

*A Most
Malignant
Spirit*

A Most Malignant Spirit

Zvi Zaks
צבי זקס



*By Light Unseen Media
Pepperell, Massachusetts*

A Most Malignant Spirit

Copyright © 2014 by Zvi Zaks, pseudonym of Harvey Sachs. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise without the prior written permission of the copyright holder, except for brief quotations in reviews and for academic purposes in accordance with copyright law and principles of Fair Use.

Cover and interior design by Vyrdolak, By Light Unseen Media.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

An earlier version of this novel was published as *A True Son of Asmodeus* by By Light Unseen Media in 2011.

Perfect Paperback Edition

ISBN-10: 1-935303-54-6

ISBN-13: 978-1-935303-54-1

LCCN: 2014947011

Published by

By Light Unseen Media

PO Box 1233

Pepperell, Massachusetts 01463-3233

Our Mission:

By Light Unseen Media presents the best of quality fiction and non-fiction on the theme of vampires and vampirism. We offer fictional works with original imagination and style, as well as non-fiction of academic calibre.

For additional information, visit:

<http://bylightunseenmedia.com/>

Printed in the United States of America

0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my parents - Al and Es - o'h

Prologue

Jonathan Harper's corpse was a bloody mess, but, repulsive though it was, the agonized expression on his face was worse; even the constable who found the body shivered at the sight. Officers launched an investigation, found a vagabond with Jonathan's brooch in his pocket and charged him with the killing. The man confessed to robbing a corpse, but proclaimed his innocence of murder up until the gallows' trapdoor sprung open and silenced him forever. Nevertheless, the police had no doubts of his guilt.

Archivists for the Perceptives tell a different story. They insist the vagabond was innocent. Jonathan's death in 1888—the year before A. Hitler's cursed birth—was just the latest in an ancient series. According to these archivists, Jonathan had to work late one night, and when he finally pushed open the thick wooden doors of the London bank, the sun had long since set. Wind howled and frost stung his face. He patted the pocket holding a bejeweled brooch intended for his fiancée and started walking towards his boarding house. The buildings along the empty roadway were like dark black cliffs lining an abandoned canyon. A cat crouching in the gloom hissed. Clouds passing over the moon cast shifting shadows like rats sneaking along the curbside. Jonathan shivered and buttoned the top of his coat.

Two blocks from his residence, the relentless smack of stiff footsteps on hard stone echoed behind him. He glanced back and saw a shadowy figure. Rumors of a demon that stalked young people

Zvi Zaks

and drank their blood had terrorized the city for weeks, and had left Jonathan's fiancée in constant dread. He had laughed at the idea, but now, with that ominous figure trailing him, terror colder than the wind pierced his chest. He tried to swallow, but his mouth had become dry. He walked faster. The footsteps drew closer. He panicked and ran.

A dark alley appeared, and with it a thought entered his head—*hide here*. Panting in terror, he entered the littered walkway. But the path ended after just a few yards, leaving him trapped.

The figure approached. *You have nothing to fear*; a voice in his mind said.

It lied. As the drab and weary looking form advanced, Jonathan knew this was the supernatural killer. With a grimace, he unbuttoned the top of his coat, and pulled out his defense—a silver crucifix. This holy replica, a gift from his mother, would surely protect him. His voice rang out in the night. “In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost I bid you depart.”

The specter ignored the adjuration and walked to his victim. He yanked the icon from its fragile chain and stared at it, turning it back and forth. “You’ve been reading too many novels. This doesn’t bother my master.” He stuffed the cross into Jonathan’s coat pocket. “And it won’t help you.” He put his hand on the youth’s shoulder and drew him closer.

A stench of vomit coming from that minion from Hell made Jonathan retch. “Jesus, save me,” he said, his voice too quiet. His hand struggled to trace the sign of the cross, but his neck obeyed the vampire and bent to the side, exposing the jugular to the apparition’s lengthening fangs.



Before starting this odyssey, I would have believed the police report. Now I know better.

Part I

Chapter One

My involvement in this saga began on a warm summer night in 1990, a year before the first Iraq war, two years before Bill Clinton defeated Bush Senior. In 1990, *The Phantom of the Opera* movie and *Edward Scissorhands* were playing. This was the first year of NC-17 ratings. East and West Germany united, Kevorkian assisted his first suicide, and airlines banned smoking on all domestic flights.

The moon was full and bright that night when paramedics wheeled a girl—she could not have been more than sixteen—into the LA General emergency room. Her face was cherubic, but grime and tears stained her cheeks, and a strip of spiked purple hair divided her otherwise bald scalp. From my desk a few yards away, I saw her kick off the sheet covering her. She wore a leather vest and mini-skirt, nothing more, and had left herself with legs akimbo, exposed. I sighed and got up to replace the sheet. Someone had taped to her chart an empty bottle of Xanax, the pills she had used to try to kill herself.

Brenda Anders, the ER resident, passed by while I was tucking the sheet under the gurney mattress. She snickered. “Eli, she’s too stoned to care who sees her twat.”

“I care,” I muttered, but Brenda had already left to check her latest crisis.

A young orderly threw Brenda a glance and grimaced. “Is she always that bitchy?”

I shook my head. “No. The workload is stressing her out.”

Zvi Zaks

The number of people in the ER would stress out anyone. Brenda's loudest patient, an intoxicated biker, spat obscenities. A background of voices cried out in pain and despair, some loud, others scarcely audible, all reverberating from the dingy walls. Most of these wretches were Brenda's to care for.

One person in particular, an emaciated, unshaven man, caught my eye. He rattled the side-rails of his gurney and intoned, "I am Christ Jesus, come to save the world." Parched lips and sunken eyes revealed severe dehydration while blood oozed from puncture wounds in his hands and feet. He could have been twenty or sixty. The chart said only that his landlady had found him nailed to a wooden cross on the wall of his apartment and had called the police.

His features looked Jewish, which was strange, because thinking you are Jesus Christ is a Christian delusion.

Fighting to keep my eyes open, I returned to the counter and continued writing notes on my patient, Consuelo Gutierrez, a middle-age lung-cancer survivor with pneumonia. Consuelo should have been the ER's patient, but I knew her and her worries of the cancer returning, and I could speak her language, Spanish.

Sheila, the head nurse, a buxom woman in her late thirties, bustled by to check the medication shelves. "Thanks for covering up that girl, Eli. I can't believe this place. It's a real zoo tonight. Is there a full moon?" Metal cabinet drawers squeaked as she pulled them open and rattled little glass bottles, releasing a medicinal smell.

My smile was wry. "There is, but that shouldn't make a difference."

"No difference?" She snorted, blonde curls shaking with mock indignation. "Are you kidding? Look at that hallway. One gurney after another with overdoses, psychotics or both. Poor Dr. Anders is two hours behind, and you say the moon makes no difference? Get real." She grabbed a vial from the cart and sucked yellow fluid into a syringe.

I laughed. "Don't worry. The ER will quiet down in another hour, though I'll be working much later."

She turned towards me with an uneasy giggle. Her eyes were wide.

A Most Malignant Spirit

“What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Uh, don’t you realize? You just made another prediction.”

I lifted my eyebrows.

“You don’t know?”

“Know what?”

She took her stethoscope from her pocket and draped it around her neck. “Your predictions. My gosh. The nurses here laugh about them, but they’re so accurate, it creeps me out. You don’t just guess good, Eli. When you say the ER’ll be swamped, we call in extra staff. The only time you were wrong, you were sick yourself and should have stayed home.”

I grimaced. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I’m serious.”

I swung my chair away. “Stop it. I don’t want to hear that nonsense.”

She adjusted the stethoscope and looked puzzled. “What’s the matter?”

I forced myself to speak quietly. “Galileo wouldn’t like it. I’m a ‘Friend of Galileo.’”

She screwed up her face. “Friend of Galileo? The astronomer? What the hell is that?”

“A club I belonged to as a kid.”

She held up her hands. “Galileo isn’t upsetting you, Eli. You’re so bummed out, you’re quivering.”

“It’s not important.”

She pulled up a chair, sat near me, and put the syringe on the table. “I’ve known you since you were a green resident. Your face says it is important. Spill it.”

I took a deep sigh and let it out slowly. “When I was ten, my cousin had meningitis and the doctors said he would die. I had a premonition he would pull through, and he did—one hundred percent. After that, my mother kept talking about ‘psychic powers’ and saw any lucky guess on my part as proof. I got lots of attention, and at first it was fun. Then my Dad insisted I coach him in a card game. It didn’t work. He lost his shirt, accused me of sabotaging him, and hit me.” I hesitated. “He and Mom fought for weeks afterwards. It was

Zvi Zaks

a miserable time that taught me never to trust magic. The whole idea of ESP repulses me.”

The corners of her mouth twitched upward. “I’m sorry, Eli. I didn’t mean to pry.”

I writhed at the memory. “It’s all right. I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

“Forget it. But I hope you’re right this time. I’m tired of these weirdoes.” She scurried off to give her injection.

I shook my head. She too thought I had psychic powers. How could an intelligent and educated nurse like Sheila believe such crap? She was right about one thing—the strange patients. Brenda’s drunken biker, just fifteen feet from my desk, took first place for weirdness. The patient, a muscular, hairy man reeking of stale sweat and booze, struggled against his restraints and screamed that a vampire had attacked him. A long, bloody gash in his throat—a friend said he made it himself while on PCP—looked horrible, but was too shallow to endanger him.

“You Goddamned motherfucking *bloodsuckers* with Goddamned *voices* telling me don’t fight. You smell like a *shithole*. Get those teeth the *hell* out of my neck!” he shouted.

The nurses would not go near him.

Brenda tried to examine him but his thrashing made that impossible. With a disgusted frown, she trudged to my desk and leaned towards me. “Eli, I’m going to do you a favor. This patient is a real learning experience. I’m going to let you have him.”

I laughed. “Good try, but no. I treated enough PCP freaks.”

“Ah, but this one’s been attacked by a vampire. His struggles ripped the puncture wounds into a gash. I’m sure you’ve never treated vampire bites before.”

“I don’t need patients with make-believe illnesses, but if the vampire himself comes to the ER, I’ll take him.”

Not amused, Brenda returned to her patient, whose urine showed PCP, as well as amphetamines, heroin and a couple of other drugs. No doubt about it, those chemicals fry brains.

“Hey, Eli,” Sheila called. “Elizabeth Forest just came in. She’s got a fever of 103°.”

A Most Malignant Spirit

“Isn’t she one of Andrew Netter’s leukemia patients?”

She smiled with saccharin sweetness. “She sure is. Be a dear and take her case. Dr. Anders is way behind.”

I glanced at my watch and yawned. It was 11:00 p.m. I should have felt compassion for this woman who had a “legitimate” illness—leukemia—in contrast to self-induced problems like drug overdoses, but I felt exhausted. “It’s late, Sheila.”

She patted my shoulder. “C’mon, Eli, Dr. Netter would want you to take over. Besides, you have the key to his office and her records. You said yourself you would work late tonight.” She smiled again.

“Please, no more talk about predictions.”

“Okay. But you know you won’t finish before midnight no matter what.”

She was right. I ordered a chest X-ray and blood tests on Mrs. Forest, and walked out of the emergency room into the moon-drenched night. Crickets called to their mates and a breeze carried the fragrance of eucalyptus as I jogged to Andrew Netter’s office several hundred yards away.

Inside, pastel purple rugs blended with original oils hanging on textured wallpaper. A fifty-gallon aquarium burbled while indigo and bright vermilion fish swam through synthetic seaweed. I sat for a moment in the executive’s chair behind the oversized mahogany desk, smelled the odors of wood and leather, and smiled. Sitting in that same chair, Andrew Netter had often said I could have an office like this if I wanted. No question that it was beautiful. The question was—did I want it?

Netter was my idol. A portly, graying gentleman a little taller than my 5’10”, he wore a mantle of geniality and quiet dignity, and treated us lowly residents and fellows with uncommon courtesy. The big brother I never had, he often invited me to dinners in his elegant house or swimming parties in his Olympic-sized pool. Though as a rule I don’t go to Christmas celebrations, I never missed his. His wife was less sociable, and his teenage children were downright rude, but Netter himself was a prince.

Six months ago, he invited me to join his prestigious oncology

Zvi Zaks

group after my training ended. I would be guaranteed status and money. Karen, my girlfriend, kept saying I would be crazy to refuse.

Yes, he had a nice office, and he'd be a good guy to work with, but the extravagant luxury around him made me uneasy. It seemed more for show than enjoyment.

Without warning, worry about Netter made my head spin. I shuddered. Could this be another damn premonition? I pushed the thought away, pulled Mrs. Forest's three-inch chart from the file cabinet, and leafed through the pages.

My pager buzzed against my hip. I jumped. The little green screen flashed, "Call Sheila stat."

I dialed the ER. Sheila picked up on the first ring. "Eli, get back here right away." Her voice quavered.

"What's wrong?"

"Just hurry!" she cried and the phone went dead.

I grabbed the chart and sprinted back to the ER. Sheila's fear, audible even over the phone, frightened me. She could handle anything in an emergency room, so what had frightened her? If she was scared, it was serious.

A siren wailed as I ran to the emergency room and inside. A nurse pointed without speaking towards the curtain half shielding a gurney. I dashed to the cubicle and gasped. My idol, Andrew Netter, lay comatose and scarcely breathing, an empty bottle of sleeping pills taped to his chart.

Brenda worked on him with efficiency and admirable detachment while I stood motionless next to the gurney. She pushed thick needles into Netter's arm and mumbled something about a pulmonary doctor. The nurse next to me, a tiny Filipina woman, touched my arm. "Dr. Rothenberg, Dr. Anders is asking you a question." Her voice was gentle.

Brenda glanced up at me. "You okay, Eli?"

"Yeah, sure. What were you asking?"

"I know he's your friend. Would you like the pulmonologist to take over?" Brenda opened the stopper on the IV bag, letting clear fluid pour into his arm vein. Then she took a large syringe and plunged it into an artery in Netter's groin. Bright red blood filled the

A Most Malignant Spirit

barrel and reassured me that at least he had enough oxygen.

I shook my head, trying to clear my brain. “Are you having trouble?”

“Oh no, I could do this with my eyes closed. I just thought maybe you wanted one of the attending docs.”

A baby in the next cubicle cried in fury. My head spun. “No. You go ahead.”

Brenda stuck a thick orange tube down Netter’s nose to wash out his stomach. She even hooked him up to a respirator because his breathing had slowed so much. Andy Netter had become another overdose, another attempted suicide in the emergency room under the full moon.

Emergency rooms are strange places. The bright lights, constant alarms, scurrying white-garbed personnel, and the smells of sweat and dying create an unreal aura. Life and death decisions are so common we doctors become numbed to their importance and don’t see agonized faces of fear, guilt and grief. But when the gurney holds your mentor, when your friend is covered with wires and tubes, life hanging on a machine, then the numbness disappears. Detachment vanishes, and the agonized face—at least for a while—is your own.



The ER emptied out at midnight, and I reached the tiny on-call room just before 2:00 a.m. Though exhausted, I tossed and turned in the narrow cot while ruminating on Netter’s suicide attempt and also worrying about the strange premonition I felt just before Sheila’s call. When sleep finally came, I dreamed of the patient with the neck gash, now a vampire himself, stalking the corridors of an ancient London hospital.

Next morning I checked on Mrs. Forest, who was feeling much better, and then visited Netter in the ICU. His face was pale and gaunt, but the breathing tube was out and he was awake. “How do you feel?” I asked, pulling up a chair.

He shook his head. “I have a headache.”

“Do you feel like talking?”

He closed his eyes. “I’ve been such a fool.” With the cardiac

Zvi Zaks

monitor pinging in the background, he told the story. He and his wife had been seduced by their huge house and its implied status, and had fallen into massive debt. Trying to catch up, he worked too many hours and neglected his family. His son had been suspended from high school for using drugs and his daughter was pregnant. Frantic, he saw his life deteriorating, but could not stop the downslide. The final blow was finding his wife with a lover. “That’s when I took the pills,” he said in a voice so low, I strained to hear him.

The confession overwhelmed me. To me, Netter epitomized the successful doctor, one whose footsteps I might follow; did those footsteps lead to such an end? I mumbled some platitudes and, fighting fatigue, left to finish rounds, Netter’s sad image floating in front of my eyes.

I escaped from the hospital around mid-afternoon and went home, or rather, went to Karen’s apartment. I had moved in with Karen Lodge five months ago. She was the most affectionate woman I had ever met, always hugging and touching me. I loved it. In her red Corvette, her long blonde hair framing long ruby earrings, she was gorgeous, a photographer’s dream.

But I was Eli Rothenberg, a gangling, acne-scarred man from Philadelphia, the classic “before” model in a bodybuilder’s ad. Instead of a sports car, I drove a Pontiac sedan. I could not find myself in Karen’s picture, and that bothered me.

Karen should have dated a football hero, but I was a geek. Even in second grade, I would spend hours reading about scientists like Darwin and Galileo who enlightened humanity and fought superstition. I read fantasy stories as well and often imagined myself a magician like Merlin or one of the legendary Jewish miracle workers of my grandmother’s fables. Locked in mortal combat with evil wizards, I would vanquish them with cabalistic incantations to win the hands of fair, if imaginary, maidens.

After my Dad’s card game and the chaos that followed, I chose Galileo over Merlin. I put my faith in rationality like some people put their faith in religion. Camelot myths, superstitions, or anything else that reminded me of magical premonitions irritated me.

The fantasy maidens stayed with me for years since as a youth

A Most Malignant Spirit

I felt too self-conscious to date. Medical school was not much better, even though med students are supposed to be irresistible to the opposite sex. When Karen and I started up, it amazed me. I had never dreamed such a beautiful woman would like me.

Karen's apartment, with plush maroon rugs, a picture window view of the mountains, and a balcony overlooking the pool, oozed luxury. Her furnishings, including a fine French provincial table and chairs, added to the air of richness, but I couldn't share her taste for expensive surroundings.

I liked her waterbed, a king-size hardwood piece with a carved sun god adorning the headboard. More precisely, I enjoyed the time we spent in the bed. We had our differences and occasional bitter arguments, but our sex life was always great.

The past few weeks we had talked about maybe making our relationship permanent. Karen was twenty-seven and didn't want to hit thirty without a husband, but like many men, the thought of getting married scared me.

My Mom did not like Karen—no surprise there. Dad was neutral, but to Mom, Karen epitomized the stereotype of a beautiful, scheming *shiksa* trying to steal her Jewish son.

Karen didn't come home before 6:00 most evenings so I dropped onto the sofa and fell asleep. A kiss on my forehead and a "Hello, sleepyhead," ended my nap.

I smiled at her and yawned. "Hi, sweetie." I stood and walked to her kitchen, a small area, but equipped with every appliance imaginable. I put leftovers into the microwave. "Did you hear what happened in the ER last night?" I asked in a soft voice. The little oven hummed as the smell of chicken and buttery potatoes filled the kitchen.

"No, I didn't hear anything. Did you hear what happened in administration today? The CEO called an emergency meeting on HMO contracts, giving me just three hours to update my summaries. Then my hard drive crashed. I swear I was going crazy." She set the table, sat down and attacked her meal. Sweaty and with her burgundy business suit rumpled, she looked not at all her usual glamorous self, but had I not been so upset by Netter, that would have made her even more desirable.

Zvi Zaks

I joined her at the table and stared at my plate. “Andrew Netter tried to commit suicide. Took an overdose of pills.”

“Oh Eli, that’s a shame.” She stopped eating and reached her hand out to mine. “But I’m not surprised.” She turned back to her meal, a faint smile on her face. “He found out that his wife was screwing around, right? Don’t worry. His group will want you even more if he doesn’t go back to work.”

I looked up at her, opened my mouth, closed it, then finally spoke. “How did you know?”

She shrugged. “Everyone knows. It’s his own fault for working so much and ignoring her.”

“I didn’t know. Neither did he.” I stared at my plate. “I’m not hungry.” I stood, went to the living room couch and opened a hematology journal. Instead of medical articles, the pages opened to classified ads. “Position available, northern Minnesota.” What a laugh. Who would leave southern California for there? “Hematology research grant, London and Munich.” That sounded more appetizing, but not practical.

Next morning, Karen left before breakfast to try to salvage her ailing hard drive. I fed her cat, sat at the wooden kitchen table and sipped coffee while my mind churned. At a party some weeks ago, someone told a rabbi-minister-priest joke in which the rabbi throws his collection money in the air and says, “What God wants, he’ll keep. I’ll take the rest.” Karen had laughed and clapped her hands. I felt as if I had been slapped. I felt the same now.

I picked up the medical magazine and reread the ad for the European fellowship. St. Bartholomew’s Hospital in London and the University of Munch had joined to sponsor a year of research in hematology, along with teaching and clinical duties. That would be fun. Except for a couple of quick visits to Tijuana, I had never left the United States. To leave now was irrational. After all, I had a promising career and a beautiful, rich girlfriend in LA. Yet both of these had lost their gloss. I needed a drastic change if I wanted to avoid Netter’s fate.

I applied for the fellowship. I sent a letter with copies of my diplomas, credentials and reprints of my published research

A Most Malignant Spirit

to London and Munich without telling Karen. Six weeks later the answer arrived in my mailbox—I had been accepted. I would spend six months with a Dr. S. W. Rodger in London and another six with a Dr. Hermann Körnig in Munich. They would send contracts and give further details. I would be in Europe for a full year.

In retrospect, the grant, a strange mixture of two hospitals in two different countries, had come too easily to be natural. Nevertheless, when the acceptance letter came, my only reaction was a broad smile.



That evening, after we had gone to bed, I told Karen about the grant.

“That’s nice,” she said in a sleepy voice, her forefinger tracing warm, comfortable circles on my chest. A moment passed. “How long is it for?”

“A year.”

The finger disappeared. “Are you going to take it?”

“Yes. I think so.”

She sat up, turned on the nightstand lamp and looked at me. Waves in the waterbed crisscrossed. “You’re going away for a year? When did you apply for this grant?”

“Oh, about a month, month and a half ago.”

Her brows furrowed. “Eli, why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

I shrugged and looked away. “I didn’t want to upset you. It seemed like such a long shot I never thought I’d be accepted.”

She stared at me, round-eyed. “You’re not proposing marriage and asking me to come with you, are you? Not that I want to leave L.A.”

I gulped. “Well no, that’s not what I was thinking.”

“And what am I supposed to do while you’re gone?”

“Ah, I don’t know. I guess I can’t ask you to wait.”

Her voice rose. “You mean you’re dumping me?”

“Well, maybe I should have told you sooner.”

“You bastard, you selfish bastard.” I winced. She threw back the covers and climbed out of bed, stomped over to the closet and

Zvi Zaks

covered her short, pink nightie with a long, blue flannel robe. I winced again.

“Come on, Karen. You know I’ve always wanted to do research. This is the chance of a lifetime.”

“Do research if you want. Do whatever the hell you want. But for Christ’s sakes, you could have *told* me. It’s so humiliating, having a creep like you sneak away like this.” She started to cry, then grabbed my arm and, almost dislocating my shoulder, yanked me out of the bed. “I don’t care how much money you’ll make. Get the hell out of my bedroom.”

I trudged off to the sofa where I tossed and turned for hours. Not telling her earlier had been piggish, but where had the comments about me being a creep and earning a lot of money come from?

When I awoke next morning, she had already left. After work that afternoon I found my bags packed and a note taped to one of them:

Eli,

I’ve gone to visit my parents. Get your things out of here before I return.

Karen

What a way to start a trip.



Consuelo Gutierrez was the first patient I told about Europe. She did not like it. She said in Spanish, “Don’t leave, doctor. No one else in this clinic speaks my language.”

I looked away. “Several nurses speak Spanish.”

She looked down. “They don’t like me.” Then she cleared her throat. “Ah, Doctor...”

I knew what she wanted to hear. “No, Mrs. Gutierrez, there is no sign that the cancer has returned. That pneumonia last month didn’t mean cancer.”

She sighed with relief. “Thank you, Doctor. I will miss you,” she said, and walked with slow, small steps from the examining room.

I felt like a deserter.

A Most Malignant Spirit



Telling Netter was worse, like abandoning my father. For several seconds we avoided each other's eyes over that huge desk.

"Andy, you know I've always wanted to do research, at least give it a try."

"Yes, I know."

The aquarium bubbled in the background. "It has nothing to do with your...with what happened."

He frowned. "Please, Eli, don't bullshit me."

I thought of the patients in his waiting room. Some were poor, but most wore furs or custom tailored suits. "I'm not cut out to be a society doctor."

"Funny, I never thought of myself as a society doctor."

"I didn't mean it that way."

"It's okay. I've been looking at things in a different way since that...incident. I have a lot of changes to make. But don't worry about me. I'll never do *that* again." He took off his glasses and leaned forward, holding his bald scalp with his hand.

I stared down at my shoe and rubbed it on the plush rug. "I'll write you, Andy, and let you know how I'm doing."

He sighed and looked off to the side. "Yeah, I'd like that." He showed me out of his office, that expensive office with the mahogany desk and textured wallpaper. I had always disdained that luxury. Now that it was unlikely ever to be mine, I missed it.



Twelve weeks later, my belongings sat in storage, the Pontiac sold, and my clothes packed. All was ready for me to leave LA. A friend, Bob, drove me to the airport in his father's Cadillac. To my surprise and discomfort, Karen came with us. As we drove, the three of us in the front seat, I smelled her delicate perfume and saw her beautiful smile. Her face ignored me, but her thigh pressed against mine. Expressing regret at the breakup? Taunting me with what I was leaving?

Was leaving Karen a mistake? In spite of the rough spots, I

Zvi Zaks

had enjoyed that half-year with her a lot. Standing in front of the bustling terminal entrance, I wanted to embrace her. Instead, we shook hands.

We had planned a rich life together. In Netter's office, I would have earned a six-figure income for us to buy a seven-figure house, a Mercedes and a Porsche. Our two children would have gone to the best schools and we to the best country club. And we would never have recognized anyone who had known us when we were poor.

Would I have paid the same price as Netter?

Then I saw the cross hanging from her neck. She didn't attend church with any regularity, but she did wear that pendant from time to time when we first dated. Though just an inch of filigreed metal, it felt like a bug whispering in my ear, "I do not share your values or your aspirations. I am different from you." It distracted me most when we made love.

"It's just a necklace, Eli, an heirloom from my grandmother. Don't take it so seriously," she said. My intellect understood, but that inner voice would not be quiet. After a while, she put the cross away. Now once more it hung from a chain around her neck.

Today, I wore my own symbol, a mezuzah—a pendant containing parchment with a specific verse from the Bible. If any Jewish sign matches the cross, this would be it. Were Karen and I still together, we could have a war of the icons. But one difference stood out. Her cross hung in public for everyone to see. The mezuzah lay under my shirt, a private statement.

Yes, I had to leave LA. Andy's suicide attempt proved how dangerous country clubs and Porsches could be. Karen also focused on pretty acquisitions, but presented an additional danger—the temptation to forget my identity. Though I and most of my family looked down on orthodoxy, being Jewish had been important to us all. Non-Jews might think it silly, but to me it was clear. To avoid the twin perils of assimilation and materialism, I had to make this trip.

Chapter Two

Inside the terminal, I stopped short. Bob wanted me to write him, but had not given me his new address. I turned and ran back outside only to catch him and Karen driving away, his arm around her shoulder. As they passed, she nibbled on his ear. Ah. So he was her new boyfriend.

As I walked to the deure gate, the public address speaker blared a warning to watch your suitcase. Passengers were already boarding. I strode resolutely down the jetway and into the plane. In spite of my determination, my knees trembled, and my palms sweated.

Two rows behind my seat stood a young woman. I stared at her. Her eyes shone, her skin was flawless, and her black hair, flowing down to her shoulders, was gorgeous. Her lips were full and pink, even without makeup. Her mauve skirt and white silk blouse covered most of her body, but accentuated her figure. She reached up to put a bag in the overhead storage, every movement as graceful as a dancer's. She laughed at something a companion said. The crystal clarity of her voice entranced me.

Love, oh how I could love her. How sweet it would be to walk to her seat, engage her in chitchat, and perhaps even ask for a date. What heaven to stroll down the street holding her hand. I couldn't envision kissing her. She was too exalted for me. As for further intimacy, that was impossible, a delight I felt embarrassed even to imagine. I stared like an idiot, pulse racing, wanting to say something. However, she was guarded by two black-garbed, Hassidic men and a middle-aged

Zvi Zaks

Hassidic woman, and was no more approachable than a nun.

My row was empty so I took an aisle seat. The plane took off and rose with an ever-increasing roar, pressing me gently backwards. As the aircraft banked, the sun cast golden sparkles on the Pacific, and the morning shadows in the valley threw into stark contrast the tree covered mountains. A scattering of fleecy clouds passed beneath us.

The sound of Yiddish caught my ear. I had not heard that language for years. The Hassidic men with the young woman were discussing prophecies from something called “The Book of Splendor.” I looked back. The elder of the two smiled at me.

I took out a diary bought yesterday and began writing:

Instead of striving for expensive belongings, this trip is an opportunity to cultivate spiritual growth. I don’t need to look down on orthodox Judaism, but I don’t have to observe its rules either. I can follow Jewish tradition in a modern way and have the best of both worlds.

This plane was taking me away from Netter and Karen, from materialism and assimilation. For breakfast, I had eaten bacon and eggs. For lunch, a kosher meal awaited me. My journey had begun.



A transcontinental flight is a world unto itself. High above the Earth, it is unmoved by storms or conflicts below—at least for a while. The terrain slid beneath us, and I drifted off to sleep as we sailed into a blanket of clouds.

The captain’s voice announcing the Rocky Mountains below startled me awake and shattered a half-remembered, luxurious dream. In front of me, a flight attendant was bringing snacks. My stomach growled and I sat up. However, the snacks, little cubes of ham and cheese speared on a toothpick, were obvious *traif*, forbidden to observant Jews.

An hour later, I smelled the tantalizing aroma of roast chicken, but the stewardess, instead of taking my order, announced, “You’re the one who ordered a kosher meal, right?” I will swear people turned to stare at me. I glanced back at the Hassidim. They had

A Most Malignant Spirit

brought their own food.

Lunch arrived wrapped in multiple sheets of plastic and foil. Squeezing all those coverings into a manageable-size ball was a challenge. The main course, brisket of beef, tasted dry and stringy. Following the ancient traditions was turning out to be harder than I thought.

After lunch I thought of apologizing to Karen for not telling her about the grant, but her comment—that I was just a creep who would someday become rich—burned. Why apologize to a gold-digger?

I opened a medical journal and had just started reading when a deep voice asked, “May I join you?”

I jerked my head to see the elder Hassid standing by the empty aisle seat next to me. “Sure,” I said.

He sat down and extended his hand. “Abram Rabinowich.”
“Eli Rothenberg.”

He had a firm grip. A long, light gray beard and wrinkles made him look about sixty or sixty-five. He wore a black frock coat, black pants, black shoes, black stovepipe hat nearly covering a black skull-cap, and a starched white shirt without a tie. With sharp creases and a total absence of wrinkles, his garments would repel any stains that dared to intrude. The uniform was typical Hassid, but his skin was atypically ruddy. A faint, ironic smile played around the corners of his mouth, as if savoring a riddle he would reveal in his own good time. He had a straight nose, not a “Jewish nose” like mine, and his eyes—black—were magnetic.

“Let me give you a tip,” he said, his accent British. “If you want to follow tradition, some meals on a plane are worse than others. But the appetizers are always abominable.” He shook his head with a mock serious frown.

A little embarrassed, I laughed. “I am sort of new to this game.”

“Wonderful. Perhaps I can help. The more you play ‘the game,’ as you call it, the more enjoyable it becomes.”

I hesitated. Some Hassidim push their orthodoxy on non-observant Jews. I wanted to follow my own path, not his.

Zvi Zaks

“What brings a young man like you from balmy Los Angeles to frigid Philadelphia? There’s an unseasonable cold spell there.”

“I’m going to visit my parents for a week.”

“Wonderful. A dutiful son is a blessing. And from there?”

“After that, England.”

“Ah. You’re a physician, aren’t you?”

My eyebrows rose. “Yes. How did you know?”

He laughed, though not with his eyes. “Careful observation and a keen knowledge of human behavior. I could tell by the angle of your mouth, the timbre of your voice, and the determined way you hold your pen. Seeing the *New England Journal of Medicine* on your lap also helped.”

I laughed also. He sounded pleasant enough, but projected a self-confidence that bordered on aggressive. One would not want him as an enemy. “I’m taking time off from clinical medicine to do research. London is my first stop.”

“Your parents must be proud of you.”

“I hope so. My father had always wanted to be a doctor, and I suspect he enjoys my career vicariously.”

“Are your parents observant of the traditions?”

“A little. I was Bar Mitzvahed and we lit candles at Chanukah, but not much else. They weren’t that interested in ritual. My father always said—excuse me—that religion was a hoax.”

He chuckled. “No need to apologize for your father, but do let me mention that in ordering a kosher meal you are striking out on your own. That is admirable.”

I blinked. I had intended to resist his “help,” but he had set me up. Had I said my parents were observant, he would have praised me for following their lead. Either way he would encourage me to observe tradition. The man’s smile was unassuming, but his charisma gleamed.

“You’re not married,” he said as if he had known me for years.

“That’s right.” This mind-reading act was a little unnerving.

“And your parents...hassle you, if that’s the right word, about it.”

“You must be telepathic.”

He laughed again. “Some people think so, but again, I’m just

A Most Malignant Spirit

being observant. Most married men abroad for a year take their wives, and parents of young men usually want them married.” He still smiled, but only with his mouth. His eyes, so black one could not see the pupils, made me uneasy.

“Your observations are good. My parents want grandchildren. To them I’m not dutiful at all.”

He nodded. “Mothers are often like that, especially with young men of about,” he lifted an eyebrow and stared with those magnetic black eyes, “thirty-one.”

“Exactly right. I’m impressed.” If Mom thought I had psychic abilities, she should think Abram was Elijah the prophet.

The Hassid’s grin was huge. “Give your mother this message. Tell her that Abram Rabinowich says that she should...get off your case and you’ll end up giving her a Jewish daughter-in-law and five grandchildren to spoil to her heart’s delight. I promise it will happen.”

He seemed to enjoy this prophetic role so much, I laughed in spite of my nervousness.

“How can you promise that? Can you foretell the future?”

“Maybe.” He moved his eyebrows up and down like Groucho Marx. “Take your time and pick the right woman. Then you’ll fulfill the commandment given to Adam and to us all—to be fruitful and multiply.”

Ah, another setup for me to follow the commandments. Like my parents, he wanted me married, though his urgings were much smoother than Mom and Dad’s.

“How did you like your kosher lunch?” he asked.

I lied. “It was good. I liked it.”

His smile vanished and he stared as if he knew I was lying. To my surprise, I shuddered at this hint of sternness. “Well, perhaps on your flight to England you will enjoy kosher food more. Dr. Rothenberg, it’s been a pleasure talking to you. Have an enjoyable sabbatical in England. And remember, avoid the appetizers.”

“I will.” We shook hands and he returned to his seat.

What a character—witty and friendly, but intimidating. The precision of his guesses made me uncomfortable, but he had to be

Zvi Zaks

just a skilled student of human nature.

The movie began soon afterward. Instead of second run films, the airline was featuring classic comedies and screened *The Frisco Kid*. I laughed a lot. Just as the film ended, the plane bucked and dropped sharply. Overhead lights flickered and motors whined while drinks spilled onto the floor and on people's laps. Two children cried and a man across the aisle paled. The seatbelt sign flashed on and the captain announced "a little turbulence, but nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about? Was he kidding? I've seen turbulence before, but never like this.

The plane's engines groaned as the aircraft bounced up and down, churning my stomach. Had we lost control? I closed my eyes tight and gripped the arms of my chair until my knuckles ached. We were going to crash. I knew it.

I forced my hands to relax and made myself breathe slower. I had wanted to live as a Jew. If we were to crash, I would at least die as a Jew. I started to recite the *Sb'ma*, a biblical passage that observant Jews chant three times a day and also, if possible, just before death. I had not recited that prayer since my Bar Mitzvah and remembered only the first sentence. I repeated it over and over, *sb'ma yisroel, adoshem elokaynu adoshem ecbad*, Listen Israel, HaShem our God, HaShem is one. The plane bumped and shook as if falling apart as I silently moved my lips and wished I knew the rest.

The shaking continued, but for no reason, my fear vanished. My stomach could not keep up with my head, but I no longer felt scared. I listened to the tortured wail of the plane's engines and opened my eyes, grateful, but puzzled as to why I was no longer afraid. Outside, the clouds had cleared, showing us flying perfectly straight. A few minutes later the turbulence subsided. My fears had been groundless. An hour later, we landed with no difficulty.

Thank God the trip was over.



When the plane docked, a crush of passengers filled the aisle. I stood and found myself next to the old Hassid. He stared at me with such intensity in those black eyes that I squirmed.

A Most Malignant Spirit

“*Eli, du redst Yiddish* (You speak Yiddish),” he said. It was not a question.

“A little,” I answered in English.

He snickered. “More than a little. You’re fluent,” he said, still in Yiddish.

I shrugged and switched to Yiddish myself. I rarely had a chance to speak that language though it held a comforting nostalgia for me. “My grandmother taught me when I was little. She lived with us before she died.”

“You still miss her.”

I let out a long sigh and looked down. “She was the most loving person in my life. How did you know?”

He ignored my question. “You’re an internist, aren’t you?”

“Proctologists don’t often read *The New England Journal of Medicine*,” I said. It was a poor attempt as a joke.

“A sub-specialist, in hematology perhaps?”

“Still in training.” He must have seen one of my other journals.

He furrowed his brow. “That turbulence was unpleasant.”

I nodded.

“Were you frightened? You kept repeating the first line of the *Sh’ma*.”

My face felt warm. “You heard me?”

“No one else did,” he said in a soft voice. “I perceive things which others do not. Though that isn’t the purpose of the prayer, I finished it for you to set your mind at ease.”

He shifted his gaze from my eyes to my shirt. “You’re wearing a mezuzah.” It was a statement, not a question, even though the pendant lay hidden under my shirt.

“‘And these words, which I command you this day, shall be upon your heart,’” he said, reciting in Hebrew the biblical verse on the mezuzah. He switched back to Yiddish. “Yes, placing the words physically over your heart is better than ignoring the commandment.”

He pushed his fingers between the buttons of my shirt, grasped the mezuzah, and rocked it between his thumb and forefinger. Such *chutzpah*. Such gall. I wanted to push him away, but my arm wouldn’t move. I couldn’t even speak. The mezuzah grew hot, burning. After

Zvi Zaks

half a minute, he let go and murmured, "It's later than I thought."

He sniggered. "Good placement, Dr. Rothenberg, right over your atrium." He touched his palm to my forehead and his expression turned cynical and uncanny. Those pitch-black eyes shone with abnormal, terrifying wisdom. Flames, actual fire darted out from his pupils and spread out to enclose the two of us. I started spinning. Panicking, I fell down into those piercing, black, burning, eyes, and passed without explanation through a hell populated by millions of souls who cried in torment while a hideous monster fed on their pain.

The next thing I knew, the old man was grasping my arm as we stood in the crowded plane. "Dr. Rothenberg, are you all right?"

"I think so." I shivered and broke into a cold sweat. Once more, I could move and speak.

His eyes were bright but no longer preternatural. "You had a dizzy spell. Sit down a moment."

I complied. "That was no ordinary dizzy spell."

He smiled like a parent soothing an anxious child. "It was vertigo, nothing more. There is no need to worry," he said, passing his hand in front of my face, calming my fears.

Abram put his hand on my shoulder while my gasping subsided, then turned around, reached up to grab his luggage, and asked, "By the way, you mentioned you were starting your sabbatical in England. Where will you finish it?"

While opening the overhead bins, he had exposed a part of his forearm with tattooed numbers from the Nazi concentration camps. I stared, speechless. The man was a Holocaust survivor. How could I tell him I planned to work in Germany?

The front door opened with a loud thunk. The crowd thinned as people disembarked. Abram saw my expression and answered his own question. "To Germany perhaps? That's all right. I visit *Deutschland* myself. I even have a house there." Abram grabbed his suitcases, spoke to his companion, and turned back to me. "May God bless you and protect you in Europe. And let me give you another tip: if you follow the Jewish path and keep your wits together, you'll be able to smell evil in time to avoid it." He wriggled his nose.

A Most Malignant Spirit

I didn't like this conversation any more than the dizzy spell. "Why do I need to avoid evil?"

"Did I say evil? Maybe I should have said trouble, the everyday difficulties of life. We'll meet again when you arrive in Munich this coming January. Look me up. The synagogue knows me. It will be worthwhile for both of us."

A chill went through me. "Why did you mention that particular city, Munich? I never told you where I'd be."

People were moving down the aisle of the plane. He glanced at me with benign amusement. "You must have. How else could I have known?"

"And in January. I didn't say when I'll arrive."

"Come, Dr. Rothenberg. You're blocking other passengers." He gestured for me to go ahead of him.

I shook my head, grabbed my own suitcase, and walked on unsteady feet out of the plane. Mom and Dad were waiting for me just past the security checkpoint. Even in the crowded terminal, they stood out. Mom, wearing a new brown leather coat, her white hair styled, waved furiously, a big grin on her face. Dad, quiet and hardly moving, stood with a more subdued smile. His bald spot now covered half of his scalp, and his mustache had turned gray. He was pale and thinner than I remembered, and looked old.

"How's my son the doctor?" Dad asked, only half joking at the cliché. His voice sounded raspy.

"Eli, you have such a nice tan," Mom said, as always.

I wanted to introduce Abram Rabinowich to them. After all, the Hassid had predicted grandchildren for my mother, but he had disappeared. I looked around for him without success.

Mom asked, "Is something wrong, Eli?"

"No, Mom. Everything is fine," I said, but it was a lie. The premonitions, those weird sensations I had come to hate and fear years ago had come back. First, they had warned me about Netter. Now, they were telling me that a crisis approached, a dangerous crux point that would transform my entire life.

Chapter Three

That evening, my sister and brother came to visit. Mom prepared fried chicken with au gratin potatoes and broccoli drenched in butter—the cholesterol special—for dinner. Meat and dairy in the same meal made it *traif*, but if I complained, Mom would feel hurt, and Dad would make a sarcastic remark. So I ate without comment. It was delicious.

A Beethoven Sonata played in the background.

“Mom, do you ever not have classical music going in this house?”

“Oh, Eli, don’t complain. You like it, too.”

Over dessert, I told Mom that Karen and I had broken up. Her lips twitched upward. “Don’t feel bad. There is a very nice girl I would like you to meet. You don’t have to make any commitments.”

Mom always knew a “very nice girl,” invariably Jewish. This time I had an answer. “No need. On the plane from Los Angeles I met a Hassidic soothsayer who told me to give you a message.”

“A soothsayer? Is this a joke, Eli?”

“No, Ma. I really did meet a soothsayer. His name is Abram Rabinowich and he said you shouldn’t worry because I’m destined to marry a wonderful Jewish girl. I just have to take my time and pick the right one.”

“I should live so long.”

Zvi Zaks

“You will, Ma. He said you’ll be delighted with my family—five children, he said.”

“Hey Eli, didn’t he predict anything for me?” Dad asked.

I shrugged. “Nope. It’s for Mom to spoil the grandchildren rotten. No one else.”

My sister frowned, but Dad and I laughed. For once, Mom had nothing to say.



Herb, the other ‘Friend of Galileo’ stopped by the next day. He had just finished his psych residency at Temple University and was busy building a practice. We walked to a nearby park. The cold weather had broken, and warm breezes rustled the greening bushes and trees. Herb skipped flat stones across the creek while I sat on a huge rock overhanging the water. A nearby waterfall splashed.

I told him about Abram’s uncanny guesses and the vertigo on the plane from LA.

Herb snickered. “Are you taking this seriously?”

“It unnerved me.”

“You stood up quickly after a long trip and felt dizzy. Why should that unnerve you?”

“The Hassid knew too much. For example, I never told him I was going to Munich or when I’d get there.”

“You told him. You just don’t remember.”

I stared at him.

“Come on, Eli. Supernatural events always have natural explanations, often something observers overlooked or forgot. Which is more likely—that you had given hints to your soothsayer without realizing, or that he actually can read minds, and everything we learned about science is worthless? You choose.”



A few days later, we drove down the tree lined expressway to Philadelphia International Airport. Excitement and apprehension welled up. This was it—the real beginning of my adventure. Though my hands were sweating, I itched to get on the plane.

A Most Malignant Spirit

At the terminal, Dad strode ahead down the long corridors, pushing through crowds and pointing out our direction as if I couldn't find my own way. His jacket hung too loose on his shoulders, and he limped and winced with pain. Rheumatoid arthritis, his torment for the past ten years, had taken its toll. I worried about him, but he would just get annoyed if I asked about his health.

Finally, suitcases checked and only forty minutes till takeoff, we stood in front of the security checkpoint. The public address system once more warned us to guard our luggage.

Mom, her eyes moist, turned to me and brushed a speck of lint from my shirt. "It's a strange place and you don't know anyone overseas. They don't even speak English there."

"In England they speak English. And I learned German in college, Ma. Besides, Yiddish is similar. Don't worry so much." She hugged me tightly. Dad just shook my hand, cleared his throat, and assured me I would do well. These good-byes were a regular ritual that always left a lump in my throat.

The moving walkway past the checkpoint took me down the concourse, out of sight of Mom and Dad and into the waiting area. Heavy air and the smell of sweaty bodies dulled the buzz of conversation. Crowds milled around endless rows of cramped black plastic seats. I sat in the only available chair, wedged between a perfumed dowager and a fat teenage boy, and closed my eyes.

Except for the hospitals I would be working in, this trip was uncharted. Anything could happen. For six months, I would be in a country where people didn't even speak English. Why was I going?

Because the alternative, returning to Karen and Andrew Netter, was worse. The loudspeaker announced boarding of the plane, and passengers coalesced into a long line with me close to the front. As I gave the boarding pass to a steward, my spirit lightened. With no more chance to back out, I sighed with relief. I had made my own decision and carried it out.

At least, that's what I thought at the time.



Though I had boarded the plane before almost everyone else,

Zvi Zaks

my seatmate, a fiftyish, paunchy man, had somehow slipped in ahead of me and was curled up in the aisle seat, snoring. Squeezing past him to my own place, I brushed his knees. He stirred, head and limbs twitching in bizarre, asynchronous fashion. A ridge of brown hair rimmed his huge bald spot. Thick glasses perched precariously on his nose. He needed a shave. His brown corduroy sport jacket had curled collars and frayed cuffs. Not my choice of seatmates, but at least he would be someone to talk to.

Out over the ocean, the East Coast far behind, my anxiety ebbed. Flight attendants pushed appetizer carts down the aisle. Remembering Rabinowich's warning about appetizers, I refused. But these snacks were only cheese spread and pretzels, a ritually acceptable combination. So the fortuneteller had erred. Thanks to his prophecy, I had missed a snack. It was worth it to see his sooth-saying debunked.

I started reading a science fiction book, *Last Voyage From Earth*, about life on a space station. An hour later, loud snorts from my neighbor's seat interrupted my concentration. The man coughed and twitched, and at one point looked like he might have a seizure. Finally, he opened his eyes and blinked, pulling himself together. He ran pudgy fingers through the remnants of his hair and yawned, mouth hanging open as he straightened up.

"Did I fall asleep?" he asked.

I shivered and reached up to close the overhead air-jet, but it was already shut. "You sure did. You've been sleeping more than an hour."

He clapped his hands. "Praise the Lord. I needed that."

For dinner, another kosher meal awaited me. The attendant, a pretty young woman with an infectious smile, offered the "special tray," as the airlines call it, without comment except to say, "Enjoy." No neon lights this time. I unwrapped the tray and picked up a fork.

My neighbor grunted. I turned my head. He was staring at my plate and at me.

"Is anything wrong?" I asked. With his eyes wide and mouth half open, he looked so upset I checked my platter to see if anything was amiss. The tray held roast beef, vegetables, rolls, margarine, fruit

A Most Malignant Spirit

and a piece of cake. All as it should be.

“No, nothing’s wrong,” he said, quickly turning to his own meal, defrosted fried shrimp. “Is that a kosher meal?”

I stiffened. *Not another fortuneteller.* But my tray held a note printed with Hebrew letters. He must have seen that.

“Yes,” I said.

“Are you Jewish?”

“Yes.” Would a non-Jew order a kosher meal? I guess some do.

“I’m Jewish also. I’m a completed Jew.”

“No sense in halfway measures,” I said between bites. This meal was good.

“My name is Sam Weinstein, but my friends call me Shmuel.” He leaned over, extended his hand and smiled. His breath smelled foul.

I suppressed a grimace. “Eli Rothenberg.”

“Where are you from, Eli?”

“Philadelphia, and before that LA. This is my first trip to England.”

“You’ll like it. I go to Europe a lot.”

I thought of the mind-reading tricks Abram had played. “How long will you be there?”

“Oh, I don’t know. It depends on how my business goes.”

Well, most married men in Europe for an indefinite period would bring their wives. “You aren’t married?”

“No, I’m not.”

Aha. That old soothsayer Rabinowich had nothing on me. You just have to use your head.

“My wife died last year,” he added.

Uh oh. “I’m sorry.”

“We’d been married thirty-one years. She had a blood clot in the lungs and passed away two days later. It was a horrible blow. I never realized how much I needed her until she had gone.” As he spoke, his face and voice lost all expression.

Why had I brought this subject up? “You must have been close.”

“Yes. The loneliness was excruciating. I couldn’t sleep. I

Zvi Zaks

couldn't work. I couldn't do anything. I wanted to kill myself.”

I squirmed. With such emotional statements, I thought he would cry, wring his hands, or do something, anything to show his grief. Instead he sat immobile, his voice flat and impassive, his grayish-brown eyes blank behind thick glasses. His uninflected words sounded reptilian, like the hiss of a small snake. I shrank back in my seat.

He said, “Then a handsome blond man came to me at midnight. The bell had not rung, but I knew he stood outside so I opened the door and invited him in. We talked until just before sunrise. He gave me dark red wine and told me not to despair.”

For some reason, my chest felt hot and itchy. I rubbed it with my knuckles and tried to sound interested. “That sounds like good advice.”

“He took me to the synagogue, Beth Moshiac. They welcomed me and I joined them. I became like them so I didn't need to feel alone.”

Had there been another seat, I would have moved. This Shmuel acted too bizarre for my comfort, but the plane was full. I felt obligated to respond. “Religion can be very helpful in times of grieving over the loss of a loved one. Though I've never heard of a temple with a name like that, ‘House of the Messiah.’”

His face remained a mask, his eyes blank. Only his lips moved. “They told me that I'm still a Jew.” Suddenly he blinked and shook his head as if waking from sleep. His face came alive and his voice regained its normal timbre. “Yes, I'm a Jew. I'm a completed Jew.”

“You mentioned that.”

“Do you keep kosher at home, Eli?”

“No, not usually.”

Sam—or Shmuel—leered. “You know, you don't have to follow all the commandments in the Bible. Many of them are out of date.”

“That's the way I feel. Many of the rules are cultural anachronisms, good for when they were written, but unnecessary now.”

He leaned over and whispered through a mouthful of food. His halitosis was fierce. “But one thing we Jews should do is study

A Most Malignant Spirit

the Bible. I mean the whole Bible. Certain passages, when properly understood, give an entirely different understanding of the Holy Scripture.”

“I suppose so.”

“Where will you be staying?”

“In London. I’m working at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital.”

“Good. I’ll look you up there.” He took out pencil and paper and started scribbling. “Check these quotations. See what they mean.”

I stuffed the paper in my pocket.

“Have a nice trip.” He finished eating and lay back, a satisfied grin on his face. Soon he was snoring again.

What a strange man. His story about a mysterious stranger with a nocturnal glass of wine bordered on psychotic. I was sorry for Shmuel, but felt inexplicably antagonized.

Between Abram Rabinowich and Shmuel Weinstein, I seemed destined to fly with religious fanatics.



After dinner, the captain turned out the overhead lights. Too excited to sit, let alone sleep, I stood, stretched, and made my way down the narrow aisle to the tiny galley in the back. At the rear of the cooking area, large black garbage bags held half-full coffee cups and dirty trays from the night’s dinner. On the front shelf stood rolls, coffee and orange juice for the morning breakfast. The coffee smelled good, but a cup then would keep me awake all night. The stewardess who had brought my dinner slouched on one of the seats. “You look tired,” I said, sitting across from her.

She sighed. “Yes, I really am.” She glanced at me with an apologetic smile.

“Busy day?”

She nodded. “One of the stewards is sick, so we don’t have a complete crew. But the plane is full. We can’t keep up.”

“I guess having to serve me a ‘special meal’ didn’t help.”

“No, that wasn’t a problem. Special meals are pre-planned and part of our jobs. It’s people’s whims that must be satisfied

Zvi Zaks

immediately, right now, that are tiring. ‘Give me a magazine. Give me another dessert. Give me everything and give it without any delay.’”

I nodded. “Some people treat you like a servant when you try to help them.”

She straightened up. “That’s well put. I’m not a servant. Yet some passengers never stop calling. This is the first chance I’ve had to sit all day.”

My eyes wandered over her and enjoyed the sight. Perky more than pretty in her navy blue uniform, she radiated a friendly energy that made me smile. She stood a little shorter than I, slender, but distinctly feminine. Her dark hair fell almost to her shoulders, and her face, round with hazel eyes, crinkled with dimples when she smiled, which was often.

“I know the feeling,” I said.

“What kind of work do you do?”

“I’m a doctor, in my last year of training.”

She raised her eyebrows. “I’m surprised. I didn’t think people treated their doctors as servants.”

I told her about people who call at 3:00 a.m. to complain of constipation. She showed me how the patient’s view of socialized medicine in Great Britain was much more favorable than I had expected. We talked about London and its beautiful sights that I had never seen, and Los Angeles and Disneyland, which she had never seen, but wanted to.

“By the way, my name’s Eli. Next year, you should visit me in LA and I’ll show you Disneyland,” I said.

“That sounds like a marvelous idea. I’d like that.” She hesitated a moment. “I’m Susan. This weekend I could show you London if you liked.” She had a delightful British accent.

I couldn’t have planned it better if I had tried. We exchanged addresses and made a date for the weekend. True, I had planned to live a more Jewish life, and I didn’t think she was Jewish, but for a simple sightseeing date, that didn’t matter.



A Most Malignant Spirit

I slept a few hours until the captain turned on the overhead lights for breakfast. Susan and I exchanged smiles when she brought the meal, but she was too busy to talk. Shmuel slept through breakfast.

We landed at Heathrow without problems—a simple thud, the hiss of the braking jets and we were on the ground. Shmuel awakened just as the plane touched down and stared at me, a nervous glint in his eye. For a second, I thought he would pull some trick like the elderly Hassid in Philadelphia, but when the plane docked, he jumped from his seat and squeezed halfway down the aisle before I even stood up. By the time I left the crowded airplane, he had vanished. I took a deep breath. My chest felt light. A sense of inordinate relief swept over me.

I looked around the terminal, and a grin spread over my face. I was in London and had made the break that would change my life. Bubbling with nervous, happy energy, I almost skipped while navigating the long, crowded corridors down to the main concourse. Out in the street, I stopped by a little food shop. Hearing British accents, smelling foods like Cornish pasties, and even getting change in pounds and shillings all excited me. In the cab to the hospital, I rubbernecked, luxuriating in the newness of trivia like double-decker buses, or people driving on the wrong—certainly not the right—side of the road. This was my first real stay in another country and it was a kick.

St. Bartholomew's hospital—"Bart's"—had given me a temporary on-call room, a small place with a maroon sofa bed, nightstand, chairs and a desk—all hospital clean. Cracks darted down from the ceiling near a faded reproduction of van Gogh's "Sunflowers." No luxury, but it would do until I found my own apartment. I lay down for a moment to test the mattress and didn't awaken until late afternoon.

Fighting off jetlag next morning, I walked around the hospital and gossiped with some of the doctors, most of whom warned me about my new project director, Sandra Rodger. One potential research physician showed me the lab Rodgers had assigned her—a small, smelly, dark room with little more than an incubator, an old centrifuge, and no modern equipment. "Maybe I should forget experimental medicine and just be a clinician," she said.

Zvi Zaks

That afternoon I met Dr. Rodger, a hematologist with an international reputation in blood clotting disorders. My own interest was in leukemia, but Rodger was investigating a promising new anticoagulant derived from vampire bat salivary glands and stood on the verge of a breakthrough. The chances of a scientific paper or two to add to my résumé were good.

When I entered her office, Dr. Rodger, a bony woman with drawn lips and white hair in a tight bun, scowled through wire-rimmed glasses, deepening the furrows in her brow. While sitting at a monstrous wood desk and leafing through papers, she described the project she had assigned me—to compare her new anticoagulant with heparin, the standard drug for blood clots. She cleared her throat. “Unfortunately, a laboratory isn’t yet available for you. In addition, Dr. Roberta—she’s one of our fellows—is currently on a prolonged maternity leave, leaving the department under-staffed. So, Dr. Rothenberg, would you mind terribly taking her place for a while?”

“Your letter said I’d see patients less than half of the time, not fill in for regular staff.”

She glanced up at me. “I didn’t specify how much time in the clinic. Eventually I do want you to concentrate on the laboratory. However, you must agree that now it simply is not possible.”

I stiffened. “A hospital this size must have at least one unused laboratory.”

She sighed and stared at the ceiling. “You’ll just have to believe me that there isn’t. I’m afraid your choices are to wait one week—two at the most—for your own lab, or to return to the States.”

I stared at her and my head started to spin. “The doctor on maternity leave just had her first child at the age of forty-one. You knew months ago she’d be likely to have complications, and arranged to join the fellowship program because it would be cheaper than hiring a replacement.”

Her face flushed. “Dr. Rothenberg, be fair. Yes, it would be convenient to have you take her place, but that wasn’t the main reason we invited you.”

The idea of returning back home repulsed me. “I’ll help

A Most Malignant Spirit

you, but with the condition that you promise me a lab within two weeks—a well equipped lab, not a renovated broom closet.”

“I’ll do my best, but I can’t promise.”

I hoped my nervousness didn’t show. “Of course you can. You’re the head of the department.”

“What if Dr. Roberta hasn’t returned to work by then?”

“Don’t worry. She’ll be back. I don’t want to return to the States and have to explain to the program organizers why I left. Give me your word you’ll get me a modern lab within two weeks, I’ll fill in for Dr. Roberta until then, and the matter will be closed.”

She glowered. “All right. I don’t like your pushiness, but I want to be fair. We really are hoping for you to advance our anticoagulation project. Believe it or not, that is the reason we invited you. From the papers you’ve published, I think you have a lot of promise.”

Papers I published? What bullshit. My name had been fifth on both of them. Still, I forced what I hoped was a warm smile, we stood and shook hands, and I left.

How in the world had I known so much about the doctor on leave? Sheila, the ER nurse, would call it another premonition. More likely someone had mentioned it earlier and I had forgotten because of jetlag. I determined not to give into superstition and went searching for the chief resident who showed me the night duty schedule. I had call once a week, a tolerable rate.

My second day in the hospital, the pager blared. I tensed. It was a code 99. Worse, it was in pediatrics. I ran down the hall to a room where a comatose infant lay spread-eagled and limp in her crib.

“Meningitis,” a nurse said.

I glanced at the chart. Prompt medication cures most children with this disease, but not her. The infection had destroyed her brain.

The resident doctor, a harried young man with a shock of thick black hair, slipped the pencil-thin breathing tube through her mouth into the lungs on the first try. I admired his dexterity, but it was a hopeless endeavor. Then he pressed electrodes onto her chest and charged them.

That was too much. “Why put her through that? She’s terminal.”

Zvi Zaks

“I don’t have a choice. We have to do ‘everything,’” he said with the grim determination of a man who knows that any mercy would be severely punished. “Off the bed,” he shouted and pushed the defibrillate button. The baby’s body convulsed as the smell of burned fat filled the room.

I turned and stomped from the room. I’m used to death, even in children, but the futile ordeal—tubes, shocks, needle sticks—inflicted on the little girl was a bad scene and bad medicine. My stomach felt sour.

That evening, I needed to talk, but the only person I knew in London was that flight attendant, Susan. How could I lay such a heavy trip on her?

We had a date for the next day, Saturday. I almost canceled, but hanging around the hospital alone all weekend would be too depressing, so I took the tube to her apartment. Her roommate, a younger woman with dull brown hair, opened the door. “You must be Dr. Rothenberg. Come in. Susan will be ready in a jiffy.”

And so she was. “Eli, it’s nice seeing you again. Did you have any trouble getting here?”

“No, your directions were great.”

“I’m glad.” She smiled warmly. She wore a light pink blouse and checkered skirt, much prettier than her flight attendant’s uniform. “Anna,” she said to her roommate, “Eli and I will be out all day. We’ll see you when we get back.”

“Have fun,” Anna answered and Susan and I left.

The day, crystalline autumn with a bright blue sky and brisk air, cheered me. From the top of a sightseeing bus, we admired St. Paul’s, Westminster Abbey, and Buckingham Palace. Then we took a tour covering the haunts of Jack the Ripper, Count Dracula, and other villains, both real and mythological. The descriptions of the killers were just vivid enough to stimulate without being repulsive. Susan giggled and held me tight. This was a wonderful way to play tourist.

Afterwards, we strolled hand in hand along the bank of the Thames and talked about the city, the tour, and the birds in the trees. We sat on a bench near the river. I put my arm around her shoulder and she snuggled closer. A gentle breeze blew. A squirrel inspected

A Most Malignant Spirit

us from a distance, then scampered up a tree. Noises of children's play drifted from a nearby playground.

I told Susan about the death of the little girl.

She took my hand in both of hers. "Oh, Eli, that's so sad."

That was all she said, but the concern in her voice resonated. She talked about herself. She played the flute with enough talent to win a partial scholarship, but had to drop out of school when her dad died of cancer. The stewardess job interested her and paid well, but her goal was to play music professionally.

Unlike Karen, she had no plans to marry a rich doctor.

We had dinner in the Alcove, a seafood restaurant in Kensington. Inside, I rubbed my hands with delight at the clinking glassware, hot buttery smells and sight of black-suited waiters rushing trays of food to diners. Susan ordered lobster. I like lobster, but like all shellfish, it isn't kosher. I had salmon instead and ordered a bottle of champagne for both of us. The meal was delightful.

Afterwards, high and happy, we went back to her apartment, and she invited me in. The living room, with floral prints and modern furniture, lacked the plush luxury of Karen's place, but was bright and spacious. A note on the coffee table told us her roommate had left for the weekend. We sat next to each other on the couch, and I leaned over to study a heart-shaped pendant on a golden chain around her neck. It was beautiful. I unbuttoned the top few buttons of her blouse to examine the pendant more carefully. She giggled, but made no protest. Soon both breasts were bare. I kissed each nipple and then the pendant, going around in a lovely circle. I liked that pendant much more than the one Karen wore.

I also admired her bedroom that evening, not that I paid much attention to details except to notice the mattress was soft. It was a wonderful night. This woman wasn't Jewish, but she was pretty, pleasant, smart and sexy. She didn't have Karen's money or Karen's rich tastes, either. I could get serious about her. Even Mom would like her. I would have to watch myself.

The next morning we awoke early, kissed and arranged to see each other the following weekend. I went back to my room and, thinking how comfortably this sabbatical was starting, fell asleep.

The following week, a mad killer appeared on the scene.