, wouldn't you say?"

Arnold couldn't get into the locker-room banter.

"I hesitate to get into compare and contrast," Keith continued, "but Thor finds the thought of a circumcised dick following hard upon mine to be a wee bit annoying. Hence this storm. And the blackout."

"How do you know we ... ?"

"The irresistible erotic attraction of the Jewish *glans penis*. The prepuce cut away to eliminate all female semblance: for the prepuce *is* female, the vagina in which the male lies happily buried. But not so for Jews: they must cut away the prepuce, and take from the male his female component. Typical stupid, self-destructive arrogance. With circumcision, you renounce your divine semblance, and the Jew becomes mere man, poor thing."

"You're crazy, Keith. They do this at the hospital. All baby boys get cut. It's cleaner."

"Yes. There is a simple solution to all problems. And it is always wrong."

"In any case, I'm not Jewish—yet—regardless of what, as you say, is in my pants."

"OK. Cut the penis stuff, so to speak. Let's get down to brass tacks. Evelyn has been detailing your neuroses around Judaism. Thor is here to help you find your inner Hitler."

Arnold found it hard to believe Evelyn would share their intimate talks with this maniac.

"May I sit down?" Keith plopped down in the reading chair and placed the candle on its arm. "Simply put, I want to save your soul, Hitler. Don't laugh."

"I'm not laughing."

"You ready to listen to me?" Keith took his silence for an answer. "The arrogance of feeling 'Chosen,' the arrogance of proposing oneself as a light to God, the arrogance of Jewish analysis and science, the arrogance of discarding bisexuality. Where do you think these things originate? All from one thing—the Jew, with his distant, frightful God, with his obedience to the Law, the Jew knows nothing of the divine. The God-in-man is the human soul. Your soul, Arnold. Listen up, this is important."

"I'm listening."

"Do you think it's accidental that there's no doctrine of immortality in the Hebrew Bible? A people without a soul have no craving for immortality. They refuse to see all the secret and spiritual meaning of things. There is no reverence, only fear. Without simplicity of faith, there remains only talmudic nitpicking. Thus the internal multiplicity of the Jew, and the internal simplicity of the Aryan. Aren't you seeking that basic core, Arnold? Don't you want to know who you really are? Among the ancient Egyptians each person had a 'little' name known to all, and a 'great' name that was kept hidden. According to the funerary literature, the greatest risk to the soul after death was forgetting one's great name. Your great name is Hitler. Hitler is the keeper of your soul."

"Hitler is just a word, an arbitrary signifier."

"And lightning and thunder are just atmospheric electrostatics. You have a *soul*, Arnold. You have a soul to give to others. Evelyn is no pushover: it's your soul—and your name—that attracts her. You may have come from Jewish stock. I've heard about Nonno Jacobo. But remember that out of old Israel there emerged the highest possibility of mankind, the possibility of Christ. The other possibility was the Jew. Nothing is easier

than to be Jewish, with a severe, demanding, wrathful, and greedy God of shalts and shalt-nots. And nothing is more difficult than to be Christian with its commanding dimension of love. Judaism is the abyss over which Christianity is erected, and for that reason an Aryan dreads nothing so much as the Jew within. Christ was a Jew precisely that He might overcome the Judaism within Him, for he who triumphs over the deepest doubt reaches the highest faith. Christ was the greatest man because He conquered the greatest enemy.”

Sal jumped up on the chair and began to knead Keith's thigh. He placed her gently back on the floor.

“Are you listening to me? What do I have to say to get your attention, to get your Hitler attention? I love you, Arnold. I want to save you from your most dangerous tendencies. I love you.”

He reached out, and put his hand on Arnold's knee. Arnold did not remove it.

“You know what Freud thought about anti-Semitism?” Arnold asked.

Keith dismissed it. “Another Jewish opinion.”

“He thought that anti-Semites always exhibit exactly those Jewish characteristics they most despise. Displacement, he called it. Whoever detests the Jewish disposition detests it first in himself; then he persecutes others to separate himself from his own Jewishness.”

“I know my ancestry back to 1066.”

“And before 1066?” Arnold continued quietly. “Are you sure there's no Jewish blood in those Aryan veins?”

“And Phrygian blood. And Hittite or Babylonian or Assyrian or Hellenic or Indus or Phoenician or Carthaginian. You think only Jewish ancestry is important?”

Arnold was strangely calm. The toothmarks in his hand were starting to burn.

“How about a little thought experiment?” he asked. “If, as you say, Jewish is really only a tendency of the mind, can you imagine some kind of psychic duality, Jewish

and non-Jewish, that would be common to *all* individuals—in the same way as bisexuality?”

Keith looked him deeply in the eyes and moved his hand up Arnold's thigh. “In life we have to decide between being male or female. We have to take a stand. Worth or unworthiness, negation or godliness. We can decide to give up our Judaism—that is the meaning of Judaism: the possibility of becoming un-Jewed, the possibility of begetting Christs.” Keith was no longer calm. “Arnold Hitler Hitler Hitler Hitler. Why were you given this oracular, guardian name?”

“Keith, your war is not against Jews, or Jewish ideology, or a Jewish political system. It's against yourself. That's what ...”

“Well, fuck you, too! Bloody fuck you!”

He jumped up. Arnold followed.

“I could have you killed. My boys would like nothing better. A little auto-da-fé in a cozy bunker? A tribute to der Führer?”

Sal hissed; Arnold's face was as a crucifixion to behold. His burning right hand shot out, and Keith dropped to the floor, his forehead spurting blood. The door flung open.

Is this not the day when suffering took the form of a fist? The fist is no menace: it is stopped by a wall. But without a doubt, the groan is its parent.

“Out! Out!” a breathless Evelyn yelled. “Out of my house! This is my house, our house. You are not invited!” She ran over to Keith and pulled him off the floor. “I won't have you here. He's none of your business.”

Arnold was astounded to see her push Keith out into the darkness and slam the door behind him.

A distant rumble of thunder, and the light came on—unpleasantly. Arnold turned it off and drew Evelyn down on the bed beside him. They lay quietly in the dim warmth of the Jahrzeit candle, looking out at the lights across the tracks. His right hand was beginning to swell.

“I’m tired of my name,” he whispered.

She lay quietly, her head nuzzled in his neck, her hand stroking his chest.

After the talk with Keith, his name sounded different, encircled with echoes traveling backward—and coming from—beyond his years. He tried to imagine his way back through repetitions increasingly faint, but his memories were no longer solid, describable in a settled past tense. He could still think “I,” but what was the source and shaper of that “I” if memory no longer sufficed?

“Ah, I’m tired of my name,” he sighed.

She answered, “Maybe I am, too. . . .” and kissed him gently on the lips.