

# The Gulf of Aqaba

By Michael Fine

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They were risk-takers and everyone loved them for it. Richie took a sleepy little family hardware store in Weirton, West Virginia, and turned it into a multimillion-dollar enterprise with a mail-order business and stores in two hundred cities. Dvorah was from New York, from the Upper West Side. She was used to having everything at her fingertips, and everyone thought her thing with Richie, who was from the middle of no-place, was just a college fling until Dvorah went with him after college, first to West Virginia and then to Pittsburgh, which might as well have been Texas or Oklahoma or New Guinea, from the perspective of Dvorah's family and friends. And then she married the guy.

But even West Virginia and Pittsburgh couldn't slow Dvorah down. She was in New York every month; she kept dressing in a way that was to die for, and she'd light up a room like no one else when she came in on Richie's arm. The Met, Lincoln Center, Carnegie Hall, the downtown galleries as they developed, you name it, Richie and Dvorah were there. They went to Tel Aviv for a month each winter. It was hard to remember that they lived in Pittsburgh at all. They lived where they wanted to live and did what they wanted to do.

Their two kids were just like the parents. Day school in Pittsburgh to be sure -- that was Dvorah's doing -- but then Sewickly, and Avi off to Dartmouth, with Dafna hoping for NYU or Yale. They both played soccer and played well -- and they also knew their heritage. Both could read and speak Hebrew, both knew trope and both could read Torah on Shabbos with just a little preparation. Dafna had a beautiful voice. She sang the female solo part during Shacharit on Yom Kippur, the part that sounds like it carries the congregation up to heaven itself while the doors of heaven are still open. Avi was just as accomplished on the soccer field. He played with confidence and with abandon and was the leading private high school scorer in Pennsylvania two years running. He competed for the US in the Maccabiah Games after his senior year in high school. Both children were like their mother in that all eyes turned toward them whenever they entered a room. Any room.

Richie learned to fly, of course. He bought himself a little airplane and flew the family back and forth to New York, which was only a little more than an hour from Pittsburgh by air,

and he flew to Florida once a month in the winter to see his parents who had a condo near the water in Sarasota.

So it was normal that, in November of 1991, they decided to go to Eilat instead of Tel Aviv or Vail for winter break. Eilat is a warm and beautiful place on the Gulf of Aqaba, close to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. You couldn't go to Petra yet. But you could go to Cairo if you were bold enough. Taba, just across the border but a little more than a mile away from Eilat, had gone back to Egypt in 1989, but the border was open and if you drove a few miles down the coast you could look across the Gulf at Saudi Arabia, which you could also see, clear as day, from the mountains just north of Eilat. Saudi Arabia! The place no Jew was permitted to walk on, home of Mecca and Medina, the location of the Haj. A mysterious, forbidden land. Just being that close whetted Richie's taste for danger, for adventure. Peace, like the border, was so close yet so far away. The strange baroque character of the human condition excited Richie. Historical enemies. A culture that hates us without even knowing we exist as individual human beings with families and inner lives. The other. People with unfathomable minds, who walk in the hot desert in flowing white robes, their heads haloed in red-checked keffiyehs. Nomads on fast wiry horses. Kings and princes who have no interest whatsoever in democracy. Oil rich monarchs, who rule with the flick of a finger, who can condemn a man to death by simply raising an eyebrow. Unfathomable. Yet seductive. And just two miles away.

There is fantastic scuba diving off Coral Beach in Eilat. Amazing desert hikes. Day trips to Saint Catherine's Monastery on Mount Sinai itself, the place the Greek Orthodox call God-trodden and Arabic speakers call Jubal Musa. Great beaches. Great hot sun, even in January.

In 1992, Israel still held the West Bank, Gaza, and the Golan Heights, captured during the Six Day War in 1967 and held during the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Israel had returned the Sinai Peninsula to Egypt in 1982 after the Egypt-Israeli Peace Treaty of 1979 but held on to Taba, a little strip of land along the Gulf of Aqaba, until 1989, when it reverted to Egypt, except for a few hundred yards of what is now called the Coral Beach Nature Reserve. In 1992, Yitzhak Shamir was the Prime Minister of Israel. George HW Bush was the president of the US. The Gulf War, in which the US and its allies took Kuwait back from Iraq, had ended the year before. The First Intifada, which had begun in 1987 on the West Bank, was winding down. It exposed the difficult lives Palestinians led under the Occupation, but it likely made their day-to-day life

worse. The Madrid Peace Conference had just ended. The UN adopted resolution 46/86, which revoked UN Resolution 3379. Zionism was no longer a form of racism, according to the UN, which meant Jews and Israeli's felt a little less bitter about their place in the world, for the moment -- although nothing had improved for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza.

To the extent there was peace between Israel and its neighbors at all, it was a cold peace, a suspicious peace, the peace of no overt warfare, a peace that included occasional terrorism across borders, expressed animosity, anger and fear. The Arab world and the Arab Street supported the Palestinian people in their struggle. The Jewish world supported Israel and entrained the US into supporting Israel as well. No one could figure out how to end the Occupation in a way that let Israelis feel safe and secure, understanding that to Israelis, whenever a Palestinian lifted a gun, it was Adolf Hitler and three millennia of other enemies pulling the trigger, and to Palestinians, whenever they were stopped at a checkpoint, it was because outsiders -- the Turks, the British, landlords in Beirut and Cairo, and now Israel and America -- had taken their land and freedom, and boxed them in for generations, this people who only wanted to go about their lives and be left alone to make their own decisions and choose their own destiny. Without invaders in their midst.

Of course, none of that mattered in Eilat. Eilat was a sleepy little resort town of twenty-five thousand souls by 1992, a place that had many more visitors than residents. Israelis from the north, who came in the winter looking for sun, and Swedes, Danes, French, Norwegians and others, who came for the cheap accommodations by the beach, along with Russian Jews, half-Jews, one great-grandfather-Jew and non-Jews, who came by the thousands once the Soviet Union started to fall apart in late 1989, to stay at hotels along the beach and sleep on the beach. Eilat became a place for sun and holiday, like Miami Beach, Blackpool, Sevastopol, Yalta, or Cannes.

People came to lie in the sun, not to think, argue or fight. The chaos of the real world stayed far away. That the little airport, with its terminal right in the city itself, just off the beach, had runways that ran parallel to the runways of the Jordanian airport of Aqaba a few hundred yards to its east but just over the border, seemed of no consequence. That the Jordanian city of Aqaba, which was three times the size of Eilat, lay a few hundred yards to the east on the other side of a border that felt impenetrable, seemed of no consequence either. Eilat was a playground

and meant to stay that way. A good place for the Goodwins to spend three weeks and wait out the return of sunlight in Pittsburgh and of Fashion Week in New York. That Saudi Arabia, a major belligerent and a desert fortress shrouded in mystery, was just a few kilometers south, seemed of no consequence at all.

So it was a shock to everyone who knew them when they heard the news. When they read about it in all the newspapers. When it was all over the TV. The Goodwins had been out on a boat in the Gulf of Aqaba, eating, fishing and scuba diving, when a motorized rubber dingy appeared, moving fast across the water. Three terrorists, armed to the teeth, a Jordanian/Palestinian and two Saudis. They overpowered Richie and Avi. And slit the throats of all four of the Goodwins, dumping their bodies in the water. Then they took the Goodwin's boat to Coral Beach and shot a security guard dead before they themselves were overwhelmed by the IDF and were all shot dead on the spot. One more senseless tragedy in a chain of senseless tragedies, linking two peoples together in an endless litany of sadness, anger and hate. In an instant the Goodwin family was wiped out, their lives and their legacy gone from the face of the earth forever.

The first question, after Jonathan Levin's heart was ripped out of his body, twisted like a dishtowel being wrung out, and stomped upon, after he managed somehow to pick up his heart and put it back into his chest, was how to think about the last terrifying moments of his sister and her family, now lost forever, the victims of a conflict they had nothing whatsoever to do with themselves. The second question was what to do next, who had to do it, and who was in charge.

There is no guidebook that tells you what to do when your sister, her husband and her two beautiful children are murdered, no set of directions, no rules to follow. A building collapses on you. There are no written directions on the box telling you what to do next. The State Department called. Jonathan had no idea how they found him. Then five minutes later the Israeli Ministry of Defense called. And then five minutes after that it was the three major

networks plus CNN. About five minutes later Jonathan's friend Rob called to say that the street in front of his house was filled with the TV trucks. Then there were TV lights bathing Jonathan's house, and someone ringing his doorbell every thirty seconds. How are the kids going to get to school in the morning? Jonathan remembered himself thinking. Even though their school was just around the corner on Sessions Street. And what will the neighbors think? Even though Jonathan already knew what the neighbors were thinking, which is what he would have been thinking had the situation been reversed – they were thinking about this awful tragedy, being thankful it wasn't them or their kids, and damning a violent world and its senseless cruelty and violence.

“No comment,” was all Jonathan could say at first. Somehow, Rob Marsh, who Jonathan davened with, his lawyer and a trusted friend, appeared and handled the press. Somehow, he told Joanna. Somehow, they gathered their three young children together, and told their children about a tragedy that was too much for any child to know about let alone to bear. Somehow Jonathan broke free and called his mother, who was living in the Hebrew Home for the Aged in Riverdale, and heard her say the Shema, and be thankful that his father was no longer alive to hear this news. Somehow. Somehow. Somehow.

Even so, and regardless of what they were thinking, their friends and neighbors appeared. They mobilized and clustered around Jonathan and his family, a herd of elephants circling a wounded calf. The community went into high gear. They took care of Joanna and Jonathan's three young children. They fed them and held them and stayed with them. They were there and would stay until the enormity of what had just transpired faded just a little into everyone's memory, a memory which would be forever cloaked in a sadness of infinite depth.

She is a beautiful woman, his big sister, Jonathan thought. Was a beautiful woman, Jonathan had to tell himself. Was. Past tense. No longer is. No longer living.

But Jonathan still couldn't believe it. Didn't believe it. Wouldn't believe it. There must be some mistake. How could this be? Are you sure? Could they have the name wrong? Couldn't this little family vacationing in Eilat have been mistaken for another little family? Sure there must be hundreds of little families of the same name, the same ages, some also Americans,

out diving in Eilat that day. But not. Of course not. It was before cell phones, so Jonathan couldn't pick up his phone to dial Dvora's number, just in case.

It was later, although how much later Jonathan couldn't say because time had vaporized, that Jonathan put in a call to Richie's sister, who lived now in Berkeley, California.

The sister was, how does one say this? a little different. They knew one another, of course, Jonathan and the sister, from family events. The rehearsal dinner and the wedding. The bris and the naming. The Bar Mitzvah and the Bas Mitzvah. The sister had come to all of them. Most of them. Some of them. Mostly alone. Her husband and kids never came. There was a husband and kids, three adopted kids, that's it, in Berkeley California. Jonathan couldn't quite remember if Richie's sister had come to Jonathan and Dvora's father's funeral. He didn't think so.

They weren't close. Richie and his sister. Richie's sister, Joanie, that's it, didn't do Thanksgiving, Pesach or Rosh Hashanah with the family. It was too far to travel, that was the explanation, the excuse made in passing whenever someone asked after Joanie's health.

Joanie had orange hair flecked with gray that came halfway down her back, hair that she sometimes wore in braids, pale skin and freckles. She was tall and thin, almost too thin, and had a tentative expression, frightened or always unsure – it was hard to tell – and she never looked at you when she spoke to you. She was partial to long shapeless flowery dresses and self-righteous sounding statements about inequality, racism and social justice, always framed in a way that made it sound like she was the only person on earth who cared about those ideas, and she was the only person on earth who could tell the difference between right and wrong. She was married to a philosopher, a tall spacey looking man who didn't appear to have shoulders, who was balding but had long hair, who was overwhelmingly and intentionally gentle, who wore flannel shirts or t-shirts everywhere and seemed to float from place to place, who bounded, instead of walking, with a huge rocking stride. They had adopted three children, one each from Haiti, Eritrea, and Vietnam.

Jonathan was pretty sure that Richie's parents were still alive. He remembered that they lived half the year in West Virginia, but spent winters in Sarasota at a senior living condo development for New Yorkers, walking the beach and talking about the day's New York Times. The father was mentally hazy now. The mother was okay. She was a decent human being, a woman who worked in her husband's store her whole life and made big family meals, big boisterous seders and big Thanksgiving dinners. Which her daughter, Richie's sister, stopped attending when she went off to Berkeley and left the earth for the stratosphere. Jonathan assumed they knew by the time he remembered to call Joanie. Everyone knew. Everyone in the universe knew. A billion or two people all around the globe heard the sound bite about the murder of Jonathan's sister and her family together, about this, their personal disaster, and all those people heard about it at the same time. For everyone else, it was someone else and too bad, such a tragedy, really. But for Jonathan and everyone he loved it felt like all the light had gone out of the world and was never coming back.

What Joanie remembered about Rich was his courage, which sometimes felt like recklessness but usually felt like arrogance. He was the younger brother. He was supposed to know his place, to be shy and respectful. But that wasn't Richie. He acted like there was no one else in the room except him, that what he thought and felt mattered, and that no one else, not their parents, not aunts and uncles and grandparents, not teachers or scoutmasters or coaches even his bigshot friends mattered. Joanie had learned the rules about how to be a child of Jews in Weirton West Virginia and she tried to teach those rules to Richie. But Richie ignored her. He ignored those rules and all rules. But none of that mattered now.

When they were really little, before either of them could read, Joanie pretended to read to her little brother, who was a pudgy little kid with black hair and olive skin, whose complexion made him look like they had different parents. Joanie memorized the words in picture books and would recite what she remembered as she turned the pages. She expected Richie to sit quietly in her lap and listen, the way Joanie listened when their mother or father read to her. But Richie



never sat still. He'd take the book out of Joanie's hands and turn it upside down, and then turn the pages and tell his own story in baby talk, as if Joanie wasn't there, as if she didn't matter.

Joanie never thought Rich would amount to anything. He broke his leg when he was eleven when he flipped over a minibike he was riding in the woods, and from then on everyone doted on him. His friends all came and signed his cast. Then they took turns pushing him through school in the wheelchair until he figured out how to work the wheels and then he started racing his friends down the hall. He never handed in assignments on time. Joanie, who was her high school's valedictorian, got near perfect grades and had perfect handwriting. All the teachers looked at her as the perfect student, that funny looking Jewish girl who listened and never talked back. Richie was the wild brother, the kid who was always testing the limits. It was a miracle he got into college at all. He lasted one semester at Ohio State. He came back home to Weirton, and Joanie thought he'd end up a used car salesman, a bank teller, a drug addict or in jail. Then he started working in the store and the rest was history. First there were two stores. Then ten. Then mail-order. And then Richie was the star, and Joanie, well, she went to Berkeley in the mid-seventies and almost never came home again.

Even so, Richie was the only brother Joanie had. The brother who stayed in West Virginia and took care of their parents, so Joanie didn't have to. The brother who made sure that his parents had a place to go on Thanksgiving and on the Jewish holidays, even if he had to fly their parents to New York, which meant Joanie never had to give her parents a second thought.

I'll go to Sarasota to be with my parents, Joanie thought. It's the least I can do.

Eilat. In Israel. My brother the Jew, who thought the rules didn't apply to him, Joanie thought. Who thought the world didn't notice what goes on in the West Bank and Gaza. We didn't grow up like that. We didn't fly airplanes or go scuba diving. We had a little hardware store in the middle of nowhere. We were just average people, like everyone else. Not royalty. Not venture capitalists. Not rock stars. Never people who profited from the misfortunes of others.

And then Dvorah's brother Jonathan called from Rhode Island. He was a doctor, a gastroenterologist, Joanie thought. Wife and three little kids. Observant Jew. Lived in Providence Rhode Island, down the street from a synagogue and JCC. In tears. As different from me as night and day.

"Ha'makom yenaheem etkhem betokh she'ar avelei Tziyonvi Yersuhalayim. May G-d ... comfort you ... along with all the mourners... of Zion and Jerusalem" Jonathan said, trying to speak and hold back his tears.

"To you as well. I'm sorry for your loss," Joanie said.

"Our loss," Jonathan said.

"Our loss. I can't believe it," Joanie said.

"It's... Do your parents know?" Jonathan said.

"They do. I'm on my way there. I have a flight from Oakland in about an hour. Your mother?" Joanie said.

"She knows. I'm only glad my father..." Jonathan said, but couldn't continue.

"The state department..." Joanie said.

"They called," Jonathan said. "And the Israeli Ministry of Defense."

"Me too. They called. I talked to them. Anyway. This should not have happened. They should never have gone..."

"It's up to us now. They need one spokesperson for the family," Jonathan said.

"You can speak for your family. I'll speak for mine," Joanie said.

"That's not what.... Whatever is best for you. My friend Rob, my lawyer has been handling the press here. He could..." Jonathan said.

"No lawyers. They only make trouble and they charge by the instant," Joanie said.

“We’re going to need some legal help sorting everything out Joanie. We can do this together,” Jonathan said.

“You do your family. I’ll do mine,” Joanie said. “I’ll be making a brief statement of my own.”

“Joanie some decisions have to be made... quickly. We can do this.... together. You and I. Your parents. My mother. We are all... next of kin,” Jonathan said.

“Which means we all have an equal voice. Or vote. Or whatever,” Joanie said. “Equal. That means no one is better than anyone else. No domination by history or gender. None of that,” Joanie said.

“They were an observant family, Joanie. You know that,” Jonathan said.

“So that?”

“So that funerals need to be in twenty-four hours. Or as soon as possible. We need a place for the funerals, and graves, and I have no idea what they planned for themselves. I can’t believe we are having this discussion. I can’t believe... I don’t know if there are graves, do you?”

“I don’t know. Maybe my parents know. We haven’t discussed it. I can call you when I get to Sarasota, Joanie said. “My family isn’t like that. Observant. Richie didn’t grow up that way. And I don’t do any of it. Religion makes more trouble than its worth. Wars. Hatred. Refugee camps. The occupation,” Joanie said.

“Do you know who Richie’s lawyer is? For the business? I know they had a will,” Jonathan said.

“I have nothing to do with the business,” Joanie said. “Richie took a little hardware store, a community business that served poor and working people for a hundred years and made it into a huge corporation. I’m sure he had lawyers. Lots of lawyers. And bankers. That’s the trouble, isn’t it. People think they can rule the world, that they can jet here and there, that they are invincible. They think other people’s lives don’t matter. But you know what? We all die of something. We’re all equal, in at least that way.”

“We have a family plot. In Queens. Our side is all in New York. Or used to be. Their friends were in Pittsburgh. Is there anyone left in Weirton? People you grew up with? Your parent’s old friends?” Jonathan said.

“I was born there. But that’s all. Everyone died or moved to Florida. All the kids moved to DC, Boston or New York,” Joanie said.

“Where are your grandparents buried?” Jonathan said.

“In Weirton,” Joanie said. “In the Jewish section of the cemetery. No that’s not right. The Jewish cemetery is in Steubenville. Steubenville, Ohio. Just across the Ohio River.”

“How far is Pittsburgh?” Jonathan said.

“About half-hour,” Joanie said. “A little more. Depends on traffic.”

“What do you think about a funeral and shiva in Pittsburgh?” Jonathan said. “Their friends are there. The kids’ friends. We need to take care of them too.”

“I’m not ready to make any decisions now,” Joanie said. I want to talk to my parents first. I don’t know what my parents can handle. I don’t know if they can make the trip. It’s January.”

“We need to move quickly Joanie,” Jonathan said. “We need to sort out the funerals and the burials and the Shiva. I’m the, I was the kids’ guardian... in case their parents...” Jonathan said, and then he broke down.

“What?” Joanie said. “I don’t know anything...”

“It’s in their will, I think,” Jonathan said as he sobbed. “Richie, Dvorah and Joanna and I talked about the guardianship piece. I thought you...”

“I don’t know anything about any of that. Typical. Typical of my brother. The golden boy. Never a thought about anyone but himself. Joanie is in Berkeley and she doesn’t matter. Never mattered. Only boys matter.”

“*None* of that matters now Joanie. We have a job to do. An obligation. A duty. We’re who’s left. We have to take care of...”

“It’s all too little too late, isn’t it? Generations of violence, of exploitation, of oppression. Think that’s going to go away by saying we are sorry?”

“Can we...”

“Arrange your funerals. Pick your gravesites. Set up your shiva. I have a plane to catch. I’ll call you in the morning from Florida,” Joanie said. She slammed down the phone.

*What was that?* Jonathan wondered.

Jonathan sat alone in his attic study looking down on the street. A man walked a dog. He and the dog entered a circle of light cast by the streetlight nearest Jonathan’s house. Then the man and the dog walked through the light and faded into the darkness. A few snowflakes dusted the night air, falling at an angle because of the cold wind.

Jonathan had never felt himself so alone. So bereft. So desolate. The world had changed from a stable and secure place to a place that was hostile and tragic. It had become a place without hope.

After it was all said and done, after they buried Richie and his family, after the shiva and the will and the lawyers and the accountants, after the inheritance tax was paid and the issues around the corporate board and the foundation board were settled, Joanie assumed she would never see Jonathan again, which was fine with her. They were different people. They lived in different worlds. The will was clear. It didn’t matter much, anyway, not really. Everyone was ok financially before. So there was really nothing to fight over. The tragedy was the tragedy. A catastrophe, Joanie thought, recognizing the irony: the Palestinians call Israeli independence and their exodus and diaspora the Nakba, the Catastrophe. The murder of Richie and his family in a terrorist incursion was just that catastrophe, brought home and made real to Americans and to American Jews. Even if they weren’t listening. So sad that it involved Joanie’s own family. But

the world isn't always fair and it is certainly far from just. That that goes around comes around. Still Joanie would have preferred that cruel fate had picked on someone else, that particular day.

Once or twice a year, Joanie found herself in Washington, DC, usually to lobby for one organization or another. She'd combine those trips with visits to her parents and would fly to Florida from DC if the trip was in winter. If the trip was in the spring or summer she'd rent a car and drive to see her parents in Weirton, which is about two hours from DC.

You couldn't really call what Joanie did lobbying. The organizations that mattered -- Women United to Prevent Gun Violence, Mothers for Public Education, and USCPR -- The US Center for Political Redemption -- called these visits Hill Week, and every organization in the nation does these visits, which exist mostly to justify the organizations' existence. You fly in and they put you up in a Dupont Circle hotel or at the DC Hilton, which was where Reagan got shot. They have a briefing session, in which they give you talking points about a particular bill or budget item that the organization wanted Congress to pass or approve. They'd have a friendly senator or representative drop by the hotel for a cocktail hour and a brief talk about the politics of the day, about who was up and who was down and why nothing was moving through Congress right at the moment, which was always because of the intransigence of the other party.

Then they'd drive you to the Hill in buses and you'd fan out to visit the offices of your particular senator or representative. Most of the time your particular senator or representative had just been called to the floor for a vote or was in committee, so you'd meet with a twenty-seven year-old squeaky clean looking legislative aid, who was almost never from California but had gone to Georgetown or BU or Villanova, a college with a good basketball team, and the young legislative assistant would half listen to your pitch and then give you their boss's position on your talking points, which made it sound like their boss agreed with you and hoped your legislation would move but always stopped short of committing to it, or signing on as a sponsor, which was what you to came ask for. "I'll tell you what we can do," the young LA would always say, and then would give you some information that you didn't need or send you to a website that wasn't helpful and that you knew about already. Joanie had been down this road a hundred

times. She knew and the organizations knew and the LAs knew and the actual lobbyists knew that these visits don't ever change one thing.

Even so Hill visits are an important part of the culture of Washington. They keep the organizations, the lobbyists and the LAs employed, and they help provide everyone with the illusion that something important was happening in Washington, even though nothing really changed. Of course no one ever really thought about the suffering of the poor, the corruption and selfishness of the rich, the pain and suffering of the sick, or the loneliness of most Americans during those Hill visits. But Joanie knew someplace inside her that government exists to keep things as they are, not to create meaning or justice. And that knowledge kept her sad but also humble when she came to DC. She knew not to get her hopes up, not anymore, despite all the marching, letter writing and demonstrating.

It was early March 2008, nineteen years after Richie, Dvorah, Avi and Dafna were killed. Washington's weather wasn't much different from the weather in Oakland at that time of year. Oakland had been cold and rainy all winter, but the cold in DC was a harsher cold, without the brilliant sun and warm breezes you sometimes get in the Bay area in the late afternoon. It was dark and raining. There was still ice and slush on the streets. Some of the flowers were up, dark green stems pushing aside dull brown earth, but nothing had bloomed yet, not even the crocuses.

It bothered Joanie that her hotel was filled with Orthodox Jews. At least she *thought* they were Orthodox. The men wore yarmulkas, but they weren't crazy people, not the kind who wear black coats and big hats and the men didn't have those fringy things hanging from their belts like the Jews Joanie sometimes saw in Oakland, the kind who drove around in minibuses with loudspeakers and who stopped men on the street hoping to get them to pray. The women were tastefully dressed, often in business suits or in skirts and sweaters. These Jews looked like businesspeople, low-level executives or doctors and lawyers, and they hurried from place to place, attending meetings of their own. They gathered in conference rooms at the hotel in the morning and evening for little prayer sessions during which they put on black and white prayer shawls and swayed back and forth with their heads buried in prayerbooks, or sang together in Hebrew, sometimes reciting prayers Joanie distantly remembered from childhood. Who were they? Why were they in DC?

AIPAC, that's who they were. Joanie saw a sign on one of their buses and it explained everything. The American Israel Public Affairs Committee, the enemy, the other side. AIPAC was an organization of American Jews that used the lobbying power and political might of the American Jewish community to lobby for Israel, to secure American support and money for whatever Israeli government was in power, regardless of their policies or positions. Israel in a war? AIPAC gets the US to send planes and bombs and block any criticism of Israel at the UN. Israel wants to annex Palestinian land? AIPAC lobbies for the US to look the other way, and block, or try to block, UN sanctions. Israel bombs Gaza again and kills a thousand people, including lots of kids which it calls "collateral damage"? AIPAC makes sure all Americans know about every single rocket fired on Israel from Gaza, which then mostly missed their targets and fell harmlessly on farmers' fields. Except the one's that don't, the ones that kill people, mostly innocent elders and children. And so it was, continuously for the last 70 years. If Palestine isn't an independent state yet, Joanie thought, it's because of AIPAC and these clean looking people who all look like they have MBAs.

Jonathan was standing in the back of an elevator at the hotel as Joanie entered, and his gaze met hers as she looked up before turning around. He had seen her first and placed her. It took her a moment to figure out who he was.

"Hello Joanie," Jonathan said quietly. "How are your parents and kids?"

"Jonathan. Hello Jonathan," Joanie said. "What are you...well I guess I know. AIPAC, right," Joanie said.

"Yup," Jonathan said. "Every year. But surely you..."

"No not me, Joanie said. "Happenstance. I'm here for Hill Week. Women United to Prevent Gun Violence. You know the drill. Then off to see my parents."

"They're well?"

The elevator door opened.



“My floor,” Jonathan said. “Let’s catch up.” He thrust a card into Joanie’s hand as he walked by. Then he was gone.

Painless, Joanie thought. One and done. Figures he’s with AIPAC. Just figures. No one ever learns from experience, no matter how sad. No one ever listens. No one ever changes, and so we are left with this mess, the consequence of our selfishness, intransigence, narcissism, and greed. The good news is that I never have to see him again.

The rain started at midday the following day and by midafternoon had become a drenching cold rain that was unrelenting. Joanie finished up the last of her congressional visits at the Cannon Building at one, and found her way to the corner exit, a long block from the Metro. She looked around for a cab to take her down the block but there are never any cabs in the part of Capitol Hill south of the mall. Good public transportation is a mainstay of democracy, she thought, and she was glad to have an umbrella, even though her raincoat, shoes and stockings were soaked by the time she had taken fifty steps.

A gust of wind flipped her umbrella inside out as she came out of the Metro at Farragut Square, so she was completely wet by the time she reached her hotel. Her hair was wet, her chest and back were wet, there was water dripping down her face and her glasses had fogged.

She’d checked out of her hotel in the morning and left her luggage with the bellhop. Change in the ladies’ room, she thought. And then a cab to National Airport, which had another name that Joanie still would not use.

She borrowed a hairdryer from the desk and changed in the bathroom. And then went rushing out to find a cab. Her flight was at four-thirty. Just enough time. Barely.

It was still pouring. Connecticut Avenue was bumper to bumper, the brake lights and the headlights of the red Washington cabs reflected in the windshields of cars and trucks, in the windows of stores and restaurants and even by the water on the street, reflected by the pavement which had become slick and glossy like the cover of a magazine. Horns honked and doors slammed. There was a line of people waiting for cabs, perhaps ten people in front of Joanie, all wearing hats scarves and overcoats, their collars raised against the wind and rain. They all held

umbrellas even though they were standing under an awning. Joanie looked at the people in front of her and tried to guess how many were together, how many parties of two and three were waiting together. I'm never going to make my plane like this, she thought and considered the Metro for a moment, but couldn't bear the thought of getting drenched again walking to the Metro in the rain.

The man getting into the first cab turned to open the car door.

Jonathan.

Joanie knocked on the window of the cab as Jonathan was giving his destination to the driver. The bellhop, Jonathan thought at first. I must have left something. Instead it was a woman, a beautiful woman, truth be told, her freckled white face and graying red hair wrapped in a green kerchief.

"I'm late getting to the airport. Are you going to National?" Joanie said.

Jonathan recognized Joanie's voice before he placed her face. The memory of that voice was wrapped in huge fathomless pain but the voice itself was an instant cue.

"Oh Joanie," Jonathan said. "Sure. Yeah. National. Reagan. No problem. Room for two." And paused. "Driver can you pop the trunk? More luggage," Jonathan said, loud enough to be heard through the plexiglass partition.

"I really appreciate this," Joanie said after she had settled herself into the seat next to Jonathan and closed the door.

"No problem," Jonathan said. "Especially you. Family. More or less," Jonathan said.

"By marriage," Joanie said.

"Yeah, by marriage," Jonathan said. "More or less."

The cab's springs bounced a little as the cab came down the hotel driveway and into the street. They swayed together as the cab made a U-turn and headed south, holding up traffic as the

driver nosed into a line of cars that wasn't moving. Horns blared but the driver didn't turn. Instead, he raised his right hand, gesturing, as if to say, 'give me a break everyone. I have to make a living too.'

"Doesn't look like we are going anywhere fast," Jonathan said. "What time is your flight?"

"Four-thirty. Yours?" Joanie said.

"Six-thirty. You meet half of Rhode Island on that flight. Senators. Congressmen. Business owners. Everybody. We all know each other."

"You know, I feel like I don't really know you," Joanie said.

"There's not much to know. And it doesn't matter much now," Jonathan said.

They fell silent. The cab inched forward, barely making one car length each time the traffic light in front of them changed. The cars from the cross street blocked the Avenue. There was a policeman in a yellow rainslicker blowing a whistle and waving his arms in the intersection. But there was no room to maneuver.

"Things get better south of the White House," Jonathan said after a few minutes. "Once you get into one of the tunnels,"

"I know. I try to fly into and out of National whenever I come to DC," Joanie said. "The airport is like, three to four miles from the Capitol, maybe less. I love flying in over the White House and Capitol, over the Washington Monument and the Jefferson Memorial. Pretty stirring despite all the mess."

"What mess?" Jonathan said.

"You know, the mess that this country is always in," Joanie said. "Iraq and Afghanistan and the racism and immigrants and the Middle East. Endless messes. Politics. That mess."

"Oh," Jonathan said. "That mess. I don't see it as a mess, exactly. I see it as a country that is extraordinarily lucky, and is finding its way in the world, feeling its way in the dark, if you will, trying to figure out how to be better. That guy Obama just won the democratic primary in New Hampshire, didn't he?"

“He won the caucuses in Iowa. And came in second in New Hampshire,” Joanie said.

“Gave a pretty good speech up there,” Jonathan said.

“Come on,” Joanie said. “This country will never elect a Black man president of the United States and you know it. Just window dressing.”

“I don’t know Joanie,” Jonathan said. “Our grandparents came here as immigrants a hundred years ago. The country has been pretty good to us.”

“I wish it were equally good to everyone,” Joanie said.” We can pass. People of color can’t pass.”

“You think? Hard to confuse me with a tall blond guy wearing lime green pants who went to Yale,” Jonathan said.

“Didn’t you go to Penn?” Joanie said.

“Point taken,” Jonathan said.

They fell silent again. The driver turned left but nothing was moving.

“I’m afraid you are going to miss your plane,” Jonathan said.

“Probably,” Joanie said. “But the time difference works in my favor when I fly East to West. A long as I can get out my midnight, I can get home today.”

A cellphone rang and the driver answered it. He spoke rapidly in another language. Arabic? Farsi? What language did they speak in Ethiopia? Amharic? How about in Eritrea?

Suddenly the cab stopped. The driver opened his window. The driver of another cab, moving in the opposite direction stopped and opened his window. The drivers talked even though there was space to drive forward in front of each cab. Talked loud in that other language. Or at least in another language that Jonathan couldn’t understand.

Then the driver rolled up his window and swung the cab around, stopping next to the curb behind the other cab, which had pulled over. He turned around.

“You pay now,” the driver said. “Get out now. Bad tire.”

“Are you crazy?” Jonathan said. “It’s pouring rain.”

“You get out now. Pay now.” the driver said.

“Why would I give you one penny?” Jonathan said. “You haven’t gotten us to the airport,”

“Pay fare on meter,” the driver said. “Pay now.”

“I’m not understanding you,” Joanie said. “Is there something wrong?”

“Bad tire. You get out now. Pay now,” the driver said.

A man appeared next to Jonathan’s window outside the cab. It was the driver of the cab parked in front of them. He was carrying a baseball bat.

“This isn’t a cab ride,” Jonathan said. “It’s a hold up. Or a kidnapping.”

With that, the doors on both sides of the cab locked. The driver of the other cab stood outside next to Joanie, his bat raised like a club.

“Let me pay you,” Joanie said, and she opened her purse. “How much?”

“Put your purse away, Joanie. They want you to take your wallet out so they can grab it.”

Joanie didn’t put her purse away. But she didn’t take her wallet out either. She rummaged around in her purse.

“How much?” she said.

“Two hundred dollar. Cash now,” the driver said.

“I don’t carry that much cash. Let me find my wallet. Jonathan, do you have one-twenty? I’m looking in my purse. I keep my cash in a hidden compartment. I think I might have eighty.”

“Are you nuts?” Jonathan said. “They have your luggage in the trunk. Pay them now and they’ll take your purse and everything in the trunk and we’ll never see them again.”

“Now. Pay now. Get out now,” the driver said.

“I know. You don’t negotiate with terrorists,” Joanie said.

“Who the fuck do you think you are,” Jonathan said. “I’m calling the DC Taxi Commission.” Jonathan leaned forward to see the driver’s picture and license which was displayed on the dash.

Jonathan pulled his cell phone out of his top pocket. But the driver pictured on the dash was a man wearing a turban who didn’t look like the driver at all.

Two quick loud thuds. The cab shook. Glass everywhere. The window next to Jonathan shattered, spraying glass fragments across the back of the cab.

Then suddenly, DOO-OP DOO-OP DOO-OP, right behind them. Brilliant white, red and blue lights everywhere.

The driver threw his door open and bolted.

Then there was a cop leaning over next to Jonathan, asking if they were okay.

Later, they sat together in a restaurant at the airport. They had both missed their flights and had three or four hours to kill.

“So you weren’t going to give that guy cash?” Jonathan said.

“No. Not even close,” Joanie said. “I was buying time. My cell was in my purse. I was feeling around for it. I dialed 911 while you were talking. I hoped and prayed that the 911 operator would hear you talking and send help.”

“Good move. Got us out of a jam. Quick thinking. I didn’t know you were much for praying, though,” Jonathan said.

‘Manner of speaking,” Joanie said. “I use language figuratively. I’m not a fundamentalist.”

“You think?” Jonathan said. “You know Joanie, I’m not a fundamentalist either. Science is okay with me. So is justice. We just have different ways of thinking about things, different ways of getting from point A to point B.”

“I’m sorry about how I acted,” Joanie said. “When Richie and Dvora and the kids got killed. So selfish. So doctrinaire. What I said at the funeral was what I believed. What I still believe. But that wasn’t the time or place.”

“You were in shock. We all were. I’m still in shock. After all these years,” Jonathan said, and his eyes filled with tears.

Joanie put her hand on Jonathan’s hand. And her eyes filled with tears as well.

“There is injustice in the world. Selfishness and greed,” Joanie said.

“And anti-Semitism,” Johnathan said.

“And anti-Semitism, but the world doesn’t turn around the Jewish people, however much Jews have suffered. Other people suffer too. “

“And that suffering is our fault?” Jonathan said.

“The challenge is to keep bending the arc of the moral universe toward justice, despite the selfishness and stupidity of human beings,” Joanie said.

“I thought you had given up on Judaism,” Jonathan said. “You sound like Hillel, Rabbi Nachman or the Bal Shem Tov.”

“All men, right?” Joanie said.

“All men, Joanie,” Jonathan said. “Good men. The world survives because of good people – Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, whatever. Men and women. Who make moral choices. Who on some days balance the evil that exists among people as well. Maybe. A little. For now.”

“Hey, we were a good team in there, in that cab,” Joanie said.

“A good team,” Jonathan said. “I can’t say I knew what position I was playing, or even that we were in the game, but history is told by the survivors, yes? By the victors and the survivors.”

“Us, I’m afraid,” Joanie said. “The next of kin.”

They stood to go. That part of the airport is dark and cavernous. The passageway in front of them had been filled by people rushing by to catch planes, people wearing raincoats that were still wet from the driving rain. But now it was late, and the terminal was deserted.

They hugged. Then they headed for different gates, understanding that they would probably never see or hear from one another again.

All of Michael Fine’s stories and books are available on [MichaelFineMD.com](http://MichaelFineMD.com) or by clicking [here](#).