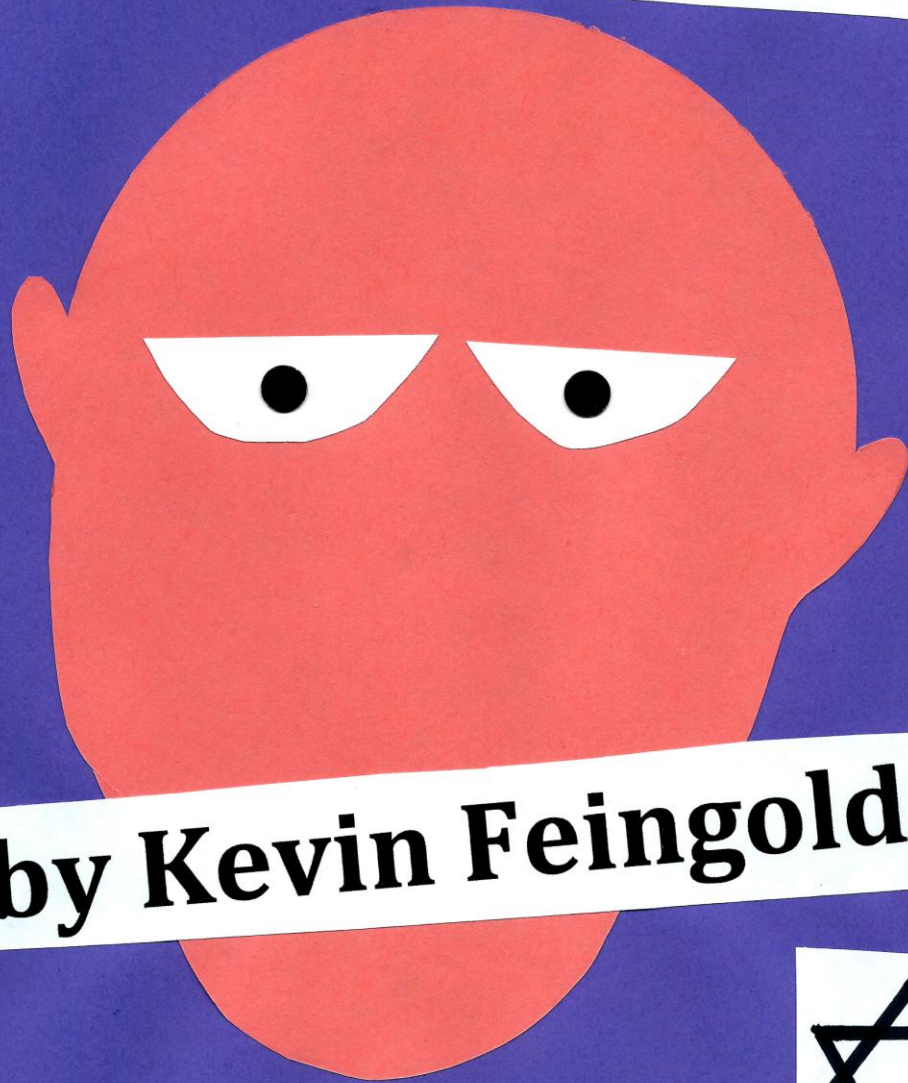


**Peace Now?**

**Very Funny**



**by Kevin Feingold**





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Illustration by Kuny.

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♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥ Introduction ♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥

I penned this political satire in 2016, so the references are dated. Hopefully, you'll still get both laughs and insight from reading it. Since October 7, nothing will ever be the same, but here's a snapshot from an earlier era.

Israel has been under the gun since its inception. As soon as the country declared statehood in 1948, seven Arab armies tried to destroy it outright. Israel's relations with its neighbors have been touch-and-go ever since. What is alarming today are the number of Americans, many of whom are Jewish, who prefer to support the Palestinians over the Israelis. "Israel?" declared my next-door neighbor Ricky. "That's the *last place* I would ever visit."

Since the 1980's, I keep running into American Jews who say, "I hate Israel! I'm Jewish! Whenever Israel causes trouble, everybody blames *me, the Jew!*" These people seem to feel no allegiance to the Jewish homeland.

There's also a branch of the Ultra-Orthodox who believe that the State of Israel is a sacrilege, since it was founded without the return of the *Mashiach*, the Messiah. It's disturbing when these hyper-religious individuals make common cause with Holocaust deniers and participate in their conferences.

Here in America, mainstream leftwing sentiment sides with the Palestinian underdogs in opposition to Bibi Netanyahu's rightwing *Likud* government. What the Israel-bashers neglect is the historical context. Netanyahu came to power *in reaction to* the failed peace process. Ehud Barak of the One Israel political party was elected by a landslide in 1999, specifically to implement a two-state solution. At Camp David in the summer of 2000 and again at the White House that December, Barak and President Clinton met and negotiated with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. They offered Arafat a comprehensive plan with all the necessary ingredients for both peace and a viable Palestinian State. Rumor has it Arafat replied, "If I sign that, when I return to Ramallah, I am a dead man." Instead of signing, he returned home and unleashed the Second Intifada uprising.

Palestinian anger knows no bounds.

That's when the Israelis decided peace and a two-state solution simply weren't going to happen. The pendulum swung the other way and they elected *Likud's* Benjamin Netanyahu. In a game of attrition, for every year that passes, less and less of the "Occupied Territories" remains available for a Palestinian State.

Meanwhile, the American Jewish diaspora's animosity toward Israel results in such things as J Street, Open Hillel and the BDS movement. We get people like Bernie Sanders, an American Jew who, like many of us, sampled kibbutz life in Israel in his

youth. Today, "Feel the Bern" Bernie portrays himself as a Son of Poland rather than a Son of Zion. My mom calls that kind of behavior "a self-loathing Jew."

Recently, my favorite Jewish-American author gathered a coterie of world-renowned leftwing novelists and went off to the "Occupied Territories" to forage for material to an anthology that he and his wife are editing. Babes in Toyland, their purpose is to illuminate the "grievous injustice" of the Israeli "occupation." Using fiction to supplement fact, it should be hot stuff. The book will come out in June of 2017, commemorating the 1967 Five Day War which has led to 50 years of Israeli life in the West Bank.

This political satire is my reaction to that unhappy publishing event. Enjoy!

### **Peace Now? Very Funny**

*Huddled with his family in their moss-covered wooden hut inside the confines of the shtetl, Moshe the Jew ached to wreak vengeance on the incorrigible hordes of the Black Hundreds. Stihopleti, that's what they were in Russian, stihopleti, the worst kind of rhymesters and versifiers, making lame puns, weak honorifics and sorry odes to a nightingale in clumsy, oafish cadences.*

*Rivka, Moshe's devoted wife, wiped her callused hands on her tattered apron, clucking reassurances as she brought earthenware bowls of borscht decorated with symbols of the kabala to the table. The air was heavy with a mixture of cabbage and dumplings. "Shoo!" she cooed, "Kateesee! Pshol von!" She swatted at a housefly bearing the lost soul of some dearly departed. It was a Thursday in August, crickets singing in the fields, thunder caps amassing on the horizon. Moshe had been hammering window frames and planing doors since 5 o'clock that morning, busy at the lathe in his dusty workshop, beads of sweat dotting his fevered brow. His clothes smelled equally of sawdust, mold and sweat.*

*A golem, he decided, frothing at the mouth uncontrollably, hands trembling in anticipation. He would fashion a human-like figure of clay from the river, recite the Hebrew prayers and breathe life into his creation. Then those hounds of the Black Hundreds would fear him, quaking in their black leather boots, rattling their puny sabers, uttering oaths under their breaths and patting the flanks of their horses as they desperately called upon the spirit of the Tsar to protect them. In iambic pentameter, no less!*

*Mah nish tah-nah ha laila ha-zeh, why is this night different from all other nights? On this night, Moshe the Jew redeemed his soul, laying the cornerstone to the*

*framework of a plan so blindingly grandiloquent, Moshe could barely speak of it, in a whisper, even to himself. His pact with G-d, Moshe lusted after revenge.*

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Say what?

You don't become the greatest Jewish author in the English language without struggle. Barry Lipowitz knew what it was to struggle. Bent over the artisanal French birch bark writing desk in his cavernous den, an ancient accordion lamp from Sears casting a yellow pool of light, classical music playing softly from a tube radio in a mahogany cabinet, he searched painstakingly for *le mot juste*, the perfect adjective, the best past participle, a truly resplendent verb, when creating his masterpieces. Mining the libraries, newspaper archives and elderly residents of the Jewish communities of Brooklyn for material to his epic novels, Barry reminded himself of what his dad always said, "Only through suffering can you become great."

Oh, how Barry had suffered! His father owned *Hiram's Used Cars & Parts*. Chugging Schlitz— "The Beer That Made Milwaukee Famous"— Barry's old man had left nothing to chance: He made sure everyone in his household suffered equally. Assigning chores, he badgered and sniped at them from morning to night. "Such a shiftless, lazy lot I have been blessed with in this family!" Hiram bellowed many an evening, smashing a meaty hand on the dining room table's damask tablecloth. Barry wanted to be a *schreiber*, a writer. He couldn't wait to leave behind the parochialism of Wisconsin. "You, Barry! Tomorrow I have six cars I'll let you wax for me. And don't spare the elbow grease, my boy. Only through suffering can you become great!"

And behold, the magic worked. Barry became "the greatest Jewish writer of his generation," to quote the New York Times. He knew that he had the Devil's own luck. Timing is everything. Born after Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud and Philip Roth but before Nathan Englander, Jonathan Safran Foer and Gary Shteyngart, for a few short years in the 1990's, Barry Lipowitz had the entire field of Jewish-American lit all to himself. *Fuckoutahea!*

Going where the work is, Barry moved to the Big Apple. The big publishing houses were in New York. Magazines had their headquarters in New York. Unless he intended to write for Playboy or the Sears Roebuck Catalog, Chicago was of no interest whatsoever. NYC was the place. It made his fortune. Ever since completing his *bildungsroman* "Look Homeward, Bagel" straight out of college, Barry was considered the epitome of Page Six chic. It wasn't his fault: Nature abhors a vacuum and Dave Barry insists on writing humor and living in southern Florida. (Plus, Dave Barry isn't even Jewish. His wife is Jewish.) So forget happy. Despite *impedimenta*, our hero

drives a Mercedes, functions as a poster boy for *Ted Baker* leather derby kicks from London, lives with his wife in a duplex on the Upper West Side, has Graydon Carter on speed dial and is a client of the Sid Harmon Literary Agency. He's just as at home texting Kanye as he is talking with Alan Dershowitz. What more could anyone ask???

Manhattan ain't Milwaukee. Barry earns extra coin composing *nouvelle vague* translations of classics like Ernest Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises"— in Barry's translation *Le soleil peut se lever sauf moi*— although his French-Canadian friends complain that Barry's translations give them migraine. He has better luck translating Polish - English. Tomes like *Polski Polutski Totenlager*, a rare chronicle of the Holocaust examined from the Polish industrial perspective: how many tons of Polish steel, how much lumber, the number of jobs created in liquidating the Jews, the effect of aerial carpet bombing on the Polish construction industry, etc. As a niche market, Holocaust lit is the gift that keeps on giving.

When Hitler murdered six million Jews, the world lost half a million writers. An entire subcontinent of literature was smothered in the cradle. *Sans Adolf*, we'd already have a cure for cancer, colonies on Mars and several million books in the style of Franz Kafka. Our loss.

Naturally, Barry also translates German pornographic novels under the pen name Ani Weinstein. Good money in pornography.

All that extra moolah helps pay for Barry's meds: Imitrex for migraine, Xanax for his panic attacks, Zoloft for his obsessive/compulsive disorder, Prozac to control his autism and pyrimethamine treatments for Late-Onset Tay-Sachs disease. "You piss," commented his Uncle Morty, "some of the world's most expensive urine."

The only people more into medicinal marijuana than Barry are empty-headed pot heads stumbling around the 'hood with short term memory loss. They may do more blunt than Barry, but he surpasses them in enthusiasm. His dealer has even christened a new, high-end variety *B. Liposuction* in Barry's honor. Until the Twin Towers fell, Barry liked to get stoned and take the elevator to the roof of the World Trade Center. The golden lobby, the whooshing ride, the dizzy elevation, the sky towering overhead and the view stretched out below were awe-inspiring. "Worth a toke," he posted on *TrippinUSA.org*, the early travel site for pot heads.

Because, of course, Barry is edgy. Who wouldn't be, with a Ukrainian fireball for a mistress, and her threatening to release his emails, f-mails and g-mails on social media? He can commiserate with Hillary. He already has over 100,000 followers on Twitter.

As a denizen of Manhattan, he professes a burning nostalgia for all things 1980's, from Crazy Eddie to the UK. Yellow plastic 45 rpm record inserts. His Sony Sports Walkman. Oxblood leather-bound drinking mugs.

And, of course, Barry teaches Creative Writing at NYU. Among other topics, his course *Short Story 101* is a major draw. The intro:

"What makes a great short story? A great short story is one written by the editor's nephew. All that love, joy, pride and affection make the words jump right off the page! 'Bravo, Billy! You are an accomplished author!' As for the rest of us, in the next thirteen weeks, we shall examine tips on how to express your thoughts and get into print..."

The course goes downhill from there.

Published in the New York magazines, Barry can't understand how lesser lights can survive *without* a direct lifeline to New York editors. What is life but a series of business lunches and editorial meetings? True, the Avast Publishing empire now puts out a paltry 20 titles, but acquisition and consolidation have been the name of the game since Ronald Reagan was president. None of this can be laid at Barry's doorstep, a 12-room duplex apartment on the Upper West Side overlooking the park. Magazines pay him in yen, riyals, shekels and Chinese renminbi, whatever currency dominates the bullion market of the moment. Sid Harmon takes his 15% commission.

As a New Yorker, Barry is constantly amazed to meet unsuccessful writers who live in burghs like Philadelphia, Cleveland or even Duluth. Of course their writing can't be any good! They don't live in New York City.

Barry knows writing. His most famous book, "Sonic Dicks," mashes *Portnoy's Complaint* with Moshe Dayan. All of the neuroses, cultural inhibitions and taboos of Judaism erupt in a cataclysm of embarrassment. "No one," writes critic Chaim Solomon, "since Philip Roth, does it better."

Barry's latest creation is a superhero, part human, part amphibian, called Frogman.

For some reason, the U.S. Navy has complained.

Frogman's secret identity by day is the loudmouthed, anti-Latino real estate developer T. Rump.

For some reason, Reince Priebus of the Republican National Committee has complained.

Froggy lives in Anywhere, U.S.A. The State of Indiana complained.

Frogman plays in a supergroup, *The Republicats*: "Lyin' " Ted Cruz on vocals, King of Cool "low energy" Jeb on guitar, "Little Marco" on bass, keyboards by Kasich, Frogman on drums. Their first album, *Don't Pull No Trump*, goes platinum.

When not staving off rampant 14-year-old girls, Frogman toils on a secret history of Atlantis.

"Not since the cinematic oeuvre of Andy Warhol has soft core had a more adept practitioner," culture critic U-Turn wrote in the New York Times, equating Barry's prose with Andy's movies. Hey, *when you got it, flaunt it!*

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NEWSFLASH, NYC – The world-famous author Barry Lipowitz proposes once again to engage with his public, this time employing revolutionary wordsmiths and scribblers in a visit to Israel to write The Great Anti-Israeli Novel, short story, polemic, poem or other (check one). He announced the anthology project this morning at Cicero's in the Village. Travel is slated for June of 2016.

Seed money for the trip comes from his recent completion of the screenplay for the tentpole movie *Apocalyptic Frenzy 2*. Release date TBA. To Be Announced.

Hopefully, Benji Books will publish. It wouldn't be the first time. His agent Sid Harmon has arranged the meeting. Barry won't travel without a pre-publishing agreement and a written contract. "We're all Jewish," insists CCO Marvin Fleischmann, your short, rotund, goateed and balding classic *New Yorker*. Duds by Sabatini of London. His office is a third carbon copy of Graydon Carter's at Vanity Fair, right down to the teak bookshelves. No Canadian *gonif* is going to outdo Marvin Fleischmann! "Judaism isn't the issue," insists Marvin, straightening books on the bookshelves. "We need a pin big enough to pop Bibi Netanyahu's balloon."

"Shit yeah!" agrees Barry, dressed for success in JoS. A. Bank. "We trippin'. Na' mean? We want to use fiction to go where non-fiction cannot easily tread," he declares, reclining so far back on the sofa, he's almost horizontal. "We want to do for Israeli politics what the anthology 'In the Field of Fire' did for Vietnam."

"Never heard of it," exclaims Marvin, chomping on his cigar.

"I have," says Dan White, CFO at Benji Books. Quiet, slim and Talmudic, he sits by himself on a chair halfway across the room. "You're going to write science fiction?"

"No, no, no," insists Barry, deeply shaken. Science fiction??? *Jesus sweet flushing Christ!* "No! We want to let each author's Israeli experience determine in what direction his or her writing shall go," Barry gulps. Hmmm, *still not enough*. "There are over 600,000 settlers in the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Somebody has to pay them a visit! We're seeking the Maya Angelou of the pro-Palestinian movement. The *Uncle Tom's Cabin* of Israel. The 'I have a dream... Let my people go!' conundrum. What effect has the BDS— the Boycott, Divestment and Shithead movement— had on the Israeli economy... at street level? Israeli apartheid. Occupation of the Left Bank. The separation barrier. Military tribunals. Child inmates in Israeli prisons. Nightlife in Hebron. West Bank hip-hop. Palestinian soccer teams," he stammers hopefully, blushing.

The moment of truth.

"We'll do it!" Marvin decides.

**YES!!!!!!**

Examining the sales figures for Barry's last two books on a paper held in front of him, Dan White chews on a No. 2 pencil, clumsily makes calculations in the margins, hums and haws. After a long pause, he finally says, "Okay, I'll add your project to the year's budget."

Never has success tasted so sweet, at least not since the last time Barry got a publishing agreement.

"I take it our purpose is to expedite the peace process?" asks Dan White.

"What?" scoffs Barry, ready to throw Dan White through a window. "Peace now? Very funny."

"Still," Marvin complains, "Nathan in France is not that enthusiastic over a translation."

"Oh? What percentage did you offer?" asks Barry. He loves the minutia of book publishing.

"Money's not the problem," grouses Marvin. "The Jews of France are getting chased out of the country by armed attacks from Muslim fanatics. The last thing Nathan wants is to fan the flames with a book critical of Israel. Sorry, Barry, but there it is. Bad timing."

He can't believe what he's hearing. Mid-morning, he was *fuh'ing* the daylights out of Oksana, his Ukrainian mistress, and now this...

"We can print in France," continues the publisher, scratching his beard and raising his eyebrows, "but sales will be limited to other countries in the French-speaking world: Belgium, Luxembourg, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Quebec..."

"*Meh!*" complains Barry, putting his feet up on the coffee table. Using an engraved, refillable butane lighter that is the pinnacle of retro chic, he lights his Turkish meerschaum pipe in the shape of a lion's head. "*Meh and double meh!*"

"Then we have the island markets. Haiti. Martinique and Guadeloupe. Vanuatu and Madagascar. Very exotic! We never sell many books, but they look great on a spreadsheet."

"Stop!" bitches Barry. "You're killing me!"

Barry's gang are to be the guests of Crazy for Peace, Inc. "The Crazies" take a holistic view of the peace process, combining Kropotkin anarchy with contributions from the oil industry.

Compare them to Peace Now, which developed out of the 1978 Israeli-Egyptian peace talks: Faced with the collapse of negotiations, 348 reserve officers and soldiers from Israeli combat units published an open letter to the prime minister advocating for peace. Thus was born a movement, as tens of thousands of Israelis expressed their support. Eventually, Peace Now became convinced that the only viable solution is the creation of a Palestinian state adjacent to Israel on the land captured in the 1967 war. Undeterred by suicide bombers, the First and Second Intifada uprisings, the 2014 war in

Gaza or the current wave of stabbings, Peace Now continues to advocate for Palestinian rights in opposition to war and military occupation.

Crazy for Peace can't be bothered with all that. Instead, they invite Barry Lipowitz and his Israeli wife Erit Sameach to gather a group of like-minded leftwing authors and come visit Israel to "see for yourselves the horror of living under the occupation." As a PR move, as an antidote to the rightwing *Likud* government of Prime Minister Benjamin "Bibi" Netanyahu, as a cudgel for peace, beating it into people's heads with all the subtlety of a sledgehammer.

Barry knows he's lucky to have Erit. He met his future wife, a stunning brunette, when speaking at Columbia University's Hillel. He grilled her the entire time, he couldn't take his eyes off her. She sat in the front row with her dynamite gams crossed, smiling through his entire speech, smiling, until the Q and A when she raised her hand and asked in a thick Israeli accent, "Why do American males think their sexual hang-ups will interest female readers?"

Oy! How do you answer that? Clueless, Barry fronted a response, referring genially to "Goodbye, Columbus" and "Portnoy's Complaint," Saul Bellow, John Updike's Jewish characters and the long tradition— since Sigmund Freud— of mixing a fixation on genitalia with sexual misunderstanding.

The gene pool of Vienna has produced some amazing-looking women. Fashion model beautiful, Erit's facial features don't really add up: the high forehead, the enormous hazel eyes with heavy lids, a fleshy nose, a chin like a golf ball. With such bizarre components, you would expect disaster. Instead, people go gaga over her. An ugly duckling, she was taunted as a child. She stalks through her adult life like a Viking princess.

And she's an author in her own right. Her latest tome is titled *Three Shades of Beige: An Ironic Portrait of the IDF*. Over 900,000 copies sold. On this trip, she intends to write about the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon, where Christian Phalangists closely allied with Israel massacred between 762 and 3,500 Palestinians and Lebanese Shiites in three horrendous days of slaughter in September 1982.

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Marjorie at the Sid Harmon Literary Agency offers to call him back, but Barry hates callbacks. What if he misses the call? Even worse, what if Sid never calls him back? How is he to interpret such a non-event? Is it carelessness or a subtle form of rejection? It's a New York thang, everybody gauging their place in life's pecking order. Better to get a cramp in his right hand gripping the phone for 20 sweaty minutes

listening to hold music than risk a misunderstanding which could rupture their client-agent partnership.

“So! How’s your little vanity project progressing?” Harmon’s jovial voice rings in his ear. “I just got off the phone with Marvin at Benji Books and he says they are on board.”

“It’s not a vanity project,” bleats Barry, unable to stop himself. “It’s a serious piece of Norman Mailer-style *The Armies of the Night* concrete literary journalistic investigation. *Vroom, vroom!* The New Journalism, what do I have to publish in *The New Yorker* to get heard?”

“Keep all your receipts,” Harmon interjects. “We’ll see what the publisher is willing to cover.”

“Oh, and thank you for making it happen,” Barry stammers.

“Look,” Sid Harmon observes, “it’s a can of worms. Israeli politics is a continual veil of tears. I mean, if you want to wade into the arena, be my guest. I’m just giving you the opportunity. Myself, I wouldn’t do it. There are so many *other things* you can write about!”

“Erit wants this,” Barry admits.

“Yeah. Well, say hello from me and have your charming wife daven for me at the Wailing Wall,” his agent quips. “No one else will.”

“No, really, it’s going to be grand,” Barry insists, always surprised at how much of a downer his agent can be.

“*Ze! gezunt*, may you have good health,” Sid Harmon concludes, hanging up the phone.

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The secret sauce behind Barry’s writing, his creative methodology, is an adaptation of *Druckerism*: Barry makes lists. He makes lists of people’s attire, their facial expressions, interesting turns of phrase, emotional yearnings, sexual urgings, their dreams, their gastronomical complaints, stupid political moves, acts of war, the color of people’s skin, surnames, family names, street names, the instructions on clothing labels, furniture labels, soup cans and fireworks, historical figures, museum displays, statues in parks and guilty secrets inadvertently blurted out by folks who have had too much to drink at high-end cocktail parties.

It is all grist for the mill. One of Peter Drucker’s famous “knowledge workers,” Barry is a key player, providing conclusions that other authors lack.

Unlike Drucker, Barry never attended Goethe University in Frankfurt Am Main in Germany. However, thanks to Peter Drucker’s organizational skill, once Barry outlines a

plot, creative writing becomes as simple and painless as a visit to a Chinese restaurant: choose one from column A, one from column B, one from Column C. Then he stylizes the details, mixing and matching, shaking and baking, stir-frying until golden brown. For example: "Using cyklotrons, laboratories in China have concluded that global warming is caused by omega-tron subatomic particles lining the stomachs of Brahmin cattle, causing them to belch methane gas at scale." Alice in *Wunderbarland*, Barry was excavating rabbit holes before rabbit holes became a thing. Best of all, Barry makes his living by taking the life stories from residents of old folks' homes, changes the names and locales and... *voila!* Humphrey Bogart in *Casablanca*.

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At Kennedy Airport, Barry leaves a sulking Erit in the waiting area and crosses the concourse to the bookstore. Finding his latest novel in paperback, he brings it to the counter. The olive-skinned young lady in a hijab standing behind the counter raises her bar code scanner like a black plastic ray gun. "Do you want to buy that?" she asks.

"Actually, I'm the author," Barry blushes, showing her the Annie Leibovitz photo on the back cover. "That's me. I always check sales at airport bookstores." This doesn't seem to impress her much. *Hmmm*. Giving her his most boyish grin, he starts over. "How are sales?"

"You want to know how many copies of that book we've sold?" she asks, a bored expression on her face.

*Really, the quality of sales help these days...!* "Yes, please," he replies.

Waiting, he watches her beep the bar code with her laser gun. He watches her check the computer screen above the cash drawer. "We've sold 23 copies of that book since we got it in on March 12th."

March 12th! ONLY 23 COPIES in TWO MONTHS!!! Obviously Barry needs to contact Sid Harmon right away and demand that Marvin Fleischmann at Benji Books launch a major ad campaign. Like, super pronto. "Thank you!" he sputters, anxious to get away from this place of catastrophic ignominy. If only there was some place he could go hide his face, red with shame, but where do you hide on an airport concourse teeming with people, baggage, children in strollers, flight attendants and janitors, all milling around? Everywhere you turn, people! Barry slinks into the Men's Room and locks himself in a stall until the tremors subside. Should he take a Xanax? Nah, he tends to zone out. He might miss his flight.

Seated in the EL AL aircraft, he and Erit share the courage of their convictions, wearing matching blue denim jackets and slacks. It's who they are. While Erit angrily turns the pages of fashion magazines, Barry stares at his tablet, reviewing his list of

participants. He frowns. B.L. & E.S. Patrice Gerard the Black Muslim. Sir Razor Babcock from Wales. Ethiopian Oso Buko. Erik Andersson, a blond Swede. Journo Roger Kaminski. Poetess Oki Nawa from Japan and fashionista Barbie Quint. Are these the ideal candidates for this writing challenge? Could he have chosen better? Are they going to write the pants off him, filling him with regret? If they win the Nobel Prize or a Hollywood screenplay, will they share it with Barry or will he become a footnote in history, a mere asterisk? "Oh, I remember him, he helped Oso Buko become the renowned international author he is today. I have no idea whatever happened to old Lefkowitz," people will say. Gripping his stylus in a palsied hand, he wonders and worries, rivers of sweat soaking his collar, a vein in his temple pulsing madly. If the plane crashes today, the world will mourn *his* passing. Who can say that will still be the case a year from now? What new works are Englander, Safran Foer and Shteyngart cooking up?! But, of course, Barry knows he shouldn't tempt fate by dreaming of plane crashes. Let others worry and dream of train crashes! He'll worry and dream of winning the Nobel Prize. Although Swedish meatballs give him aggravated bowel syndrome. And he's not sure which capital has the most beautiful women, Stockholm or Oslo. A 30-foot motor launch would be good to own, touring the fjords of Norway, surrounded by leggy Norwegian blondes in bikinis. Or not, as the case may be. Is it true Icelandic women are frigid or is that just the climate? Do Finnish women come equipped with Wi-Fi and, if so, what is their bandwidth? What did Hillary know and when did she know it? All Barry can do is sigh and say "Thank G-d for Google!"

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Erit fidgets, napping fitfully. Barry reads Englander's latest book. As far as Barry is concerned, the dude is a total twit, always focusing on the most mundane aspects of human life, employing literary devices that died with Papa Hemingway. Turning the pages of a first edition, Barry discovers a typo on page 14. And a misplaced participle on page 27! *And the dude calls himself a Jewish author!* Had he suffered for his art? Barry is sure that Englander has never suffered like he has suffered. Barry had been forced to eat pork in high school. Pork chops! Ribs! Barry has had to eat ribs. He knows what true suffering is all about. Ribs.

They'll be landing in Israel in time to celebrate Shavuot, but how do you celebrate Shavuot? Barry checks the anthology section of his digital calendar. The holiday commemorates G-d giving the Torah to the Israelites assembled at Mount Sinai. *What possible noisemaker do you use to celebrate that???* Aha! It's also a celebration of the first fruits of the season. You bring *Bikkurim*—portions of wheat, barley, grapes, figs, pomegranates, olives and dates—to the temple to be burned in sacrifice. *Quelle horreur!* he muses. *That and \$10 will get you a frappuccino at Starbucks.*

A member of their team, chrome dome mulatto lawyer Patrice Gerard, author of *The Art of the Spiel*, sits two rows back, looking more hip than Al Pacino. An ardent follower of Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam, dressed in a \$2,000 suit, he takes pride in being *gangsta*. Telegenic, he does guest commentary on TV talk shows. He is also very tall. Annoyed at Hillary for wiping clean her email server, he raps loudly enough for everyone to hear, "I ain't squintin', Hillary Clinton! This campaign, other people pay the Bill un-amended. Listen, bitch, no pun intended. Amidst the crowds an' all the cheers, H.R. Clinton should go to jail for a hundred years! Whether or not she's pilloried, obstruction of justice, yer name be Hillary."

"Word," declares his seat mate.

When the stewardess rolls the snack cart down the aisle, Barry absentmindedly requests peanuts and a Diet Coke.

"We're all out of peanuts," replies the stewardess, busy popping the tab on the Coke can and filling a plastic cup with ice.

"Get the fluff outta here!" Barry tells her. "Real talk, didn't you restock the plane in New York or somethin'?"

"Well, we're not really *out of* peanuts," admits the stewardess with a pained expression. "EL AL no longer serves them since so many Americans have peanut allergies."

*Well, well, leave it to Bieber!* These Israelis are definitely yanking Barry's chain. *So much for Israeli democracy, the great, liberated Israeli people, the booming Tel Aviv economy,* he thinks, settling for pretzels. *You can't even get a token bag of peanuts!*

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That first evening, jet-lagged, they are the guests of a lefty Israeli screenwriter named Zalman who looks like a shoe salesman with glasses. Barry met him at a writers' conference in Chicago about a million years ago. Zalman takes them to a trendy Tel Aviv night club just off the beach. "Traditionally, Israeli war movies portray soldiers as victims, deeply scarred by the violence they experience," he tells them. "Carrying on the Polish tradition, angst and ennui are very big in Israeli film." Considering how successful Zalman has been as a screenwriter, with credits up the kazoo, Barry keeps his mouth shut.

Erit shares no such scruples. "Really?" she demands archly in Hebrew in that voice of hers that can damage fruit at fifty yards. "What of the true victims of Israeli violence? Children blown up in drone attacks on the beaches of Gaza, in clear view of the international press? Whole families whose homes are bulldozed to punish a single miscreant. Entire neighborhoods in Gaza reduced to rubble!"

"That's true, but the Palestinians in Gaza aren't that keen on letting us use their demolished neighborhoods as film sets," Zalman points out, taking a sip of wine to hide his smile. "I keep waiting for Gaza Films to make *Attack of the Mole People*."

"Well, *really*..." replies Erit self-righteously. It's so hard to find an Israeli intellectual you can converse with! Everybody talks non-stop and no one stops to listen.

A writer is firstly an observer of human behavior. Barry gazes around the smoky, crowded room, observing. At the bar, he notices a three-way conversation among patrons who look the worse for wear. "Here's mud in your eye," says an American dressed in desert khaki.

"This, too, shall pass," replies an Aussie, perspiring in a charcoal gray suit.

"*Por la patria*," insists a Spaniard, dressed in chinos and a designer work shirt.

The plaque above the bar says "We trust in Jehovah. Everyone else pays cash."

Bellying up to the bar belligerently, Barry accosts them. "Kanye tell me?" he asks. "You claim this is the Jewish homeland, but 20% of the population are Arabs."

"No one denies there are Arab citizens of Israel. They have their own representatives in the Knesset," nods the Aussie agreeably. "London has a Muslim mayor, mate, but I wouldn't hold my breath about anything like that happening here."

"Listen," insists the American blearily in a flat mid-western drawl. "There've been Jews in this part of the world for 3,000 years. It was the Emperor Hadrian who, in 79 A.D., expelled the Jews after the Bar Kochba uprising. It was Hadrian who changed the name of the place from Israel to Syria Palestine, in an effort to eradicate any trace of the Jews."

"Don'tcha know who the Palestinians are?" growls the Spaniard. "The Palestinians are the Philistines! Same dudes as in the Bible. Samson and Delilah. No wonder the Palestinians won't give an inch! The Jews are the ones who brought down their temple! They're holding a 2,500-year-old grudge!"

Faced with such a compact wall of opinion, Barry takes his drink and returns to his own people, the phrase "Who's the bloody yank?" buzzing in his ears.

"I'm going to write a screenplay about Hillary Clinton," Zalman proposes. "There's plenty of angst and ennui there."

"People say Hillary's transgender," exclaims Erit. "That's why she wears the pants in the family. I don't know, I'm not a gynecologist, but still..."

"She's a cyborg," suggests Barry. "As seen on TV."

Wandering in from outside, Sir Razor Babcock, part of Barry's entourage, sits down at their table. A John Cleese look-alike, a Welsh nobleman and acclaimed Holocaust denier— affectionately known as "Shiraz"— he is the author of over 200 thumbnail biographies of theatrical cast members published in the British edition of *Playbill*. Additionally, he is author of the seminal study *Hitler - Man, Machine, Mayhem*. Based on Hitler's incarceration as a political prisoner in the fortress at Landsberg in

1924, Shiraz's work breaks new ground psychologically. After all, it was at Landsberg that Hitler dictated the ever-popular book *Mein Kampf*. In English, *My Struggle*. Until it expired in 2015, the copyright was owned by the Bavarian state government. Frowned upon in America, *Mein Kampf* remains a major read in India, Russia, Sweden and Turkey. A new, annotated edition has just been released in Germany. Hitler's original title was *Men Discovering Love in the Trenches*. His advisors in the National Socialist German Workers' Party talked him out of this. Instead of passionate homoerotic encounters, editor Rudolf Hess insisted Hitler focus on politics, international relations, race, national aspirations and revenge. Good old Hitler! What he lost in magazine serialization, he more than made up for at the ballot box. "*Erzählende- oder Sachliteratur?*" asked Hitler. Fiction or non-fiction? Having had some success getting published in the *Südbayerische Zeitung*, a wannabe novelist, he's a young man with a temper who has his whole life ahead of him. "Did Wagner spell his name with a V or a W?" he wondered. So what if the Beer Hall Putsch didn't go so well? He'll know better next time! *My Struggle* also marks the last occasion Hitler ever takes advice from his fellow party members. After that, everything has to be done *his way*. He even designs the uniforms for *Hitlerjugend*, the Hitler Youth. The rest is history.

Heavily fortified on anti-depressants, Shiraz gaily shouts, "Bring on these sheenies and we'll all have a bundle of fun!"

"I know who you are, I've read all your books," exclaims a tall woman with breasts like twin tennis balls pushing against her blouse. Approaching their table, she hands over a napkin for Barry to autograph. "Your novel *Milwaukee* helped me survive secondary school..."

"Delighted, delighted," Barry assures her, scrawling his name.

"...and not in a good way," finishes the woman. Taking the napkin, she stalks back to her table.

"Well, *really!*" demands Erit, morally indignant for the both of them. Barry just assumes it's a typically booze-fueled misunderstanding.

The entertainment is a young troubadour with a mountain of black hair, a wide-open white shirt, a Star of David nestled amidst the hairs on his chest, black slacks and *de rigueur* leather sandals. He plays a 12-string, double-necked guitar, plugged into a Marshall amp. Puffing his P's into the microphone, he belts out Israeli rock standards Barry has never heard of. On the break, he comes to their table. "*Mee-zeh?*" he asks Zalman, smiling ferociously.

"A very well-known American writer. Greatest Jewish author since Pierre Salinger. Big money deal," explains Zalman, incandescent with postprandial glow.

"Hello," says the performer, taking a seat next to Barry. "How do you like Israel?" Teeth that white must be veneers.

"We don't! We're here because internationally, Israel is a pariah. United Nation's resolution 242—"

"Eh! Always the same kvetching. You are in the homeland of the Jews!" exclaims their new acquaintance. "Never again will Jews climb into cattle cars to be killed. Anything Israel does is based on the simple fact that most of our neighbors want to murder us. You don't like that? *Tant pis!* Too bad! Nobody asked you to come!"

"We're guests of Crazy for Peace."

"Ugh!" grunts the entertainer. "Crazy for pizza."

"No, no, *Crazy for Peace*," Barry corrects him didactically, only to see that the dude is laughing at him. A group of Israelis come by and interrupt, informing Barry that the entertainer's nickname is *Jimmy Poisson*, "Jimmy the Fish." As slang, they noisily explain, it can also mean "Jimmy the Bully" or "Jimmy the Fag." Barry doesn't like him any better for it.

"*Crazy for Pizza* runs ads in the American Jewish press criticizing American armchair generals for their resolve to fight to the last Israeli," exclaims Jimmy. He doesn't look happy.

"What is wrong with that?" demands Barry.

"*Nu?* I assume Crazy for Peace already has a plan to get the Palestinians to the negotiating table without preconditions. I assume Crazy for Peace also has a workable solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that guarantees both Palestinian sovereignty and Israel's security. *Bravo!* Such brilliance should be rewarded. Please share the details!"

*Oy gevalt!* What a bully! Where does this guy get off knowing what's in the American press? That's the problem with the Internet, everybody examines everybody else's dirty laundry. "Solutions are the responsibility of the government," insists Barry. Jimmy looks at him. Once. Twice. Rolls his eyes and raises an eyebrow sardonically. "Piss off, Jack!" he declares. Then he excuses himself to play another set. This time he includes Buffy Sainte-Marie's *The Universal Soldier* and John Lennon's *Working Class Hero*. The audience gives him a standing ovation.

According to the Theory of Transactional Analysis, people must know their position in the social hierarchy, otherwise chaos ensues. People are nice to Barry. Six blockbusters on the New York Times bestseller list does that. When people are rude, Barry dismisses them in his own mind as ignoramuses who have yet to crack open the New York Times bestseller list. Did Jimmy the Fag write *The French Lieutenant's Jewess*? No, he did not! Barry did, netting a cool \$1,250,000 advance in a bidding war that left blood knee-deep in the corridors of New York publishing.

Jimmy the Fish is followed by an Israeli grunge metal band called *Psyche & the Delics*. "Very poppy in the West Bank," explains Zalman, shouting to be heard.

Obviously, it's time to get gully and show a little street cred. Exhibiting his Argonite-5030 wristwatch by Shinola of Detroit, Michigan with a Star of David embossed on the black leather strap, Barry explains, "I know what it is to return to Capistrano. Other American Jews sit at the *Pesach* table and proclaim 'Next year in Jerusalem!' I say 'Do the bossa nova!' That's all she wrote... *Disco!*"

Dumbfounded, the other patrons just stare. Never underestimate the star power of a Shinola watch! Reliable in any situation.

That night, under the covers, he and Erit screw passionately, holding onto one another for dear life. "Israel does this to me," she whimpers, covered in sweat. "The contradictions fuck up my bodily functions something awful."

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At the breakfast table the next morning— rolls, hardboiled eggs, hummus, tomatoes and coffee— conversation is subdued at best. Rounding out their little group— there, but nowhere in evidence— is Manhattan's very own Barbie Quint. A syndicated columnist in the world of fashion, she's also a notoriously late sleeper.

"Look at this!" exclaims Oso Buko excitedly, his ebony black face glistening in anticipation. Having flown in from Ethiopia, he shows off a newspaper he purchased in the airport gift shop. "The front page of *The Washington Post*! A photo proclaiming 'We love you, Muhammad.' See! We are making progress already." He seems incredibly proud.

"*Få se*," replies Erik, the Swede, whose hair resembles thatched hay and who speaks with the precision of a grammarian. From the university town of Umeå in Swedish Norrland, he's been invited along to give the European perspective. Economically dependent on Arab oil, the European Union hates Israel. Barry expects Erik to focus on war crimes. "Wait a minute," Erik points out, examining the photograph meticulously. "This is a funeral cortege for Muhammad Ali."

While they hope Oso's behavior may provide much-needed empathy— he is, after all, from Ethiopia and Ethiopians have heart— the gloom that descends upon the group is palpable. Passing the newspaper from hand to hand, they discuss options. It still isn't too late to convert the trip into a vacation holiday at a beach resort in Netanya or Eilat. In the end, they decide to persevere.

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The Tel Aviv landscape seems very jarring, a mix of cars, blinding yellow sunshine, hustle and bustle, window displays, high fashion, glossy new buildings, decrepitly old ones, towering high-rises and four-story apartment houses shaped like shoe boxes with rusting balconies staining their façades. This sure ain't Brooklyn, Toto!

"Hello. I'm your guide, Yaakov Ben Ami, " says a clean-shaven young man. Barry can see that the young fellow is the perfect choice for the assignment: Seared in the crucible of war, he's dressed in Abercrombie & Fitch. "How do you like Israel?" he asks Barry.

"We like it just fine," Barry answers, tired of fighting.

"Ha! What do you know?" sneers Yaakov. "You've been here less than a day and you think you know the place? *Rak réga!* Just wait. No work for the younger generation, prices skyrocketing, endless war. Get used to it!"

"We're here to protest all that," complains Barry.

"Protest all you like, it won't change a damn thing," insists Yaakov sullenly.

*Welcome to Israel*, thinks Barry with a sigh.

Emphasizing the multi-cultural aspect of their visit, Crazy for Peace holds the welcoming ceremony in a Druze village halfway up Mount Carmel. At this elevation, the air is refreshingly cool. A constant breeze, strong enough to snatch papers from their hands, hums in their ears. There are goats everywhere. Static from a P.A. system mounted on the bandstand wafts comically through the nearly deserted village. Barry's group sits, huddled, on gray metal folding chairs originally cadged from the IDF. After five minutes of embarrassed inertia, Barry arises and climbs onto the stage.

Approaching the microphone, he does the honors, breaking the ice:

"Ladies and gentlemen," he declares. "And especially ladies..." *Holy thirstbucket!* Right away, he loses half the audience, the female half. He can see it in the spazzed-out expression on their faces. *Not kosher! Not kashrut!* He's got a lot riding on this speech. Scrambling, he explains himself. "You are the ones who read magazines. You are the brilliant minds attuned to the subtleties of American fiction. Remember, our ideology unites us. We are so far left, we consider Putin a reactionary... Chill out, scrap!" He pauses to sip from a high-end, silver-colored water bottle which he wears on a belt loop. "Often in the course of inhumane events, *hotsie totsie*," he continues, bantering. "Yes, *hotsie totsie* with a cherry on top. And if not now, when?" Fucked, he gives it up and resorts to his notes, proclaiming, "K-i-x. We are Kix LLC. *Kikes investigating existence. Kix.* We are here in the Middle East— or *le Proche-Orient*, if you will— seeking peace. Some seek it here, some seek it there. It's certainly a thrill. We're

crazy for peace! But enough about us. We're not here to preach, but to learn..." Having said that, confronted by a captive audience, Barry drones on for another 25 minutes: He lists 50 Eastern European villages destroyed in the Holocaust. He outlines the latest John Kerry peace initiative. He compares the rolling hills of the Galilee to his wife Erit's breasts. He extols the quality of Jerusalem's hashish and the strides made during the presidency of George H. W. Bush. "Synergy, the production here in Israel of commemorative tile plaques depicting the windmill and the Wailing Wall of Jerusalem, reached its peak during the George H. W. Bush administration. Those were the Good Old Days, followed by oppression and uprisings despite the Balfour Declaration or the Oslo Accords. Peace Now? Sounds fuzzy."

They still haven't recovered from jet lag. Barry can see that Erit and the others keep nodding off. Quickly getting down to specifics, he announces: "As writers, people often ask us 'Do we need G-d?' I ask 'Does G-d need us?' Do we contribute anything special to life uptown?... Not a tirade, just a dissertation. As the late Muhammad Ali once told us, 'The man who has no imagination stands on the Earth. He has no wings; he cannot fly.' Now *there* was a storyteller! 'Fly like a butterfly, sting like a bee!' Or was it vice versa, 'fly like a bee, sting like a butterfly...'? No doubt the answer will come to me.

"We Americans are willing to free eight dolphins from their imprisonment in the National Aquarium in Baltimore, Maryland, yet we allow the Palestinian people to remain under the yoke of Israeli aggression. Just because *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* turned out to be a forgery by the Czar's secret police, that does not absolve us Jews of all guilt.

"In conclusion, riding down life's golden escalator, let us dedicate our efforts to the world's most oppressed minority," Barry proposes gallantly, inviting a little call and response. Can't hurt. Wake everyone up.

"You think Palestinians are the world's most oppressed minority?" asks Roger Kaminski the journalist, nailing down any ambiguity. His red hair tufted like a squirrel, he wears a perpetual scowl on his sun-tanned face.

"Well, no— "

"*Black lives matter!*" agrees Patrice Gerard, impressed at Barry's acumen.

"I meant— "

"You can't mean *Jews?!!*" wonders Yaakov the guide.

"No, no," Barry stammers.

"He means gays!" answers Barbie Quint matter-of-factly. She works in fashion.

"Actually— "

"It's obvious he means *Muslims!*" shouts Oso Buko, smiling in agreement.

"Insha'Allah."

"Er... " gulps Barry. *As a rhetorical flourish, this device is turning into a disaster,* he thinks in dead panic as the group's cohesion splinters before his eyes.

"Poor people!" suggests Roger.

"The idle rich..." counters Barbie.

"The idle poor..."

"MSM, the mainstream media?"

"Trump supporters!"

"Mel Gibson?" asks Yaakov.

"Drug dealers!" ... "Drug users..." "Narcs!" they conjecture, focusing briefly on narcotics.

"*Who the hell is he talking about?*" blurts Erik the Swede angrily.

Children!" declares Erit. As Barry's wife, she should know. Additionally, children are an issue in their marriage: They don't want any. Little tykes would slow down their lifestyle.

"Really, I was thinking *women* as the world's most oppressed minority," Barry wails, flapping his arms.

There's a long pause, while the group digests this information. Surveying their frumpy expressions, the outcome doesn't look promising. A mad gust of wind blows his cheat sheet off the rostrum and across the square.

"This shows that mankind oppresses just about *everybody* at one time or another!" explains Patrice, standing and addressing the group. Mercifully, he's solved the problem.

"To Holy Land Tours," declares Barry, "we say: 'Behold! One man's vacation is another man's sojourn into the crucible of Hell. Bring on the bus, you motherfuckers!' "

Not understanding half of what they have said, their host, Jamal Kumquat—rotund, sporting a purple fez, a black Hitler moustache decorating his upper lip—welcomes them effusively. "We Druze produce goat cheese," he declares booming, "but let nothing curdle our relations!" Opening a cardboard box, Jamal releases a white dove, symbolizing peace. Its pink albino eyes staring nervously, it flutters a few feet and crashes to the ground, exhausted. "Didn't anybody test fly the dove?" Jamal can be heard asking his staff bitterly. An embarrassing moment. "Who are we?" he cries incredulously. "John Kerry?"

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Even if Jerusalem is only three hours away by bus, Barry is damned if he's going to listen to Arabic zither music blaring from the loudspeaker above each seat. Sitting

next to Erit in a row halfway back, facing the emergency window, it takes a while to get Yaakov the guide's attention.

No problem, of course, since Barry and Erit have their adages down pat: Don't sweat the small stuff (and it's all small stuff). U R what U eat. A penny saved is a meaningful opportunity indefinitely postponed. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank is a crime against humanity.

"Yo, *compadre*," he eventually explains to Yaakov, all but shouting in his ear. "Peep this. Enough with the audio Chinese water torture. Gotchu?"

"Torture is forbidden under Article 3 of the Geneva Convention," Yaakov replies uncertainly, looking about 10 years old.

"That's *why I want it to stop!*" seethes Barry Lipowitz. "You're turning me into a frothing militarist."

"Whoa, what?"

"Stop the music! I want to get off!"

"The recorded music?"

"The same," he sighs.

"Okay," Yaakov replies doubtfully. Five minutes later, after consultation with Shmuel, the driver, Yaakov returns down the aisle to inform Barry, "It's not our bus. It's a rental. We have no idea where the button is for the sound system. Listen, as soon as we reach a car park, I'll ask someone and get it turned off." Ever helpful, Yaakov hands him an unopened packet containing two E.A.R. yellow earplugs. "Just until we reach Jerusalem," Yaakov assures him. "That's Maya Nasri doing the singing, by the way. Very popular Lebanese songstress. A total fox. Sexy bod and lots of soul."

Frustrated, Barry jams the earplugs into his ears.

An appointment has been made to visit the Knesset and confer with various pols. Batman vs Superman vs Mayor de Blasio. Finally, a building that doesn't look like it was erected in the last two weeks!

"Knesset, huh?" sneers Barbie Quint. "*Je ne sais quoi.*" A petite strawberry blonde, garrulous and breathtakingly antisemitic, she is convinced the Jews control everything. *Everything*. Maybe not on purpose, but still... Caustic, it makes sense that she has penned the *Sniper's Cave* series, novels that explore the lives of Rock, Tom, Bob, Rip, Tim and Bill. Members of a top secret U.S. government sniper unit, they spend most of their time shooting white supremacists and sniping at one another. Their glamorous young wives shop, gossip and cook, taking up at least half of every book. Women love this series: Ostensibly about military hunks, there are a lot of really good fashion tips and some dynamite recipes. You get the best of both worlds, fantastic sex and beef Stroganoff. Nobody ever goes hungry in a Barbie Quint novel.

When they arrive, half the Knesset is feasting on cupcakes provided by the von Dreck family. Until recently, they ran a bakery on Ben Yehuda Street in Tel Aviv called

*The Habsburger Palais*. "It's a shame they had to close," says Knesset member Yuri Schwartz. "They were very supportive of Israeli politics. This stabbing intifada is too much for them. They're moving back to Vienna. During World War Two, they did support the Nazi regime, so it's not really surprising—"

"WAIT!" demands Erit. "*Vienna?! Supported the Nazis???* Don't you see a contradiction?"

"No-o," Schwartz answers slowly, considering. Fresh-faced, as wide as he is tall, his physique doesn't help his argument. A true activist, in younger years he planted trees in Israel in order to have something to which he could chain himself in protest later in life. Thirty years in politics, however, has left him a cynic. "I think the von Drecks are your classic conformists. Like many people, they simply feel most comfortable supporting whoever is in power. WTF, half of us Israelis feel that way! You go along to get along."

Gritting his teeth, fists bunched in his pockets, Barry doesn't know where to *begin* to refute this windbag. Calling him a Quisling is meaningless and the term "collaborator" lost all credibility with the dissolution of the French Resistance after World War Two. This discussion is totally loopy.

That evening, swatting at sand flies, he and Erit watch the sun sink ironically into the sea. "This reminds me of the movie *Beach Blanket Bingo* with Frankie Avalon and Annette Funicello," he suggests. *When you got it, flaunt it.*

"The same sun is setting in Gaza, just a few miles down the coast," Erit reminds him. "We're free, they are not."

Mad hungry, they march into town to find a halfway affordable restaurant.

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Things look brighter the next day. "*Shalom* and welcome to *Eretz-Israel*," intones Erit's cousin Ozzy, toasting them with long-stemmed glasses of Carmel wine. The four of them— Barry, Erit, Cousin Ozzy and Cousin Shlomo— sit around a glass coffee table in the cousins' apartment in Ramat Gan. Sumptuously furnished, it's hard not to like. Among the Indo-European décor, the stuffed black leather couch and coffee table chairs shout "Danish Modern!" The six-foot long cedar table in the dining room whispers "Made in Lebanon." The brothers, bronze-skinned and bushy-haired, could be twins. Ozzy is clean-shaven, Shlomo has a soup-strainer moustache. They wear white shirts and black slacks. Erit has given Barry their backstory: Both men had been married. Ozzy was divorced, Shlomo a widower. Shlomo's wife died in a suicide bombing. A Palestinian insurgent climbed onto a bus, detonated his suicide vest and took everyone else on

board with him. By the time the fire department put out the blaze, only the skeletal frame of the bus remained.

Barry finds himself lusting after their intricately carved and gilded wall art. These Israelis! You can't love 'em and you can't hate 'em. "Is that a drawing by Chagall?" he asks, making conversation.

"Zoya Cherkassky," replies Shlomo.

Barry feels like an idiot. "Israel has the dirtiest politics in the world," he declares brightly, showing off his legal expertise. "Ehud Olmert, former mayor of Jerusalem and an ex-prime minister, just went to prison for bribery and corruption. He was preceded by a long and sorry list of similar officials, including former Israeli President Moshe Katzev, who sits incarcerated for rape and sexual harassment. He got seven years. It does make you wonder."

"Those are unusual cases," insists Ozzy, while Shlomo eyes Barry with a bemused expression of indignation on his face. "I know our Erit," says Ozzy. "You little twits are pre-disposed to hate everything about Israel."

"We're not antisemitic, we're anti-Zionists," insists Barry, an argument that goes down well in the States, but rings a little hollow here in the Land of Zion.

"To use the Yiddish, the two of you are *yenems zi yidden*," Ozzy replies. "You are 'somebody else's Jews,' practicing a brand of Judaism with unusual rituals and attitudes that we are not part of. We call you self-hating Jews."

"*Fuhgeddaboutit!*" complains Barry plaintively. "You're not being fair!"

"Typical Israeli aggression," fumes Erit.

"I'm an American Jew," Barry explains. "We're here to see how our money is being spent in the West Bank. Tell Netanyahu to stop rattling people's cages. Remember the old adage, 'He who rattles the cage of the tiger soon ends up inside.' Automatic, knee-jerk support of Israel is no longer guaranteed among America's younger generation. Netanyahu has sharp elbows, but our head-bangers are more inclined to fist bump with the Palestinian underdog than the Israeli alpha dog."

"How do you fist bump with a dog?" asks Shlomo, a furrow creasing his brow.

"On a dark desert highway," counters Ozzy, "the dude with a flashlight is king." They drink.

"Israel is *Likud*," insists Barry, sure of his politics. "Israel is rightwing."

"Israel *is* rightwing," agrees Ozzy. "After 70 years, everybody knows that trying to make peace with the Palestinians is a lost cause. All pain, no gain. Yitzhak Rabin died trying."

"The definition of insanity," adds Shlomo, "is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting to get a different result."

"Well-I-I," drawls Barry, "you can lead a horse to the River Jordan but you can't make it drink. Is that your argument?"

"We should never have invaded Lebanon, but you can't unring a bell," Shlomo agrees, shaking his head. "Give it time. When a few of your friends and relatives have been murdered, you will be far less forgiving." He looks ready to slit Palestinian throats with a cheese knife.

Swallowing a clunk of wine, Barry wants to counter with a flippant remark, but refrains.

"What about your country?" asks Ozzy. "Half the people hate Donald Trump, the other half hate Hillary Clinton. How can you criticize us?"

"Two wrongs don't make a right," hisses Erit. "Melania Trump is on our side! You don't live in Manhattan, you wouldn't understand."

A year ago, to be ironic, Barry wore a Trump tee. Since then, the joke hasn't aged well. "Electoral politics in America are based on a 240-year tradition of democratic representation and States' rights," he explains, feeling like a pompous ass. "Donald J. Trump ignores all that. A failed businessman, he's an economic predator. A Manhattanite, half of what he says is bringing the cray-cray, the other half is high-lining. Like Erit says, if you're not from around the way, you wouldn't understand. Trump attacks minorities, opposes immigration, insults women, supports white supremacists, ignores the Constitution and threatens democracy. But he might be good for the Jews."

"According to *The Economist*," Ozzy points out, wiping the table top with a soft brown cloth, "a Trump presidency would be riskier to international trade than an armed conflict in the South China Sea, the European Union falling apart or even jihadist terrorism. The man is irreconcilable. He has no standing."

"As every schoolchild learns, America leads the world. We contribute three billion dollars a year in military aid to Israel," counters Barry.

"Of course," Ozzy replies, putting a green wooden bowl of figs on the table. "Our two countries have a special relationship. We Israelis appreciate your help. If there's anybody you wish to see while you are here, we can probably arrange the introduction. Israel is a small country in that respect. Everybody knows someone who knows someone."

"I'm sure that won't be necessary," replies Erit icily, setting down her wineglass on the coffee table vehemently enough to make it ping.

The cousins are just like Erit's parents! The same damn thing, endlessly solicitous, constantly asking what they need, consistently offering to help. When Ozzy announces, a concerned look on his face, "We have a rooftop apartment you can use for a longer stay," Barry knows it is time to leave. The *last* thing they want to do is become *beholden* to these people!

The cousins suggest lunch at a *Sbarro* pizzeria. Erit spots the obvious reference: Everyone knows a *Sbarro* was the site of a 2001 Palestinian suicide bombing that claimed the lives of 15 Israelis and left 130 wounded. Everyone knows that! *Typical*

*political propaganda!* As if there were no other pizzerias they could choose! *Sbarro is synonymous with terrorist attacks and fresh stromboli*, she silently frets. When Ozzy hands Barry a pack of *Noblesse*, the high-end Israeli cigarette, clearly he hopes that Barry will succumb to lung cancer. That cigarette has the highest tar and nicotine content of any cigarette on the Israeli market! Insidious, conniving Israelis, they are positively Machiavellian. No wonder the Palestinians can never "get their land back," as they so aptly put it. All of Israel, to boot.

Sighing, Barry tries yet again. "I am J Street. I am pro-Israel," he insists. "The 1946 borders."

"You mean the Palestinian Mandate?" guffaws Ozzy. "Aren't you the root and bow man! Tear the country out by its roots, will you? *Zeh lo tov!* Not good."

Shlomo isn't laughing. "We're not stupid," he announces. With eyes like gun barrels and his Pancho Villa moustache, he looks like one unhappy camper. "We know who our friends are. In every conflict, J Street sides with the Palestinians. Saying that you are pro-Israel doesn't make J Street a Zionist organization. Pro-Palestinian, yes. Pro-Israel, no."

"*Whassup?*" asks Barry, impervious to criticism.

"Let's clear up the mystery of why there's no two-state solution," Ozzy proposes with the finality of an ax chopping wood. "The Palestinians want for their future state the entire dagger-shaped land labeled on western maps as 'Israel.' Every centimeter, every dunam of land. It's what they teach their children in their schools. *That* is the 800-pound gorilla in the room that everyone tries to ignore at peace conferences."

"Everybody knows that already!" insists Erit, exasperated.

"Here's a clunker for you!" Barry guffaws. " 'A land without people for a people without land.' Why in the world did Golda Meir say that? What was she thinking?"

"I think," opines Schlomo, "the Palestinians are like Ali Baba, looking for the magic incantation, the 'Open Sesame,' that magically will make all us troublesome Jews disappear, marching backwards into the sea."

"You have to work with the hand you're dealt," claims Barry.

"I don't get you," Shlomo complains. "If the Palestinians take all the land, what happens to us?"

"Oh! Jews will be allowed to live in a modern, secular State of Palestine," Erit chirps helpfully.

This statement is followed by a very pregnant pause.

"And who," asks Ozzy, carefully choosing his words, "advocates that position?"

"I do!" cries Erit. "It is *my* position, it is *Erit Sameach's* position. Nothing the Palestinians have done compares to the genocidal apartheid regime of Bibi Netanyahu, amply funded and supported by the U.S. Congress."

"Twenty thousand rockets fired from Gaza?" asks Shlomo.

"That's Gaza!"

"Knife attacks. Screwdriver attacks. Motor vehicles which Palestinians use to plow into groups of Israeli pedestrians?" asks Ozzy.

"Those are desperate acts by the disenfranchised!" explains Barry.

"BDS, the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement?"

"Economic warfare," replies Barry breezily.

"And you call yourself pro-Israel?" scoff the cousins.

"Yerp! Certainly!"

"Call yourself whatever you like. You sound like an enemy," Shlomo observes, eyes aglow with rage.

"Look at Jack, back to the attack!" Erit insists self-righteously, jumping to her feet and gathering up her possessions. "Why are you always attacking people?"

"In Israel, aggressive behavior is not an issue," observes Ozzy. "When you get four Jews in a room, you hear five opinions. Everything in life is political."

♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥ 12 ♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥

Soldiers in khaki, rifles slung over their shoulders, patrol in front of the beachfront hotel in Tel Aviv. With the sun setting in the west, by the evening of the third day, it begins to irritate him. Approaching the young men, Barry asks them jocularly, "Hey, soldier boys, is an attack imminent?"

"Hello!" answers one of the youngsters, not more than 20. "You are staying at this hotel?"

Barry shows them his passport and electronic key card. "Peace out!" he jokes. "All we are saying is give Frump a chance!"

"Cool beans! Go inside. Enjoy your stay," replies the young man laconically, having exhausted his English.

Speaking Hebrew, Erit wades in, giving the soldiers what-for. They respond in kind. Roughly translated, they tell her, "Arab slut! Who are you talking to? Do what you are being paid for. Take your American john to his room and fuck his brains out." Pointing to the revolving front door of the hotel, the soldiers stare angrily at the tourists. Sensing disaster in the making, the head bellhop in his fine red uniform and black top hat pushes open a pneumatic door from inside and beckons them welcome.

♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥ 13 ♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥

That night, in their room, stretched out on the bed, Erit suffers a total meltdown. Barry has unpacked, but she hasn't. Superstitious, she thinks that if they never move in, they can't be kicked out! Your basic gypsy, Erit spends her whole life moving from place to place. She is always in the process of moving in, only to have circumstances change, ending in the proverbial eviction notice. No wonder she doesn't finish unpacking! Gasping "Oh, oh, oh!" breathlessly, she cries, drools and pounds the pillows. "The poor Palestinians!" she shouts. "It's so frustrating! Fucking Israel!" Gyrate her hips, her face wet with tears, she pulls Barry to her. "Yes! Yes! Fuck me, Raoul!" she groans, blindly clawing at his neck, before descending into a smoldering, smoky finish with just a touch of erotic hysteria.

Barry does as his wife requests.

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Relocating to Jerusalem the following morning, they dump their bags at the Waldorf Astoria, pile back on the bus and drive to Damascus Gate to visit the *souk* open air market inside the walls of the Old City. Yaakov the guide leads the way, making sure they know which shopkeepers are Jews and which are Arabs. "Ho hum," says Barbie Quint. "This don't impress me much." Taking selfies, they talk to everyone they meet, arguing with soldiers who examine their passports at impromptu checkpoints.

"Now where *exactly*," asks Patrice Gerard haughtily, "are you hiding the Jerusalem crickets? *Stenopelmatus fuscus*."

Since no one knows what he's talking about, Barry pulls out his tablet and goes online to google it. A night burrower common to the southwestern United States.

"Please stop," Barry beseeches him.

"But these Israelis—"

"I know, I know, but please stop asking about crickets."

Oso Buko wants to know if booksellers stock Hebrew – Reformed Egyptian dictionaries. Firstly, this isn't London or a bridge over the Seine. It's hard enough to even *find* a bookseller. Secondly, the ones they do find don't have anything in Reformed Egyptian. No novels, no Bibles, not even The Book of Mormon. The proprietors suggest he try a university bookstore.

They pause in the doorway of a shop belonging to an ornamental lamp-maker from Vilnius. Wearing a skullcap, sandals, a jerkin and a tattered tan apron over gunny sack pants, he looks about 100 years old. "When my grandson said he wanted to do something for the country..." he complains forlornly, "...I didn't think he meant joining a

hip hop band! Israel is supposed to be a light unto the nations," he adds, indicating his wares.

"*Kamazman?* How much?" snaps Erit angrily.

Barry leads her away before the situation devolves into a major confrontation.

Shiraz, from Wales, bursts out laughing. "Make 'em all into lampshades," he suggests to the gnarled craftsman in a thick Cardiff accent. "Where there's smoke, there's fire, eh, old sport? (*War thar's smock, thar's fahr, eh, auld spahrt?*) Send 'em all up through the smokestack, that's *my* solution."

The Old City is crawling with armed Israeli troops, a veritable sea of khaki. Niceties aside, simply for the sake of survival, Barry asks Shiraz to please, please, please mind his tongue.

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They tour the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, at least the accessible part. Amidst major scaffolding, a Greek crew is renovating the entire chapel, which is collapsing under its own weight. Using titanium bolts and stabilizing mortar, they hope to permanently restore the 200-year-old structure. This is the fourth chapel. The holiest place in all Christendom, followers of Christ have been praying here since A.D. 66. What is said to be the tomb of Christ lies underneath a towering rotunda. During his rule, Hadrian built a pagan temple to Aphrodite atop the tomb to discourage Christian pilgrims. His choice of the love goddess Aphrodite was a way to give the chaste pilgrims the finger. The Emperor Constantine dismantled Hadrian's edifice and built the first chapel in the 4th Century. At long last, the site was Christian. That building was destroyed by the Egyptian Caliph al-Hakim in 1009. The Crusaders built the second chapel, which was later destroyed by the Khwarezmian Turks, who rode into the church on horseback, lopping off the heads of praying monks. A third chapel burned down in 1808. That's when the Greeks built this current domicile to the spirit of Christ.

While bored again Christians and sticky-faced schoolchildren ogle the sanctuary under the hawk-like gaze of Eastern Orthodox monks in somber black robes and amazing hats, Erit and Barry probe deep into the basilica. "Jesus loves me, this I know, because the Bible tells me so," he murmurs over and over under his breath. In this deeply spiritual place, he finds it nurturing. It's chilly in here. They discover an out-of-the-way, hidden chapel containing the raised tomb of some obscure crusader. Opening an intricately fashioned metal gate, they approach the tomb. "Nobody we know," confirms Barry. Silently stripping off their jeans, they do the down and dirty atop the chilly stone lid. Having screwed their way to victory in a Men's Room stall at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, they are old hands. Maybe they can fornicate their

way to salvation. Who knows? It sure beats getting crucified! Even if, G-d forbid, they should get caught, they know the authorities won't do anything. Nobody wants an international incident. Do the hippy shake!

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Somebody tipped off the Arabs! Flashing diplomatic credentials, looking strangely out of place, an Egyptian delegation dressed in fine linen the color of chalk visits them at their hotel. "We know who you are. We are great admirers," explains Saïd Ramadan, Second Secretary of the Egyptian Embassy. "We would like to assign to you this man, Colonel Daoud El-Wasabi, as a bodyguard for the remainder of your stay."

Everyone looks at the Colonel. Granite-faced, dressed in an olive-drab suit, he seems like a rough customer.

"An *Egyptian* bodyguard?" croaks Oso doubtfully, wringing his hands and shaking his head.

"We come in peace," insists Barry, at a loss.

"I'm sure that will not be necessary," hisses Erit. "Here in Israel, the IDF is perfectly capable of providing protection."

"Okay," says Saïd, looking worried. "Just don't venture into the Sinai. We cannot guarantee your safety."

Once they leave, Barbie Quint comes out of the bathroom, where she's been hiding. "What did they want???" she asks shrilly.

"They offered us additional security," explains Patrice.

"Against whom?!"

"Against everybody."

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In preparation for a visit to the West Bank, they receive an Intel briefing. "Military Intelligence reports—" begins the Israeli officer in his immaculately pressed uniform, indicating the first slide in a Power Point display.

"Whoa!" shouts journalist Roger Kaminski. "Just, *whoa!* Now there's an oxymoron, if I ever heard one! *Military... Intelligence?* I. Don't. Think. So."

"Bravo!" cheer Barry and Erit. "Go, team, go! Sock it to 'em!" Jumping to their feet, they applaud enthusiastically. *Huzzahs!* A standing ovation. Dancing, they make a quick circuit of the conference room. *Get down!* Hooray for anarchy!

Embarrassed, the Crazy for Peace people roll their eyes and sigh audibly. "You guys are a little noisy. Could we at least hear what the IDF has to say?" they beseech their guests.

"You Israelis may have created drones, but we Americans invented the light bulb, the phonograph and basketball!" counters Barry, annoyed. Sitting down, he listens stolidly. This certainly isn't the way things are done back home!

"As you may have heard," the same officer begins again, smiling ever so slightly, "Donald Trump has announced in Terre Haute, Indiana that he will broker a peace treaty between Israel and the Palestinians. We will all look forward to that!"

The room fills with discreet laughter.

"On the home front, Amnon Reshef has founded Commanders for Israel's Security. They call their peace plan *Security First*. Reshef's idea is to stop waiting on negotiations. Instead, he suggests we finish the security barrier in the West Bank, stop building settlements, and *then* put pressure on both sides to negotiate. Stabilize. Secure. Negotiate. It's an interesting concept. Something might actually come of this.

"Further afield, our own Yisrael Katz, Minister of Transportation and Intelligence, is exploring the option of building an artificial island three miles off the coast of Gaza. Once again, the purpose is to stabilize a bad situation. It would give the Gazans a commercial port, solving a major logistical bottleneck, and open up Gaza to international trade. Putting the port off-shore allows Israel to man checkpoints on the causeway between the island and the mainland. Hopefully, this will prevent the importation of weaponry and contraband. Fat chance, but okay! The island could also feature an airport. Budgeted at \$5 billion, the Israeli Security Cabinet is batting the ball back and forth on that one. If anybody finds \$5 billion floating around, please let me know!"

More discreet laughter.

"Finally, the Palestinian terrorist attack on the Tel Aviv food court at the Sarona Market in which two West Bank cousins in suits shot and killed four Israelis and wounded 15 others. Their attack with homemade 'Carlo' type submachine guns, based on the Swedish K firearm, may be interpreted by some as a relatively violent critique of the chocolate brownies and coffee served at the café. Our investigation has led us to the unequivocal conclusion, however, that the young men showed up already planning to attack the patrons, regardless of the food quality at the *Max Brenner* desert emporium. Please note: Theoretically, a high Zagat rating may actually *attract* terrorist attacks. Terrorists like big venues with lots of soft targets. Think about it. Attractive locations draw big crowds."

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You would think that in a city as large as Jerusalem or a country as diverse as Israel, Barry and his group could go about their business basically incognito. Not so. On their second visit to the Old City, ostensibly to talk with Arab vendors about discrimination, three healthy-looking young Israelis in H & M sweatpants and matching black and white tees— two girls and a boy— track them down. "Hey, man!" they whine. "Who do you think you are, coming here out of the blue, no invitation from us, *Jewish Voice for Peace*, no experience in the IDF or anti-war movement, tourists with no real roots in the country, most of you *not even Jewish*, and *you are going to write about Israel?! Get real!*"

"Well, the purpose of our visit is to examine the very issues you raise," Barry placates them. "We are stepping up to protest the injustices perpetrated upon the Paleolithic... uh... Palestinians... living in the very Middle East since time immemorial and even before that. We cannot normalize nor caramelize this iniquity. It's obscene, it's obtuse, it's *mucho* bad. There's no sugarcoating the candy apple. The early bird catches the worm and the Palestinians have been squatting on this AstroTurf since, like, forever."

All the youngsters do is give him the finger and walk off.

*Young people! So impatient.* Do they have any idea how long it takes to proofread the galleys to a book of 320 pages, including Acknowledgments, Footnotes and Bibliography? *Have they ever struggled to find inspiration in The Hamptons?*

Tramping the same streets and alleyways a second and even a third time, it's Patrice Gerard who announces, "These A-habs ain't the bros we lookin' fo'. They's all in on the system."

"Please talk like a human being," Oso requests.

"These Arab merchants have obviously sold out. We gotta look further afield if we want to hit pay dirt."

Their search for authenticity takes them to East Jerusalem. As they meander through the narrow streets, the number of Israeli patrols increases alarmingly. "It's not a war zone," they keep reminding themselves. "People live here."

It's a sandstone city, built on two levels. "Hi!" shout the locals, waving from their terraces. When approached, they turn out to be Americans from Skokie, Illinois or West Palm Beach, Florida. The walk starts to feel strangely surreal, the pebbled stone landscape alien, the people entirely too familiar. Far from being on edge, the local inhabitants appear to be happy, exuberant transplants. Happy in a way the rest of the country hasn't displayed.

"Aren't you afraid of Arab riots?" Barbie Quint asks a young housewife named Miriam, dressed in the long skirt of the Ultra-Orthodox. "You live so close by them."

"The Arab Quarter? We don't associate much with them," Miriam explains blithely. "They do their thing, we do ours."

"Something's not right," Patrice decides, after another ten minutes of walking doesn't seem to bring them any closer to the Arabs. "Every time we approach the east end of town, the street is blocked off, bricked up or sealed shut."

"Word," replies Barry. "What's going on, Yaakov?"

Interrupting his cellphone conversation, Yaakov sheepishly acknowledges that the Jewish and Arab communities of East Jerusalem are fenced off from one another.

"WHAT???" demands Barry.

"Come." Yaakov mounts stone steps to the upper level and, sure enough, through a chain link fence, they find themselves breathing dust while looking into the courtyard of an elementary school.

"Arab," explains Yaakov. "Look but don't touch."

"Fuck."

"It keeps the peace," he suggests apologetically.

"Hey, little school kids!" hails bald-headed Patrice genially, waving, when some Arab boys in green and white school uniforms and brown shoes pour from a doorway. "How ya doin'?"

Startled, the children glance up at the gaggle of uncouth strangers lining the fence above them. Quietly consulting one another, they disappear back inside the schoolhouse, as shy as birds.

"Damn!" swears Patrice. "Fucking apartheid."

"Everybody wants it like this," insists Yaakov. "Jerusalemites have learned to live together but apart for generations."

"Now you sound like bloody *Likud*," growls Shiraz in his thick Welsh brogue. "Separate but unequal."

"Wow!" replies Yaakov, taken aback. "You may be right. I never thought about it like that."

Shaking his head, Barry sighs wearily. *¡Mierda!* Maybe Yaakov is prepped regarding the West Bank, but he seems woefully uninformed when it comes to East Jerusalem. "Go back and find out the party line," he requests. "I refuse to believe that the Arabs of East Jerusalem are content being penned up like cattle."

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Avi.

Cousin Avi is one scary dude. Not actually estranged, he and Erit have at best a distanced relationship. While Barry and Erit can look down their noses at everyone living in Israel simply because they don't live in America, Avi divides his time equally

between Jerusalem and California. Whereas they are writers and can secretly chortle at working stiffs, Avi runs a political consultancy that wields real power. While Barry preaches that "the pen is mightier than the sword," Avi isn't averse to chopping off heads. A chameleon, neither Republican nor Democrat, Avi works both sides of the political spectrum. He is consul for several small Eastern European countries who find his lobbying efforts in Hollywood and Silicon Valley both timely and effective. Where Barry and Erit have three million dollars in the bank, Cousin Avi has seven million. The fact that he doesn't give a shit scares them. Having fought in several of Israel's wars, when in America, Avi likes to take helicopters onto some of Colorado's more inaccessible peaks in the San Juan Mountains where he goes downhill skiing on virgin snow.

"It's too hot to stay cooped up in the apartment. Let's visit Masada," he purrs into the phone.

So while the rest of the gang does the museums, B & E accept the invite of Erit's least attentive cousin. As chisel-jawed and crinkly-eyed as Paul Newman, his scalp is shaved to a quarter inch of peach fuzz. He exudes charisma from every pore. Dressed in hiking boots, khaki shorts and a green jungle shirt with a dozen pouches, he drives them down to Masada in a vintage Renault that sputters like a tea kettle. A music enthusiast, he has a cassette adapter that plugs into the tape deck on the dashboard, allowing him to play compact discs on a portable CD player. Blaring from tinny speakers, his musical taste centers on Rami Fortis's punk bands from the 1980's and the rapper Lay-Z.

"Why bother with all that mechanical junk to play music if all you listen to is techno?" complains Erit.

"I'm into Conceptual Art," Avi exclaims. "It's the idea of the thing that counts. I'd play 8-track if I could get the equipment."

"What's 8-track?" asks Erit.

Barry and Avi look at one another. "Still psychic after all these years?" Avi taunts Erit. "Or is it psycho?" An obvious throwback to their childhood. "You never knew Erit when she was a girl. A total tomboy. She took piano lessons but preferred rope climbing."

"That's true," she admits. Barry hopes Avi can make some sense out of modern Israel. Erit harbors no such conviction. The fact that Avi writes for rightwing political magazines in the States is just another mark against him. "How are your parents?" she remembers to ask.

"They're in Tel Aviv working at a desalination plant," Avi replies, laughing. "Can you imagine? At their age? Engineers never grow old. They convert sea water into drinking water. My sister says hello."

"Ronit?"

"That would be her, unless she's changed her name."

"Still with the military?"

"She continues to devise weapons of limited destruction," Avi cracks, with obvious pride. "It's all so hush-hush, even I don't know what she does. We are Israelis. We achieve."

His teeth are clenched so tightly, Barry is getting lockjaw.

Masada is a mountain fortress 1300 feet above the Dead Sea. According to Josephus' account, it became the last redoubt in Israel's revolt against Rome in 69 – 73 A.D. Besieged for three months, its 953 Jewish rebels preferred to take their own lives rather than be captured and enslaved by the Romans. Selecting ten executioners by lot, the Jews allowed their throats to be slit, one by one, after which the executioners dispatched each other. When the Romans arrived, they were greeted by the only survivors: two women and five children. Modern Israelis see Masada as a symbol of courage and resistance.

Starting at the Masada Museum, they take the Snake Trail on the eastern side of the mountain. They hike for 10 minutes in silence. Avi gazes at the Dead Sea through binoculars. "So, how do you like Israel?" he asks.

*Oh, no! Not again,* Barry groans. *If I say I don't like it, I get an argument. If I say I do, I get an argument.* "Too early to tell. Hard to say. No comment," he mumbles, dissembling.

"C'mon, man!" guffaws Avi. "I'm not asking you to sign away your inheritance. You've been here awhile, *what d'ya think?!*"

"NO COMMENT."

"That figures. This is the Year of Disaffected Jews," Avi remarks.

"*Scusa?*" replies Barry tartly. "Say again?"

"In America, you've got the Ultra-Orthodox. Chabad and Hasidim. You've got Orthodox, Conservative, Reform and Reconstructionist Judaism. So where do people like Bernie Sanders and Jill Stein come from?"

"Who is Jill Stein?" pants Barry. The climb is leaving him badly winded. It must be 100 degrees on the mountain.

"Now you sound like Ayn Rand," comments Avi with a dry chuckle. "Who is John Galt?" Jill Stein is the presumptive presidential nominee of the Green Party. She'll probably get four percent of the vote. Another Disaffected Jew. She wants to cut off military appropriations to Israel. She favors Palestinian statehood. She wants to try Israelis for war crimes." Standing on an outcrop, he pulls out an Army compass and checks magnetic north.

"I thought the Greens were like the Amish," Barry suggests. "Non-violent, ecologically sound, horse and buggy, homegrown chickens with a cow in every yard. Bicycles. Anti-nuclear."

"That was the 1980's edition," Avi comments bitterly. "Since the Communists hijacked it, the Green Party has become rabidly antisemitic."

"I prefer to think of them as pro-Palestinian," hisses Erit.

"Not since the 1970's, have I met so many anti-Zionist Jews," Avi insists. "Not pro-Palestinian. Anti-Zionist. Tough times breed contempt. As the last of your 'pro-Palestinians' leaves the smoldering wreckage that once was the Land of Israel, who'll turn out the lights?" he asks. Grinning, he returns to the binoculars, scouting their surroundings for terrorists. "We'll have peace about the same time that Antarctica qualifies for the Winter Olympics! Sea lions take gold in the 2,000-meter relay. Penguins take silver in water polo."

"You bugging," observes Barry, gulping water and chewing on a Bar Bary energy bar. Dates, walnuts & banana it says on the wrapper. It's like chewing tree bark. Between the heat and the exertion, Masada is killing him. "You're upset. How very post-modern!" he quips. He's curious about Avi's living arrangements Stateside, but he bites his tongue lest he find himself extending an invitation. You live in Manhattan, everyone wants to stay with you when they visit the Big Apple.

"The stylish left inside Israel is always rending its garments and crying '*Mea culpa!* My bad. Forgive me that I am not kinder to the Palestinians.' It's damn hard to cuddle a porcupine," Avi complains. "You get shot full of quills."

"This... That's..." pants Barry. "That's what I hate about you proponents of *realpolitik*," he blurts, perhaps the most honest thing he has said in the last 30 years. The altitude is having that effect. "You see the glass as half empty, while I see it as a golden opportunity to create an entirely new reality! All of us together as brothers and sisters, united. Man, woman and child. A spiritual rebirth!" *To hell with it!* Gasping for breath, he plops down on a cairn of stones by the side of the trail. He needs to rest.

"We're into the other thing," Erit proclaims adamantly.

"What other thing?" demands Avi.

"You know, the alternate universe. Astral projection. Time warps and black holes. Dark matter lives!"

"Not on my watch," growls Avi, looking, for the first time, truly angry.

Erit lets it slide.

"What are you going to do about the Shiites and the Sunnis?" asks Avi. "The Alawites versus everybody else? It's not like every Arab loves his brother."

"That's cold," complains Barry. He looks out over the valley floor. His vision a sweaty blur, he feels himself blacking out.

"You're trembling," remarks Avi, opening his knapsack and handing him salt tablets and a fresh water bottle. "The Jews of Masada held out for three months and when faced with defeat, they chose death over enslavement. I wonder what the American Jews will choose under a fascist MAGA presidency."

"That's so unfair!" explodes Erit furiously.

"History repeats itself. We're back in the 1930's and it sure doesn't resemble farce to me," declares Avi, calculating their elevation on his smartphone.

*How barbaric!* decides Barry. "You are so far to the right of Genghis Khan, you risk falling off the edge of the planet," he protests angrily. "I thought it was just your iconoclastic, libertarian style. I didn't think you actually believed all that stuff..."

Groaning, he adds, "Next time, let's take the cable car."

Avi laughs, not even winded. A typical sabra, born in Israel, bred for the desert.

*How unreal,* thinks Barry. *We come all this way and the bad guys get all the breaks!*

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It turns out, Masada is only a foretaste. Every day after 10 a.m., the cool, clear air of morning gets incinerated by a yellow sun that fries everything to a golden crisp. Panting in the blast furnace heat, chugging liters of water, Barry and his crew fear for their very survival. "Get me through this one day, Lord," they pray. Reason says it's just hot weather, but instinct rings alarm bells in their heads. "Sweat freely," reply the Israelis. They do.

Eating a light lunch in a Greek bistro in Petah Tikva, Erit orders *dolmades*. "I think these stuffed grape leaves were rolled in the last century," she complains.

"They are marinated in olive oil," explains the server, a dark, petulant Sephardic Jew whose family was among the few to escape Salonika before the Nazi massacre. "*Dolmades* have a very long shelf life."

"They are rancid," Erit insists, demanding to see the manager.

The closest thing to a manager is the cook, who comes out in a white smock covered in blood stains. Bald as a bowling ball, he carries a meat cleaver. Waving it threateningly, he asks, "Why did you order *dolmades* if you cannot eat them?"

"It's fine," sighs Barry, shoving the guilty appetizer to one side. "*Fuhgeddaboutit*. Here, Erit, eat some hummus. Try the pickles. Tomatoes! Pickled tomatoes."

"If grape leaves are on the menu and we order them and they serve them," she reasons, "they at least should be edible."

"Try the *moussaka!*" Barry pleads. "It's pleasantly spicy."

"What about my grape leaves?!"

**BAM!!!** With a mighty crash, the cook smashes his meat cleaver upon the offending item, shattering the white porcelain plate and sending shards of pottery in every direction. Thus rendering the meal inedible. "PAY... and... LEAVE!" he bellows, his face red, eyes bloodshot with anger.

*Temperamental Greeks*, thinks Barry. Fortunately, most of their group has already devoured enough to hold them until dinner. Barry pulls out his black American Express Centurion charge card.

"*Mah-zeh?*" asks the cook suspiciously, while the server rolls his eyes.

"Yaakov!" yelps Barry. "Explain to these cretins what a credit card does. *Pullease!*"

"That's a hard one," Yaakov points out. "This is Petah Tikva. Can't you pay cash?"

By scrounging everyone's shekels, they are able to cover the bill. "We'll go to the bank as soon as we're out of here. Or an ATM machine," Barry promises.

"I don't mind paying my way," claims Barbie Quint bitchily, "but I never forgive a moocher."

"I'M NOT A MOOCHER!" howls Barry.

"*Yu-u-u-uge!*" Barbie primly replies. "*Yu-u-u-uge!*"

Another meal down the hatch! Another Israeli experience.

Avi has given them a phone number to a member of the Israel Bridge Federation. When they call, a Russian answers, "*Da?*"

"Oh, I'm sorry, I'm calling to discuss a bridge date with, uh, Yosef."

"*Da*. I'm Yosef."

Barry explains who they are.

"Seven o'clock," says Yosef, giving them directions. "You'll pay the fee in shekels?"

"Of course. We're looking forward to the game."

"*Da, da*. We cannot take dollars," Yosef laments. "Some *shlemiel* might accuse us of currency smuggling."

"We'll play a lot of bridge," Barry suggests excitedly.

"Oh? You are in Israel a long time?"

"No. I meant we'll play every evening while we are here. We're leaving at the end of the week."

"This is not a lot of bridge," the Russian admonishes him, making him wish he'd never made the call.

"*Lama lo? WHY NOT?*" interjects Erit, taking the phone. "Are you afraid to play with us?"

*Ta-ta!* It's all right. The Russian can't wait to see them that evening.

Erit has a penchant for bidding "No Trump."

♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥ 21 ♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥

As the days wear on, everyone admires Yaakov, their guide, saddled with a dozen thankless tasks. "Yaakov didn't like his time in the IDF," confides Shmuel, the driver, to Barry. "So a lot of it is personal. Getting back at people in the military. His position on the Settlement Watch team of Crazy for Peace pays next to nothing, but Yaakov's a clever boy. He always finds other sources of income." True to form, Yaakov tries to sell them *Altnou* brand Hebrew-lettered wristwatches. Smuggled from the Czech Republic, they run counter-clockwise.

They bus to Tiberius to inspect the ruins of a Roman villa purportedly once the home of centurion Marcus Fartus. Standing on the crumbly site strewn with potshards, Yaakov lectures them on the righteousness of their mission: "The French statesman Georges Clemenceau told us 'Military justice is to justice as military music is to music.' I think he meant that it's not melodious, it's no Brahms's lullaby and it may not even be justice. Behold, my friends, the shattered remnants of the spoils of war. *Tempus fugit*, time is short, war's ill-gotten gains are at best temporal. Booty is as booty does. Put that on your bookshelf. Thus passes away the glory that was Rome, assigned to the dustbin of history. Only the proverbial pushpins and paperclips of antiquity remain." It sounds like he rehearsed this *spiel* in his bedroom.

"I don't see any pushpins," Oso complains, plucking a dirty paperclip from the ground.

"They must be on the other side of the villa," Barry suggests sardonically.

Kicking at the rubble, Barbie Quint announces, "Lookee here, this whole show don't impress me much."

As if on cue, Land Rovers come roaring up in a cloud of dust. Students from the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev embark carrying buckets, shovels, trowels and sieves. Their nominal leader, sporting Timberland hiking boots, blue shorts, a baggy university sweatshirt, a floppy blue hat and a bright red beard, marches up to Yaakov and declares, "*Scram!* This is an archeological dig! Who gave you permission to be here? Fuck off, fellah!"

"I was just showing— "

"Yeah, yeah! Take it up with the university provost!"

So Barry and the gang get back on the air-conditioned bus and proceed to the West Bank. At the security barrier, a wall reminiscent of West Berlin and Donald Trump, an armed Israeli soldier climbs aboard. Walking down the aisle, he points to each parcel in the overhead rack. "*Shay-lee?*" he asks. "*Shay-lee?*" He waits patiently for someone to claim the item as his own. When the baggage has been accounted for, he walks down the aisle again, slowly, staring into each person's face in turn. "*Kadima!*" he commands, signaling with the business end of his rifle that certain parties should vacate

the vehicle: Shmuel the driver, Yaakov the guide, Patrice Gerard, Oso Buko and Oki Nawa. Introducing them to the joys of a truly thorough examination of their documents and the reason they are in Israel. "If we're lucky, they'll skip the full body cavity search," Yaakov points out consolingly, dreaming of fat tips.

"I'm poet laureate of my prefecture in Japan," sobs Oki Nawa, plainly terrified. "I'm here in Israel to compare and contrast as many kinds of falafel as we can find. I saw graffiti on the walls. Is this a hippy hangout?"

Writers!

"We members of the black community take offense at your racial profiling," Patrice Gerard tells the Israeli soldiers, handing them his business card. "I can get you very reasonable rates regarding Holocaust survivor demands for restitution from the German government for artwork looted by the Nazis. I'm familiar with the process and I have colleagues who *sprechen Deutsch*. In the meantime, I protest this curbside outrage in the name of the Malagasy Jews, the Lost Tribe of Israel in Madagascar. Indian Ocean, calamine lotion, mad Maddy Madagascar be the biblical land of Ophir, a major source of lemurs and vanilla extract. Descendants of the Levites be 'round the 'hood in Vatanasina-Vohipeno. You knows any of them Joes? Ark of the Covenant be buried on the island. *No lie!* It's a good thang. Why you makin' a beef?"

Wisely, Yaakov shuts him down before the situation escalates any further. Eventually, everyone is allowed to resume their journey.

♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥ 22 ♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥

Getting to the nitty-gritty, they make their first stop in the West Bank, a hilly desert full of scrub.

"This is our WALK FOR FREEDOM!" chants Oso belligerently. He sashays forth, looking regal in his round cloth hat and flowing, multi-colored African robe.

"But you're only walking from the bus stop to the Visitors' Center," counters Roger Kaminski. A journalist, he demands a modicum of fact mixed in with the rhetoric. He writes well, but everything comes out scathingly negative. Which is why Barry has chosen him, hoping for an exposé or three. For example, Israeli white slavers. Russian prostitutes. Maybe the Israeli Connection in drug trafficking.

"Even the longest journey begins with a single step," Oso declares magnanimously. "Walk the walk and talk the talk, whitey."

A young Arab boy approaches, offering to sell them souvenirs. "Wood from the cross, parchment from the Dead Sea Scrolls, shell casings from Baruch Goldstein's Uzi machine gun."

Charitable, Barry buys three shell casings. Irritated, Erit tells him he's an idiot. "It's *murderabilia*," Barry protests. "There's always a resale market for this stuff."

"Whatever," fumes his wife.

Looking over the sandstone building, Barbie Quint announces, "That there don't impress me much." They're beginning to understand that she says this upon arrival at every new location.

Inside the Visitors' Center, the *Bet Mityashvim*, they meet Yehuda, a weathered local politician of some renown. Dressed in Arab sandals, sun-bleached denim shorts and a torn white tee, two days' stubble on his chiseled jaw, he's a walking example of the psychic toll the Occupied Territories take on Jew and Arab alike. Of all the positions open to him as a local dignitary, the one Yehuda wanted most was Chief of the Regional Power Grid. Thoroughly entrenched, he loves driving from settlement to settlement after 10 p.m. every night in his jeep, Snap's *The Power* blaring on the stereo: "I've got the power! I've got the power!..." Unlocking the cage to the control panel just off the main road at each checkpoint, he pulls out his bullhorn and gaily shouts in Hebrew "*Lights out, suckers!*" Pulling the switch, he plunges his co-religionists into medieval darkness. Nobody crosses Yehuda. He has the power.

They are seated in a rock garden under an immense skylight. After the usual greetings, *shalom* this, *shalom* that, women in sun frocks and kerchiefs serve them Turkish coffee in tiny cups. Each coffee comes with a glass of chilled well water to offset dehydration. "*Le chayim*," exclaim their hosts. "To life!" After that, the visitors walk around, studying the charts, graphs and displays lining the walls. These illustrate population growth, crops, livestock, economics. Facts and figures. Examples of paper money under the Ottoman Turks, membership cards in agricultural collectives of the 1920's and 2,000-year-old urns reside behind glass. There's also a presentation about *SodaStream*, an example of the pernicious influence of the BDS movement: Hounded out of the Occupied Territories by the threat of an international boycott, now relocated inside Israel proper, the once-thriving local factory *ist kaputt* — it's gone! — and 470 paid Palestinian jobs with it. Call it withdrawal symptoms. "If we withdraw from the West Bank, it will just become a repeat of Gaza," Yehuda tells them. "Israelis out, terrorists in. Everyone loses except the terrorists."

A considerate host, he takes Barry on a tour of the fields. Accustomed to getting a baker's dozen on every purchase, one-on-one, no witnesses, Barry hopes to get the real dope regarding the occupation. "What do you grow in the greenhouses?" he asks for starters.

"Carnations," replies Yehuda, taking him inside. "For the European market. We're losing market shares to Spain, but flowers are still a moneymaker. We grow tomatoes and eggplants, too, you know, but they sell so cheaply around here, you can't make a living on fresh produce."

Aha! Exploitation of the local economy.

They walk back out into the sunshine. A Bedouin stands by the nozzle to an irrigation pipe. As the sparkling water gushes forth, he fills one of his two plastic buckets. He has a blue one and a white one, the colors of Israel! He smiles at the westerners sheepishly.

"Why does he look so guilty?" Barry asks, visions of Mandingos dancing in his head.

"Because, Jewboy, he's stealing water," harrumphs Yehuda.

"Hey, you punkin' me? " asks Barry. "Surely it's his water, too!"

"He didn't pay for the prospecting or the drilling of the well, the steel pipes, the nozzle or the faucet. What he is doing is simply stealing water."

"Certainly the water belongs to him, too!" insists Barry. "It seems so obvious. He lives on the land, you live on the land. The sunlight, the air, the water should be shared equally."

"You think so?"

"Of course!"

"Listen, *grauber yung*, not even the Bedouin thinks that!" Yehuda concludes vehemently, pointing at the robed Arab, who dances around in the hot sun, embarrassed. Embarrassed, but getting the water.

Despite further probing, Yehuda's well seems to run dry right before Barry's eyes.

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*DATELINE, Hebron – A group of renowned international writers, advocating greater autonomy for the Palestinian people, today visited the grave of notorious mass-murderer Baruch Goldstein, the Israeli-American physician who went berserk in 1994, took his Galil assault rifle to the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron and killed 29 Palestinians who were at prayer, wounding 125 others. Under the leadership of prize-winning American author Barry "The Dude" Lipowitz, the writers stood sweltering in the heat at the settlement of Kiryat Arba. Contemplating this shrine to the Settler Movement, Lipowitz warned, "We're not having the bestest day, but we'll do what we can to understand the enormity of criminal conduct behind the actions of this murderous creep. Hitler would be proud. Or Mussolini. Maybe Stalin. Yeah, definitely Stalin. Goldwasser would have made one of them proud, I'm sure! Ou sommes nous? There are certainly Arab-haters in the world, and no doubt they idolize someone like Geldman. We, on the other hand, think Grossman had a language deficiency. Unable to express his rage in words, he resorted to high caliber bullets."*

*Goldstein*, that was his name, *Goldstein!* As in George Orwell's 1984. *Goldstein*, the Leon Trotsky fifth-columnist betraying the revolution through his simple declarations and insidious propaganda. A little like Donald Trump. *Goldstein!* Barry and his entourage know all about Emmanuel Goldstein, thank you very much. Obviously, in this case, the apple didn't fall very far from the tree!

"Baruch Goldstein," Yaakov the guide intones, a sour look on his kisser. "The inscription says he died a martyr with clean hands and a pure heart. His admirers place small stones on his grave in lieu of flowers."

"How did he die?" asks Barry.

"Oh, the enraged Muslims overwhelmed him and beat him to death."

"Sweet," gulps Barry.

"The last time I was here," hisses Erit, dressed in a halter top and shocking pink hot pants that accentuate her curvy legs, "I brushed the stones off his headstone. Such a beast deserves no commemorative stones!"

"Show some respect for the dead," murmurs Shmuel the driver, looking shocked.

"What about the Palestinian dead?!" rants Erit, her face a furious red.

"Relax. Relax, honey," implores Barry, nervously taking her arm to console her.

Erit pulls out an e-cig and stalks off for a quick time-out.

"Hey, you!" catcalls a group of local boys from the kibbutz, abandoning their game of soccer. "What you doin' with *that* creep?!" Pointing at Yaakov, they address him as "Hey, fatso!" Never actually touching anyone, they manage to stampede among the adults in a threatening horde. Soon, they are joined by angry settlers shouting "Get outta here!" and "Murderers! You're no pacifists. You don't mind violence, as long as the victims are Israelis. What about our dead? If you cut us, do we not bleed?!"

"That's... you..." Barry sputters, but it's like trying to argue with a swarm of angry badgers. He feels like he's being ripped to shreds.

More children dog their group, some holding aloft black and white photographic enlargements of Jayne Mansfield. "You people come here, understanding nothing," insists a youngster who can't be more than 10. "Then you treat us like Arabs!"

"Somebody has to portray you as the blackguards, troublemakers and provocateurs you are!" Barry blurts out. *What the f---, I'm having a political argument with a 10-year-old???* he marvels, appalled.

Having heard enough polemics, the kid asks instead, "Hey, you wanna buy a Jayne Mansfield poster? Fifty shekels! I can get you Ann-Margret Olsson in hot pants! Shiksa hotties, big money deal." The kid has a whole sales speech worked out. "For you, 'cause I like you, special price: Two posters for a hundred shekels!"

"Are those by any chance cypress trees?" asks Sir Razor Babcock, pointing daintily to a clump of foliage in the distance.

"I don't know," Barry replies, hightailing it back to the safety of the bus. "I'm not an arborist."

♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥ 24 ♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥

*Standing tall, clutching the terrified Palestinian waif to his breast, Mike Hudson braved a barrage of insults and innuendo from the angry Israeli protesters. Well, hell. From Auschwitz to the geopolitical entity now known as Israel, they seemed to have learned nothing! Not a damned thing. Let he who lives in a glass house throw the first stone. All around him, scores of Arab youths threw stones at the settlers. His credentials as a U.N. peacekeeper his only defense, Mike found himself on the right side of history, but the wrong side of the battle line. His eyes smarting from the tear gas fired in canisters by the panicked troops, he rounded a corner and stumbled into the Aid Station. Karen, impeccable in her starched white uniform of the United Nations Women's Auxiliary, approached. Brushing white splotches of encrusted pepper spray from his padded vest, her hands trembled ever so slightly. "Oh, Mike," she breathed, "I was so worried..."*

♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥ 25 ♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥

A Birthright Israel tour group is staying at their hotel, 40 young adults plus chaperones. Even if he'll stoop to churning out YA lit, using the pen name Alicia Bennett, to rake in some guap, it bothers Barry that a crowd of noisy kids in identical *Taglit* T-shirts are utilizing a five-star hotel. Aren't there kibbutz guesthouses for groups like them? This whole Birthright Israel thing strikes him as preposterous propaganda. You never see any Sudanese children dressed in *jubbas* and *entaris* in a Birthright group, only Americans. The Israelis are playing them for suckers, Barry feels, when all the Israelis really want is the three billion dollars a year in military appropriation from the U.S. Congress. It makes his stomach ache to see the kids in the lobby, gaily laughing and earnestly talking, wildly enthusiastic. Barry's group of adults aren't laughing. Nor are they wildly enthusiastic. "While you're laughing, the teenagers of Gaza are weeping," he tells a girl and two boys who are practicing secret handshakes.

"You mean the Palestinians?" asks a redheaded boy whose nametag says "Marty."

"I. Mean. The. Palestinians," answers Barry meaningfully, clutching his tablet and thrusting out his chin.

"We meet with groups of young Palestinians as part of the program," replies the girl.

*Empty-headed bitch!* "Well?" asks Barry.

"They're having a very hard time. They're really unhappy. They want a homeland. Only we're not going to give them ours. Still, we all think peace is the answer."

See! It's totally impossible to talk to these people!

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Shmuel the driver calls in sick. He's had enough, disassociating himself from the project. It could be their behavior. Whenever they pass another tour bus on the road, they scream, wave their arms and stamp their feet. The smoked glass windows mask most of this pandemonium, but Shmuel had taken to wearing chipped green ear protectors left over from his Army career. At rest stops, Barry and his gang boorishly accost groups of Japanese tourists, schoolchildren on field trips and, especially, other Americans. Hooting, sticking their tongues out and pretending to pick their noses, they yammer in Hungaro-Croatian, a fake language they have developed to confound their enemies. This is Israel and they are fighting way below their weight class; they make damn sure to avoid brawls. Writers, they would end up in the hospital.

The only good news is Galit, an attractive brunette from the Ministry of Culture who has been assigned to touch base with their group every two or three days and field as best she can their questions. College educated and no nonsense, she provides factual data updates and links to Israeli institutions. She also has great gams.

Shmuel's disappearance is a wake-up call. "Reality check, people!" announces Barry. "This shows that we're doing some good." His fondest hope is to have the BDS movement rechristened to *Badger, Disrupt and Stymie*. The actual BDS proponents he encounters online in their chat rooms take a rather dim view of this suggestion. "What are the economic consequences?" they keep asking. Yasser, the lanky new driver, is a 20-something punk with coal-black eyes and a gun-barrel stare. An Israeli Arab, he is named after the peerless Yasser Arafat, freedom fighter, esteemed leader of the PLO and sticky-fingered father of his country. This Yasser, taking his instructions solely from Yaakov, is so angry at everything and everyone, he won't even talk with the rest of them.

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"Barry Lipowitz and Erit Sameach, we're *B'Tselem*," declares a talking midget, putting aside a copy of the newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* to ambush them in the lobby of their hotel. "*Shalom!*"

"Oh, wow!" replies Barry. "*T-Slam*, eh? I have your album 'Loud Radio' on vinyl. You have no idea how exciting it is to actually meet one of you musicians!"

"That's not us! We're *B'Tselem*. We document human rights violations in the Occupied Territories."

"What d'ya want us to do about it?" Barry mopes, unable to mask his disappointment. *Apparently, there's no such thing as privacy in this country*, he concludes.

"What does he want?" whispers Erit, leaving a dull buzzing in Barry's ear.

"How can you write about the situation without consulting us?" complains the dwarf.

"As Ronnie Reagan said, 'There you go again, casting aspirations,' " replies Barry.

"He means aspersions," corrects Erit. "Casting aspersions."

"We're happy to talk to everyone!" Barry insists. "We've never encountered an Israeli act of self-defense that we couldn't smear. Listen, any response is a disproportionate response. How many dead Palestinians does it take to change a light bulb? War is war. Are we supposed to give Israel credit for avoiding civilian casualties?"

"We talk, you listen," suggests the dwarf. "Do you ever do that? *Listen?*"

Checking dates, they touch smartphones, automatically exchanging personal data.

It takes a while for Barry and his crew to realize that all over Israel, their cohorts in the anti-war movement are in a months' long process of mourning over the passing of Swedish sculptor Carl Fredrik Reuterswärd, designer of the iconic peace symbol of a revolver with its barrel tied in a knot. Titled "Non Violence," Reuterswärd created the knotted gun in protest over the assassination of his friend John Lennon. The image became so ubiquitous, it even appeared on postage stamps. United Nations spokesperson Stephane Dujarric calls it "a true symbol of disarmament... a true symbol of peaceful resolution of conflicts." There's a version of it outside the U.N. building in New York. Tourists love to pose with it in the background. All politics is local.

Barry is sure his time has passed. He remains "America's greatest living Jewish author," certainly, but no more than that. So he feels pleasantly surprised to find himself in demand. As a person, as a traveling companion, maybe even a friend. It's one thing to never return calls, something quite different when your phone never rings. A practitioner of the former, as of late Barry has become familiar with the latter. *The New Yorker* no longer publishes his short fiction.

Tramping around the West Bank from settlement to settlement in their bus, they don't feel so much unwanted as a fifth wheel. Whatever opinions they have don't seem to make a dent among people whose entire lives are taken up, hardscrabble, with

farming, harvesting, growing grapes, making wine, educating their children and carving out an existence.

Stopped by the side of the road in the middle of nowhere to take pictures of the local flora, Barry spreads his arms wide and cries, "I christen thee Wadi del Margo. Ladies and gentlemen, timeshares *are* available! Please speak to my secretary on my left." Such is frustration. He is reduced to making bad jokes.

*Armed to the teeth with high-tech surveillance equipment, they wound their way amidst the squat gray Arab villages of Tatoonie, the incessant warbling of Arab women's voices puncturing the air. Unbidden, their existential doubt joined the roar of the diesel bus engine, echoing forlornly across both olive grove and citrus orchard. Justice cried out from a cloudless blue sky,* he writes, intent on crystalizing the group experience down to its very essence. A tingle up his leg turns out to be a centipede.

Standing at the entrance to still another chain-link enclosure topped with concertina wire, they drink from their plastic water bottles, rub the dust from their eyes and wonder if they'll ever get to the root of the story.

Barry grows angry with the settlers. He and his group are world-famous writers, yet these dumb villagers seem more concerned over their livestock and pets than making a good impression. *Such nonchalance will not go unpunished.* Barry promises himself that. These settler fanatics are bad news Jews. They give Judaism a bad name. He, Barry Lipowitz, will skewer their self-righteousness in blistering prose.

He can't wait to get home and get started!

Suddenly, seemingly out of nowhere, Barry and Yaakov the guide are accosted by an Israeli woman in Hasidic garb. The long, patterned skirt, the headscarf. "*Mah atah rote-seh?*" she demands gruffly, looking Barry up and down. "Lar! Whatchoo want?" she adds in a Boston accent.

"We're here to protest— "

"Your Arab driver says you're touring Judea and Samaria," she exclaims, talking straight over him. "What about the Golan Heights? Youse ain't seen Israel 'till youse seen the Golan."

An Army helicopter rattles by overhead.

"— protest the mistreatment of the Palestinians and the illegal expropriation of their land— "

"Yeah, right!" she insists abruptly. Staring at him with chocolate brown eyes, her ruddy complexion the epitome of health, this is a lot of woman. Nobody's fool, she obviously doesn't care who she pushes around. "Only, up on the Golan, we got lovely rooms that we rent out, Swiss chalets, guest houses with all the mod coms, most within ten miles of the Golan Heights Winery. They got the cleanest air you'll ever breathe in your life, bar none, superlative hiking trails and views over Syria like you won't believe."

" — 'Cause the inequality reeks to high heaven and I mean, just look at you," Barry insists. "The Settler Movement. The Israeli Army holds the Palestinians down while you run roughshod— and for what, a lot of pre-fab concrete blockhouses and chain-link enclosures! You're back living behind barbed wire, just like the Jews in the concentration camps!"

"Listen, bub, I know Debbie Wasserman Schultz and you ain't no Debbie Wasserman Schultz," she declares. "Now get serious! I'm talkin' Bed and Breakfast. B and B. It's simple to book online. You can get an Eggèd bus or take a taxi. It's all on computer. They arrange your arrival at the checkpoints, they see you have plenty of grub, they provide maps of the area. My brother runs a guest house. I can guarantee you the time of your life! And if you're religious— "

"No! No way, José. You don't understand why we're here!"

"Oh, I know exactly who *you are*, Mr. America," she declares, without a trace of condescension. Pity, if anything. Spitting, she says, "You send your kids to private school, you struggle to meet the car payments on your SUV, you spend your days searching for a café with decent Wi-Fi, then you think you own King Solomon's copper mines if you can pay the rent and still have some pennies left in your pocket. That is America!"

"What are you talking about???"

"You are *a shanda fur die goy*, an embarrassment to the Jews! Listen, 57% of religious hate crimes in America are directed at us Jews. We, who constitute less than 2% of the population. We don't need you adding kindling to the fire! Look at the life you lead. Get it together, *mensch!* You're so *farblondjet*, you're coming back around the other way! Check your Bible. Join the Settler Movement. Learn to live Orthodox. You won't regret leaving the empty life behind, I can assure you!"

"We are patriotic Americans!" bleats Barry, ready to tear his hair out. "Look! Boat shoes. Purchased at Macy's. I've made two tax-deductible contributions to the Clinton Foundation! Two! On the 4th of July, *Cuatro de Julio*, we light fuse and retire quickly. I don't see any Israelis lighting fuse and retiring quickly. Not on the *Cuatro de Julio* nor any other time. Unless, of course, they are blowing up half of Gaza!" Helplessly, he turns to Yaakov, who apologetically explains to the woman in Hebrew that he's a spokesperson for the Israeli left and opposes virtually everything she represents. When he finishes speaking, she spits once again at their feet, turns to Barry and says, "Google it. Golan Heights + B and B." Turning, she marches through the gate without a backward glance.

*Word!* Barry concludes. *This Settler business is a lot harder than I thought.*

♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥ 28 ♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥BL♥♥♥♥

They are tired, it's been a series of long days. Barry decides to reward himself by having sex with Galit, the attractive brunette from the Ministry of Culture. They are in the bar of the King David Hotel in Jerusalem, drinking cognac. "Cross-cultural pollination requires spadework," he jokes. Galit doesn't seem to get it. Taking his remark seriously, she delivers a long, involved explanation of the effect of Americans vis à vis Israelis on the Settler Movement.

Downing his third cognac, Barry says "Let's fuck!"

"Excuse me?" answers Galit, blushing crimson, a fleeting smile crossing her luscious lips.

"You heard me, let's do this *thang*," suggests Barry in his best Scout leader basso profundo tone of voice. Then he beams like a 10-year-old, just in case she takes offense, busy undressing her with his eyes.

"Well," she replies, playing with her pack of cigarettes on the counter top. "I am flattered, but the services provided to writers and journalists by our ministry don't include that. If you are truly in need, I can suggest an escort service. They are Russian, but discreet."

"C'mon," chuckles Barry, "you know you want to. Booty call! Who's your daddy? I'm your daddy!"

"Well, it's late," remarks Galit, checking her Rolex and hopping from the bar stool. "You've had a lot to drink."

Barry takes that as a provisional "yes." He offers to escort her to her car.

"That is not necessary."

"I insist!"

At the car, he waits until she opens the driver side door before grabbing her roughly and pulling her to him. His need is very great.

Kneeing him in the groin, Galit swings her heavy purse into his face, pulls out a canister of pepper spray and gives him a royal dousing.

Blinded, on his knees on the rough macadam, Barry says in a loud voice, "I take it this means a tentative 'no.' "

Ripping open two foil packages, she provides him with portable hand wipes. She stands by her car while Barry cleans the chemical from his eyes, nose and mouth. Israelis! World leaders in self-defense!

*The life of a writer is never easy*, he consoles himself, stumbling to his feet.

"Good night," says Galit curtly and drives off into a night humming with big-city traffic.

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Barry has an epiphany. Lying in bed asleep, The Land of Israel calls out to him. Awakening amidst lightning and thunder, a deep voice rumbles from the heavens, "Barry Lipowitz! I am *Yahweh*, the Lord Your G-d. I command you to become devout and follow the laws of the Torah."

He looks desperately to Erit, but zonked out on barbiturates, she sleeps as if dead.

"You mean become an Orthodox Jew?" asks Barry, unsure where this conversation is going. "The settlers are Orthodox Jews. No good can come of it."

"I have made a covenant with the People of Israel," proclaims the voice of G-d. "You shall have no other god but me. Bow down before your maker. Show penance for your trespasses. Obey the laws."

"I do," insists Barry, accidentally drooling on the duvet. "I'm a gastronomical Jew." Feeling this fulfills his commitment, he turns over and goes back to sleep.

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The next morning, they depart for Ramallah. "Bus ride here, bus ride there, everywhere a bus ride!" they chant in unison.

"Why don't they chopper us in, like in a war movie?" asks Barbie Quint.

As they bump along in the tour bus, klezmer music adds an Eastern European vibe. Route 60, an asphalt road, unwinds before them, meandering over the hills like a strand of weak spaghetti. Once past the Arab village of Jenin, a perennial flashpoint, the road intersects with Ramallah Street. Passing through three heavily armed checkpoints, they arrive at the lobby of the exquisite five-star Mövenpick Hotel on Emile Habibi Street in south central Ramallah. Head tilted skyward under a ridiculous canvas sunhat, Barbie Quint examines the façade of the \$42.5 million luxury hotel and announces, "If it don't say 'Hotel Trump' right up front, it sure as hell don't impress anybody. *Inclusive moi!*"

"I know a Swedish journo who once ate din-din with Yasser Arafat," exclaims Erik. Days in the sun have turned his skin a copper color. "Not seated at the same table, of course, but in a banquet hall adjacent to the main event. They drank strawberry soda from Egypt."

They are ushered into a conference room and served tea and figs. Through the sun doors, they can see a patio and a swimming pool, its blue azure water beckoning. Instead, they are given a lecture by one Abdullah from the Palestinian Authority's Office of Information. Dressed western, smelling of cologne, he sports French cuffs and a

Guard's tie. He is gruff with a "take it or leave it" attitude. His English is clipped and precise. Roger Kaminski records him on his cell phone. "The Israeli aggressor is a thief in the night, stealing our land and oppressing our people!" Abdullah suggests, deeply offended on behalf of Palestinians everywhere. "The land of Palestine is our holy inheritance," he hectors them. "Ever since the Ottoman Turks, we have been betrayed. Betrayed! They sold so much of our land to the Jews, land where our fathers and grandfathers are buried. Heretics and foreigners, the Jews show no respect for our culture. They exploit Arab labor... for a pittance! No wonder our young people are desperate for a solution, their wrath exploding uncontrollably. Palestinian anger knows no bounds! Entire villages rise up, crying for *intifada*, crying for vengeance on the oppressor!

"Make no mistake, all of your so-called Israel is Palestinian. As Palestinian as the day is long. As Palestinian as a walk in the park. As Palestinian as a punch in the nose. Give us our political sovereignty— free of Israeli interference— give us our land back, a unified Palestine, and we shall work out the details. Ha-Ha-Ha Hamas!

"The so-called Two-State Solution is devolving into a two-state delusion. Every day, more Israeli settlements spring up, further separating Arab villages in your so-called West Bank. How can we Palestinians ever attain a cohesive nation if the Israelis divide the West Bank into cantons?

"We, too, believe in a two-state solution, mind you! A unified Palestine on the one hand and the Jews living somewhere else, in a second state of their own. Two states. Palestine and Madagascar. Palestine and Uganda. Anywhere else that will take the Jews. Cuba. Venezuela. Tasmania."

Barry once wrote a book placing the Jewish homeland in Nova Scotia.

"We see Hamas and Hezbollah as moderate rebels," Abdullah explains. "No more mass murder, no more genocide! They kill off the Jews one at a time.

"The Israeli aggressor must be thrown into the sea," concludes Abdullah. "After that, we can begin long-term negotiations."

Barry records the speech on his tablet. He finds this data extremely useful. Israel-bashing never goes out of style!

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They spend the afternoon at Crazy for Peace's own hillside bungalow retreat outside Jerusalem, doing laundry and catching up with themselves. They sit in the shade of the garden on wicker chairs and concrete benches, sipping almond smoothies handmade from blanched, crushed almonds, each one individually mixed by an olive-

skinned Moroccan bartender. Everyone has a hundred emails to delete from their online accounts. Barry finds angry emojis from groups who feel ignored: The activist organization *Gush Shalom*. Parents Circle Families Forum. *Adalah*, The Legal Center for Arab Minority Rights in Israel. *Gisha*, the Legal Center for Freedom of Movement. *Neled*: Women for Coexistence. *Tandi*, the Movement of Democratic Women for Israel. *Bat Shalom*, the Coalition of Women for Peace. The New Israel Fund. *Machsom Watch* who monitor checkpoints and the bureaucracy of the Occupied Territories. *Zochrot* who document the Palestinian *naqba* or "catastrophe" that was the founding of Israel. Combatants for Peace. Breaking the Silence. The pacifist New Profile. Tent of Nations. Just Vision, a media outlet. *Sikha Mekomit*, a webzine.

It's an avalanche of complaint. "Let's not get all tight over this," announces Barry, bathed in sweat and eating raisins. "I will address the issue at a later time." *Yikes!* Although logistics has always been an issue, he never expected the research phase to become this big a can of worms.

Worse still is the response to an online article on *The Times of Israel* website detailing the nature of their visit. The *talkbackim* in the comments section tends toward the vitriolic, accusing them of being pawns in the pocket of the Palestinians, indulging in neurotic self-hatred, a gaggle of fifth columnists, Obamaniacs or clandestine supporters of a Bernie Sanders leftist revolution. "Go home and overthrow your own government," writes *SonofGideon123*, "instead of measuring the Knesset for drapes."

Meanwhile, angry Yasser, their driver, leaves in a taxi. One less headache.

Erit reads aloud from her latest work: "*As I say goodbye to this mortal coil of pain and woe, I leave behind those whom I met and all that I know. A draft dodger and daft jogger on the treadmill of life, I'm full of sound and fury, sheer decibels of strife. Next year in Jerusalem, Katmandu or Myanmar, he who travels longest is he who travels far. The sidewalk out front needs a hosing, even as the coffin lid is softly closing. Jumpin' Jehosaphats spit wooden nickels as they pass through the doorway to my demise. Headaches, heartaches, political tricks meet the boatman on the River Styx. 'Tis all a crock. Sherlock, Skylar, hemlock and Shylock cannot stop the ticking of G-d's celestial clock.*"

*She gets applausissement poli*— polite applause— from her literary contemporaries, who are also her competitors. There are only so many openings in publishing and jackals don't share.

They spend almost two hours participating in International Solidarity Work. In their case, this consists of folding hundreds and hundreds of Palestinian flags and placing each one in its own plastic bag. "This is crazy," complains Barbie Quint, feeling as if she's been shanghai'd into doing manual labor. "Why don't you just let us make a monetary contribution and pay someone to do this?"

"Who are we going to hire?" bleats Yaakov the guide plaintively, dressed in a forest green military style shirt from Adam Levine's designer label. "Palestinians?"

"Either you show solidarity with the Palestinian freedom movement or you don't," Barry calms them, feeling the comfort zone of childhood slave labor slowly reawakening. Been there, done that.

Not fooled by pretty words, Oso Buko laughs derisively. "White man imperialism replaced by Arab imperialism," he declares.

*Bang-o!* Everyone stops working.

"KEEP FOLDING!" screams Barry, mouth agape. "PLEASE! For my sake. So we don't lose face. Pul-lease???"

Reluctantly, they get back to work.

"You!" Roger Kaminski insists to Patrice and Barbie, fellow Americans. "You can choose a centrist Republican like Mitt Romney as your candidate at the convention in Cleveland in July. Or you can elect to go with Mr. T who will huff and puff and blow your house down. Either way, you'll tear the party apart and experience a thundering defeat come November. In this case, Republicans lose."

"Say again? We ain't Republicans," Patrice assures him.

Downing duty free Scotch from a hip flask, Roger sinks into a frumpy fugue of introspection.

The visitors also get their first opportunity to hear from five former IDF soldiers themselves. "*Shalom!*" says a bewhiskered young man, running to fat now that he's no longer on the front line. "We are *bosér*, Sour Grapes in English, a pro-soldier sounding board for anonymous complaints from members of the Israeli Defense Forces." Nodding solemnly, dressed in civilian attire, the young men take seats around the garden. "Keep in mind," he continues, "military service is compulsory in Israel. And please, for maximum candor, no video or audio recording! Feel free, dudes, to complain at any time," he tells his companions.

"The meals at our Forward Observation Post were really terrible," exclaims one soldier.

"I had to rifle-butt young Palestinians, both boys and girls. Who wants to do that?" asks another.

"My commander forever smiled and said 'Now we'll give the little piggies a taste of their own medicine.' He should be cashiered from the Army," insists a third.

"Three years! Three years in the IDF! We shot people and detonated explosives all over Gaza one summer. Life sucked, big-time," says a fourth.

"*De flesta verkar småskärrade*," announces Erik the Swede = Most of them seem still in shock.

Barry returns from a bathroom break to find Patrice Gerard monopolizing the attention of the group. "I know you are concerned about my qualifications," he

pontificates. "First and foremost, I am very tall." The others shake their heads in agreement. "Secondly, and this is important, I have a letter from my doctor attesting to my fitness to serve as president of the Guggenheim or the United States of America, whichever comes first. It's amazing what \$3,000 can buy. Baby, am I into baby aspirin! Although not necessarily the healthiest, I will be the shrewdest individual ever elected to such high office."

"What's he talking about?" Barry wonders.

"If the Republicans dump Trump, Patrice is prepared to do a Norman Mailer and throw his hat in the ring!" explains Barbie.

"Why am I not surprised?" asks Barry.

News of the latest stabbing reaches them over the Internet. Same old, same old. A young Palestinian, acting alone, a so-called "lone wolf," has attacked Israeli civilians at a Jerusalem bus stop. His weapon of choice, a fish knife. The assailant was shot dead at the scene. Three injured, one critically. Israel's reprisals include demolishing the house of the perpetrator's family and revoking the work permits for every member of the perpetrator's clan. "Let them sit among their ruins in the West Bank and rot!" is the Israeli reaction.

A pall falls upon Barry's group. "My heart is breaking for the poor Palestinians!" insists Oki Nawa, their resident Japanese. Hey, it's the first time Barry has heard a peep out of her! *Such a drama queen*, he thinks. His heart isn't breaking, although his investment in the Ramallah futures market obviously took a hit. Very volatile is the economy of Ramallah. Good money to be made, although even their municipal bonds are a shaky proposition. With so much smuggling from Jordan, there's no such thing as stability in the West Bank antiquities market. Maybe he shouldn't have bought that sarcophagus purported to have held the mortal remains of Jesus Christ.

*Win some, lose some*, thinks Barry philosophically. He'll tell the tale in one of his novels and deduct the loss as a work-related expenditure.

"I don't want to sound like a complainer," says Barbie, "but this trip is all screwed up. How can I write about murderous Palestinians when I haven't met a single one?"

"That's where fiction comes in," counsels Barry. "Choose Che Guevara, Ho Chi Minh or someone else heroic, slap on an Arabic name, throw in a love interest and write your heart out. Like your *Sniper's Cave* series, but different. Whatever washes up on the shore of your imagination. Then you synthesize the material. Only don't use Napoleon Bonaparte as inspiration. Tales based on Napoleon never seem credible." Teaching creative writing has made him a master of technique.

"How bad is the apartheid in Israel?" asks Oso. "Can I mix in whites with my colored wash?"

"Oh yes!" Erit assures him.

"Actually," he chuckles, a guilty look on his handsome Ethiopian face, "that was more in the style of a joke."

"I *need* an Israeli joke," Barry points out, reviewing his notes.

"So do we all," sighs Patrice grimly.

"Hey, I got this," smiles Yaakov. He's busy baking fresh pita bread in a brick oven set into the hillside. "Why did the chicken cross the road?"

Everyone groans.

"Okay... Why?" asks Barry.

"To detonate his suicide vest, blowing up himself and taking a dozen Israelis with him in the name of global jihad and the Islamic State."

"Any others?" Barry gulps, video recording.

"Sure. Why did Moses walk 40 years in the desert?" quips Yaakov. "Your typical male, he was too proud to ask directions."

Once started, Yaakov is hard to stop: "Liebowitz and Trump are out on the golf course. Their long game and irons being about equal, Liebowitz is phenomenal at dropping the ball into the cup in one. On every hole. He just taps 'em in. Finally, exasperated, Trump asks him, 'Tell me your secret!' Liebowitz looks at him and says, 'My wife kisses my balls. It makes my *putz* go straight.'"

"Stop! *Ma-speak!* Enough," groans Erit, deeply offended.

Yaakov breaks off his baking to scoop up a hardboiled egg from a serving bowl. Losing patience with the local fauna, he screams "Die, mother!" and hurls the egg, pegging a little gray mouse squarely on its head. Chunks of egg white and rich yellow yolk explode in a dozen directions. Stunned, the encrusted rodent falls on its side, tale inert, its four pink legs jerking spasmodically. "Incoming," Yaakov smiles proudly.

Yasser returns... with his mother! Her name is Fatimah. The writers are confused. Is this an Arab courtesy thing, "Meet me, meet my mother"? Or is it a sympathy ploy to garner larger tips? "Maybe the old lady's here to collect the money," Barbie wonders. That's something a character in the *Sniper's Cave* series would do, bring his mother to collect his money.

"I want you," announces Yasser to all and sundry, "to hear the Palestinian narrative from someone who has actually lived it *firsthand*. My mother!"

So they gather 'round in the shade, give the woman an almond smoothie, clean the wax out of their ears, hold aloft their smartphones and listen. Dressed in a shabby black dress and a patterned shawl, a green kerchief covering her hair, she speaks only Arabic and a smattering of Hebrew. Yasser translates with an assist from Yaakov.

"Palestine under the Pasha was a paradise, a tranquil land of farmers and tradesmen," she begins.

"That's the Ottoman Turks," explains Yaakov.

"A land where happy families lived for generations, venerating their ancestors, farming and raising their children. We had no quarrel with the Jews, even as they bought up our land and pushed my family to the fringes. Then the Jews made war on our neighbors! I was not yet born, but my mother told me of the *naqba*, the catastrophe, that befell our people. In the midst of battle, we were further driven from our lands, the Jews grabbing everything, *everything*, for themselves! Overnight, we became second-class citizens in our own land! Suddenly the Jew was the lord *effendi* and we the *fellaheen* peasants. Entire families ran to take shelter in neighboring countries. Where our Arab brothers and sisters treated us like vermin! As penniless refugees, we were shoved into refugee camps. At the mercy of the international community, generation after generation of Palestinians await the glorious day of our return to Palestine! It shall happen! *Insha'Allah!* God willing. It shall happen."

"This is our suffering!" screams Yasser. "This is the rage that festers in every Palestinian heart!"

"Peace now?" marvels Barry. "*Fuhgeddaboudit!*"

It is all they can do to calm Yasser down. Murmuring sympathetic comments and wiping away tears of compassion, they thank his mother profusely, raining cash down upon her head. They follow Yasser and her to the highway and wait while he sends her home in a taxi. When they return to the courtyard, Yaakov the guide points out, "Palestinian women wear the pants. No one hates like a Palestinian mother. They never, ever forgive a slight or a misdeed." Shrugging, he tells them, "Palestinian society is rife with blood feuds."

Hearing that, Yasser stomps away angrily to the bus, but he doesn't deny it.

Waking from his torpor and not entirely satisfied with the progress of their self-proclaimed *Kix* odyssey— *Kikes investigating existence*— journalist Roger Kaminski corners Erit and Oso. "You seem the most vocal," he points out. "What exactly is your beef here? So life is unfair. The Settlers are redeeming the land. I don't see anybody else doing that. Ramallah seems dead set on playing the obstructionist card. In their eyes, nothing the Israelis do is ever any good. You show up with the publically declared intention of maligning Israel. Is that a good thing? Have you no conscience?"

"You don't understand!" seethes Erit. It's a long afternoon and tempers are frayed. "*Sie verstehen nicht!*" she cries, lapsing into German in a desperate effort to explain herself. Ten days of inner turmoil has left her totally fritzed. "My great grandfather worked in the secret bullet factory underneath Kibbutzim Hill in Rehovot. An underground factory the size of a tennis court, they produced *five million bullets* from 1945 to 1948. Even if Israeli soldiers only hit their targets once out of every ten shots, I share the guilt of *half a million* Arab deaths. Half a million! How can I ever wash away the stain? Why couldn't he have been a baker and worked in the adjacent bakery? But

no, he had to be a machinist, the most pernicious of warmongers. Woe is me! *Wehe mir!*" she cries, tears streaming down her face.

Torn, Roger feels for her. He is also delighted to finally have a story to tell.

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The bus slows on a curve and pulls off the road.

"What's wrong?" Barry asks worriedly.

"It's a Bedouin encampment," explains Yaakov. "You should experience this for your writing."

There are tattered black tents and stubby black goats everywhere. Gnarled, brown-skinned Arabs with furrows in their faces, long bony hands and broken fingernails are dressed in traditional layers of Arab garb. Stinking of incense and goat milk, they come forward to greet Yaakov's group, smiling at the Americans with brown teeth. "Come *Sāhib*, you are our guest," exclaims the oldest male present, latching onto Barry and graciously dragging him to the largest of the tents. Ducking under the flap, Barry catches a last glimpse of Bedouin women surrounding Erit with offerings of cloth and brassware. For sale, obviously. It all makes sense. Give the tourists an adventure to write home about while injecting life into the local Arab economy. Why should the Settlers make all the money? The odor of incense inside the tent is so thick you can cut it with a knife. Barry feels his head spinning.

"Come! Sit!" cries the tribal elder grandly. His name turns out to be Fayyad. "This is my joy, my youngest son, Ramzi," he prattles, busy pouring tea for Barry and himself. He dusts it with brown powder which Barry assumes is sweetener. "I learned my English from the Egyptians," he proclaims, but Barry can't make heads nor tails of the pronouncement. *When? Where?* The tea is cloyingly sweet and pungent enough to make his tongue twitch. *Wow!* A real Bedouin experience. Meanwhile, Fayyad lights a quiff of what smells like very raw hashish, takes a major hit and passes it ceremoniously to Barry. Pulling the white smoke deep into his lungs, Barry feels it burning its way down his throat. It's like inhaling sandpaper. Nothing. He takes another drag. That's when it hits him. Sitting on his haunches on the dirt floor, Barry feels himself floating into space. Now he knows the secret of Aladdin's flying carpet! Floating, flying, he grandly surveys the colorful cushions spread out at his feet. *Surreal.*

A small black goat noses its way into the tent, bleating. "Ah, *Suha!*" cries Fayyad happily. "My prize goat. She makes wonderful milk." Barry sits staring at her in a daze. She's such a pretty goat, so well-proportioned, with short, prickly hair and a wandering eye. The day seems endless. The tea tastes so sweet. Laughing hysterically, in a

mellow fog of hash-induced euphoria, Barry only has the vaguest notion of what may or may not be inter-species coitus. One moment the goat is nuzzling his ear, the next, Fayyad's steady brown Bedouin hand seems to guide Barry's swollen staff deep into the goat's murky hindquarters. Not that it matters. And the sensation of release! *Percussive! Explosive!* It's like nothing Barry has ever experienced before in his life.

"The East shall shake the West awake" dreamily passes through his thoughts until he discovers Ramzi, the 11-year-old, holding a smartphone and shaking him. "Wake! Wake up, mister! You wake!" cries the boy in his squeaky young voice. Leading Barry groggily from the tent, they join the others by the tour bus where Fayyad is deep in conference with Yaakov the guide.

"Ah, good, you are awake!" Fayyad greets him, as solicitous as ever. These Arabs! Nothing can beat their hospitality.

"When we return to Jerusalem, I'll take you to the local clinic for a shot of antibiotic," suggests Yaakov.

"Why? Is somebody sick?" asks Barry.

"Precautions. Precautions," replies the Israeli curtly in a show of typical Israeli brusqueness. Barry is sure it is something in the water that makes them so testy. Before leaving, he hands Fayyad a crisp American ten dollar bill.

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*"Hey, baby," leered the Israeli soldier, ogling the Palestinian schoolgirl. "How 'bout a quick ficky-ficky for a packet of Elite spearmint gum?" This was the backside of the occupation, Barry conjectures, the dehumanization of both the conquered and the conqueror.*

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On Twitter, he reads

**#Trump** The Islamic State is CRAZY for The Donald. They know he will put America in the doghouse.

**#Trump 2016** Sales of anti-depressants rise as Trump nears the presidency.

**#Election 2016** Party politics: Hillary's a donkey. Donald J. Trombone leaves a trail of elephant dung everywhere he goes. Messy year for the USA.

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Even as America mourns the 49 dead in the terrorist attack on a gay club in Orlando, Florida, Barry and his group march in front of the Prime Minister's residence in Jerusalem in protest over the latest Turkish-Israeli peace agreement. The rapprochement forgives Israel for the 2010 attack on the Turkish vessel *Mavi Marmara*. The background: Loudly proclaiming their intention to break Israel's naval blockade, a group of Turkish activists sailed a small flotilla carrying construction materials and humanitarian aid toward Gaza. Israeli *Shayetet 13* naval commandos boarded the ship from speedboats and helicopters, intending to force it into the Israeli port of Ashdod for inspection. Hand to hand fighting broke out. The Israelis ended up killing nine of the Turkish activists. Ten of the Israeli commandos were wounded, as well. "Down with Israeli aggression! Freedom on the high seas!" chant the protesters, marching in a circle waving dreidels, although whether the Mediterranean can be considered a high sea remains open to interpretation. Under the watchful eyes of two policemen in black uniforms and peaked caps, pariahs in the Land of Daniel, it feels good to have something concrete to protest about.

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On his blog, Barry writes: *Nationalism has never been more popular. That said, we can relegate to the scrap heap of history such concepts as democracy, socialism, communism, syndicalism, unionism and the unadulterated corruption called religion. God spelled backwards is dog. Agnostic spelled backwards is citsonga. Dance to the music! Ayn Rand would be proud. Perhaps all we need is a single strongman— iron-willed, resolute, convinced of his divine right to reshape the world. In which case, he shall lead us all to a New Jerusalem! Although Old Jerusalem isn't bad for the money. I give it three stars.*

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To: Barry Lipowitz

From: Sid Harmon Agency

Subject: New Project

Need U 2 brush up on Ralph Lauren & Calvin Klein as prep to pen script for medium budget high concept block comedy "Dances With Wool." Think "Breakdance" meets Groucho Marx in the Garment District. Bread & butter financing available. ILGWU, International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, on board big-time. Sid

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America beckons. He misses Oksana, his Ukrainian mistress, terribly. The green-eyed goddess with loins of fire. Her brother Maksym owns a limo service and is major muscle within the Ukrainian mafia. To the victor go the spoils, Barry feels he has every right to a mistress. He is also booked to give a speech next Wednesday before HABA, the Hasidic American Hebrew Association, a major, non-profit advocacy group providing gainful employment for the Goldfarb, Becker, Mankiewicz and Lippmann families. It's not like Barry isn't a professional speaker. Move over, Hillary! Our boy's résumé includes speaking at the United Nations! Not in the General Assembly, *per se*, but on a soapbox outdoors under the open sky at Dag Hammarskjöld Plaza overlooking the East River. He attracted quite a crowd— almost a dozen listeners— before the NYPD men in blue told him to "Pack it up and move it along there, ace!" (It all happened so fast, he didn't even have time to get the blue-eyed blonde's telephone number.) *When you got it, flaunt it!*

As self-effacing as he is, Barry nonetheless likes to consider himself a student of the Talmud. The campaign of a certain presidential candidate, also from New York, is using one of Barry's more intellectual treatises, *The Handbook of Half-Baked, Over-Ripe, Fully-Cooked, Warmed-Over and Burnt-Out Ideas*. So ineffectual is this guide, anybody watching the campaign would think the candidate and his staff are simply winging it. It's in the Lipowitz genes: Not for nothing was Barry's dad a leader in used auto parts.

As any successful author can tell you, the publishing industry is voracious: Once you become an established winner, you can put sheets of used toilet paper between book covers and sell it.

A final confab among the scribes is a revelation. Patrice Gerard's chapter will be free-form Gonzo journalism called "Boom or Bust on the Israeli Stock Exchange." Tipped off about several investment possibilities, he's made some dead ass choices. The bro is seriously in the cheese. Sir Razor Babcock has fallen in love with *Yad Vashem*, the Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. Finally, an archive that covers every aspect of antisemitism from soup to nuts! Murder squads. Gas chambers. Josef Mengele! Adolf Eichmann. Delighted, he doesn't know where to begin his writing. Oso Buko has discovered common ancestry among Israel's "*Falashas*," Ethiopian Jews from

Gondar Province. He intends to return to Israel very soon. Erik Andersson the Swede has decided to stay, requesting membership at the *Sha'ar Ha'Amakim* kibbutz outside Haifa. It's the same place Bernie Sanders once stayed as a volunteer in 1963. Erik intends to write freelance and make his living by producing solar water heaters at their on-site factory. "It may not be pure socialism," says Erik, "but I like it." He's ain't leaving. *Have these people no sense of allegiance?* wonders Barry. *Mission? Purpose?* He feels like beating the walls with his bare fists. He isn't holding anyone to a written contract, but he assumed that it was in their own best interest to stick with the critical focus of the project. "We come to bury Israel, not to praise it" has been Barry's motto this entire trip. Now he feels like a fool.

Roger Kaminski at least is writing an exposé. Titled "Cutting Edge Israeli Anti-Missile Technology Will *Blow You Away*," it's Life Magazine in tone, nerdy in detail and a fuh-yucking puff piece for the Israeli defense establishment. Oki Nawa is composing a sonnet to hydroponic husbandry and crop rotation. Barbie Quint is busy writing "The Miracle of *Ahava* – New Life from the Dead Sea," her stream-of-consciousness experience of Israeli spa life and the cosmetics industry. Barry feels a little sick reading about the many beneficial uses of mud. Erit finds it interesting. For her part, she is composing an ode, "Life Among the Ultraviolent." Loosely based on The Epic of Gilgamesh, a Sumerian tale from 2500 B.C., she portrays the Jews as the villains. Barry is left with "Bad Vibes in the West Bank," wherein he maligns as many fictional straw men as possible within the specified 15,000-word limit. *Keepin' it real!* This is not what he expected.

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In their hotel room, packing their imitation Louis Vuitton luggage to leave for the States, Barry reminds her, "We're heading home to a strawberry moon over Manhattan." Erit gives him a sad look, a last vestige of the romantic passion they once shared. Scooping up the tiny, complimentary bottles of shampoo and body wash and dumping them in his travel case, he also gets a text message and enclosed video from little Ramzi. "Sank U 4 wisit, we enjoy yu company," texts the child. "Daddy say U maybe send us 5,000 shekel thru tour guide Yaakov, maybe we no show nobody these video."

The clip is short, less than 30 seconds, in full color. In surprisingly sharp detail, Barry can clearly be seen bugging Suha the goat, stupid looks on both their faces.

"What is it?" hoots Erit, sensing disaster. Dropping a handful of clothes on the bed, a swirl of motion, she grabs the tablet from Barry's trembling hand. "Fuck!" she swears vehemently. "Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!"

"STOP THAT!" screams Barry hysterically. "I can see very plainly what I did!" Weeping, he adds in a small voice, "I am so sorry. It was the hashish. Or the tea. Or the incense... Or all three."

"Goddam Arabs!" seethes Erit. "It's called sextortion. Very popular in some circles."

"What are we gonna do?"

"Send them the goddam money, honey! Five thousand shekels isn't the end of the world."

"But it will never end! They'll be milking us for small change forever and ever," wails Barry Lipowitz.

"Welcome to the Middle East," replies his Israeli wife.

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It's not like he abandons the anthology project, not at all, he simply becomes sidetracked by spin-offs, chief among them a 60-page 12" X 12" A-B-C style children's book titled *AMinALs of the Holy Land*. Harnessing his celebrity status, Barry runs a photo contest in the five borough newspapers, once again milking the Jewish community, this time for vacation photos of wild animals in Israel. Geckos, desert foxes, night photos of leopards, Canaan dogs, Nubian ibex wild goats, crocodiles, mountain gazelles, jackals, lynx, Persian fallow deer, dolphins, birds, bats, owls, doves, field mice, turtles, fish, frogs, snails, scorpions and spiders. "Win a trophy!" he advertises on Instagram, "What's not to like?" Choosing the cutest 50 photos, Barry has East Village artist Murray Melman do rainbow-tinged pen & ink illustrations, to which Barry writes deeply satirical rhyming couplets:

Nubian goats feel their oats tethered to the Lion of Zion.

Jackals at the Gates of Heaven, the Settler Movement is one big lemon.

May wonders never cease, waiting on peace in the Middle East.

Lump Sum Publishing rows home the project. The Hanukkah present of the year, it goes down like a bomb.

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Join your fave authors Barry Lipowitz and Erit Sameach in a celebration of Palestinian independence. This exquisite multi-media, 3-dimensional Concrete Art boxed set collection includes:

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Street map of Ramallah.

Map of the Proposed Free State of Palestine (formerly the entity known as "Israel").

The Hamas Charter in English and Arabic.

The Fatah Charter in English and Arabic.

The Palestinian Liberation Organization Charter in English and Arabic.

The Proposed Charter of Free Palestine in English, Arabic and the original Swedish.

Facsimile menu from the Greek Pavilion Restaurant, Petah Tikva.

Eggèd bus schedule.

Full-color photo of Yasser Arafat.

Photo of the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem.

Photo of Gamal Abdel Nasser, early proponent of Palestinian statehood.

Arabic zither music on CD by *Yasser in the House* feat. Fatima.

E.A.R. ear plugs.

EL AL sleep mask.

Sites of Israel playing cards.

Book of Psalms key chain with pomegranate design.

Bahá'í English-Farsi Persian Prayer Book, 22 pages.

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THE END

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Any reference to Israel (aka *Israel*, *Israël*, **Israel**, ISRAEL, *ISRAEL* or **ISRAEL**) shall not be construed as binding the reader to a specific interpretation of Zionism *per se* nor the Jewish State nor milk (for the lactose-intolerant) nor honey.

While recognizing all halachic and cultural variations thereof, the preceding narrative abstains from promulgating any single worldview. You are not required to support Jabotinskyism, Palmachniks, Messianism, Hasidim, etc. Like Rumpelstiltskin, the U.S. Constitution or the Tooth Fairy, I try to be all things to all people. Impartial. When giving offense, I try to offend all sides equally. As the tough, young Vietnamese businessman standing outside the Golden Dragon restaurant on Wilson Boulevard proposed, throwing his cigarette angrily to the pavement, "Hey, man! That my girlfriend you staring at! You want I cut off your balls?!" The lesson: Either never visit the neighborhood of Little Saigon or keep your gaze averted when you do. Covert beats overt every time. I feel the same about my writing. All characters, characterizations and descriptions spring directly from the author's imagination. Any resemblance to real, living human beings is entirely coincidental. When dealing with factual material, I have tried to be accurate. Maps provided by Map-o-rama™.

Like you, I am an antisestablishmentarian. Unless, of course, you prefer democratic socialism or intend to overthrow the government! That makes you a disestablishmentarian. As a budding capitalist plutocrat hoping to score big money on this tome, I strenuously object to any viewpoint other than my own.

The opinions expressed herein are those of the author, his immediate family, his relatives—including cousins—his friends, editor, literary agent, historical figures, Jews and the occasional Arab. What you see as plagiarism, I consider homage. No animals were injured during the writing of this book.

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