

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion

By Michael Fine

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Stanley Moseson shrank when he heard about the demonstrators in the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. He was never a big man. Five-six at his prime. A hundred and forty-five pounds. Not much in the shoulder department. Not muscled. The flesh hung down from his arms and face like water spilled in a plastic bag and quivered like jelly when he moved from place to place, which he did only with great care, tentatively. The wrinkled suits he wore to work every day always seemed too big for him. His neck swam inside his shirt collars. There were bags under his eyes.

Jewish people demonstrating against one another! Israeli police on horses, chasing demonstrators. Riot police shooting water cannons. Wasn't the trouble with the Palestinians bad enough? Enemies from the outside, the Iranians, the Syrians, Hezbollah and Hamas everywhere. Putin invading Ukraine – Hitler and Stalin, back again, Amalek and Haman back to torment the Jews once more, Petlura and Chmielnicki back from the dead. Only now the Ukrainians, those Cossacks, those murderers, only now they were the good guys, with a Jewish prime minister, the whole world topsy-turvy. But Jews tormenting one another? These demonstrators, these Israelis – have they no respect?

They call themselves a start-up nation. What ever happened to the People of the Book? What ever happened to study, observance, and humility? Who did these people think they were?

He shrank, contracting into himself. Don't they know? he thought. Don't they know what happens to us when they see us? That should we raise our heads, those heads will be cut off?

It was spring now. The daffodils had pushed out of the ground but had not yet bloomed. The robins and the cardinals were back, appearing as if from nowhere, as if their great migrations occurred in the middle of the night. Purim came and went. The sun rose higher in the sky and the days lengthened. Passover was coming.

But Stanley Moseson bowed his head as he walked. They are coming for us, he told himself. We must always be ready to fade into the woodwork. Disappear. Otherwise they will find us all when they come for us again. They will find me when they come for us. They know who I am already. They must know.

He spat on the ground, something his mother did, something he hadn't even thought about in years. To discourage the evil eye, which his mother thought was everywhere in the world. It's back, Stanley thought. No. It never left. It was always here. And will stay with us forever.

That was when the three people came into Stanley's store, the store where he still worked part-time selling furniture, social security not being enough to pay for the nursing home where Ellie was, and because Stanley himself got a little bored being home alone so much with Ellie gone.

Two men and a woman. The woman was alluring: dark tan skin, blue eyes, big dark eyelashes, dark brown hair with bangs to the middle of her forehead and that cascaded over both shoulders in a way that said she was both wild and free. She wore a tight red dress that revealed every curve a woman's body can have but still suggested there was more to her yet, more curves, more heat, tan boots with stiletto heels and red soles, and an open white fur coat. She sashayed more than walked as she came through the front door with the two men beside her.

One of the men was taller than she was and much taller than Stanley. He had a shaved and oiled head -- his white skin glistened under the too bright white-blue fluorescent lights which hissed above them. He stood straight, his shoulders broad like those of a basketball player, under a black leather jacket that reached to his hips.

The other man was of average height and build, about the same height as the woman in her heels. He had brown hair with a receding hairline, glasses and an intent, studious expression. He was wearing blue jeans, a red cowboy shirt with white mother of pearl snaps instead of buttons and a tweed jacket.

Once upon a time, when Stanley owned the store and was in a hurry to build his business, he would have hurried to greet these people, these new customers. Now he waited. People need to breathe. Customers need a moment to look around, to get oriented. Stanley wasn't in such a hurry now to make a sale and beat out the salesmen who worked for him, so he didn't have to pay them commission. He wasn't in much of a hurry for anything or anybody. Better to see than be seen.

The three people walked through the sofas and chairs, past the dining room tables and floor lamps to the back of the store where the mattresses were displayed. They walked among the mattresses for a moment, a dizzying array, one mattress and the poster advertisements for each in bright blue, red and green type, showing cutaways to illustrate inner springs of different materials and numbers and different kinds of foam, after the next.

The woman put her hand on one or two of the mattresses, pressing down to test for firmness. Then she sat on one and tried to bounce on it.

The Protocols of the Elders of Zion is a document written in Russian about 1903, and is a forgery, to the extent that it represents itself as being composed by Jews who are representing the Jewish community of Russia. It was composed of parts plagiarized from many documents, some blatantly antisemitic and some from political satires that were turned on their heads. The Protocols appear to be a plan by Jews to conspire and achieve world domination, quite a stretch, when you consider the plight of world Jewry in 1903, when the world Jewish population was no more than 10 million, a population centered in Eastern Europe, in Galicia (now Ukraine – then

mostly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) Poland, Russia, Germany and the US but also scattered in tiny communities across North Africa, Yemen, Greece and Turkey, Central Asia, even India and China -- a time when the world population was about 2 billion. Then most Jews in Eastern Europe and around the globe lived in abject poverty, although some, and some communities, were better off. In America Jews wandered the countryside as peddlers, carrying pots and bolts of cloth to sell to the farmer's wives, during a time when most of America farmed, and then they started little dry-goods or furniture stores in the market towns and tiny cites all across the South, the Midwest, and New England, where they lived in tiny communities of fifty or a hundred, the storeowner's family, a doctor, perhaps a dentist, or a lawyer or two, a jeweler or an accountant, the telegraph operator. In a country without pogroms, most of the time, a place that tolerated them, not embraced them. As a world community Jews were a people without a home, who barely had the means to care for one another, let alone mount an international conspiracy to achieve world domination.

In Russia and Poland, though, the Jewish communities were often semiautonomous, living side by side with their neighbors but also often self-governing by way of Jewish community organizations called Kahals. The Jewish communities used a different legal code and legal system, a process which likely made their neighbors suspicious of this people who kept to themselves, spoke languages that the rest of the population didn't understand, were able to read and write when many of their neighbors couldn't and who though limited to just a few professions and often prevented from owning land, were sometimes able to build businesses and prosper.

These suspicions were too often fanned by local politicians or others, some seeking to divert attention from their own misdeeds, or for reasons of their own, and led to blood libels (matzah, the unleavened bread Jews eat on Passover to commemorate their flight to freedom from the Egypt of three thousand years ago, were said to be made from the blood of Christian children -- and those blood libels too often led to pogroms.) Some 100,000 Jews were killed in 1100 pogroms in Ukraine and Russia between 1918 and 1921 alone.

What is remarkable about the Protocols of the Elders of Zion is how effective this book was at convincing people of a conspiracy that just didn't exist. Far from wanting world domination, the Jewish world was made up of people who lived modestly, studied their

traditional texts, hoped for little other than to earn a living and to be left alone, and for acceptance and tolerance from their sometimes hostile and occasionally violent Gentile neighbors. In this way, the Protocols were almost a caricature of what Jews were not, and might have been used for entertainment, except too many non-Jews took them seriously, turning hallucination into fiction, and fiction into murder and death. What cruel pathos! It was as if the authors and publishers of these lies put their own fears, evil designs, plots and blood lusts into the mouths of their victims, blaming the victims for the treachery of the perpetrators, a very dangerous game of three card monte, a cultural and social pattern we see far too often in our own world, as too many of our fellow citizens turn their fears and hallucinations into self-fulfilling prophecies, as they destroy a world of decency and collaboration by acting on what they imagine, instead of valuing the richness of what we and they have – and create profit for themselves out of these lies, fabrications, distortions and deceptions.

The Protocols were a big lie, a calumny, not the first but certainly not the last, a fiction constructed to cause a stampede, evidence that human beings are forever gullible, forever distractable, inclined to xenophobia and too often to violence, and forever missing the mark. Instead of building a durable democracy, the Russian authors of the Protocols drenched themselves in plots and counterplots, in lies and assassinations, a heritage that led to Lenin and Stalin and Putin, to the deaths of millions of human beings, a heritage that haunts Russia and the world to this day.

“How may I assist you?” Stanley said.

“We got it covered,” the tall man said.

“Do all the mattresses come in king size?” the woman said.

“Quality mattresses come in all sizes,” Stanley said.

“Is there something larger than King?” The woman said. “We need the largest mattress you have.”

Stanley paused. He did not raise his eyebrows. He was certain he did not raise his eyebrows or even smile a little. He was too old for that. No judgement. Or better no window into what he was thinking. He was a clean slate. You raise your head, you get your head cut off.

“Mattresses only come in standard sizes, I’m afraid,” Stanley said. “You could put two kings together, of course.”

“There’s an idea,” the shorter man said. “What’s the width of a king size mattress? We’d have to make sure we have enough space in the bedroom.”

“76 x 80 inches. 76 is the height. 80 is the width” Stanley said.

“Seventy-six is six-foot-four. You ain’t gonna fit, Oleg. Too bad for that,” the shorter man said.

“Fuck you,” said Oleg, smiling. “I bend. I don’t break. As you both know better than anyone.”

“Boys, boys, boys,” the woman said. “Ain’t I a lucky girl to have you both. We can play later. Let’s sort this out now.”

“Eighty plus eighty is one hundred and sixty. Divided by twelve is thirteen feet four inches. The bedroom is bigger than that,” the shorter man said. “Way bigger.” He raised his eyebrows.

”I don’t like two mattresses,” the woman said. “I like it close. Skin to skin. I want to feel your heat.”

“Which mattress do you like better?” Stanley said. “Inner spiring, memory foam or latex? Pillow top or not?”

They didn’t hondle, didn’t try to bargain, didn’t try to get a better price like people always did in the old days, as if they didn’t know there was a ten percent cushion built into the price to allow for that, a cushion that was Stanley’s if he could make the sale without a discount. Stanley offered his card after the cashier rang up the sale, a reflex. The woman took it from him and slipped it into her brassiere. They paid cash and walked out arm in arm, the woman in the

middle. Smooth. Simple. No digs like there used to be after many sales, the asides that one person of a couple would say to the other under his or her breath, the “they got our money again” with “they”: meaning “the Jews” and then the other one would say “yeah but we got a good deal. It would have cost us more at JC Penney or Jordan Marsh.” No mention of George Soros. They were gone as quickly as they had come, a summer thunderstorm, more lightning than thunder or rain.

They were mostly men in shul that day, on the morning of day of the first seder, the day Jews call Erev Pesach, mostly little old men like Stanley, men who wore tefillin, strange little black boxes that hung on the foreheads and left arms of the men and some of the few women who were there, held on by leather thongs. Thirty-five or thirty-six men. A woman or two, but mostly men today, at a prayer service that usually attracted a mixed group of ten or eleven, on the days they got lucky. The sun was up, but only barely. Its slanted brilliant yellow light streamed through the windows at the front of the chapel, flecks of dust dancing in the light which made the dark winter just passed trivial, evaporating any memory of cold and dark. Not like the old place, a dark room stuffed under a staircase, where twice as many men used to gather every day on this day, to daven, to prey in a musty room with study tables lining the front, a room lined with books in Hebrew and Aramaic.

But the men came anyway, heeding a call from their ancient past. It was the service for the bahurs, the first-born sons, men who came to pray then study together for a few minutes, or at least listen to a report and discussion from one of the men or women, telling about the study of a book of Talmud they had just completed, an old formula to avert the need for a day-long fast. The men were commemorating the death of the first-born sons of the Egyptians, an event that

was supposed to have occurred thirty-three hundred years before, the tenth plague, which caused Pharaoh to let the people of Israel go after four hundred years of slavery, but even more, they were commemorating the fact that the first born of the Israelites had been spared by God in that plague. Lamb's blood, painted on the doorposts of the houses of the Israelites, the miracle of passing over, when God passed over the houses of the Israelites, as it is said, and the first born of the Israelites were spared. So, these men, looking backward, were thanking God for their own lives, and for the liberation of their people, so many years ago. And we were slaves in Egypt, the words that rang in Stanley's head, strangers in a strange land. Let all who are hungry, let them come and eat with us, and all who are in distress, come and celebrate the Passover with us, to worship God and find freedom together.

He came automatically, each year, every spring, and every year, those words from the seder itself would start ringing in his brain, surprising him with the depth of the feelings they provoked, feelings he didn't know he had. It was an old promise to his grandmother, to go each year to the service for the bahurs. He didn't know how much he believed in the literal hand of God, but he came anyway. Perhaps this service commemorated a different truth, he thought. Old men, as he looked around the room. Shriveled, like he was. Not much to look at. Beaten down by the years, by life, by sadness and by loss. But perhaps, thirty-three hundred years ago, a band of brothers, who rose up together to defend their community, their families, their people, to fight for freedom together. What a silly thought. But if spring can come again and bring new light and new life, anything is possible.

"Can I help you?" Shirley, a gabbai, the woman who organized the services, who called out the pages and kept things running on time, called out, while the rabbi was immersed in the Shamoneh Esrei, the silent prayer and while the others all similarly immersed, standing, bowing or swaying rhythmically with prayer books open before them, murmuring to themselves.

"We're just visiting," a man's voice said, a voice that Stanley somehow recognized. He turned to look.

The two men and the woman who had come together to buy the bed stood in the back of the chapel -- the people whose very existence and whose relationship seemed so overwhelming

to Stanley that he tried to forget them as soon as they left the store that day. The woman wore the same shaggy white fur coat, but it was buttoned now. She still had the same brown hair cascading over her shoulders and the same blue eyes, and still wore stiletto heels. The tall man with a basketball player's shoulders and a shaved head still stood next to the woman on one side, wearing a bright orange satin yarmulke, the kind they give out at bar and bat mitzvahs. The studious looking shorter man stood on the other side of the woman, wearing a woven blue and white yarmulke, the kind worn by modern Orthodox men who wear theirs in the street and at business as well as in shul.

Just visiting? Stanley said to himself. Who, just who did they think they are?

"I'm sorry we have no seats to offer you today," Shirley the gabbai said.

"Wait, I'll get folding chairs," said Morty, who sat in the back and always came late.

"No need," said the woman. "We can't stay."

And then they turned and walked out the chapel door.

You can't stay? Stanley said to himself. You never should have come. Have you no sense of propriety? Of decency? And then he went back to murmuring his prayers, his lips saying the words automatically, words his brain and heart had stopped understanding and thinking about more years ago than anyone could count. In a moment, he forgot about the three people again. He put them back in a distant corner of his brain, a place from which he hoped they'd never emerge.

Two weeks passed. It is amazing how much new growth can occur in two weeks in the spring, how much life force there is in the earth, lying dormant, bottled up by winter, and how it just explodes when the sun raises higher in the sky and the days lengthen, when the light is gold and yellow in the morning, and the sky is bright pink and orange when the sun sets.

Everything bloomed at once. Redbud bloomed, red and purple flowers hidden in the notches of dark spindly trees. There were yellow forsythia flowers everywhere at eye level. The gray-brown trees gave forth pale green leaflets on all their branches. White blossoms covered the cherry trees. First white and yellow daffodils bloomed. Then tulips of all the colors in the rainbow burst open, the blooms enveloped by broad two or four lobed dark green leaves, the flowers thrusting out of the dark earth on straight long green stems, as the air filled with white and yellow pollens, and insects which flitted about in the light,

Even Stanley felt the wild freedom of the springtime and allowed himself some liberties. He went out once without a coat. He frittered away time. He sat one evening on a rusted silver colored metal rocker on the porch of his house, the first floor of a triple decker in Pawtucket, and looked, just looked at the huge copper birch across the street, at its new leaves dark red and purple, the color of blood.

Even so, he was surprised when his cellphone rang a little later that evening. The junk calls from people selling things rarely came at night.

“Hello,” he said, waiting for a recorded voice to give its spiel.

“Mr. Moseson?” a woman’s voice said.

“Hello,” Stanley said again. He hadn’t quite heard what had been said. “Hello? Anyone there?”

“Mr. Moseson? It’s Latoya Green. I bought a bed from you a few weeks ago. You gave us your card,” the voice said.

“So?” Stanley said.

“I was there with two friends. Perhaps you remember?” the woman said.

“I don’t. Lots of people come into the store. Can I help you?” Stanley said. “The bed, the mattress is okay?”

“The mattress is fine. I was hoping you could give me some advice.”

“Ann Landers is for advice. Or Dear Abby. I sell furniture. During business hours. Thank you for calling,” Stanley said. And then he hung up.

Two days later the woman walked into Stanley's store. Alone. In jeans and a simple green blouse. She wore a simple tan coat that was open, and black leather boots, but no makeup now, no huge eyelashes and no lipstick. Her brown hair still cascaded over her shoulders and her eyes were still that shocking clear blue. Stanley was talking to a young woman with three children, all old enough to walk, who was asking about dining room furniture.

"I'm from Argentina," the woman with children said, with just the trace of an accent. "That's why I have an accent." Which Stanley took to mean, I'm not Columbian, Honduran, El Salvadorean, Puerto Rican, Mexican, or Dominican, like the rest of your customers with Spanish accents, who I suspect you don't like. No, I want you to think I'm married to a Brown or RISD professor, that I have lived in London and Paris, so you'll actually pay some attention to me and answer my questions, instead of treating me the way I think you treat all the others, some of who are undocumented, it's true, and many of whom don't speak much English and want to buy on time and won't keep up with their payments so the furniture will end up being repossessed. I get that. I want you to think I am different.

Stanley recognized the woman with the brown hair and blue eyes instantly but he kept talking to the Argentinian woman with the three children, patient as she broke off in mid-sentence to chase and corral one child or the other. That gave Stanley time: he looked like he was busy, but he still had time to think.

The woman with brown hair and blue eyes drifted from section to section, not pausing to look at anything.

Cherry. The Argentinian woman was looking at a cherry table and chairs. Quite elegant. Not as well made as it looked, of course, because nothing is well made any more – everything is made

from composites, overlaid with veneers. Stanley knew furniture. This was better than most of the junk in the store. But it wasn't quality none-the-less.

"Do you have a full set in stock?" the woman said. The table, eight chairs and a sideboard?"

"Six chairs are standard. I'll have to order the other two chairs. When do you need it delivered?" Stanley said.

"What does delivery cost?" the woman said.

"Free delivery if you pick it up at the warehouse. Our premium weekend delivery is \$239.99. Our premium weekday delivery is 219.99."

One of the children tugged at the coat of the Argentinian woman.

"Ma-uum," the child whined.

Stanley ignored the child.

"What day would you like it delivered?" Stanley said.

"Home delivery isn't free? I thought it was free," the woman said. "Let me think about it." She let the child tugging on her coat pull her away and walked toward the door.

Stanley turned his back as the woman walked away. He didn't shrug. Not for customers. Not for anybody. Not anymore. This is a numbers game, he told himself. If enough people come to look, enough people will buy. No need for excitement or disappointment. What will be, will be.

"Mr. Moseson?" a voice said.

The woman with the cascading brown hair and blue eyes hadn't gone away. Stanley turned and looked at her over his glasses.

"It's Oleg. I need help with Oleg. You remember me?"

"No," Stanley said.

“LeToya Green,” the woman said. “We bought a mattress from you about a month ago.”

“So?” Stanley said. “A lot of people buy mattresses. This is a furniture store. The mattress is okay?”

“The mattress is fine,” the woman said.

“And I saw you at the synagogue,” the woman said.

“People go to shul. It’s a free country,” Stanley said. “Still. Maybe a little too free, if you ask me.”

“And I called you on your cell,” the woman said.

“I don’t remember. It doesn’t matter. Come to the point,” Stanley said.

“There is no point. I’m losing Oleg.” The woman said. “He’s drifting way, drifting into a bunch of crazy beliefs. He thinks the Jews killed Christ, that Democrats are all pedophiles, that the matzah you eat on Passover are made from the blood of Christian children, that Jews run the banks, Wall Street and Hollywood, and that Vladimir Putin is God and is preventing the collapse of civilization, that people in the West are about to be replaced by hordes of Muslim robots.”

“He wouldn’t be the first to believe these things. And he won’t be the last,” Stanley said.

“But Oleg *matters*,” the woman said.

“Matters for what? For who?” Stanley said. “The world is full of crazy people. Mostly they run around in pickup trucks with flags. Or drive police cars. Or go to football games. Or jump out of airplanes. Or ride motorcycles. Sometimes they run for political office. Only once in a blue moon do they end up in the insane asylum where they belong. When other people start to listen, they’ll eventually come to kill us, but we can usually see them coming, and find a way to run and hide. That’s the history of the world. *None* of it matters. They come to kill us. We survive. Any questions?”

“I don’t want to lose him,” the woman said.

“What do you care?” Stanley said. “You’ve got the other one.”

“So, you do remember,” the woman said.

“I remember everything. What I remember doesn’t matter either,” Stanley said.

“You’re wrong about that,” the woman said. “Every person, every act, every word matters. What do you say at Passover? Let all who are hungry. Let them come and eat. Let all who are in distress, let them come to be with us? Don’t you say a blessing for every meal, for every new fruit of the season, for every moment, thanking God for sustaining you and allowing you to reach each new day?”

“What do you care about what we say? That’s our business,” Stanley said. “And your Oleg, he’s just one more Cossack. A Russian, no?”

“A Russian. A human being.”

“Like the human beings invading Ukraine? And killing everything and everyone in sight? Bombing schools and hospitals. That kind of human being?”

“He’s here, isn’t he? Not bombing anyone. “

“So why me? What do you want from me?” Stanley said. “I’m a furniture salesman. Not a psychoanalyst. He needs a different kind of a couch than what I sell.”

“He wants to meet you,” the woman said.

“He met me!” Stanley said. “We had a very nice conversation. You bought a mattress. It was very nice. Business is business. I have nothing more to offer. Tables. Chairs. Beds. Mattresses. Sofas. That’s what I do. I don’t do advice.”

“Yann told him to talk to you. After seeing you in the synagogue. To talk to a real Jewish person. So he sees you as a human being, not an idea. To understand that you have a rich inner life, like the rest of us.”

“Yann?”

“Yann. Our other friend. Who *is* a psychoanalyst.”

“Yann is Jewish perhaps? He looks Jewish. But Yann...”

“He’s a Buddhist. But he changed his name. From Jacob. Born Jewish. Just not Jewish now.”

“What is this world coming to?” Stanley said. “Men who are women. Women who are men. People who sleep three in a bed. Black people who look white. White people who want to be Black. Pretty soon we won’t be able to tell left from right. Or up from down. Or day from night. There are ten commandments. Not thirteen or twenty. Not six-hundred and thirteen. Or twelve hundred. Enough is enough!”

“You’ll meet Oleg?”

“I’ll meet Oleg. But in a public place, not in a dark alley. In broad daylight. With other people around. But understand this: I am Stanley Moseson. A furniture salesman. A schnoorer. Not a rabbi. Not an expert. Not a holocaust survivor. I don’t know Torah or Talmud. I can barely read Hebrew. So I am no example of anything for anyone. Just a man, just a typical average human being, and barely that.”

They met on Congdon Street, at the Roger Williams Memorial, in the little park that sits on top of Providence and seems to hang over it, where the whole city sits below you, open and palpable like a chessboard where you can see all the pieces and how everything stands in relation to everything else.

It was a cool day in spring. There was no frost anymore. The sun was strong when it rose high in the sky but the sky was often full of clouds, so moments of bright sunlight were few and far between. A stiff wind blew off the port, a wind that made the flags around the memorial flap and crack and the ropes that held them snap against the flagpoles, their hardware ringing on the metal poles. The leaves on the trees were fully formed and open but they were still small and pale green. The daffodils had come and gone – their blooms now tan and withered but their thin foliage abundant and dark green on the ground. The tulips had bloomed but they also were now past their prime, their petals bright red or yellow but open and drooping, flowers bowed over, the yellow pistil and stigma hovering over a black stellate base, broad leaves surrounding each

flower like cupped hands trying to bring a mouthful of water, sweet and cool, to someone's mouth,

Stanley was late, of course, because he didn't want to be there. He dreaded talking to three people at once and dreaded talking to these three people even more. He beat himself up as he drove, calling himself a fool for doing this. He had no interest in these people, he told himself. And they certainly had no interest in him. Goyim. Mishegoss. In a world that has gone completely crazy. It was going to be a complete waste of his time.

Oleg sat on a bench just north of the Roger Williams monument, his eyes closed, basking in the sunlight. Stanley sat on the bench next to him, the strong sun illuminating Stanley's face, making his old and withered pink-white skin glisten.

"I didn't think you'd come," Oleg said.

"I didn't really want to," Stanley said. "But here I am."

"Nice day," Oleg said.

"As long as it doesn't rain," Stanley said. "What can I do for you?"

"I don't know," Oleg said. "Meeting you like this wasn't my idea."

"That makes two of us," Stanley said. "They tell me you like Hitler."

"Putin. Also Hitler. But mainly Putin now. The world needs strong leaders."

"Why? So they can blow things up? Everyone dies of something. There's no need to rush and to kill more people before nature does that by itself. God is complicated. People are born. Others die. But he or she or they don't appear to need our help killing people. Everyone dies of something without our help. In due time."

"There is a conspiracy. Without strong leaders, people become confused. Families disintegrate. There is chaos on the street. Muggings. Violence. Mayhem. Murder."

Oleg stood and began to walk off toward the monument. Then he turned and walked back. Then he turned again and walked away, and turned and walked back again, and paced back and forth, back and forth.

“Look mister,” Stanley said. “There is no conspiracy. People aren’t that smart. I have news for you. Jews aren’t that smart either. We fight with each other all the time, just like everyone else. We believe impossible things: burning bushes, oceans that part, wrestling with angels, and people turned into pillars of salt. And we do the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result. You really think that sitting in some synagogue and murmuring the same words over and over has any impact on the world? That old men arguing over old books is doing the world any good? Or that good acts are going to bring the Messiah? Mostly we hallucinate and call our hallucinations holy. At least all that keeps us from getting into trouble, at least some of the time. Or used to. But if you want to hate us, go ahead. You wouldn’t be the first. Or the last. We survived your Hitler. And we’ll be here after your Mr. Putin is long gone. What did Shakespeare say? Sic semper tyrannis? Such is the way of tyrants, to die on the swords they brandish.”

“Yann says that these beliefs come from an unconscious fear and repression of my sexuality. That I’m afraid I can’t control myself or constrain my desires, and that I’m afraid others have the same impulses, which, if everyone acted on them, would lead to a world of constant tumult, a world of no certainty, a world where nothing can be understood or felt because everything is always changing. He’s only part right. That *is* what worries me. But I’m conscious of those impulses and those fears.”

“You don’t look like someone who is afraid of anything, sonny boy,” Stanley said.

“No, you don’t understand...” Oleg said, and then he spun around.

There was a huge noise.

A loud farting roar and the trumpeting sound and screech of a hundred unmuffled gas engines, a hundred simultaneous controlled explosions, a barrage, a blast, was coming up the hill from Angell Street.

A pack of all-terrain vehicles, bright and camouflage green, blue, yellow and red swarmed up the street, darting in and out, popping wheelies as they came on, with a swarm of dirt-bikes, their chromed exhausts swept up and back, their frames lifted so they barely touched

the ground circled in and around the ATVs, the dirt-bikes like flies or gnats swarming around the backs of an elephant herd.

“Watch out,” Stanley yelled, as three or four of the dirt bikes jumped the curb and swarmed into the little park, racing up the asphalt footpaths. Stanley stood and then ran to stand behind a tree.

But Oleg, caught in the middle of the footpath, stood his ground.

Two of the dirt-bikes came down the path side by side. They turned a corner at the bottom of the park, just below the statue of Roger Williams, and then came right at Oleg, who squared his shoulders and held both hands out in front of him as if he were a traffic cop, ordering the oncoming cars to stop.

The dirt-bikes came straight at Oleg.

“Wait!” Stanley said. “YOU! Stop!” He stepped out from behind the tree. But the dirt-bikes kept coming, bearing down on Oleg.

“ASSHOLES!!” Stanley yelled. It was the loudest he’d ever yelled, more like a bellow than a yell, a great noise that Stanley, who always did his best not to be noticed or seen, didn’t know he had inside him.

The dirt-bike riders who had focused on Oleg and were riding right at him turned their heads to the noise and then together shifted in their seats. The dirt-bikes swung toward Stanley, moving as one, like synchronized swimmers or precision pilots flying in formation. The bikers roared onto the grass, so close to Oleg that he could feel their wind and the pressurized air from their exhausts.

Stanley dove behind the tree.

By the time Stanley realized he was on the ground, the bikes had zoomed past him, their riders catcalling as they went. They found another asphalt path and turned onto it. Then they

both popped wheelies together and rode out of the park to catch their posse, a final flourish to show who runs the world now, who was wild, who was free, and who was invincible.

Then hands lifted Stanley, who started coughing.

“Mr. Moseson, are you alright?” one voice said.

“Call 911,” another voice said.

In a moment, Stanley was sitting on a bench with a knot of people clustered around him.

“No 911,” Stanley said. “I’m fine. A little shook up, that’s all. They missed.”

“What is it with you people?” Oleg said. “Don’t you understand the world hates you? I’m starting to hate you. And you still try to save my ass.”

“Don’t you ‘you people’ me,” Stanley said. “That was me, sonny boy. Nobody else.”

“They were going to run me down,” Oleg said.

“You don’t know that,” Stanley said. “They could have swerved at the last minute. They’re kids, just trying to show how big they think they are. It’s all just bluff.”

“I still don’t get it,” Oleg said.

“Listen, smartass,” Stanley said. “There isn’t much to get. Life matters. Nothing else. Dead people don’t get to change their minds. I couldn’t just stand there and watch you get mowed down. Regardless of how crazy you live or how crazy you think.”

“This doesn’t change anything,” Oleg said. “You people are still running the world.”

“Nix on the ‘you people’,” Stanley said. “I told you once already. Don’t make me repeat myself. Stupidity runs the world. Greed runs the world. The rest of us, we’re just trying to get by, trying to live our lives. In the margins. By not being noticed. That’s all there is to it. Stay out of harm’s way. Don’t raise your head up. Or it will be cut off. Get that memo?”

Rescue pulled up on the street, sirens blaring. At that moment, the woman with the blue eyes and cascading brown hair appeared. She was wearing tight designer blue jeans and a sequined denim jacket. The shorter white man with glasses, the one named Yann, appeared on the other side of Oleg.

“How’d it go?” Yann said, as the people milling about the park pointed at Stanley and Oleg.

Three EMTs in jumpsuits ran up carrying a red go-bag.

The sun burst through the clouds, its brilliant light illuminating everything, the green grass, the Brown and RISD students lying on blankets, the statute of Roger Williams, and the streets, cars, buses and buildings in the city below them, at their feet.

“Want to tell me what happened?” the lead EMT said. “Anybody hurt?”

“I stumbled and fell,” Stanley said. “I’m fine.”

“What’s your date of birth?” the lead EMT said, and then he answered his own question, in his own mind, before Stanley replied. The guy had to be 70 or 75. He needed to be evaluated in the ED. Simple as that.

“I’m fine,” Stanley said.

“Why don’t you come with us,” the lead EMT said. “We’ll get you evaluated.

“I’m going home,” Stanley said. “Thank you for your interest. I’m sorry for your trouble. But even thirty-five nice people just like you couldn’t get me to go to any emergency room. Thirty-six couldn’t either.”

Stanley stood. He brushed the grass and leaves from his knees and shoulders.

Then he walked away.

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