

It's a Jesus Sighting in My Rearview

Darrell Spencer

Of course wardrobe got the clothes wrong. Washed-out multi-pocketed cargo shorts to the knees. Grey briefs, waistband showing. Those tire-tread huaraches. No socks. A black drugstore-brace on the left ankle. And there was the first-day golfer's sunburn, legs a blistered vermilion, His feet fish-belly white. No shirt, which was, for starters, at the least unnerving, if not creepy. The ginger beard a machination lifted whole cloth from legend and more seventeenth century than early Anno Domini. Something loosely braided and kelp-like about it. Because we're talking first part of the twenty-first century, 2011, bright summer, July and one-hundred-ten degrees outside, heat pulsating on the asphalt, and I'm driving Highway 89, headed south toward Moab, Utah. No question it was Him. Him of the capital H. The King of the Jews. The King of Kings. *Jaw-hov-a*. He who told Lazarus to pick up his sick bed and walk.

I blew past before I caught the Savior in my rearview, closer, as the fine print says, than he appeared. He had set up shop at the point where State Highway 14 out of Zion met 89, His booth in an empty lot across from the Golden Hills motel, north of the Merry Wives Café and Thunderbird Restaurant, the crossroads where if you turned right you had no choice but the side-winding up-and-down-and-around two-lane past the pink sand dunes to Moab and then, if you chose west, across northern Arizona on your way to Colorado City and Hildale, those polygamist playgrounds, along the edge of southern Utah, or there was south to Flagstaff and Phoenix.

I braked and U-turned.

Opportunity knocks—so our daddies teach us—and you sit upright, gather yourself unto yourself and answer the door. You shut your pie hole and open your ears. You pull on your finest duds and shake Opportunity's hand. You got manners, unpack them and brush them off.

In the rearview I had spotted first that evangelical beard—Byzantine, maybe?—and the Sixties hippie hair. The cargo shorts riding his hips looked, as I said, out of sorts.

They drooped. Were unironed and a shitty shade of egg yolk. It all put the sorrow on me, and at the same moment I went all repentant and as if I ought to lower my eyes, hunch my shoulders. The Savior—oy, nothing to cover his torso, and there was the sunburn, the ankle wrap. Cargo pants on the Prince of Peace? What did He who preached the Sermon on the Mount, He who divvied up the fish and loaves of bread, need with all those pockets? He who pulled things out of thin air.

I parked at the far end of a Shell station and Trading Post slash Gift Shop and let the engine idle. A wooden cigar-store Indian hovered next to the entrance. I sat and practiced a look both benign and curious. I swiped Chapstick at my lips and slicked my hair this way and then that way, accented its part. I took a Wet One to my hands. I plucked my bottle of Evian from its cup holder.

“Your Worship,” I said. I put a touch of fear and of trembling in my greeting. Didn't really grovel as much as hint that it was within me to do so if called upon. You speak *His* name, you bow in spirit. You go deep in the knees figuratively. A two year old knows the protocol. I attended Sunday school as a youngster. He of the capital H, I had learned, had the power to turn me to stone or reduce me to dust. The Lamb of God had it within Him to lift my soul up to the heavens or tattoo hurt upon my soul. One day, on the streets of Albuquerque, a panhandler asked me, were I forced to choose, would I rather be Peter or Judas? I gave him a fifty and he disappeared into a ragged crowd. The dude wore the grey river-boat gambler's hat and spoke like rapids. I admit he frightened me. He sported a wiry and threaded-to-his-face mustache. You could see troubadour in his strut, ferocity in his beady eyes.

The Messiah nodded, coughed, sort of bowed in reply to mine, sweet and benevolence and eternity in His smallest endeavors. Behind Him, laid out and flat before the foothills, was a dirt picnic area, those redwood tables aligned side by side on concrete slabs, the tables with the bent iron legs. There was a waterspout, pump-style and a row

of recycle dumpsters. Dead oleanders. Scraggly bushes and unhealthy trees. Little, if any, real shade. No serious reprieve from the heat.

I shuffled a few steps, and the ground released chalky puffs. A highway sign at the crossroads identified the number of miles to Fredona, Arizona, west to Zion, and north to Centerville. East was the only way you couldn't travel out of here directly. Gorgeous red cliffs blocked your way. An arrow on a billboard pointed in the direction of the Big Rock Candy Mountain. The Anointed One had jerry-rigged his booth, part bookshelves, part shipping palettes, all of it held together with two-by-fours and twine. Not one nail showing. The Firstborn and Begotten One did apprentice as the Carpenter of Carpenters. The King of Kings was selling THIRSTYSTONE coasters, rock art, t-shirts, necklaces, pinky rings. An ashtray held mints. A stack of business cards next to it. In quotes, cursive, they said, *Better This Than That*. Then had been crossed out and changed to *than*.

I checked out His wares. Most of it made in China. Some genuine so-the-card-said Indian stuff. Turquoise and silver—bracelets, pins, earrings. You could buy the THIRSTYSTONES on-line for half what The Messiah had priced His.

Behind Him a group had gathered in the shade at the Golden Hills Motel. The place offered Weekly and Monthly Rates on a budget. Its rooms opened onto a circular drive and parking lot. Three or four had screen doors. Three people sat at a card table, two women and a man, the man a dead ringer for the pig I raised when I was thirteen years old and living in Tucson. You know how that goes. 4H. Keep your eye on the prize. A blue ribbon at the end of your journey, the one that began with one step. I earned fifteen hundred dollars and bought my first vehicle off a guy named Bunker, a Ford Mustang, gold on white-gold and black pin-striping. Four on the floor. Zero to sixty like a ghost's exit. I drove the desert roads until I turned sixteen and found the hard tops. These women across the highway from me and the Jesus of Nazareth had swirled their hair up high, all of it field-stacked and punched with holes, one lady a brunette, the other one two-toned, hair dyed a blazing red from the top of her ears up and from there down a blue to the neck and on through a pair of spit-curved sideburns. Another dude by the office hovered over one of those portable bar-be-cue pits you scoot around

on tiny wheels. It wasn't going anywhere in the pea gravel. A thread of smoke rose like a signal from the grill. He wore gym shorts and logger boots. Black half-calf socks, and from where I was I'd have said no laces. His cap said VFW.

The King of Kings leaned over and collected a guitar. On his back a tattoo of a vertebrae stretched the length of His spine. He strummed—lighting the gas, Mr. John Lee Hooker would have said—the Judge of the Quick and the Dead readying Himself to cook, and He said, "You play." Not a question. My whole being, sinew and bone and the spirit material, on display to the Good Shepherd. He saw into and beyond me.

"Sax," I said.

He said, "Alto."

I told Him my instrument—a gold Martin Magna my grandfather on my mother's side bought in Huntington Beach, California—had passed down through the family, and God's Anointed said, "Only way to do it, blood being thicker than water."

I explained to the Great Mediator how I got the pain riding me like a bronco on my heart, and He of the Last Supper made one of those clucks you can do with your tongue, the one that says, *Been there, done that, I know where you're coming from*, and His all-knowingness felt queer to me but the kind you take to the bank. He said, "Your horn, it bleeds—am I right?"

"Like its throat's been cut by the sharpest of knives. Deep and in more than five directions. Razored. Hourly. Every minute of every hour of every day of every fucking year on the planet."

The Man of all Men had reached inside my chest and insinuated Himself unto my being. His call and my response across the barren centuries. I experienced chill and fire and ecstasy at the same time. Brother Bob from the talk radio—picture me, all my days cruising the western highways, tooling along the two-lane stretches, crossing high-mountain passes in Colorado, my dial set to the radio preachers—jumped to mind. *You having yourself a God-sized experience, son?* Brother Bob's exhortations in my ear. *Pray that prayer. Let it minister unto you.*

A woman pulled up to the recycling bins behind us, the bed of her Dodge pickup piled high with bulging plastic bags. Five kids jumped from the double-decker cab, and she hollered at them to line up. Pint-sized soldiers. She handed each one a garbage bag.

The Resurrection and the Life said, “Suffer the children.”

I awaited what was to come. A sermon, perhaps. I longed for a pen. Even one of those tiny pencils the golfers use. A scrap of paper. I understood I’d need another language or two. His ways are not my ways, and I wanted to record the words of the Mighty One of Israel. Turn them into song. Our obligations are not His. He giveth. Truth on a stick. Put up signs, I was thinking. Call the hoi polloi to attention. Hail those fence sitters away from their bar-be-cue and cards and present to them repentance as an option. Pearls, let the swine understand, cost you dearly. Someone always pays the piper. More of my old man’s wisdom.

Brother Bob teaches us that one translation of the word gospel is *listen up*.

He-Whose-Name-Thou-Dare-Not-Speak picked into the air a few notes on his guitar. The blues. Of course. What else are you going to bring into play once you’ve crawled your way down from the cross and collected centuries of the misery wide and far and in immeasurable amounts, once you’ve heard the cries like pistol shots in a tunnel, after your very soul has wept for all of us? He of the Last Supper died, we’ve been told again and again and again, of a broken heart. Science supports that diagnosis. It is a fact. Oozing being what oozing is.

The children couldn’t reach the recycle bins. That was problem number one. On their tiptoes—no dice. Number two was the one-foot wide circle you had to push the trash through. There was no getting the bags inside. You had to wonder how many times they had lost this battle. You could only guess what the woman’s goal was. Did she hope to teach them a lesson in impossibility? In determination? Stupidity?

In miracle itself?

I waited on Him Who Moved Mountains.

He watched the children. He was handsome up close. I noticed the whiteness of a scar alongside his nose. The Light of the World said, “*Gebentsht mit kinder.*”

Made sense.

My put-upon uncle Saul, my dad’s older brother by five years, he lived out back when I was growing up. We had moved to Las Vegas. Dad built Saul a bungalow. Saul joined us and stayed on. Has remained. To a person, at family dinners and on holidays, we call him Pawky. All

day and much of the night, flip-flops on his feet, uncle Saul, Kool cigarette or a Macanudo cigar in his face, he circled the pool. “*Pisk,*” he said. He wore nothing but a terry-cloth robe and underneath black bathing suits tight as rubber. He dipped a toe in the water, shallow end, and he said, “*Groisser gornisht.*” *Big good for nothing.* He sat at the glass-top table and wrote in his notebooks the history of his thoughts. He said, *Dershtikt zolstu veren.* Said, *Vos noch?*

The Good Shepherd played a second chord. His notes a facsimile of our fall from grace and an enactment of His atonement. He was the creator of all I could see. He was The Word. He picked free the notes that brought Adam’s temptation and Eve’s gregariousness to life and fruition. It was He who had given Choice to us with that capital C.

I said to the Firstborn, “Smoke, man?”

“Shouldn’t,” he said and reached for my pack. Lucky Strikes bought at The Smoke Shop. He shook free a few cigarettes, pocketed all but one and adeptly put it to his lips.

I produced my lighter, an act that rushed delight to His eyes so deeply brown they shone black. A dot of gold in each pupil. You stared at Him long enough and there would be no you left. I lit up Him of the Forty Days and Forty Nights, and He set his guitar aside, misdirected me—no cape, no wand, no jabber—and, sleight of hand and in defiance of physics, he turned my bottle of Evian into wine, a red-purple blood-color not seen before on earth. His way was the true magic. He told you how the trick was done—listen up, children of God—and He still pulled it off with you sitting one foot in front of Him. He said to me, “Drink up.”

I did.

He said, “*Salud.*”

I raised my bottle to him. Then drank again.

He said, “One hand washes the other.”

I said, “Merlot.” I took one more slug. I said, “Smoking Loon.”

The Holy One of Israel said, “*A leben audein kop.*”

Of course. A blessing on your head. I said, “Ditto.”

I said, “Sir, the same to you ten times over.”

He said, “Not yours to muster.”

“Forgive me,” I said. “I have overreached.”

He said, “Consider it done.” He left his Lucky Strike on his lip, grabbed the guitar, and said, “Let not your

left hand know what your right hand is doing.” He winked. The Redeemer of the World wasn’t above pulling your leg. He could be as funny as the next guy in the locker room.

Elise refused to listen to the joke the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob told me, her anger clearly out of proportion to what I had said, which was, “So Jesus sez to me, ‘A Rabbi and a polar bear and a midget go into a bar.’” That was all I got out. I had stripped down to my underwear, was headed for the shower, all set to cleanse the filth of the world from my body. Weeks I had been on the road. Slept in the car most nights. My theory is you go out and live it and carry the message home. Nothing revolutionary in that thinking. It’s the minstrel’s credo. Go. Go. Go. See. Talk. Listen. Walk the world. The whole shebang. Valley and mountain top. All of it twice. Then once more. Get dusty. Return. Unpack your instrument and the music will follow. Notes. Chords. Phrases. Lyrics you scribbled on the palms of your hands and on what you wore.

Walk, my friend. Walk. Walk.

It was the same message-in-a-question the man in Albuquerque offered me. Judas? Peter? Your choice.

“Kiss off,” Elise said to me, and she was gone, but not before she tossed over her shoulder one final refinement and the bird she flipped me off with. She said, “And they’re called little people.”

Now she was gone.

Not gone gone.

I rolled some weed and found her on the patio afloat in our one butterfly chair, dangling a sandal from her toe. She seemed threadbare, ragged, pinched in. Pissed. Touchy. Cinched unto herself. Her hair—Elise had dyed it burgundy and butch-cut the sides and back. The effect was as if she had washed it in the sink, jumped in the car, punched the gas up to seventy-five and stuck her head out the driver’s side window and into the rays of the sun.

She said, “You’re proving to be an ass.”

I retreated to the house and returned with a Coke.

She took it. Elise is a born-again Jewish and loves her prescription oxy, but won’t do illegal.

I said, “The Savior is like fifty-five and in tip-top shape. Way older than Jesus ever got to be as a person.” I revived myself on a hit and said, “He could do fitness commercials.”

“You ought to quit the weed,” she said.

I said, “How do you thinking aging works for the resurrected?”

“It doesn’t.”

“Honey, baby,” I said, and I sat across from her, settled my butt into one of the wrought-iron chairs we swiped from a café patio in Phoenix. Me and Elise met at Arizona State and dropped out together third week of our sophomore year. We held hands and walked out on a class, Memory and Memoir: Where Does the Truth Lie? One early morning, about the time we departed ways with higher education, five a.m., our hearts afire, larceny on us, I snagged three of the chairs and tossed them over a retaining wall to where Elise waited on a grassy slope. We damaged the backseat upholstery cramming the last one into the car.

“Shower. Go,” she said. “Put some adult clothes on.”

I said, “Baby, sweetheart, you know I got the hurt. I described it so to the Man of Men. I opened up to the Prince of Peace. His aura made you want to speak. Confess the confessable.”

She said, “Don’t talk like you’re stupid. Like one of your lame songs.”

You write music you take an interest in Jesus and his guitar and traveling. You invest. You’re all in and let the chips fall where they will. It’s a form of cutting yourself. Truly. Suffering for the sake of suffering. I said, “This dude’s lived years and years beyond what Jesus did in the Bible. He’s got more to tell us.” Only way to describe Elise’s look was to turn to the clichés we all live by. It was withering. It was a sack full of hair on fire. I doubled-down on my joint. Let the withering begin. “He promised a second coming,” I said. “Jesus dies in the Bible, a true history of betrayal and grief.”

“The world’s Jesus was a hoax,” Elise said. She leaned back and glanced at the blue sky. She said, “Jesus wasn’t who they say He was.”

“He appeared to the whore of whores.”

“Grow up. You’re talking like you’re three years old.”

“He deserves more than hymns.”

“You say so. He’s yet to appear.”

“Evangelical dude on talk radio is reporting six hundred people saw Jesus after he died. The man pointed

out that you only need two witnesses in court. Jesus had six hundred. Everyday people saw Him. It's all on the record. So He returns, and then He goes again, takes himself a long rest, that overdue vacation, a sabbatical, and then He second-comes, and here He is in Utah, and maybe He's back because he has more to say."

Elise said, "The theory is He comes a second time means it's all over."

"The end of days?"

"The end of days."

"The world stops being a world? It don't world no more?"

"It's the end of times."

I said, "One minute things are one way. The next minute things are, what? Something else? Over with? Finished? Reversed? Turned upside down? What happens to the ground we stand on? These chairs? Vaporized—and we are where?" I hit on the joint hard. I said, "There will be trumpets. Maybe a sax for company, you think?" Again, I toked the joint so I was squeaking and tight-eyed when I said, "He's probably visited us now and then. Don't you think? Probably slipped by the guards and confabbed with the Pope."

Elise climbed out of her chair. She said, "Dry up."

"Time can be tricky," I said.

She said, "Jesus wasn't Jesus. Get that straight."

I said, "You talk to some of the really smart people, and you learn that time isn't what we think it is." I showed her my watch to prove my point. The Montblanc was my daddy's once. I said, "There is science and philosophy behind what I'm saying."

She said, "You wear a watch?"

"You hadn't noticed?"

She said, "Who wears a watch?" Elise raised her hands in defense. She choo-chooed in place, and she started to tap dance. Barefooted on patio pavers. So you know the sound. The thump of bare feet on stone. Soft and muted and palpable. Elise tap dancing, it was her language. Her last resort. She had studied under the toughest. The task masters we all praise. Her tapping was her telling me to shut the fuck up, her letting me know she no longer cared to listen, her calling what I had to say tripe and bullshit and you name it. Elise no more suffering this particular fool.

She tapped her way into a classic. She shuffled off to Buffalo. Minus hat and cane. She improvised. Shuffle.

Hop. Dig. Shim Sham Shimmy. Fa-lap. Dig. Fa-lap. Dig. Her arms swung hinged at the shoulders, and then she put one finger to her mouth and opened her eyes wide. Ssshhh. Ssshhh.

She tapped toward me. Then, leg over leg, she scissored across the pavers. Exit left.

Tap dancing is not, Elise had taught me, because those mentors had taught her, about the shoes. We are, she claims, all tappers.

Next day she was the real gone gone. She hijacked our Volvo, left me the Tacoma. She texted on her way out of town. She gave me three months to get my act together. She counted the days out. Elise would be at her parents in Las Vegas. Don't come. Don't call. Give it a rest.

I dropped off a month's rent—no reason to stiff the landlord—opted out of our lease, and hit the road myself.

And He of the Omnipotent was omnipresent.

Jaw-ho-vah.

He reigneth over the sunset. He reigneth over the sunrise. He ruleth the moon and the stars in the firmament.

I was glad. I rejoiced.

Daily arrived contact from Elise. Her doing. Not mine. Texts, e-mails, tweets, videos. She wrote, Meet me half way.

Half way to where or what or when?

She wrote, But don't call. Don't come. No contact.

Three months become six. Fall. Winter followed. Spring.

Like I said. Get out there. Walk. Walk. Pick your feet up and put them down.

Our obligation is to bear witness.

The U.S.A. is a land of highways.

One day—this accounting just so you'll see what I'm saying—late afternoon I tooled into Rawlins, Wyoming, and stopped for the night, radio warnings of tornados ahead, tornado warnings behind. Cheyenne shut down. Hail falling by the time I pulled into the Holiday Inn. I risked a sprint across the parking lot and hauled my duffle inside. I hustled from the pickup to the lobby. The hail quit, the sun appeared, lit up the underside of the clouds on the horizon, put a blush on them that then stirred up into a broiling red and orange. You had to appreciate

the artistry of He Who Made The Sky and the Sun. His mastery of color, His use of negative space, His insight into the geometric and rhythmic. God but the twilight rose up as a mindboggling and reviving sight. The evening warmed quickly, three seasons in five hours, and I crossed the highway and walked down to Front Street, which was raw concrete, tumbleweeds, and empty, ready for a shoot-out. I packed along my saxophone.

The evening was at that point where day clicks over into night when I entered the first bar that called itself a saloon. You're thinking barn wood and one light bulb. You're thinking cowboys and cowgirls. Singles sitting over drinks. Pool tables and TVs. Maybe a jukebox. Choreographed boot-scooting boogieing. Not so. Instead, vacationers wearing straw hats and at rest on the black-and-white checkerboard tile, laid back in booths and afloat around tables arranged in half circles. Short-order food. Too much fluorescent light for hanky-panky and over there sat The Guzzler's Corner. The place served vegetarians. Vegan. Gluten-free.

I bought a man a drink, me and him at one of the tables, and he said, "My feet weren't nailed to the floor, I'd go about my business." He talked out the left side of his mouth. The other side was frozen up. A stroke, he explained. Started with pins and needles and ended with him half blind. Left eye. Not the right one. His little joke. He had combed his hair like he had done battle with it. He had an accent. Spanish, but not quite. He was frighteningly thin. He called for rye, and behind us, a bartender stopped setting up and said, "Lee-land." Hell of a lot of rebuke in that second syllable. These two gentlemen had a no-good history. My new friend kept his back to the bar. He lifted his shot glass overhead.

Barkeep said, "Lee-land. Lee-land. Leland." Sounded like the way a snake would chant a prayer if one could.

Lee-land gave him a peace sign backwards. He'd lost a thumb, only knobby and chapped scar tissue left. The absence turned the gesture ugly. "My feet weren't nailed to the floor," he said loud enough for the whole bar, "I would solve me a nuisance."

A couple clapped. A lady whooped. The bartender played his role, said, "That you're I.Q., Lee-land?"

I ended up playing the patrons some sax and took my pay in liquor.

Back in my room, I read a text from Elise and watched a video she had sent. Just her feet—two-toned *Bufalino!* shoes I didn't recognize her as owning, sparkling gold in color, *Capezio teletone* taps. What I could see of her pants, black and cuffed, and she tap-danced the star of David on a sprung-wood stage.

To further illustrate, weeks later and a woman's backyard, Barstow, California, three a.m., boulders, sagebrush, cactus and all of it under green and blue and yellow flood lights, the lady asleep and me at first wandering her house full of antiques from out of Ohio, her big worry the wood cracking in this arid land. The woman must have been six-foot-six in her socks. Her hair a dark wood grain. I eased open the slider to the backyard and lit up on her patio. Underwater bluish lighting swam in a pool. The diving board extended itself into the solitude. Her property rolled downward toward a clustering of rocks, the slope a drop-off of twenty, thirty feet. Three coyotes sauntered like insouciance itself through the desert beyond the fence. Riff-raff, hipsters, indifferent at the core of their DNA. Near the shallow end of the pool, a glass humming bird on a rod glowed a pink that pulsated into the red you see in embers when you bank a fire, that color turning itself inside out and then liquefying into a blue tinged with a purple that took over and finally transmigrated into the green you see in alcoholic drinks of a certain kind under neon. All of it, solar light gathered during the day and now coming alive. The present retreating into the past and sucking in the future. I thought, 1960s. The movies I had seen. I thought, Psy-cho-delic.

God, I begged—and here I pulled like joy itself on the joint I had rolled—forgive me my sins. I fished from my pocket my phone and downloaded a video from Elise. Her tap dance a slow waltz to "Taking a Chance on Love." All of her on the screen and in a spotlight.

Add to this the man I spotted leading a mule along the edge of Rattlesnake Wash and under the highway outside of Kingman, Arizona. One-hundred-fifteen degrees in the desert. Sunlight so flagrant the day was a white out. Me doing eighty semis flew by me and rattled my pickup. The air did harm. Off in the distance three dust devils raced toward mountains. The man wore a stubby-brimmed cowboy hat and kept his face from me. He loped, his

donkey a model for all the relentlessness on our planet. I caught a glimpse of the man's beard. Ginger. I pulled over and scrambled down the road bank. He didn't return from where He had gone under, and He didn't exit the other side. He wore a dew-rag under His hat.

The journey was only one hundred feet from opening to exit. I could see clean through the underpass. The way he walked, the way the mule moved, the slant the two of them took—it all seemed as if they were bucking a strong head wind and had done so for centuries.

Bullhead City.

I rode in like a villain and played my sax. Earned a dinner and a night's stay.

To the few in the room, I delivered the message, the news that is the oldest news. Young as I was I had seen enough. You see devilry, you see the angelic. The king of the ruse is the king of truth.

How many songs have to be written before we get it?

I swear, standing in the dust of the Mojave, sunrise, I heard singing, the voices castrato and choir-like. The sound the sound of wire in a high wind. He-Whose-Name-is-Four-Letters—YHWH—will come, so we've been told, like a thief in the night.

He will, however, be a little late. His time is not our time.

December nineteen, a freak snowstorm in southern Utah, I-15, me on the road and listening to Reverend Bob, me slowing to ten, to five miles an hour in the tracks of a eighteen-wheeler up ahead. I exited the freeway and found myself in a Wal-Mart parking lot. Four a.m. Nothing but white and a flatness so modest it appeared groomed. I cut the engine, and my smart phone rang. Elise. No visual. I said, Hello? Hello? I needed a human voice. But got no reply. Just muted sound—more tap dancing, barefooted. Slap your hand against your thigh. A one, and a two, and a three. You'll hear what I was hearing.

Then a thawk outside the car. The windows had begun to ice over, had grown lacy at the edges like an old-fashioned greeting card. Thawk. Thawk. An uncanny noise that organized within me the real kind of fear as wicked as a throb. I turned the engine over and hit defrost. Five more thawks before I could see, the sounds getting closer.

And Elise continuing to tap.

Go ahead. Slap your thigh.

Hear it?

Outside my car the thwak thwak thwak. Inside, a rhythmic thump thump thump.

The frost withdrew, cleared, and I saw birds falling from the sky. Eared Grebes I would learn the next morning. They had been duped, had followed their leaders into hell. The wise ones misread the landscape. The low dark shadowed cloud cover, the clearing below, the trapped city lights, no stars—the flat area parking lot read as a lake. The Grebes didn't know which way was up. They're built for landing on water. The newspaper reported that Grebes are big-bodied compared to their wings. Their legs, near the rear of their bodies, can't support a hard landing. They smacked into the parking lot at thirty miles an hour. More than fifteen hundred of them died. Volunteers rescued another three thousand and hauled them over to Quail Lake nearby and to other large bodies of water close to Zion.

Gorgeous birds in the photos the papers published. I quit counting at fifty.

A woman, driving a black Cadillac, her hair filigreed and as ornate as an iron fence against the whiteness of the night—she parked her Escalade five feet from me and flung cardboard boxes from the back. It was six a.m. at this point. "Help me," she said. In her headlights, she mouthed the words and pantomimed for me to get out of my car, for me to come over, for me to pick up birds. Her movements, the way she held her hands, showed how delicate the job would be. She began collecting the survivors.

She said, "Please."

She said, "Not a sparrow falls to the earth."

She said, "Peace unto you."

She said, "Follow me."

We delivered dozens of birds to the Park Service. In the morning sunrise their beauty killed me, and I wept.

I find Uncle Saul at his spot on the backyard patio. He's thinning out and flirting with death in his wrought-iron chair. I see him and think of dry leaves. Where they took cancer from his cheek a patch of brown skin buzzes like a coffee stain. On the glass table he sits up to, he has arranged a cityscape out of his Arizona iced tea cans, a

coffee cup, three mini-bar Jack Daniels, and a deck of cards unopened. To one side is a crystal bottle of blue-black ink. A Macanundo smolders in an ashtray. Uncle Saul is writing in one of his notebooks. His fountain pen is stout in his stumpy fingers. He has his nails manicured. The Montebanc could be centuries old. His European family passed it along to him. One day it will go to my father. Another day it will be mine. My dad and his brothers, even Saul's pals, and my mother—everyone calls Uncle Saul Rebbe. Pawky. Rebbe, we say. Whatever the situation, the time the place the circumstance, we say of Uncle Saul, he knows how to walk. I have tried to read his handwriting which is small like stitches, and it carries a weariness to the pages he fills up. If you have seen a line of crisscrossing ants on dirt, you know what I mean—the drudgery of the labor, of the task at hand. The family joke is Uncle Saul has been writing his memoirs since he was six years old.

My parents have taken an Alaska cruise and will be gone a month. They hire people to watch out for Saul. A cook. Housekeepers. An R.N. comes in. She holds Saul's wrist. She puts a stethoscope to his chest. Mother likes her Black Wolf Blend coffee. She buys in bulk in Juneau and ships it home. No point in telling her about the internet. She would plug her ears.

Tonight I will attend Passover seder at Elise's. She invited me. Actually spoke to me over the phone.

Right this minute, me and Saul, we sit together walled in by ten-foot high weeping cinder block. Palm trees hide us, their fronds rattling in the breeze, and Saul's cats—five tabbies—pass in and out of the open slider. They saunter over one at a time and check us out. It's like they have messages to deliver from the front desk, words in tiny envelopes.

I tell Uncle Saul about the seder dinner. "I'm to read one of the four questions," I say, and Saul says, "You're doing this because you owe the young lady?"

I shrug. *How can I know?* is what I mean to say. I already told Saul I haven't seen Elise for close to a year.

He sips tea, unboxes the playing cards. He says, "Seems funny she calls and you should go." He gives me classic Uncle Saul—a shrug, which I mirror, and he hacks up phlegm. He says, "You have no obligation to the girl." He shuffles the cards. He says, "What is the circle of your relationship? Its profit and loss? Your debt? The cost?" He examines me and says, "The juice and the squeeze?"

How do I tell Saul it's not like that?

He deals himself five hands, straight-up old-fashioned Jacks-or-better. He says, "My boy, you keep your money in a handkerchief. *Knippel*."

As if I get it.

He says, "*Farshtaist?*"

Comprehend? Nah. I don't.

Saul checks each hand he's dealt, folds one, drops cards from the others. He fiddles, and he once again gives me what our family calls the shoulders, the posture like he is holding an offering. He dismisses himself. He says, "Ack." He says, "I am an old man trying to capture air in a cup."

I wait.

I am ready to write things down. Up town, down town. We must greet all of experience. Wisdom. Hold your paints at the waist when you dance. Advice. Like how to saddle a horse.

Simple stuff. Listen.

You can't learn to get up if you don't fall.

Uncle Saul has no more to give. He has gone into his bag for the last time. He shuffles and deals. One of the cats, swirled in dark stripes, jumps up and settles on the table after turning in circles.

I slip out of my chair, reset it in its place, and I am walking way. Behind me, Uncle Saul says, "Next year in Jerusalem."

I don't even hesitate. I'm on the move.

"Hang fire," he says to my back.

Elise's family's driveway, grey stones like a riverbed, circles through the front yard and returns to the street. It cuts through palm trees and flowering bushes. You have to be buzzed in. Tonight the gates swing open. I count six BMWs, four black, two white. There is one silver Lexus. You could race three cars here side by side. I am rehearsing, and did so on the drive over. *Ma nishtana ha lyla ha zeh mikkol hallaylot?* Why is this night different from all other nights? The distance is less than a mile from my family's house to Elise's. My pronunciation stinks. Her family lives on Red Arrow Drive, a guard-gated community. Two gates, actually, one allows you in from the outside world, the other one takes you into Elise's neighborhood. All of it part of the Red Rock Country Club. Elise brought me here once, maybe two years back. That day, no family was

at home, only a couple of maids and a cook. Yard guys outside. The kitchen was round and big enough for a restaurant. It had traffic flow. Bamboo floors in most of the rooms I saw. One room, empty, was where Elise tapped, its hardwood cut and scraped and gouged. It looked like a painting. The south side of the house is three-stories.

Today Elise meets me in the foyer just after sunset. The candles have been lit, the shabbat light. Picture the seder feast laid out on the counter tops. Picture the table readied, all the gold-leafed dishes and goblets. We cleanse our hands. We fill our cups with wine four times. We dip our fingers in that wine. We eat the maror, the hardboiled eggs, the boiled meat. We dunk our vegetables in the salt water in the broken bowl. We stand for the eating of the bitter herbs.

Elise and I do not talk. Maybe one word here. Another one there.

And throughout we praise He Who Is Above All Merciful, the Lord-God-of-Us. He Whose Grace is Everlasting.

I ask my question, *Ma nishtana ha lyla ha zeh mikkol hallaylot?* Why is this night different from all other nights? Elise's father answers. Elise's brothers ask questions two, three and four. In the end, we sing a song for Elijah. We sing the "Chad Gadya," the song of the little goat, of the Holy One—blessed is He—who slit the throat of the Angel of Death, who butchered the butcher, who slaughtered the ox that drank up the water, that put out the fire, that burned up the staff, that beat up the dog, that bit the cat, that ate up the goat that the father bought for two zuzim, one little goat, one little goat.

Throughout the seder, our encounter is a mock encounter, but we have in practice confronted trouble and sorrow. We have in ritual eaten with the least among us in our midst.

At the door, at my departure, Elise finally says to me, "Don't be a stranger."

She, too, can make a joke.

She says, "Next year in Jerusalem."

Even funnier.

"Hang fire on that," I say.

During the seder, together Elise and I had eaten the bread of freedom and the bread of affliction.

We had, as the scholars argue, deflected oblivion.

He of the capital H will come. Late, but He of

Everlasting Grace is on the way.

Be glad.

Rejoice.

No designated driver so I walk back to my parents' house. Half a block from Elise's I pick up a call. A video she's sent. Under street lights I hold up my phone, and its screen is empty. Elise is tapping in the dark. There is nothing to see. There is only the black magic of taps on wood.

Early a.m. and Uncle Saul remains by the pool. He has not slept. I am upstairs watching a video. It's a tribute to Sammy Davis, Jr. Gregory Hines stands at the edge of a stage, sprung wood under his feet, holding like a prayer book a mic in his two hands, and he is talking directly and really only to Sammy Davis, Jr., who sits in the audience. Hines tells Sammy that he grew up idolizing the man who might as well be Mr. Bojangles. Hines mimes the hat thing Sammy Davis, Jr., did when he sang and tap danced "Mr. Bojangles." Like air guitar, he trims an imaginary bowler's brim after he fits the hat to his head. Hines taps toward Sammy Davis, Jr. He dresses the entire stage, tap-dances like there truly is no tomorrow. He brings the street to his performance. He teaches us the difference between a tapper and hoofer. He goes to school. Then he climbs to the roof top and descends to the basement.

Hines comes over and bends down, and he is helping Sammy Davis, Jr., who is front row center, get into his own tap shoes. This is a video I'm looking at, and we can see all of the action. The camera provides us the angles and close-ups we need. All that is happening is planned. We see Mr. Bojangles getting into his shoes. We see his dress socks. Hines helps.

This is all part of the plan. It's staged.

And then they are on the hardwood together, and they face each other. They jam. Sammy taps, and Hines taps. Sammy first. Hines answers. One soft-shoes. The other one soft-shoes. Sammy bucks and wings it. Hines does the same. They riff.

This conversation goes on for five, ten minutes.

And afterwards Hines hugs Sammy for the longest time. We are privy to love, man. Our own hearts thrum. Hines bends down again, and then he is on his knees and he is kissing Sammy's shoe. The right one. The audience applauds. Mr. Bojangles thinks this is hilarious, but

he is embarrassed, too, and he leans in at the waist and sort of slaps at Hines. His gesture is saying, Cut that out. Cut that out. But now Hines is kissing Sammy Davis, Jr's, left shoe.

And you can't help but think of Mary washing Jesus's feet with her tears. Of her drying the tears with her hair. Of her kissing her Savior's feet. And you can't help but think of He of the Last Supper rising from the meal, filling a bowl with water, and washing the dust from the feet of his disciples. The King of Kings as servant.

In the video you see Hines bowed down here in front of Sammy Davis, Jr., and you can't help yourself.

What I want to do is to play my sax for you, and for Gregory Hines, and for Sammy Davis, Jr., and for our Savior, even for Uncle Saul, only I don't go for my instrument. What I want to tell you is inside me. I want to play the notes that celebrate the epistemological fact that Gregory Hines is not Mary, that Sammy Davis, Jr. is not the savior.

That the Master of Masters got on his knees and washed the feet of the man who would betray him.

You need to know that as more than a fact.

You need to experience—like you will your dying but not your death—the failure of your desires. Your wish to find yourself is, my friend, the end of you.

Talk about closure.

I have the notes in me. The phrases. The chords. I can feel my sax in my hands.

Can you hear me?

Can you hear Him—He who distinguishes for us between Holy and Holy? He Who Draws That Line In The Sand.

Uncle Saul, out back, he can. I see him stand from his game of cards, and he tips over the glass patio table, which ought to shatter but it doesn't. It bangs against the flagstone, settles on a row of marigolds. His notebooks fly. His cards scatter. His drinks spill. What he has done ought to be epic but it isn't. The catastrophic is not in Uncle Saul. Not even upheaval. Uncle Saul turns, and he looks up at me.

Can you hang on? Can he? Us? We? You?

Listen. Pay attention. Can you hear me? My sax. Listen. Are you listening?

Uncle Saul?

We're still here. The door is unlocked. Come in. You're more than welcome, stranger.