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GREAT NECK

**JAY CANTOR**

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# GREAT NECK

A NOVEL

JAY CANTOR

VINTAGE CONTEMPORARIES

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*For the Graces*

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# ACCLAIM FOR JAY CANTOR'S

## GREAT NECK

"A big, brilliant, social novel." —*Los Angeles Times*

"Sly and quick-witted. . . . Cantor can be an insightful and caustic caricaturist about terrain, both psychic and geographical, that he obviously knows well. . . . The author can articulate his view of bourgeois turmoil in ways that are literally right on the money." —*The New York Times*

"Told in a jazzy narrative style. . . . The United States in the second half of the 20th century emerges as a single story, necessarily complex and yet with startling coherence." —*The Seattle Times/Post-Intelligencer*

"Dense, wildly ambitious. . . . It is a book that cannot just be read. You must talk back to it." —*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Cantor captures the complexities and contradictions of Great Neck perfectly. . . . His edgy take is instantly recognizable." —*Newsday*

"Wonderfully anarchic. . . . The balance between thought and action suddenly seems so right we have to marvel that all along we didn't see the truth Cantor shows us here. . . . Simply a masterpiece." —*Richmond Times-Dispatch*

"This isn't the whole story of the '60s, but *Great Neck* encompasses more of that story, and more insightfully, than any other attempt in fiction that I know of." —Dennis Drabelle, *The Washington Post*

"*Great Neck* is savvy, generous, lively and entertaining, and Cantor excels at catching the intricate worlds encapsulated in individual, private moments." —*The Jerusalem Report*

"*Great Neck* captures the whole restless sweep of civic life and emotional politics, of rebellion and collaboration, of history, and turns it into something in which we must all feel complicit. . . . It is a demand that we acknowledge our collective status in the 'dark rolling hills of the republic,' and that we face up to our country's passions, crimes and aspirations." —*The Brooklyn Rail*

"Cantor works on a Tolstoyian scale as he maps a historic time of violent and necessary change, and illuminates the evolving psyches of a diverse cast of compelling characters as deeply affected by the legacies of anti-Semitism and racism as by their involvement in a many-faceted, epic struggle for justice. . . . A virtuosic work of heart and genius, a great, singing web of a novel." —*Booklist*

"Cantor has the soul of a Delta bluesman, the mind of a high-energy particle physicist, and the glaze of a teenage comic-book whiz kid. *Great Neck* is a multilayered, polyrhythmic, sustained explosion

talent.” —Randall Kenan

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“Sprawling, ambitious. . . . *Great Neck* fairly bears comparison to James T. Farrell’s *Studs Lonigan* and Theodore Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*. . . . Those books achieved a lurching cumulative power in spite of their awkwardness, and delivered piercing social criticism. So, for his own generation, do *Jay Cantor*.” —Samuel G. Freedman, *Forward*

## 1978: SIDEBAR

On the morning of his thirtieth birthday, Arthur Kaplan—nicknamed Arkey by his brother-in-law and transformed to **OurKey** in the BillyBooks series *Tales from the Kabbalah*—bounced nervously in a taxi, bumping along on an Israeli jockey's Island City route to the courtroom. Asleep or awake, long reveries and fleeting images, Arkey Kaplan was given to dreaming, mixtures of memory and longing that transformed and commanded him. Today, a sentient corpse ordered him to pat his jacket pocket to make sure he had his checkbook—in case he needed to pay his childhood friend Ben Jacobs' bail for not showing up for trial in Chicago nearly a decade before. Or for setting bombs throughout this great land of ours. Or for God knows what else.

*Can you actually pay bail with a personal check?* Distracted, Arkey forgot to tell the cab driver to take the bridge. *Too late.* The Israeli jockey had thrust them into the line for the Holland Tunnel—the insecure Dutch dike against the river, that clammy, oppressive place, that long, tight ceramic tomb.

Ghouls and coffins were much on Arkey's mind. Perhaps they always had been, but a year and a day ago, Arkey had had his second operation for skin cancer at the Beth Israel Hospital in Boston. "Happy Birthday," his surgeon had said as Arkey lay nauseous in the recovery room, dreaming of the time he'd opened a mojo hand's rolled scroll and so put a curse on himself. "The margins were very good," the doctor had said. "We got it all." His savior had looked down at his chart then and had added mildly, "Probably."

Arkey wore his long-sleeved shirt buttoned to the top so the sun couldn't tickle his weak-willed skin. He had a white scarf around his neck and a Panama on his head, and he even kept his hands in his pockets. Moisture bloomed under his arms, formed a fragrant acid-and-roses river with the Guerlain cologne he wore to mask his continual sweating. How had Billy Green managed to predict *that* in his comic books?

And how much longer would this damn tunnel go on for? Any dark enclosed space made Arkey feel already trapped in his grave. *How long*, each bump said, *how long, how long?* This fucking tunnel ended in Pardes, Arkey dreamt, and the cab would take him to join the person he had most respected, his grandfather Abraham, the shop steward, now one month in his own tomb. The word reminded him of the Tombs, where Beth waited, just as Granddad had predicted, Avraham having found strength to denounce her, among others, before he died, this allrightnick's Eleventh—and scrupulously observed—Commandment being *Thou shalt criticize others*. "She was never part of the world she supposed she wanted to save, Arthur. She acted without guidance from any class organization. No discipline. No solidarity."

"They had solidarity, Granddad. With the Third World."

“Baloney!” Abe’s once strong voice was now a harsh whisper. “A fantasy,” he gasped-magisterially. His finger, skinny but for the swollen knuckles, tapped a temple. “She and her pa really served their own meshuginah psychologies. That’s *it!*”

*Thank God*, Arkey had thought, *I’ve always remained faithful to long dead socialist organizations*—for avoiding Abe’s poking finger had been, since childhood, Arthur Kaplan’s Eleventh Commandment. And Abe’s approval? *That* miracle was reserved for the great—the greatly moral observers of the mitzvahs, heroes of labor. I.e., *not Arkey*, who was merely a historian of the movement, not a participant.

His grandfather had coughed, the ratchets of his lungs grinding on each other. A claw reached toward the night table for Kleenex, scattering bottles, letters, flowers, capless ballpoints. Arkey had knelt to pick things up, bobbed up and down by the bedside, trying to arrange things by category, with the long black box of the nurse’s call button in front.

“Thank you,” Avraham said. “You are a pillar for me, Arkey.”

Well, Arkey tidied, Arkey loved, but on the whole Avraham didn’t make much distinction between Beth Jacobs, for example, and the rest of Arkey’s generation, including the grandson himself. “It was *never* a revolutionary situation in this country,” Avraham had said, that visit. “She was putting on a show for herself and her friends with those bombings. America is a stage set for her psychodrama. The audience stops watching, boychick, she’ll get bored and surrender.”

Apparently true. Anyway, according to Jesse Kelman, at least Arkey and his friends had nothing to worry about from Beth’s trial. The State, he said, didn’t know anything more than before about the MIT bombing—or anyway, it couldn’t *prove* anything—so long as Michael Healy didn’t talk. And even for what Beth might have done *after* that, well, whatever it had been, other parts of the Weather Underground—known as the Eggplant, at least in their own frenetic, whimsical imaginations—had gotten wrist slaps when they’d surfaced: suspended sentences, probation, tiny morsels of county time. Mark Rudd had—in Eggplant patois—*inverted* a year before Beth. He’d gotten off with a two-thousand-dollar fine and some probation time. Only Cathy Wilkerson, Jesse said, might get more—her parents had owned the town house, which put her in legal possession of the dynamite. But all the government could hang on Beth Jacobs was being there. Or so Jesse Kelman had said. And, as always, his friends had rested themselves in Jesse’s quiet certainties, his *You’re home now, I’ll take care of you* tone. Thus his nom de BillyBooks: **The Defender**, with its overtones, rare for Billy’s work, Campbell’s Soup and Mom.

Special Agent Olson, still especially piqued with Beth, had managed to delay her bail hearing a week with jive about a vast international terrorist network still crouching in the American night. But even Olson couldn’t jerk off to that fantasy for long. Beth’s hearing this morning, Jesse said, would be brief and pro forma. She would probably walk out with them this afternoon, bored with setting bombs ready for a new life; the final bow of the Weathermen—with most of the audience already at the summer houses.

But when a brusque guard stopped Arkey in the courthouse lobby and passed a metal detector’s curved rods over the legs of his seersucker suit and into his sweaty crotch, Arkey knew there’d been a glitch.



Jesse had got it wrong. Maybe Beth had been heedless again, suffering from a masochistic desire for restrictive, punishing authority (her psychoanalyst father's theory) or just from an upper-middle-class certainty that the world would once again conform to her fantasies.

A Hispanic TAC Squad officer holding a rifle with a curved clip stood next to the guard. He glared at Arkey as he walked past him into the courtroom, probably able to tell from Arkey's long nose that he was a friend of the guard's hated enemy, the defendant, the notorious comic book star Beth Jacobson, i.e., **Athena X**, or **Ninja B.**, or (in the *Justice* series) **Deborah, AKA the Prophet**. The guard muttered something. A curse?

Arkey loosened his scarf as he walked to the front of the court and took a seat next to his friend Jeffrey Schell. The guard, Arkey knew, wanted him to die. He needed wood to knock on, to stop new tumor cells from sprouting. *This must be the throne room of Zargon, or of the devil himself! On concrete everywhere!* Arkey tapped his own head lightly, clearly wood through and through, Avraham often said. Arkey knew superstitions meant religion had failed him; or he'd failed it, Arkey fitfully observant only for the last six months and lacking the hefty Abe-style moral greatness that might provoke God's protection. Besides, old habits die hard; probably after the person, even. Had he been this bad, he wondered, before the melanoma?

"Yeah," Laura had said, last time he dragged this subject up. He'd always been a wood knocker, she'd said, a crack skipper. A penny swallower. Laura usually wore stylish versions of peasant things, thickly textured, many different-colored threads—but both a little more intricate and more muted, the peasant's patron Saint being Laurent. In fact, Laura, in consultation with her dressmaker, designed her own knock-offs, gathered her fabrics for her kimonos moderne, her très riche Irish milkmaid cloak. Laura a multiethnic tribe unto herself. That day for an amiable lunch—croque mesdames in the faded Bauhaus of the Brasserie—she'd worn a straight, long tweed skirt, a woven forest-garden.

"Wood knocking," Arkey had said, "that's ordinary kid stuff, you ask me." He'd hoped still that Laura might make love again even if only for old times' sake; pity even. Touching someone pushed death away—for a moment anyway.

"Arkey, darling," Laura said, with a mock shake of her head, "you have to spin around every time someone mentions sausage. You have to tie your hair in knots and rip the knots out at one in the afternoon and one at night. We won't even talk about the dropped-coin thing, or that you can't even listen to 'Take Me to the River' because someone you knew who died once listened to it, all right? None of that is ordinary, dear. You're more like a tribe of your own."

Him, too? "You know, I think it was Billy's sixth-grade school report that traumatized me. I had come up with magic spells to keep the Nazis away from Great Neck."

Laura had laughed at that explanation. Insufficiently Oedipal, probably. "Well, thanks for your effort. It seems to have worked."

"Yeah. *So far.*" He took another forkful of fried bread and cheese. Join the Jews for a Larger Trial and Better Spells? Not that *theirs* had worked so very well against Germans. Or even Babylonians, for that matter.

Then, just as he was imagining Laura's bow-shaped lips, his dream became reality and Laura Jafar—AKA **SheWolf**, and **Dr. Fantasy** in BillyBooks—walked into the crowded courtroom, in a short black skirt—more professional today than haute couture peasant—a short-sleeved, white scalloped shirt and small pearls, and a cane topped with a silver wolf. The lawyers, as if on cue, started to gabble at each other in excited voices. The whole thing, Arkey thought, must have sounded to Laura like a murderous argument at her family's dinner table. After all, Robert Brown, the government's lawyer, was the handsome nephew of her family's maid, and the defense counsel was played today by Jesse Kelman, her first lover—and still, Arkey suspected bitterly, the champeen.

Laura glanced at Arkey—the not-quite-father of the child she hadn't had—and she smiled almost warmly at him (or was it at her best friend, Jeffrey Schell?)—but the seat she decided on was across the aisle from them. A *snub*. Arkey couldn't help himself; he tucked his leg under his bottom so he could look taller.

Laura, as if responding, put her right hand under her long black hair and lifted it over her blouse collar, a gesture that seemed to Arkey, like everything she did since they'd split up two years ago, both enticing and dismissive.

Though what Laura actually felt that morning was anxious—like *she'd* suddenly become the one on trial here. She liked being looked at, loved being wanted, but she didn't cotton to being divided, used up, found wanting, and she sat now in a courtroom with Jesse Kelman, a handsome boy who, in girlhood times, she'd deeply loved; Arkey Kaplan, a lover in penny loafers who'd always wanted too much from her; and Bobby Brown, a man with whom she'd already, in fantasy, started to make love. So she touched her hair to reassure herself, anxiety being most certainly not good for her under-siege myelin. *How important could this case be*—she said to herself to mock her own desire—*if the Justice Department has sent a thirty-year-old lawyer to try it?*

Still, she couldn't take her eyes off Robert Brown, who, with an expertly controlled lawyer's death-voice that without inordinate volume could push you into the corner of a room and beat your brain black and blue, now said that Laura's dear friend Beth Jacobs had, to the government's certain knowledge, participated in several bombings over the last ten years. The government would show that during the course of these conspiracies the defendant had seriously wounded at least one man. And those were just the felonies the government could be certain about. The government soon would present evidence of other, even more destructive, crimes and conspiracies, some of them just at the point of explosion. The defendant had jumped bail before, he said, and would undoubtedly flee again when she realized how desperate her situation really was, coldly indifferent as always to the effects of her actions on her community and her family. Robert Brown nodded his head toward Beth's parents and the strength in Brown's muscular body, his numen of banked power and anger, or so Laura dreamed of him, gave the downward tilt of his large head an expressive force, as if this strong man was simply overcome with righteous sympathy for these wronged old people, whose dearest wish, he knew, was that their cruel daughter should be denied bail. Laura couldn't help herself, she became a little wet for square-jawed Bobby Brown, could feel his arms pulling her toward his chest. (*Too square, too large. What would children of his look like?*)

Then Harrison Baker, the other of Beth's lawyers, smiled, showing wolfishly long, Chesterfield-patinaed teeth, and whispered a question in Jesse's ear. Arkey had told her he felt confident the

friend could pass the Talmud's test for a lawyer's ability to try a capital case: that he could elaborate sixteen reasons why it was all right to eat snake, even though Leviticus expressly forbade it.

Jesse rose in an ill-fitting gray suit and shook his curly black-haired head with sad surprise at Bobby Brown's "unreasonable cruelty." In slow, soft tones that made him sound like a weary father correcting an obtuse, obstinate child, Jesse said that the State's claims were a government fantasy to clear the books at this poor woman's expense, for if the State had evidence of supposed conspiracies, why had no other Weathermen ever been charged in them? Beth had surrendered voluntarily, and this was a huge, nonsensical show of force—metal detectors, pat searches, police riflemen inside the courtroom—was the State's unconscionable attempt at intimidation, its way of substituting innuendo for argument, trying to convince the judge that Beth was a dangerous character, when, in truth, she never had been a violent threat to anyone and her parents' dearest wish was only that she be returned to the States and to Great Neck, Long Island, the town where she was born and still had deep roots. Surely the court could give some consideration to how much this family had already suffered?

Was Beth a threat? Laura wondered. Beth had spent two weeks hiding out in Laura's studio apartment, while Jesse negotiated her surrender. She'd been meek, bewildered, and obviously bored. Does a terrorist spend her afternoons watching *Family Feud*? Nights, they'd eaten take-out Kung Pao Chicken together, and Beth had never once mentioned the violent overthrow of the government. The only secret communiqués she'd received had been love notes from her boyfriend, Snake, scrawled on torn magazine pages.

But if she wasn't dangerous, then what made Beth worth even this charade of force? Did they hope for heavy bail as a present for Special Agent Olson—his lips set tightly but his eyes shining, Laura imagined, with dreams of finally imprisoning Beth in a box she'd never escape from. Olson had somehow known about Beth's part in the MIT bombing from the first moment he'd interrogated Laura about the explosion, had already badly wanted to nail Beth then. But *still*? Why would even he want to make an example of her? For what audience in this wide, indifferent world? Beth had maybe been briefly notorious in 1968, when her father, Dr. Leo Jacobs, camp survivor and media favorite, had published a famous essay in *Commentary* on her misguided generation, a bunch of sadomasochists undone by fantasies—a hook for *Life* magazine to make his daughter a Symbol, and himself famous among the parents worried that their children might follow Che Guevara's or Herbert Marcuse's piping right into the ground. But by now, Laura would bet that only adolescent comic book readers cared about Beth Jacobs, or someone kind of like her, called **Ninja B.**, or **Deborah, AKA the Prophetess**, or whatever tawdry new marketing gimmick Billy Green had thought of to make her multicolored, big-breasted antics ripe for geekoid consumption.

And consume they did! Two years before, Laura had sold a silly picture book Billy had done for her when he was twelve to a twenty-year-old Chinese American with bad teeth and a nasty smile, netting more than enough to pay for her abortion. Billy Green, he told her as he'd wrapped the hand-sewn pages in cellophane, was the greatest American genius since Herriman, whoever that was, and Beth the greatest heroine since Wonder Woman (though she was sure that wondering was pretty much all the boy had ever done about women). Only people like that cared about the real Beth Jacobs anymore. Laura was sure, and only because she was Billy's character.

Her father cared mightily, though—and probably still thought of Beth as *his* character. He sat with

his wife on the other side of the courtroom from their daughter, and their two small bodies rocked forward and back when hers did, as if they wanted to seize any possible link with her. Dr. Jacobs' face turned longingly toward Beth as they swayed, and his eyes behind thick lenses looked scoured—they usually did, actually—by a long weeping. But Beth wouldn't look at her small, sad-eyed parents or at any of her friends; she only stared downward, at the wooden defense table.

The two lead lawyers, doing their steps in the jail minuet, approached the bench. Robert Brown, Arkey imagined, gave the judge a smile meant to say, There'll be plenty of evidence soon, so trust us, Your Honor—if you cut her loose, we'll see that Beth Jacobs is the *Daily News* boner of the day for you:

## **NINNY JUDGE SETS COMIC BOOK STAR NINJA B. FREE! She and the Joker Start Unfunny Gotham Terror Wave!**

Meanwhile, as the lawyers gabbled, Beth, in short-sleeved blue denim prison dress, slumped even lower at the counsel table, the neon-passion color of her fingernails seemingly the only defiant thing about her. A thin leather cord went around her neck and under long black hair in back. A leather packet hung from the cord, and lay on the table right in front of her. In 1964, just before he'd been murdered, Laura's brother, Frank, had sent Beth that flat, embroidered pouch from Mississippi calling it an African custom re-told in the new world, "a nation sack." Beth must have given the prison officials her unblinking organizer's stare and a torrent of words to convince them that her pouch had constitutionally protected religious significance, her equivalent of tefillin, the black leather boxes attached to leather thongs that Arkey himself had just learned to wind criss-cross around his arm and circled about his head when he recited morning prayers, the boxes containing, by sublime tautology, the fragment of the Torah that said to wear the boxes. Arkey was also pretty sure that the sack contained one of the letters that Frank had mailed from the Lovette jail. Or, according to some folks from the grave.

Beth, probably feeling she was just the legal system's McGuffin, sunk a little farther forward with each sentence of the lawyer's wrangle. She pillowed her head on her pale, bare arms. Her body looked wan—but, Jesus, Arkey whispered to his companion, was that a pale green snake tattoo curling out from under the edge of her sleeve?

"Beth's like a work of found art," Jeffrey Schell whispered into Arkey's waxy ear. "Sculpted by the history ocean, smoothed and shaped until she's been cast up in this courtroom for us to stare at. And needn't be beautiful if it's fascinating, charismatic, even."

*What the fuck was he talking about?* If anyone on God's earth was beautiful, Arkey had known from the time he was eleven and she'd given him a painful afternoon-long boner, it was Beth Jacobs with her thick black hair, green eyes, a straight if down-turned nose, and already amazing, intimidating breasts.

But truly Jeffrey just wanted to riff on his beloved, he always having been the one perhaps *more* crazy about crazy Beth, an artwork, an opera star, the woman, perhaps, that he would have wanted to be. "Maybe whatever fixes the attention is called art by us morally indifferent moderns," Jeffrey

murmured with seductive knowingness, while the lawyers continued to blow wind into the judge.

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Jeffrey was all soft musing *maybes*—the reverse of the bully labor historians and ideologues (his grandpa Abraham included) that Arkey usually apache-danced with. An Ichabod Crane of a man, Jeffrey had a large Adam's apple, thinning blond hair, and the largest nose of the group. And, a reverse miracle by Great Neck standards, he had uneven teeth—the sadism of his father having denied him the sadism of the orthodontist. He had nearly translucent skin, too, the tracery of every vein visible beneath. Jeffrey looked vulnerable, slightly morbid. And yet *he* managed to make the package appear dandyish—like he'd intentionally stitched himself from such ungainly parts. Arkey tasted something almost erotic about his initial distaste, as if such a strange-looking person must be in touch with secrets it would be worthwhile to know.

But the bailiff didn't think so. He glared at them both. A courtroom, apparently, was the wrong place for a seminar. Arkey looked at the rifles— *they* really fixed his attention. Did that make the art? He whispered to Jeffrey to shut up. But hypnotized by Jeffrey's art-dealer voice, Arkey took another look at Beth, like he was deciding whether or not to acquire *her* for his nonexistent collection. The tattoo on her arm showed a snake surrounded by blue Arabic-looking letters worked into a red and-green design, and it felt unclean to Arkey even to look on it, to be joined to it by the eyes. Excited him and made him queasy, like a cock ring or a pornographic stage show, a tattoo being forbidden, Arkey had learned in his Talmud study group just the week before, not by good taste and class decorum only but by Law (Leviticus 19:28); the body to be returned to the Creator as delivered (minus, for men, that one crucial snip, a sacrifice that made you worthy of God's attention). Still, Arkey yearned to draw the letters over with his finger, for he had always dreamt there was a magic touch, and he imagined that contact with Beth's skin would give him entry into Beth's hidden world, the underground rivers of passion and violence that had fed her Eggplant existence. Those were waters that he feared and despised, adrenaline rivers for adventurist junkies, a particularly disastrous drug (he could hear his grandfather say) for the working class. Just look what happened to that boychick Healy. Yet Arkey still longed to feel the turbulence of Beth's heart's blood for a moment.

"Sit up, Miss Jacobs," the judge said, peering between the lawyers to see Beth more clearly. A fifty-year-old man, he still wore a Marine's crew cut in 1978—a retro-coiffure, which couldn't, Arkey thought, bode well for his friend's case. "You'll have plenty of time to sleep later."

Beth's back rose slowly from the table, but her head still slumped toward the earth. Billy Green's pencil moved along the large sketchbook page on his knees, following, Arkey imagined, the line of defeat in Beth's bent shoulders, probably drawing the Alphaville courtroom for the next issue of *Girly with Guns*. In BillyBooks, Billy Green (who'd lost a tiny bit of hearing in the upper registers) had become a character called Billy Bad Ears, a boy who'd gone grandly deaf weeping for the world's pain and so gained the power to hear other men's hearts. As "The Super Hero Who Draws Himself" Billy was famous among the can't-dance adolescents and adults who worshiped comic books. Well, why not? After all, hadn't Arkey and his friends themselves once worshiped Billy, a rite that had helped make *them* into self-deluded isolates with their own dating—and legal—troubles?

Arkey saw tears in Billy's eyes, and maybe not only for suffering humanity this time. Michael Healy had been a stand-up guy, but during his trial the courtroom had been crowded with spectators who gave the judge the power salute and oinked whenever he rose from the bench. The NLF's envoy

Cuba had called Michael “a hero of the Vietnamese people.” But that was 1970. In 1978, Arkey imagined, a girl might want to make a deal to avoid jail time that nobody cared about anymore—even in Cuba or Vietnam.

But not **Ninja B.**! who had already stood shackled (in *Girls with Guns*, Ish. #46) in a “courtroom” whose gray cement and dark wooden benches signaled it was also one of Zargon’s control centers, the walls covered with video screens that showed any place in the world—for in this parallel reality your home TV was a double agent that also scanned you, providing instantly updated computer readouts when your eyes widened with desire (Hey, look, he doesn’t know he likes the beefcake better than the babes!) or blinked with fear, matching the scan with your charge card receipts, your mail orders for pornography, and so revealing, by Psycho-Spectral Marketing Analysis, the kinks by which even consumerzen could be manipulated, to his bliss and your profit. **Ninja B.** (Beth’s name depending on what comic book series she was in, who her enemy was) wore heavy Bobby Seale chains at the waist and feet and a straitjacket (for in comics things are never bad enough); and her mouth—watch out for the Death Scream!—was gagged. Beth was only a year older than Billy, but like a stone her father had sent skimming across a lake, she’d skipped on two more grades ahead of them, into college and into initiation, they’d all dreamt, into subtle sexual mysteries. She was Billy’s older woman, teasing him for weeks, fucking him rarely—making Billy a Skinner-box pigeon, Arkey thought, on a random reinforcement schedule—so he’d paid continual court to her (who knows, push a lever—or set a fuse—and this might be your big day, little pigeon), which meant **Ninja B.**’s premier skill was to make people her mind-slaves. Today the chains and straitjacket kept her from using her psyche-controlling arts, or the voodoo hand jive that could (in the kind of pun that comics thrive on) manipulate the weather, bringing tornadoes as disturbing as a teenager’s desires down upon her enemies; and she couldn’t shake her body with the esoteric martial arts techniques (the snake, the slow grind, the bum-whose vibrations could mambo a man to bloody pieces.

But those eyes, those lips, those breasts! The Judge wants to kiss **Ninja B.**—perhaps because Billy himself, or someone else in the courtroom whose feelings Billy received on that psychic radio he can’t jam, had yearned for Beth Jacobs’ full, slightly down-turned mouth, thinking that its touch would let him join with her power, her underground existence.

**The Judge orders her brought to him.**

**He strips off his own robes to reveal his 346 suit**

—for in BillyBook world most people wore futuristic costumes—skate-boarder’s knee pads and colored codpieces for women and short kilts for young men, who also wore neck braces as fashion accessories—but the **ORG.**’s minions almost always wore blue Brooks Brothers suits.

**The foolish lovesick Judge orders Ninja B. ungagged—**

**and Beth unleashes the Death Scream—a sound rawer than any soul singer’s throaty yell!**

**It turns the Judge into her zombie puppet!! He orders the Imperium’s soldiers—trained in the neo-samurai code of absolute, hypnotic obedience**

~~—to point their guns at their own heads and kill themselves!!! And he puts a gun to his own temple!!!!~~

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**Blood spatters the television screens!!!!**

But what would become of **OurKey**, Arkey wondered, that fussy, nervous, ancient historian, whose kabalistic spells brought the mutants the wisdom to see their enemy's plans, though he hadn't, in his real-life Clark Kent identity as a graduate student in labor history when **OurKey** first appeared in *Guerrillas*, #12, known any kabala besides what Billy Green himself had taught them when he was fifteen. And what of Jesse—the Defender—or Jeffrey Schell, known in BillyBooks as **Jeffrey the Sophist**, master of faulty logic and empty rhetoric, super con man of the dread Band of Outsiders? Or of Laura, who was far from being an analyst when Billy first drew her as **SheWolf**, a lithe magician who can show her victims hologram hallucinations of their screaming fears and va-voom desire visions that make her enemies flee out windows, or run forward toward her claws? (Actually, had Billy predicted those things, or just drawn them into one of the endless revisions called *The New*, *The True*, or *The New True*, *Never Before Revealed Origins of the Band of Outsiders*?) Would **Nina B.** give the Death Scream to her former comrades now—that commanding, enchanting sound that would force her aboveground supporters who had fertilized her underground Eggplant existence with an old sweater or a bus ticket to purge themselves for their weakening commitment to world revolution? Probably someday soon the panel Billy drew would fill with *their* blood, too.

A book of Beth, Arkey thought, could be called *The Woman Brought Up On the Opera*, Arkey remembering Leo Jacobs' program of special Euro-education for his Valkyrie daughter. *That* was the whole problem. Or had the problem started when she'd spurned the Met and become *Undone in Rhythm and Blues: The Story of the Girl Who Wanted to Be the Scream from James Brown's Mouth*.

Maybe that's what he should do for his next book—a book of Beth that would really be a book about all of them, written in a hectoring way that his late grandfather and the Brandeis Tenure and Promotion Committee might approve of. Possible title: *Jews with Money*—an outtake title from his first book, the one that had been a rewrite of his thesis on the Jewish labor movement, telling the story of their grandparents' and parents' rise (but was it a rise?) from the Lower East Side ghetto to the mink-lined one.

Arnie Golden, a Jew who already had lots more money than Arkey ever would, strolled into court with a yachtsman's rolling walk, taking a seat right in front of FBI agent Olson. It was Arnie who had saved Arkey's first book from the *JWM* title with an irony to it as bitter as the mounds of cocaine Arnie had passed around to the guests on his leather-covered couch in his all-white Beverly Hills living room. "Yes," he'd said disgustedly, "it was a rise. For God's sake, think about your malarkey Arkey-Barkey. Wide lawns, good schools, no tuberculosis. Don't be an asshole. Of course it was a rise." And he'd shepherded Arkey toward writing a popular (with the Jews, anyway) story of Jewish triumph, *Our Brilliant Careers*, a book mostly purged of his beloved grandfather's gravelly voice, the radical cutter and cloakmaker's Yiddish harangues rich with the Prophet Isaiah madness that said *the success is no success*, and that even Arkey's near best-seller was bupkis—for he hadn't helped realize Justice for All. Abraham's son and his grandson and all their wealthy friends had made nothing but houses of sugar that the rain of Righteousness would surely someday wash away.

But “yes,” Arkey’s father, Isaac Kaplan, had said, reconciled to his son’s life by the same book that glorified his own, “yes. My father has always been a fool. But my son has gotten it right. *This* is the Promised Land.” Meaning Great Neck. Moses, a few millenniums previously, had mistakenly turned left to Jerusalem instead of right toward Long Island, causing no end of trouble, the Jews probably having been destined, just as his Israeli cab driver must have suspected, not for the unfortunate weather of the Middle East but for endless summer afternoons by the country club pool, good delicatessens, fine public schools, and minor skirmishes with the tough Italian kids in Little Neck.

Taking his seat, Arnie Golden smiled at them with grand, tanned well-being, pleased with a world that had someone like him in it, certain that a little sugar-melting rain would only be a cooling comfortable change after so much lovely beach sun. A thin, beautiful blond woman sat cuddled next to him with a clipboard on her lap, their legs touching. Both of them wore deep blues you could drown in, draped silks and linens whose tailoring Arkey genuinely admired, though linen was an unkosher fabric for all but Cohenim, Arkey had already *lernered*, giving a moral meaning to his envy—for as rich children, Arkey and his friends had felt certain that they starred in a fairy tale, while poorer Arnie Golden had grown rich making fairy tales. *So there’s a movie in Beth*, Arkey thought, *or Arnie Golden wouldn’t be here*. He had heard, too, that Arnie had been in touch with Michael Healy in jail, probably trying to option his life rights for the screen. *That* would probably be more seductive to Michael than the time off the feds had once offered. And if Michael ever sold his story, some of his friends might be arrested too, which was probably the cream of the jest for Arnie, angry that they had never let him into their teenage clique—an omission that was, Arkey suspected, probably an unconscious class prejudice; Arnie’s parents were high school teachers, Jews with less money. Or maybe it was just Arnie’s precociously developed cynicism that had blackballed him; Arnie already the kind of kid who wouldn’t clap to save Tinkerbell, let alone someone already dead and buried, like Frank Jaffe.

Mostly, though, Arkey wasn’t scared of Arnie or guilty toward him; he was *competitive*. Arnie would infallibly know whether irony toward their dreams was hip and enticing (as it was in a late night comedian, like Arnie’s client Jimmy Benjamin) or impious and disfiguring (as it would have been in a history of the Jews). Arkey tried to scan his friends’ faces more deeply into himself, tried to experience their souls the way Billy seemed able to—so *he* could write the book before Arnie could option their lives. And he felt for a moment the residue (like grains of sleep on the eyelids after you awake) of what he’d sometimes felt in Laura’s bedroom listening to Frank’s letters when high school teenage sublimity (which had to be, he thought, the strongest and stupidest drug in the world, secret fuel for all the world’s armies), that his life had been covered with the dark wing of History’s grandeur and terror. He had been called to help Frank Jaffe, who suffered in his grave. How? By healing the world, doing justice.

But Arkey didn’t know anymore what justice meant, what the fuck he was supposed to do to rescue the dead Frank: Bring the working class to power? Make sure all swords got beaten into plowshares? Help Beth? Or maybe keep *her* from doing any more damage? And who, he wondered, could he even ask about any of it? He couldn’t talk about it to any friend, rabbi, or psychiatrist; he’d never even talked about it with any lover but Laura, because she’d been part of it, too—and even they had hardly whispered to each other that they’d once thought they had actually received letters transmitted from her brother *after* he’d died—“which,” Laura had said one night, “we might have realized was unlikely. I mean, how can communication from the dead possibly come through the U.S. mails? They can’t.”



barely manage to deliver a supermarket circular!” the MIT bomb having supposedly blown a belief those letters out of her long ago.

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There had been three of those, postmarked from Lovette, Mississippi. The first had said, *I am dying, I am done, I am dead*, in a broken childlike script, not (Beth and Laura said) like Frank’s own precise angular handwriting. Jesse thought that was maybe because the deputy sheriff of some little Mississippi town had again smashed Frank’s hand in the jail door, making his fingers stumble forming words, and that he meant he couldn’t take any more of “jail, no bail.” The second letter said, “*I am still in pain. If anything, the pain is worse. How long, how long, how long? Oh God, what if this is hell?*” *The pain is worse*, Jesse said, must mean his hand hurt more. *How long?* Maybe that meant he was thinking of staying past August—which would give his parents a conniption fit. He wasn’t going to graduate school or return to his family until . . . until when? *How long?* Well, how long until the Negroes in the South had their freedom, or at least the vote? So, by *hell*, they had thought that meant Mississippi.

Except for Billy Green. When Beth had finished reading the first letter, his little voice floated up from the floor. “He’s dead,” he said. “He’s been murdered. And he’s forced someone’s living hand to move, to write to us.”

Which, Jeffrey Schell had said immediately, had to be crap. Billy, he pointed out, already drew for his father’s comic book company. Naturally he wanted to turn life into a horror story! But then, when a lot of other things Billy said about what had happened to Frank turned out to be true on the front page of the *New York Times*, they had decided that the letters had been written by Frank himself *before* he died, the way Jesse had said, but still when Billy had touched them he’d known that Frank had *already* been murdered by the Lovette sheriff, which made him eerily psychic—and *that* meant, in a blind feedback loop, that if someone as psychic as Billy said so, then maybe the letters *had* come from the grave. Billy had become their leader—or maybe something more, something like their suburban wonder rabbi.

So maybe Frank was just the way Billy also said, alive-yet-not-alive in his box, like a coma victim cum-zombie, and his pain in the grave would be endless (*how long?*) unless his friends, as Billy instructed, helped him out, doing holy actions that would raise his soul-spark back to its source. He should have called the *Enquirer*:

## **MIDGET JEW GURU REVEALS IN-GRAVE HORRORS! Fucks Up Friends’ Lives with Pointless Quest to Help Corpse!**

Anyway, making justice, Arkey had to admit now, was a job he’d been a lot more sensitive to fourteen years ago in Laura’s bedroom, when he’d listened avidly to Billy’s high, excited, earnest voice and had grown dazed by a strong mixed drink made up of: one jigger of the letters and Billy’s stories about them; two parts the sweet, syrupy whiskey that Jeffrey Schell finagled for them from older men; and many, many tumblers of the close proximity of 2Girls2, Beth and Laura, beautiful members of the opposite sex with whom Arkey had secrets (if what Billy said was true anyway) that linked him almost more intimately than sex could have—and that would certainly, he’d hoped, tumb

over into sex with at least one of them.

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Drunk on all that, he'd felt like a great hand had swiftly lifted him up toward heaven and shown him the Big Picture, given him a chance at greatness—a high they'd maybe all chased after for the next fourteen years, in violent actions, in art, in drugs and sex as orgiastic as they could make it given the physical and moral limitations, chased after though they should have felt from the first that they were being fools for sure if they believed in such overstuffed melodramatic furniture as *giant hands*. Yeah, Arkey thought. But the thing was, *they did believe*.

Or used to.

Probably the letter Beth carried around her neck was all that was left of those fragments. Billy had given each of them pieces to save, and each of them, except for Beth, had, he knew, contrived to lose them, misplace them, leave them at home in the pages of a *Little Lulu* comic book hoarded since childhood, half knowing that the letter and the whole comic book collection would be swept into the trash when their parents cleaned out the attic.

They really needed to bail Beth out, Arkey thought, go someplace calm, like that very same bedroom of Laura's, with its views of the wide back lawn and the double rows of Dr. Jacobs' dogwood trees, and bend together over the most opaque of texts, the one most difficult to tell the truth about the story of their lives. They needed to discuss their memories of Frank's "special" letters, be like Talmudists in reverse, and move from the letters' supposed laws back not to Moses and Sinai but to the crazy mistake they'd all made together, led astray by their tiny magus, Billy Green, alias Billy B. Ears, the Super Hero Who Draws Himself.

Though before the spring of Mr. Hartman's sixth grade class in 1960, all Arthur Kaplan had ever valued about Billy Green was his height, Arthur thanking God and knocking on wood each September when they lined up in size places and he found that Billy was still the smallest student, boy or girl, at Arrandale, the gloomy secondary school of worn brown bricks, a relic of Great Neck Before the Jews Arrived, and so sadly different from Cherry Lane, their enlightened windows-everywhere primary school, with its pleasantly bogus poetic name, bright pink bricks, and (no doubt for good educational reasons) musky, dark forest along the side filled with sewer-smelling skunk cabbage, where a boy could defy his fear by making others fear his wildness, playing boisterous running games of keepaway whose art was to throw the stolen object—a tan windbreaker, a Yankees cap, the right to practice medicine—tauntingly just over the head of its rightful owner, who was, often enough, little Arthur or even littler (thank God!) Billy Green.

By sixth grade there was only one pretty blue-eyed girl between Billy and Arthur, Arthur's wall to keep back an ocean of shame called Smaller Than *All* the Girls!, Laura Jaffe, who had a tiny scar on her wrist that scared Arthur, as if he couldn't or shouldn't love her because she was marred, though he also dreamt he might touch her scar and be deliciously linked with her. But if he tried, he knew she would laugh dismissively at him, the thing he feared most in the world.

Anyway, without Laura between them in the class photo Arthur imagined he'd be ever more humiliatingly married with Billy Green because they were both small and sickly, and because neither of them could kick the mottled red ball out of the infield, and because both of them were suck-

thumbs through the second grade, though Billy did it shamelessly in public, while Arthur discreetly hid himself in the bathroom for time with his special friend.

One day in the fourth grade, Johnny Ryan, the graceful, heedless kickball star and keepaway aficionado, had urged him to slug Billy, and ashamed that he hadn't understood a dirty joke Johnny had told them earlier (about a woman and Houdini, who couldn't escape from a scumbag), ashamed most especially, of his body, its sickness and its negligible size, he'd hit Billy on the side of the head as a way to please Johnny Ryan and to say *I'm not like him* about Billy Green. Billy threw himself at him, and they rolled around in the grass next to the asphalt playground, staining Arthur's specially tailored white Saks Fifth Avenue shirt. The other kids gathered in a ring, screaming with excitement while Arthur and Billy cried and batted at each other with skinny open hands and almost straight arms, not understanding how to cock their fists for a punch. "Come see the Battle of the Midgets!" Jimmy Benjamin shouted, and Johnny Ryan screamed, "Come on, Tiny, break his beak." But who was Tiny and which beak did he mean? Had his mentor abandoned him? Billy got on top, and Arthur was terrified that he and Billy would be joined now in everyone's mind, even kind of mixed together, like he might get called by Billy's name. He lost heart for the fight, and just cried and spit and gasped for breath as if the warm weight of the body on his chest were monstrous, though really Billy's skinny body was more like sixty-one damp washcloths.

Billy rolled off, and lay beside him, and though he was the victorious one, Billy wept, too, and smiled quizzically at Arthur, as if they must both be bewildered to find themselves lying in the dirt. "Wait," Billy gasped. "Please." But Arthur got up and ran away, humiliatingly beaten by someone who didn't even care about beating him.

In the two years since that fight Arthur had hardly ever spoken to Billy, even on the way to Sunday school, for their mothers, and Jimmy Benjamin's doting mama, carpooled together, though Mr. Green wasn't born Jewish, which meant, Arthur's mother said, that Billy wasn't really kosher—like Arthur maybe dreamt of *eating* some of Billy! Every Sunday, Billy looked toward Arthur expectantly, as if this time they were going to be friends because they were linked by the way their bodies had once touched, but Arthur, pressing his legs together so his thighs wouldn't make contact with Billy's, turned away and looked out the window, even though Billy's father published comic books.

This whole Billy thing was driving Arthur crazy, because when he even said anything to him in the car, like "did you see last night's *Twilight Zone*," he felt like Billy was a starving space monster with long sucker-arms that would leave hickeys all over his legs. And he laughed so hard when Arthur told a stupid moron joke that he looked like that fat man on television going *hardy har har*—like maybe he hadn't really gotten the joke, which was impossible, it was a moron joke!

It wasn't just Arthur who thought Billy was creepy. Every day, Billy sat alone in the corner of the cafeteria, eating his brown bag lunch (probably queer medicine foods), rocking back and forth and humming to himself. Once Arthur had walked by accidentally-on-purpose to hear what was going on. "Mr. Sandman, send me a dream," he heard Billy sing quietly. "Someone to buy me vanilla ice cream. Someone who likes pizza and never feels blue. Mr. Sandman, tell me it's you . . . One, two, three, look at Mr. Lee, four, five, six, pick up sticks, seven, eight, nine, oh, I must not whine." Arthur was pretty sure those weren't the right words. Billy looked over and smiled at Arthur, he even maybe batted his eyes at him! And then, as if Arthur had asked for an encore, Billy had his brain damage Arkestra play

a little number called “I married Joan, what a whirl what a twirl what a swirl what a girl what a pea what a merle, what a furl, what a churl, what a curl, what a . . . ,” and on and on. Arthur had to run away before anyone could think Billy had been singing to him. Thing was, Billy had taken over his mind; even in the bathroom, he still heard *whirl twirl swirl girl*, round and round, like it meant something. When it *didn't*. Except that Billy was creepy.

Other days Billy creepily forgot to eat lunch, and just sat rubbing his eyes for a half hour at a time, the ball of his thumb making a slow repetition in the socket that looked positively painful. Once Jimmy Benjamin had even said, “Look, he’s playing with himself,” and everyone had laughed. Billy looked up bewildered, like he hadn’t known there was anyone else there; then, of course, he started to cry, making a river of snot run from his nose. Jesus, why *would* Arthur *ever* want to talk with such a weirdo, such a *tiny* weirdo? Arthur was even careful not to throw at Billy in dodgeball, though Billy would be an easy, badly coordinated target and the kiss of the well-aimed ball would have raised a satisfying red welt on his pale, skinny arm, a sweet tribute mark, like the painful Indian rope burn a bully summer camp counselor had once given Arthur when he was seven and in tenderfoot bunk.

That spring in Mr. Hartman’s sixth grade class they were each to give their reports on the countries of Europe. The morning before, Arthur had marched to the front, his bowels twisting inside him, and standing before the blackboard, right beside Mr. Hartman’s huge gray metal desk, he’d read from fifty-by-eight cards that were too large for his small hands about Rembrandt, Vermeer, and the history of the Netherlands, which was surrounded by dikes, which were walls that kept the ocean back—or the Dutch would all drown because they were *under* the ocean, really (and so, Arthur dreamt, the Dutch were scared to death every waking moment of their lives).

Billy’s country was France, and Arthur worried that showed how much more Mr. Hartman liked Billy, for he had given him what Arthur suspected was Mr. Hartman’s personal favorite, a country with a lot of history, which meant a long entry in the encyclopedia that all school reports were rewritten from, for basically a school report, his older sister, June, wise in the ways of academe, had explained to him, was a matter of changing enough words from the encyclopedia article so that your essay wasn’t called “plagiarism” (though Arthur’s childhood, outside class reports, was often a matter of repeating sounds from the huge Encyclopedia of Adulthood—like “scumbag” or “justice” or “love”—which he didn’t understand and couldn’t possibly put into his own words).

Mr. Hartman had given each student an eleven-page mimeographed list of all the great artists and writers of the countries they were going to study, and France had won the genius Olympics, though Holland had done well, too, Arthur thought—partisan now of the doughty Dutch as of the mighty and reliable New York Yankees—for such a little country. The sharp-smelling blue-on-white lists also contained Mr. Hartman’s personal ratings of the importance of each thinker on a scale of one to five stars, and you were supposed to say something about all of the fives from your country in your report. Arthur had decided to memorize the non-Dutch part of the list too, because the list was important to Mr. Hartman, and Mr. Hartman was important to Arthur, so different from his stocky, balding father who was kinder, Arthur could tell, naturally both more powerful and more gentle than Mr. Hartman yet too concerned, his mother implied, about money, the factors, the goniffs, the fall line, and not—Arthur thought, though his mother didn’t say this—about truly precious treasures, like genius, “the cultural wealth”—Abraham told him—“that would someday be the common inheritance of all the world’s people.” Arthur felt these lists were an important clue to a grand future he would begin

make by memorizing all the names and rankings on the list, as if training in being a genius was to recognize other geniuses and give each one the right number of stars, and he was frighteningly certain that Mr. Hartman's grades for geniuses—or for Arthur—would be accurate.

Arthur's awe of Mr. Hartman's judgment would have comforted the teacher, who, like the Dutch, was scared every moment of his life. Age twenty-eight, overqualified for Arrandale and ill at ease in Greenvale Neck, where there seemed almost to be zoning laws against homosexuality, Mr. Hartman taught the suburban sixth grade because it gave him many opportunities to display the stern educational protectiveness that Arthur found so attractive. The work also offered him precious free time to work on his poems, and a job that was close to his analyst's suburban office, but most of all it gave him children to mold—children he didn't entirely *like*, with their wailing for no reason, when there were, they but knew it, so many good reasons. The children were the subjects he used, Dr. Jacobs had told him, to embody his own confusions before they choked him inside, though he'd explained to Dr. Jacobs that he didn't use the students to ease his own psyche; his severity would educate these spoiled children who were the same age as he was when he was saved; hidden; abandoned. For Mr. Hartman's parents hadn't loved him, or they wouldn't have sent him away; if they hadn't miraculously contrived to send him away from the transport camp at Drancy, he knew, he would have been murdered along with them; they had sent him away because they loved him so much. He envied his charges for their sheltered lives, and confused himself with his parents in his desire to protect them and to hurt them *for their own good*, for sheltered as they were, no protection, he must teach them day by day, would ever be enough, and one wrong answer could lead to their murder. His uncle in Queens thought Greenvale Neck was the Promised Land, and Hartman the handmaid to children who bathed in warm milk and frolicked with honey. But he washed them in cold water, and he washed their clothing in cold water and gave the rags back to them to wear.

Arthur could hear that, like him, adults, too, thought Mr. Hartman was different and special. Mr. Hartman had been raised by an uncle, in Queens, New York, because his real parents were from Austria, like the Kaplans' neighbor Dr. Jacobs, but they had moved to France, and stayed there, which was strange; they had *never* come to the United States, his mother said meaningfully (and out of such half-understood hints—for Arthur, for example, feared "jack's boots," and "creamertoria" though he didn't exactly know what they were—Arthur formed some of his nightmares). Living in so many countries was why Mr. Hartman had a strange accent, one that Arthur heard as lovely and distinguished, though his parents thought it might be too hard for children to understand. Mr. Hartman looked different, too; his clothes were loose on him—something Arthur's mother would never have allowed, for she made the tailors at Saks measure Arthur all over, even, embarrassingly, what the tailor called his seat and his crotch. His black hair, even in the age of the crew cut, was too close-cropped against his skull, which made him look self-denying, unsparing. And his short hair made his large brown eyes seem, to an eleven-year-old uncertain about percentages and fractions, fervid and inquisitorial—and certainly he'd be as likely to punish Arthur as himself. When the other teachers, mostly women, bunched together during recess Mr. Hartman stood apart, because, Johnny Ryan said, Mr. Hartman was a homo, and Billy Green was a homo, too, you could tell because they both had long eyelashes, and maybe that was why, Arthur thought jealously, Mr. Hartman might like Billy more than him, and had given him France to report on. Maybe he should become a homo, too?

Still, all the parents thought Mr. Hartman was really smart, for he'd heard his mother and Jimmy

talking about the teacher. Mr. Hartman had the children put hand-drawn maps of the world on the classroom wall—which was, they said, more grown-up and challenging than cutting out colorful pictures of native costumes, like the other classes did—a pedal-go-logical advance that came from Mr. Hartman having a teaching degree from Columbia, and an advanced degree, too, an M.A. in French literature. His father said there must be something wrong with Mr. Hartman if he had an M.A. and all that meant was that he could teach sixth grade, even in Great Neck with its superb schools. There was something wrong with him or with M.A.'s in French literature. Yet his father, too, Arthur thought, respected Mr. Hartman, and sounded like he was beating something back with his words, as if he were trying to destroy the world Mr. Hartman stood for in Arthur's mind. Arthur would have a difficult time telling his father what that world was (or what Grandpa Abe's socialism meant) except that there were places where people remembered the achievements of those on Mr. Hartman's list, so it was worth doing something like they had, because you would go on the list and be remembered. Arthur felt his father respected Mr. Hartman's list, wished he had his name on it; he criticized Mr. Hartman to discourage Arthur from doing what he hadn't had the courage, or the chance, or the ability, to do himself, the way he had discouraged Arthur's mom, who had been working for her M.A. in economics when his father had met her at a Temple dance and said, "I'll make you a different kind of M.A." Maybe now his father didn't want that bargain criticized, while his mother praised Mr. Hartman's degree as a way to accuse his father of denying her such a wonderful distinction by saddling her with an Arthur and a June to mold instead of an economy.

Mr. Hartman, too, though his eleven-year-old admirer didn't suspect it, hated M.A.'s and the sorts of things they studied, even his own poems, especially his own poems, with far more ferocity than Mr. Kaplan could, for the differences between him and the cloak-and-suiter included Mr. Hartman's gift for hatred. Mr. Hartman lived for the art he dreamt of making (and despised); for he, too, imagined joining his own list of those who had made objects worthy not just of interest but of adoration (as if such objects mattered)! He crossed Middle Neck Road by the train station in his badly fitting black suit, its jacket pocket sagging from the books he'd carried there. He imagined his bohemian costume would gather other bohemians—but then why did he choose to live where there were none, choose Great Neck, where the bourgeoisie would ostracize and protect him? He was on the way to Kuck's, the German's empty delicatessen, for his nightly roast beef sandwich, and he felt terribly exposed. His uncle had said that as he grew up the world would grow smaller. It hadn't. It had grown larger. God, he knew, had zimzumed himself to leave empty space where creation might take place. But so much empty space! And all without God!

". . . and with plenty of mayonnaise," he said to the broad-faced, surly owner behind the high glass counter. Why had this man come to a Jewish suburb to live? Mr. Hartman wondered. What choking internal conflict did *he* make these burghers embody?

*I'm not a Jew of faith*, he thought, on his way back to his room, as he imagined the suburban householders who crowded Squire's Jewish delicatessen were, *or rather my faith is culture*, like (he liked to think) Freud's faith, or Kafka's or Proust's or Walter Benjamin's, all the old Talmudic fervor now focused on secular texts, literary masterpieces made almost holy by the longing and the burning regard of the acolyte.

Only *almost* holy, Kafka prompted from his imaginary chorus. What a terrible swindle art was, what always disappointing idolatry to worship art! For Mr. Hartman found his beloved endlessly enticing

endlessly disappointing. As he watched the opening credits of a movie at the Squire or the Playhouse the two theaters facing each other on Middle Neck Road where he went regularly twice a week watch whatever they had playing; or as he stripped the cellophane from a new long-playing album; gave a hard crack to the spine of a new book of poems; he always felt that *this* would be the longed-for friend, *this* would be his transformative angel; and he was, of course, forever disappointed. Culture popular or esoteric, was insufficient as compensation for what he'd lost, and it was part of his faithful love to the parents who saved him to find it so. And as transcendence, a world elsewhere for him to live in, culture was more ineffective than a weekend at Grossinger's (where he'd often gone with his single uncle); the repetition of the movie, the aria, the poem, never translated his torso into poetry, his limbs into fire that fed on air. No, he remained abandoned in the third row on the aisle and still alone in his rooms near the train station, listening to Callas records, eating his sandwich with dollops of consoling mayonnaise, growing forgetful of himself, not like one teased out of thought but like one made so infinitely small that he almost had to look at his wooden tag to discover his name. This Jew of Culture loved art and felt always, like the prophet Isaiah, on the point of cursing it, and those who studied it, and those who created it; even himself; especially himself; his prominent ears; his queer heart; for Johnny Ryan was right, he was homosexual—at least that. He is his dead mother; he is his father who he lost—was lost by. His sister stayed—was *left*—and he had to find her, too, inside himself. The world was gone; he must bear them. And all their eyes looked out behind his, making a terrible pressure in his skull that caused him to hate his large, pursed lips; his too wide nose; his clumsy words; his ugly accent, for while Arthur found his speech beautiful, Mr. Hartman thought himself robbed of all language, each word battling another with an equal claim to be his mamaloshen; an equal reason to be hated by him, until any sentence he spoke seemed mangled by sharp shadows and sounded like gnashing and wailing. We are digging the pit of Babel, the archangel Kafka had said. But Mr. Hartman was sure he lived there.

And Arthur was right, the French words that tormented him in that pit were the most loved, and the most despised, the most darkly shadowed. The French had produced works Mr. Hartman helplessly adored above all others; they had conspired with the Nazis to murder his parents and to murder him. France could have done that, then culture meant nothing, language could order anything, murder could happen anywhere to the accompaniment of Bizet, of Ravel, of Berlioz, by men whom music made feel noble and sentimental as they slaughtered the innocent. And France had done that; murder could happen anywhere; art meant nothing. He knew that. But he could think of nothing else to want in this whole overly large world. So Mr. Hartman kept beautiful shapes and murderous deeds apart in his mind by force of a continually overstretched will, which made, he knew, his poems difficult to write, impossible to read, an endless, clunking series of insipid oppositions, without form, without vitality, without a reason to live or a will strong enough to die.

But Arthur didn't know any of that when he counted France's golden 5's, or when Mr. Hartman spoke yesterday afternoon lovingly telling them how the artists and thinkers of France had invented liberty, equality, and fraternities, without a word for Arthur's efforts on behalf of Holland. And Mr. Hartman even got out from behind his desk and stood in front of them in his baggy brown suit, displaying large reproductions of Renoir paintings, sweet women swathed in wide red dresses, that Mr. Hartman had himself pasted on white oaktag backings—something he hadn't done for Arthur's Rembrandt, though Arthur had to admit that the women made Arthur feel soft inside, like when his sister stroked his hair at night so he could sleep (though it didn't help him sleep) while Mr. Rembrandt's photos made him

feel scared and helpless. Mr. Hartman so loved France he had even taught them to say *l'etoile*, and *non*, and *oui*, and *I, my name is*, in French.

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When they got back from the cafeteria and recess, Mr. Hartman looked down at the blank assignment book open in front of him on his desk and gave the closed-lip smile that made Arthur feel ashamed of himself. "Billy Green," he said, and Billy trod slowly to the front, his upper body swaying and he made small sharp gasps as he walked, the departing winds of a tear storm. Maybe, Arthur thought, Billy's scared to give his report, though he should know *that* wasn't something that would make Mr. Hartman relent. School was far too important for such childish considerations! Billy carried a pale brown reversible windbreaker in his right hand, as if he planned to run away, and a wad of fifty-by-eight cards in his left. His bright blue short-sleeved shirt was unevenly buttoned, his khaki chinos hung on him like the hospital johnny Arthur had worn for his tonsillectomy, and his arms looked like knobby sticks. Maybe he shook because he was faint from hunger. Maybe he was wasting away. Maybe, Arthur imagined, moved by a murderous jealousy, Billy had just learned he had *a fatal disease!*

Billy's head bobbed from side to side, like it was on a spring. "Wait," he said. "Please. I know I shouldn't cry. I know I'm ruining things." He put the note cards and the jacket in the same hand, then separated them again, then used his mouth to hold the jacket so he had both hands free to put the cards in the right order—but then his jacket dropped to the floor.

"Bozo the student," Jimmy Benjamin, the class clown, said, letting Arthur laugh away the nervousness he'd started to feel on Billy's behalf.

Billy bent to pick his jacket up with his left hand, stood up, and leaned against the chalk well of the blackboard.

"Now suck your thumb for us, Rabbit Mouth," Johnny Ryan said, and Arthur put his own hand under his thighs.

"Begin," Mr. Hartman ordered, sick of the boy's clumsiness and his horrid little sobs. Mr. Hartman had hardly slept the last two days, his arms waking him as they unconsciously crossed over his head trying to ward off the air that might reduce him to nothing; he could not teach his hands to sleep. The boy must stop his disgusting whining, worse than nails scraped on blackboard, so Mr. Hartman could let his attention rest on an inner darkness, as it usually did during these pointless class reports.

Billy told the class that his father had just gotten an encyclopedia of Jewish history, eighteen heavy volumes, and so Billy had looked in that encyclopedia for information about France (which represented both a tremendous scholarly innovation on Billy's part and an unfair advantage, adding to Arthur's anger at him). Billy said he hadn't understood a lot of the words in the new books. Arthur thought it was so very like him to admit he had used an encyclopedia, thus giving away everyone's chief resource (instead of simply pretending that you had *always* known about Holland so as to not raise in the teacher's mind the copying possibility) and to admit, too, that he hadn't understood something, as if he had given up trying to protect himself, or maybe he thought being simply truthful would protect him, that modesty would be more winning to Mr. Hartman than braggadocio. The genius that was either before or beyond ordinary strategy made Arthur want to work on Billy's little



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