

THE DISCMAN  
AND  
THE GURU

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Shoshana Street Productions • Jerusalem

טוב להודות לה"

This book is dedicated to my children, and all the children of Israel, with the prayer that they grow up to love Hashem, the Torah, the Land of Israel, and all the Jewish People.

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Computer typesetting and layout: MK

Who shall ascend into the mountain of the L-rd?  
Who shall stand in His holy place?  
(Tehillim 24)

## Chapter One

### BEVERLY HILLS, CALIFORNIA

I was meditating on the carpet in my bedroom, legs crossed in a lotus position, when the sounds from the party interfered with my concentration. Sighing, I rose to my feet and opened the door to the hallway. The noise from the celebration downstairs rushed into my room like a train speeding into a station. There were sounds of laughter, orchestra music, snitches of conversations, the clinking of champagne glasses, boisterous greetings, and my father's baritone voice rising above all of the clatter.

With a shudder, I shut the door tightly. Barefooted, I walked across the room and gazed out my bedroom window. Down on the lawn, United States Secret Service agents were patrolling the grounds of our family mansion in Beverly Hills in preparation for the President's arrival. You see, my father, Ralph Singer, was one of the richest men in America, and one of the President's most influential supporters. Tonight's fundraising party was the kick-off event in President Bill Boston's re-election campaign. You didn't have to be a political genius to know that money would decide the race to the White House. So, for the President, and for my Dad, the evening was super important.

“Who cares about politics?” I groaned, uneasy with all of the hoopla. “Why did I come home anyway?”

To tell you the truth, I was sorry that I had returned home to Los Angeles to spend time with my father after graduating from private school in New Hampshire. I should have spent the summer alone in the family mansion in Riverdale, a short limousine ride to Manhattan, where the Singer clothing empire was headquartered. Or in the rustic family estate in Cape Cod. And yes, I almost forgot, we've got another house too, in the Côte d'Azur city of Cannes. As best as I can remember, the family used it only once. Actually, it wasn't the whole family. You see, my father and mother have been separated for years. As part of the multi-million-dollar divorce, my Dad was entitled to spend two months with his boys every summer during our vacation from school. So Sam Singer, that's me, and my older brother, Wayne, had tagged along with Dad for the film festival in Cannes. At the time, Dad was dating the French actress, Leslie Laffont, and so we were left on our own, free to hang out on the beach at our leisure. My brother spent most of his time in beachfront cafes, trying to impress French girls with the family fortune, while yours truly stayed in the opulent mansion, reading Balzac. Truth is, the whole time we were in Cannes, I hardly ever saw my father. He shuttled between business meetings in Paris and nightly film screenings with Leslie. Instead of sleeping in the mansion with his sons, the founder of Singer Fashions chose to party to the wee hours of the morning with the movie stars he would invite to his yacht in the glittering Mediterranean harbor.

Man, did I ever feel lonely that summer! I didn't speak French well enough to make friends with the locals, and, as far as I was concerned, the Americans in Cannes for the film festival were all a lot of phonies. Investors, journalists, actresses, and directors stuck to my father like flies. They were the cast in the movie my father liked to live. Everyone wore a costume. Everyone played a role. The Singer line of clothing was one of the biggest in the world, and to my Dad, life was one big fashion show.

“Designer clothes at affordable prices!”

That was the Singer Fashions motto. Singer's top-of-the-line sportswear, "Parisienne," was the rage all over the globe. Dad predicted that it would become as popular as Wrangler Jeans and Levis, and he was right.

"I stuck a French name on the shmattas we were making in China and made myself a billion," my father was proud of saying.

Believe me, it wasn't easy growing up a billionaire's son. Whenever I had to tell my name to someone, I would lower my head and say it under my breath, hoping that no one would make the connection. Everywhere you looked, you saw the name Singer. There were Singer slacks, Singer dresses, Singer shirts, Singer blouses, Singer suits, Singer coats, Singer rainwear, Singer perfume and cologne, Singer handbags and luggage, Singer jewelry, and Singer towels and sheets. For fun, my father had produced two movies and bought up the major shares in a professional basketball team. My older brother, Wayne, loved being the son of the fabulously wealthy Ralph Singer, but I fled from the attention like fire. It's hard for me to describe, but I always felt like an extra in the "Life Story of Ralph Singer." You could say that I grew up in a world of fashion, not life. I mean I always felt out of place. I'm embarrassed to say it, but since I decided to tell the whole truth, I will. When a reporter once asked me how it felt to be the son of the merchandising genius, Ralph Singer, I answered, "I'd rather have a real dad like everyone else."

"Don't be so introverted," my parents always said.

When I was younger, when they paraded me out to meet some of their fancy guests, I would run away and hide in my bedroom closet. Then, when they were fighting all of the time, I started praying to G-d. Fearing that I was retarded, my father sent me to see a psychiatrist. The doctor recommended a drug which made me feel really sleepy. I was only ten at the time, but I'll always remember the conversation I had with the shrink.

"Why do you hide in the closet?" the baldheaded Dr. Herbert had asked.

"I don't hide in the closet," I answered.

"No? Your parents told me that you hide in the closet a lot."

"Sometimes I sit in the closet. I don't hide there."

"I see," the psychiatrist said, scribbling something down on a notepad. "Very well. Tell me, why do you sit there?"

"It's quiet and dark."

"You like the quiet?"

"Yes."

"And you like sitting alone in the dark?"

"Sometimes," I answered him, bored with the questions. "If your parents fought all the time like my parents do, you'd probably sit in a closet too."

The shrink looked up over his glasses. With his long, curving beak, he resembled a bald eagle. "Your parents fight?" he asked.

"They almost kill each other."

That merited another note on his pad. "What do they fight about?" Doctor Herbert continued.

I figured I had better shut up. Maybe I was blabbing too much. How did I know that I could trust this guy? After all, my father was paying him. He was working for my father, not for me.

"They fight about a lot of things," I answered vaguely.

I didn't want to tell the doctor about all the models who drove my Mom crazy. Nor did I want to tell him about my grandfather's old prayer-gown and tallit, the only family heirlooms we had. They hung in the back of the closet, giving it a smell of the past.

"Like what?" the nosey shrink asked.

"Lots of things," I repeated.

"Fine," the psychiatrist said. "If you think of something specific, you can tell me later. Let's get back to the closet. Aren't you afraid of the dark?"

"No. Why should I be?"

"You shouldn't be, but a lot of people are."

"That's their problem, I guess," I replied, wondering when the stupid meeting would end. The truth was, talking to the creepy

shrink made me feel like running off to hide in the nearest closet.

“What do you do there?” the doctor asked, interrogating me like a detective on TV.

“I think.”

“What do you think about?”

“I don't know. About a lot of things.”

“Like what?”

“Sometimes I think about G-d.”

Once again, the witch doctor's eyebrows rose up over his spectacles. “You think about G-d?” he asked with a tone of surprise in his voice.

“Yeah, sure,” I replied.

“Why do you think about G-d?” he wanted to know, as if that were the stupidest thing a person could do.

“Why not?” I answered. “IN G-D WE TRUST. That's what it says on the dollar.”

The doctor thought for a moment, then said, “Well, that's true, but most people don't take it all that seriously.”

“They do on Sundays.”

“Yes, I suppose some people do, but you go into the closet not only on Sundays, isn't that right?”

“Yeah, probably.”

“Well, that's a little unusual, don't you think?”

“Maybe to you and my parents, but not to me.”

The psychiatrist nodded his head and glanced at his watch. Then he wrote some more scribbles.

“What are you writing?” I asked.

“Oh, just notes about our conversation. Are you having a good time?”

“Not really,” I told him.

“Do I make you nervous?”

“A little.”

“Why?”

“You ask a lot of questions, like the police in the movies.”

“Do you like going to the movies?”

“No,” I answered.

Now I know that probably sounds funny, cause most ten-year olds like the movies a lot. But that's the way I felt about them. I preferred reading books than sitting in a dark place with so many strange people.

“Now that's very interesting,” he said, as if he had made some great scientific discovery. “Why don't you like movies? After all, it's like sitting in a dark closet, isn't it?”

“No, it's not like a closet at all.”

“What's the difference?”

“Movies are noisy. My closet is quiet.”

The psychiatrist nodded and wrote down a few observations. While he was busy, I stared at the bookshelves which covered the walls of the room. For someone who had read so many books, the psychiatrist sure asked a lot of dumb questions.

“Do you talk to G-d?” he asked.

His voice was getting on my nerves, but I kept cool out of respect for my father.

“Sure,” I answered.

“Does G-d answer?”

“Sometimes He does and sometimes He doesn't.”

“When He answers, what does He say?”

The psychiatrist leaned forward as if my answer held some deep, important meaning.

“He says that I should love my Mom and Dad even though they think that I'm crazy.”

“I see,” the psychiatrist answered, sitting back in his chair. He thought for a moment, then smiled.

“What does G-d's voice sound like?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, is it a loud voice? Is it clear? Does it sound like your father's voice?”

I tried to imagine the voice, but with the guy's beady-eyes staring



at me all the time, I couldn't get in the mood. "It isn't a voice like a person's," I answered.

"Oh?"

"I hear it inside of me."

"Inside of you?"

"Like a feeling."

The psychiatrist nodded. "Maybe it's the voice of your conscience. Maybe it isn't G-d at all."

The psychiatrist grinned at me with a big friendly smile on his face, as if he had said something really intelligent. I didn't want to disappoint him, so I smiled back without responding. But he was way off. Between you and me, the voice I heard wasn't my conscience. My conscience sounded like my own voice, and the voice I heard in the closet was completely different. It was a voice without words.

"G-d is like Santa Claus," the psychiatrist said. "He really doesn't exist. If you want to make your father and mother happy, you'll stop going into the closet and forget about talking to G-d."

"What do you mean He doesn't exist?" I protested. "IN G-D WE TRUST. It says it right here on the dollar."

To prove it, I reached into my pocket and pulled out a dollar for the doctor to see. Funny, but I remember the day my father gave me my first dollar bill. I was four-years old and it was my birthday. There was a picture of George Washington on one side, and the mysterious eye peering out from the pyramid on the other. And there, smack in the center were the words "IN G-D WE TRUST." From that day on, I started believing in G-d. I thought that's what my father was trying to teach me. So why, I wondered, was everyone getting down on me now?

So that's pretty much how that first meeting went. When I continued to hide in the closet to get away from all the crazy things that went on in the house, the psychiatrist announced his diagnosis.

"I'm afraid that your youngest son suffers from delusions and manic depression."

The pills he prescribed made me feel like a zombie. Instead of keeping me out of the closet, I started to sleep there.

Otherwise, I had a pretty regular childhood, considering that I was the son of one of the wealthiest men in the world. I went to school like other kids, and though I never did very well on tests, I never failed a grade. In the afternoons, instead of going out to play with friends, I hung around my room and read. It's hard to describe, but I had the feeling that no one understood me. It seemed that everyone wanted me to be someone else. My parents wanted me to be more like my brother. My teachers wanted me to be an achiever just like my father. The gymnastic instructor wanted me to be an Olympic champ. And the shrink wanted me to act just like all the other kids my age.

“Sammy, why can't you be more sociable with guests?” my mother would always complain.

My brother called me a “freak.” But that wasn't true at all. I simply didn't get all excited about sports, or movie stars, or watching TV all night. Then, when I got to be a teenager, I wasn't interested in cars, or drugs, or rock-and-roll music, or hanging out with girls in the park. I liked being alone to read about distant places and times. If that meant that I was a “square,” and a “nurd,” and a “weirdo,” what could I do? When I tried to imitate other teenagers – to look cool, wear hip clothes, talk about movies and grin like the latest Hollywood tough guy, it just wasn't me.

“Be a man like Sylvester Stallone,” my father would say, giving me a slap on the back.

But I wasn't Sylvester Stallone. I wasn't my brother. I wasn't my father. I was me. Sam Singer, not Ralph. If I couldn't be me on the outside, at least I had my closet. Then this is what happened. The pills the psychiatrist prescribed made my brain so bonkers, I really thought I was going out of my mind. My muscles started to vibrate. My hands started to shake. Inside, I felt like a rocket ship about to be launched into space. One time, I really did freak out. They tied me up in a straight jacket and kept me in a mental hospital for over

a week. After that incident, I was considered certifiably cuckoo. Instead of my usual white pill, they gave me two little pink pills to help make me like everyone else.

“Please, Dad, don't make me take them,” I begged.

My father sighed. He loved his children, and I was his baby. He would have given anything in the world to make me a normal, happy kid.

“It's for you're own good, Sam,” he said.

“Please, Dad, you've got to believe me,” I pleaded. “I am normal. It's the pills that make me feel crazy.”

“Then why do you spend most of your time in the closet talking to G-d?”

“What's the matter with talking to G-d? Look at the President? He's always talking about G-d in his speeches. Is he crazy too?”

“That's politics. The President has to give speeches that the American voter wants to hear. He believes in G-d about as much as I believe in the quality of the clothes that I sell.”

That seemed funny. I mean, the President was supposed to be a leader, not just somebody out to get votes. I mean, if the President of the United States isn't honest, who can you trust?

So that's how I grew up. Three times a day, morning, noon, and night, like an inmate in prison, I had to stand in front of the housekeeper and take the new, experimental drug which the psychiatrist had recommended. When the medicine made me hallucinate, I was dumped into a psychiatric ward for a month. My hands trembled so much, I could hardly hold a glass of juice without spilling it. True, my father arranged for the best hospital and the very best team of psychiatrists that money could buy, but it was a looney farm all the same. One guy thought he was Superman. Another guy claimed he had come to Earth on a space ship. There were weirdos all over the place.

Finally, after all the well-meaning doctors medicated me out of my mind, I learned that I had to “act sane” in order to convince the world that I was. That's right. I got hip to the game. I started to

wear Singer fashions and strut around like a Hollywood star. I still felt happiest sitting in my bedroom closet, surrounded by the smell of my grandfather's old clothes, but to keep the shrink off my back, I hung up a DO NOT ENTER sign on the door. Sure enough, when I stopped locking myself in the closet, the doctors reduced my intake of drugs. For safe measure, I was kept on a “maintenance dosage” of lithium to make sure I didn't flip out, but all in all, even though I still had the shakes, I learned to act like every other teenager my age – going to the movies, talking with girls, watching sports on TV, even laughing at dirty jokes, just to be considered one of the fellas. For the first time in my life, my father was pleased with me, and my mother, who had a growing addiction to alcohol, didn't seem to care anymore.

Now here's the big secret. In my new role as Sam-The-Normal-Teenager, whenever I felt the need to be close to G-d, I went to the beach. I took the bus out to Malibu and climbed up the cliffs. On a ledge overlooking the sea, I'd sit in solitude with the ocean wind in my face, far away from all the pollution and noise of the city. Scaling the cliffs wasn't easy at first. The medicine I took made me dizzy, but I kept repeating out loud, “IN G-D WE TRUST.” He kept me from losing my balance.

To strengthen my climbing muscles, I worked out at home with my brother's nautilus and weights. Before long, I was able to scurry up the Malibu cliffs like an experienced mountain climber.

“That's the spirit,” my father said, happy to see his youngest son exercising in the miniature gym he had built in the house. “Keep it up and you could be the next Schwarzenegger. If you want, I'll get you a membership to my health club. Lots of good-looking girls work out there.”

My father meant well, but I wasn't interested in girls. I wasn't interested in muscles either. I wanted to get closer to G-d, and muscles helped me climb up the cliffs. It was as simple as that. In the meantime, I kept my cliffside ledge a secret which only a few seagulls shared. Now, whenever my parents fought, I put on my

sneakers and headed out to the beach. It could be that fishermen thought I was crazy, but for hours on end, I would stare out at the incoming waves, as if searching for something on the other side of the ocean.

After my parents divorced, when my Mom moved to England, my father sent me off to an exclusive private school in New Hampshire. Though I wasn't the greatest student, nobody bothered me there, maybe because my father donated a million dollars to build a new sports complex on campus. On Sundays, when my classmates went off to chapel, I snuck off into the woods to pray on my own. There was a religious service in the basement of the church for Jews, but I only went once. Sure I was Jewish, but it didn't mean much to me – a few Yiddish curse words and Hanukah candles, gefilta fish and bagels – that's about the only Jewish things that I remember from my childhood, except for the feeling that Jews were somehow different from goyim. That's what my father called the non-Jews. In fact, since I decided to set down on paper the whole story about how I single-handedly almost caused a world war, I'll let you in on another secret. Our real name was Cohen. That is, my father's real name was Cohen. He changed it before I was born.

“What women would ever buy a Cohen dress?” my father would say. “Or a Cohen negligee?”

So, he changed the family name to Singer. To me, it was all the same. There were Levi pants – why couldn't there be Cohen dresses?

But in those days, before I got to be famous, nobody asked my opinion.

But I didn't mean to wander so far off the subject. I started off telling about the fundraising party and then got off the track. Well, there was no way that I could meditate that night with sirens blaring outside on the street. Motorcycles roared up to the house. A motorcade of police cars followed right behind, surrounding the President's bulletproof limousine.

“Hey, Sam!” my older brother called.

The door of the bedroom swung open. Wayne stood dressed in a flashy tuxedo.

“Let's go, champ,” he said. “Dad wants us first on line when he welcomes the President. He wants some family pictures.”

“We already have pictures with the President.”

“I guess he wants more. What do you care? Just get dressed in a hurry.”

It was funny about rich people, I thought. No matter how much they had, they always wanted more. More pictures, more money, more famous friends. There was simply no end to it.

Wayne darted off. Downstairs, the orchestra was playing the Presidential anthem, “Hail to the Chief.” Guests were already applauding.

I looked at the new tuxedo which the housekeeper had laid out on my bed. To look like a penguin, or not to look like a penguin – that was the question. A few days before, my father had sent a tailor to the house to give me and Wayne private fittings.

“Hurry!” my brother called from the stairwell.

Reluctantly, I picked up the tux jacket. If I played the part, I had to play it all the way, or else they'd say I was crazy. Who cared that the President was coming to the house? He was the biggest phoney of them all. But I couldn't say that to my father. Whenever I had blurted out the truth in the past, they had increased my medication, so I learned to keep my lips shut and smile.

“It's just a different kind of strait jacket,” I thought, buttoning the tuxedo and tying the bowtie. I looked at myself in the mirror and bowed at the clown smiling back.

“Whahut school is the boooy in nahhh?” I joked, imitating the President's thick Texas drawl.

“Well, Mr. President, Sam just graduated Grover Academy in New Hampshire,” my father would undoubtedly say.

“Fiine a school as cain be,” the President would answer, posing for a picture with the family. “And we sho want to win New

Hampshire in a landslide, don' we nahhh?"

Downstairs, the crowd of excited guests was standing in a long welcoming line which stretched from the backyard patio to the front door. I ran down the stairs, not realizing that in my rush, I had forgotten to wear shoes and socks.

"Excuse me. Excuse me, please," I repeated, pushing my way through the mob.

Hurrying toward the front door where my father stood waiting, I recognized famous faces from all walks of life – actors and actresses, writers, famous singers, TV personalities, film directors, a former President, and a Fortune Magazine list of leading corporate executives. I heard a few comments and chuckles directed my way, but I didn't pay any attention in my rush to please my father.

"Oh look!" a woman called out.

"Look at that!"

"It's Ralph Singer's son," someone said.

Television lights lit up the house like a theater. Gold jewelry sparkled. I blushed, noticing how some of the women were dressed. Though I had grown up in a world filled with beautiful women, immodest attire on women always made me feel like running back into my closet. The model, Susie Lane, stood glowing at the head of the line, as if she were posing in a new Singer dress. The Presidential anthem, "Hail to the Chief," blared out in the rotunda. Secret Service agents cleared a path for me as I hurried to the door. You would have thought I was someone important.

"He hasn't got shoes on!" someone observed.

"Look, he's barefooted," another voice laughed.

I heard the words as I took my place beside my father. I watched with a dumb smile as Dad gazed down at the floor. Sure enough, my two naked feet stuck out from the bottom of my black tuxedo trousers.

"You idiot!" Wayne whispered.

“LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES!” a voice called loudly over a loudspeaker.

My father's furious glare transformed into a broad smile as he turned away from me to greet the President and the First Lady. They walked hand-in-hand through the door to a burst of loud applause. The President raised a practiced campaign hand in greeting and stood smiling as photographers snapped pictures. Then he stepped over to Dad and gave him a big Texas hug. The crowd cheered wildly. The First Lady stood waving with a smile that stretched from one end of the entrance hall to the other. I tried to slip away, but my brother blocked my escape, pushing me forward with a mischievous gleam in his eyes.

“Well, howdy, boys,” the President said, turning towards Ralph Singer's two children.

“You remember the kids, Mr. President?” Dad said with a blush.

“I sho do, Raalph,” the President answered with a grin. “Wayne and Sam, am I right?”

I stood as straight and tall as I could in my tuxedo, hoping that the President wouldn't look down at the floor. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see the First Lady flinch and do a double-take as she stared down at my feet.

“Whahut school is the boooy in nahhh?” President Bill Boston said, laying a hand on my shoulder.

“Well, Mr. President, he just graduated Grover Academy in New Hampshire,” Ralph Singer answered.

“Fiine a school as cain be,” the President said.

For a split second, his glance dropped toward my feet on the floor. His eyes blinked, then, like the skilled actor he was, he turned back to my father and said, “And we sho want to win New Hampshire in a landslide, don' we nahhh?” as if he hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary.

It was Dad's cue to answer, but he was too embarrassed to speak.

“You sure will, Mr. President,” Wayne said loudly, coming to the rescue. “New Hampshire and the forty-nine states after it.”



The crowd cheered. As if on command, balloons hovering near the ceiling exploded and tiny pieces of red, white, and blue confetti rained down from above. As a CBS TV camera tilted down toward my feet, the President's chief advisor stepped forward and hustled the President along the welcoming line to greet Susie Lane. A wall of Secret Servicemen gave me a shove. Whether mistakenly or not, one of the gorillas stepped on my foot.

"OUCH!" I hollered.

"Sorry, kid," the bodyguard said.

As the President shook hands with enthusiastic supporters, Winston Foster, the man who had turned the computer into a household appliance, grabbed my Dad by the arm.

"What's the matter, Ralph?" he asked. "Is the shmatta business so bad, you can't buy your kid a pair of shoes?"

Singer pretended to chuckle. "Teenagers will be teenagers," he answered.

I got out of there as fast as I could, hurrying through the door to the front lawn, away from the loud celebration. It's funny how you remember some things and there are things you forget. One thing I distinctly recall was the coolness of the grass under my bare feet. Shoes were another straight jacket of a sort, I thought. They didn't let a person feel the energy of the earth, which surged up my legs as I stood alone on the floodlit lawn. I guess no matter how much I tried, I just wasn't cut out for a world that dressed up in tuxedos and shoes.

Music blared from inside, turning the house into a giant juke box. Truth is, I didn't want to go back to the party. I felt a lot more comfortable with the Secret Service agents who were stationed around the lawn, watching me with careful glances.

"Hey, Tarzan!" I heard a voice call.

It was my brother, Wayne, sticking his head out of my bedroom window. A pretty girl was at his side, giggling.

"Catch!" he said, throwing a pair of shoes and socks down to the lawn. "Put these on and come join the bash. The hors d'œuvres are

delicious.”

Once again, the girl laughed as if Wayne were the funniest guy in the world.

I could feel a lot of eyes staring at me as I picked my socks out of the bushes.

“You're lucky,” quipped a Secret Service agent who was strolling by on his rounds. “If I took off my shoes, they'd fire me on the spot.”

“I guess so,” I answered. After all, my father couldn't fire me from being his son, no matter how disappointed he was with my abnormal behavior.

I sat down on the grass and slipped on my socks. Mr. and Mrs. Roberts, neighbors from down the street, came out of our house and headed off down the long driveway which was jammed-packed with Rolls Royces, Mercedes Benzs, Cadillacs and Jaguars.

“Great party, Sam,” Mr. Roberts called out to me.

“Yeah, sure thing,” I answered, standing up.

“We're off to Paris tonight,” the Hollywood lawyer said.

“Have a good trip.”

“What are you doing this summer?” his friendly wife asked.

“Don't know,” I answered. “Just hanging out, I guess.”

“Do some traveling. See the world. Get off on your own,” Mr. Roberts advised. “Let your father take care of the President.”

“I'll think about it,” I promised, returning their waves.

As unobtrusively as possible, I snuck back into the house. All the guests were outside on the patio and back lawn, where barbecues were blazing. Feeling a little like a burglar, I snuck up the stairway. Just as I got to the top, my father called out.

“Just what the hell do you think you're doing?” he asked sternly. His eyes were glaring. There was no one around. We were all alone, me on top of the stairway and he down below.

“Going back to my room,” I answered.

“Did you do it to spite me – embarrassing me in front of all of my friends?”

“I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean....”

He didn't let me finish the sentence. “I'll deal with you later,” he said.

I closed the door to my room and locked it, but I could still hear the loud music and voices from the party. That's when my forehead began to pound. It felt like the drums of the band and the laughter were going off in my brain. My body was shaking inside like a pneumatic drill. Sweating, I opened the door of the closet and stepped inside for the first time in ages. Immediately, I felt soothed by the darkness. Silence surrounded me. Sitting down on the floor, I leaned back against the wall, closed my eyes and breathed in the comforting smell of my grandfather's old kittel and tallit.

“Oh G-d, if you're out there,” I prayed. “Please help me get out of this closet.”

Chapter Two

## OUT OF THE CLOSET

The memory of that night is still fresh in my mind. After the fundraising party, I had fallen asleep in my closet. An angry pounding, pounding, pounding had sounded on the door.

“Open up, Sam,” my father's voice ordered. “Do you hear me?! Open up now!”

My father wasn't alone. Two psychiatrists stood beside him. They were part of the Dream Team. One from the old school and one from the new. The best that money could buy.

“Guess I fell asleep,” I said, sheepishly opening the door.

The house was quiet. No music. No laughter. The celebration had ended downstairs.

“Asleep in the closet? Most normal people sleep in their beds,” Ralph Singer exclaimed, glaring at his son.

I braced myself for the worse.

“Do you want to explain your little stunt tonight, embarrassing me in front of all of my guests?”

“I'm sorry, Dad. I didn't mean to. Wayne hassled me to get dressed, and I forgot to put on my shoes.”

“You knew you were meeting the President of the United States, and you forgot to put on your shoes?” my father asked with an incredulous look on his face.

“It isn't a criminal act,” Dr. Rogers, the psychiatrist from the new-school-of-thought interjected. “In fact, in certain African and Asian societies, people take off their shoes when meeting the chief of the tribe.”

My father glanced at Dr. Herbert, waiting to hear his response.

“This isn't Africa. This is Beverly Hills,” the old buzzard responded.

My Dad stood deep in thought between the physicians. In a way, I felt sorry for him. I mean, I bet it wasn't easy having a kid like me for a son.

“At least Sam wore his trousers,” he said. “I suppose I should be thankful for that.”

Neither of the psychiatrists laughed, but I thought it was kind of funny.

“We gave him a chance without the medication,” good old Dr. Herbert, the pill pusher, noted. “I recommend resuming drug therapy to treat a clear case of cerebral chemical imbalance which is manifested in manic depressive states.”

“Oh no, Dad, not that,” I pleaded. “I've had enough chemicals in my system for a lifetime. I don't need them, believe me. They only make me feel worse.”

“Your behavior isn't normal,” my father retorted.

Whose behavior was normal, I thought? Was amassing billions of dollars normal? Was putting kids in strait jackets normal? Was a President who dropped bombs on innocent civilians all over the world normal? Who made them the judges of normalcy? They were as screwed-up as everyone else.

“Please, Dad,” I begged. “It's summer vacation. I want to travel. I want to see the world. I won't get in your way. Just don't make a zombie out of me once again.”

I suppose my words hit home. My father paused. I could tell that

the look in my eyes really tugged at his heart. He had tried his best as a father. He had sought out the best medical help he could find. All of his millions meant nothing to him if his boy wasn't happy. I knew that.

"No one wants to make a zombie out of you," he said. "It's for your own good. Isn't that right, Uncle Ed?"

He turned to Dr. Herbert. His first name was Edward. We had known him so long, we called him Uncle Ed, as if to pretend that he was one of the family.

"One-hundred-percent correct," the Freudian analyst answered.

"You know I don't agree, Mr. Singer," the younger psychiatrist said. "Traveling can be very therapeutic. After all, life is one long voyage, and everyone has his unique individual path."

For a moment, I breathed easier. At least someone was on my side.

"What are you going to do if he freaks out in Timbuktu?" Dr. Herbert Frankenstein asked.

"That's a negative attitude," Dr. Rogers countered. "I think we need to give Sam the feeling that he can make it on his own."

"Tonight's behavior proves otherwise," Dr. Herbert insisted.

"Can't someone make a mistake, Uncle Ed?" I appealed in self-defense. "I didn't forget my shoes on purpose, you know."

"That's what disturbs me," Mr. Singer said. "If you came downstairs barefooted on purpose to meet the President, OK, I could say you decided to rebel about something. Teenagers do things like that. That kind of behavior is normal. But you weren't even aware of what you were doing. That signals a red light."

Dr. Herbert nodded his great bald head in agreement.

"That's ridiculous," the New-Age doctor answered. "Everyone has lapses."

"True, but this boy has a history of them," Uncle Ed maintained.

Like a referee in a boxing match, I stepped forward before the psychiatrists came to blows.

"Please, Dad," I appealed. "Let me go away on my own for the

summer. I know it will help.”

“What about school?” my father wanted to know.

“I’ll start in September. Just like everyone else. I won’t miss a class. I promise.”

That’s when G-d came to my aid. Just like it said on the dollar: IN G-D WE TRUST. Like a heavenly messenger, my brother Wayne appeared in the doorway.

“Sorry to interrupt the pow-wow,” he said. “I forgot to tell you. Mom called during the party. She postponed her trip to Kenya and said that if Sam or I want to come see her, she’ll be in London until August producing a show.”

Ralph Singer snorted. “Producing a show! Why not? Your mother always liked hobbies. With the millions she gets out of me, she could produce every show in the London theater for the next twenty years.”

“I haven’t seen Mom since Thanksgiving when she came to New York,” I said.

My father nodded. Seeing the look of concern on his forehead, I had the feeling I could read his thoughts.

“Maybe the young shrink is right,” he reflected. “After all, kids will be kids. The boy’s screw-up wasn’t the end of the world. In fact, it had made the party a little more interesting. Everyone had had a good laugh. Sure, I felt embarrassed at first. But what does it matter? I still have a few hundred-million dollars in the bank. My ego can take it. And the boy does seem to act more normal without all of those pills. Besides, the look in his eyes goes right through me. He looks so damn sad. Wake up, Ralph Singer. Chemical imbalance or not, the barefooted creature standing in front of you isn’t some stranger – he’s your own flesh and blood, whose chemicals, at least half of them, were inherited from you.”

“All right, Sam,” Dad finally said. “You can travel. And we’ll forget the medicine for now. Uncle Ed will give you an emergency supply in the event that you need it. If you feel all right, you can give the pills to your mother instead. Maybe the medication will

help bring her back to reality.”

“I think you are taking a very big chance,” Dr. Herbert said, disapprovingly.

My father sighed deeply. “Maybe a change will be good for the boy. Maybe he needs to sow some wild oats like every other teenager his age. We want him to get out of the closet, don't we? Who knows? Maybe some independent adventure and travel will help.”

My father stepped over to me and put his arm around my shoulder.

“You still have your credit cards?” he asked.

“Sure, Dad,” I answered.

“You know how to use them, right?”

“Right.”

“Well, use them for whatever you need. Have a good time. Blow off some steam. Get yourself a girlfriend or two. You know my phone number. If you need anything – call.

Uncle Herbert turned away with a grunt and walked angrily off toward the door.

“Is that a deal?” my father asked.

“A deal,” I said with a smile of tremendous relief. “Thanks, Dad, you're great.”

Hugging him really felt great. It was the first time we had really hugged each other in years.

### Chapter Three

#### LONDON

I stood alone on the bow of the majestic oceanliner, bracing myself against the powerful wind. My hands gripped tightly to the guard rail as the ocean's endless swells raised the massive ship in the air like a toy, then lowered it with a mighty splash back into the deep.

“YAHOOOEE!!” I shouted up at the sky, like a cowboy busting a bronco. “YAHOOOEE!!”

The nice thing was that no one could hear me. No other soul dared wander the deck in such rough seas and stormy weather. But

I loved it. I loved the great symphony of nature. I loved feeling merged with the might of the wind and the sea. The pure ocean air rushed through my brain, cleansing it, clearing out all of the poisons which had been building inside it for years. Not only the poisonous medications, syrups, and pills, but the poisonous voices as well. Voices of parents, teachers and doctors telling me that I should be this way or that. Voices of TV commercials and movies. Loud voices. Angry voices. Voices not my own. With the bow of the ship pointing toward Europe, and the hope of a new beginning, the mighty ocean wind howled around me, blowing the Voice of America out of my brain.

“Why must I be like everyone else?” I had asked them.

“To be happy,” they always insisted.

“But I am who I am,” I protested.

“Nonsense,” they answered. “You feel that way because of your sickness. But don't worry. We can help you. We can make you behave just like everyone else, think what everyone thinks, want what everyone wants.”

It seemed that ever since I could remember, people were programming my brain with discs as if my head were some kind of CD player. There was the Disney Disc for children; and the Pledge Allegiance to the Flag Disc when you went to school; the Christmas Disc in the winter; and the Baseball Disc all summer long. Growing up with an older brother, I had been Beatled, Bob Dylaned, and Rolling Stoned out of my mind. And let's not forget the Barbie Disc and the Ralph Singer Disc of Big Business which lauded the virtues of money and fame. When you think about it, I hadn't grown up; I had been programmed.

“I'm not Sam Singer. I'm the Discman!” I yelled out at the wind.

Whatever voice I was born with had been erased long ago. But I was finished with that. I had set out to find my lost self. To rediscover the voice in the closet. Yes siree, ladies and gentlemen, G-d was out there somewhere, and I was determined to find Him.

“YAHOOOEE!!” I cried, feeling free.



It was true. I had been Michael Jordaned, Astronauted, Televised, Cyberspaced, Power-Rangered, Madonnaed and Haldoled day and night. Bye, bye, big American lie. The time had come to break free.

“YAHOOOEE!!” I hollered up at the sky.

A wave, like a colossal hand, raised the ship in the air.

“Ride 'em, cowboy!” I screamed.

I had never felt so high in my life. I was free. Free to be me. Free to discover who Sam Singer was. Free to find the wee small voice I had lost long ago before pills had clouded my mind. I was free. Didn't have to pretend anymore. I could stop playing the role of The Normal American Kid. No more performances to please Mom and Dad. I was free. Dad had agreed. That in itself was a miracle.

So with a credit card in my wallet, and a backpack slung over my back, I embarked on my great summer voyage, little knowing that at the end of my adventure, I would be even more famous than my father. The truth is that I had always dreamed about crossing the ocean by boat. It was romantic. Literary. Something all of the famous American novelists had done. Thomas Wolfe, Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, to name but a few, had all made their first pilgrimages to Europe by ship. I had read all of their books, and identified with every one of their heroes. They too hadn't fit in with the herd. Call them what you will – wanderers, outcasts, poets, rebels, and dreamers – their souls were too big for the strait jackets which society forced them to wear. So I decided to set off in their footsteps to discover WHO I REALLY WAS. On the way, I would stop off and visit my mother.

The ocean voyage lasted five days. Mostly, I kept to myself. I must have jogged around the deck of the ship hundreds of times to get my body and mind into shape. One night, with a lot of free time on my hands, I found myself lingering by the door of the ship disco, trying to get up the nerve to go in and “sow some wild oats,” as my father had advised. But the loud, blaring music just wasn't for me.

“Why are you standing by the door?” a girl asked me. “Are you the doorman or something? Why don't you come inside and dance?”

“It's too noisy,” I said.

The girl shrugged and disappeared inside. It was just as well, I thought. I really didn't know how to dance. Anyway, jerking around like a monkey to a bunch of loud drums, seemed like a pretty stupid thing to do. Instead, I headed out to the deck and started running laps around the rocking and rolling ship. The night was jet black, and the roar of the wind sounded like thunder. It was kind of spooky out there, but I wasn't scared. Wasn't life like a boat in a tempestuous sea? Even during my darkest moments, in the psycho ward, when I had felt like the Titanic going down in the cold and kindless deep, overdrugged and out of control, I hadn't been afraid, for I knew that G-d was with me, watching out at me from the pyramid on the dollar.

Feeling rested and refreshed from the voyage, I arrived in London and gave my mother a call.

“Where are you, honey?” she asked with a laugh. “In London? How splendid!”

Again, her conversation was interrupted by a burst of hysterical laughter. “I have some reporters here now,” she said. “Take in the sights for a while, then get in a cab and come over around five. My play is opening tonight, and we're having a big party to celebrate. I'll introduce you to all of my wonderful friends.”

She cackled again and hung up.

“Great,” I thought. It sounded like fun. I had made up my mind to have a good time during my travels and to experience what life had to offer. I knew I was too uptight, and maybe that was my problem. In the past, I had kept a distance from people, and, as part of my odyssey, I had decided to venture out of my shell. At Mom's party, I was sure to meet some real artists and writers, people who could understand a person like me. I had written some poems in my more reflective moments, but nothing I ever wanted to show anyone.

Like the poem I called, "Have a Fit."  
It ain't no fun, is it?  
To be a round peg  
In a world of square holes.  
They beat you  
To get you to fit.  
"Hey, I'm a round peg!" you scream,  
But nobody listens.  
A round peg?  
Whoever heard of such an unusual thing?  
Get with it.  
Get with it.  
Or we will beat you  
And drug you  
To make sure that you fit.  
To make sure that you fit.  
And drug you  
To make sure that you fit.  
Have a fit  
Have a fit  
Have a fit.

My mother lived in an elegant apartment not far from Buckingham Palace. Before going over, I decided to stop by and catch the celebrated changing of the guard. I had been in London once before, when I was eight\_years old, but I only recollected double-decker buses and fog. The "bobby" on guard at the gate to the palace stood tall and straight, just like in all of the pictures. In his red uniform and regal black hat, he was the symbol of English tradition.

I slipped my mini video camera out of my backpack. It was a going\_away gift from my father. Instead of taking a long shot showing the guard and the royal palace behind him, I stepped up beside him and pointed the camera right at his nose. Everyone knew that the bobbies on guard at Buckingham Palace stood

motionless for hours without making a twitch, and I wanted to record it in close-up on film. To show that the nose belonged to a real London bobby and not just any bloke, I bent down and tilted the camera up to capture the impeccable English profile, the chin strap, and the famous bushy hat. Sure enough, the guard didn't bat an eyelash. Though the lens of my camera was only inches away, the soldier acted as if he were completely alone.

My mother, Gloria, lived in an elegant townhouse in the most exclusive section of town by the park. When I pressed the doorbell, chimes rang melodiously from within. A tall English butler, dressed in a fitted suit and tails, answered the door with a bow. His gloved hand clutched a clipboard and a list of names.

"Hi. I'm Sam Singer. Is my mother at home?"

The butler gazed down at me with an insolent look, as if repelled to discover a backpacking youth on the doorstep.

"The mistress of the house is resting," the butler said with the most impeccable English accent.

"She told me to come over."

"She left orders not to be disturbed."

"But I'm her son," I protested.

"Orders are orders," the butler said.

"Then I'll wait here till she awakens. I've come all the way from America."

"What did you say your name was?" he asked.

"Sam Singer, or maybe just Sammy or Sam."

"I am truly sorry, sir," the butler responded. "But your name doesn't appear on the list."

Then, with another slight bow, he shut the door in my face.

The truth is, I never had a spectacular relationship with my mother. The way I figured it, she had wanted to be Ralph Singer's wife, more than she had wanted to be the mother of his children. In fact, after my older brother was born, she hadn't wanted any more kids. As she declared on many occasions, "Sam was a mistake." When I turned out to be "a problem child," our relationship

became distant and strained. I loved her because she was my mother, but I don't think I ever knew real motherly warmth.

While I stood facing the door of the townhouse, a laughing couple bounced up the stairs. They looked like people going to a masquerade ball. The man was dressed like a mime with white paint all over his face, and the woman was dressed up in a short skirt and Shirley Temple curls. I stepped out of the way as the mime theatrically rang the bell with a white-gloved finger. He was Darcel Darceaux, the world's most famous pantamimist – I immediately recognized his elegant movements and smile. The butler opened the door, bowed graciously and motioned the couple inside without even bothering to check his list.

“But I'm...” I began to explain. Before I could spit out the sentence, the door closed again in my face.

A van drove up in front of the townhouse. “Hermes Flowers” was written on its side. Two delivery men got out of the front seat and opened the rear doors. Slowly, they inched out a massive red vase with a giant bouquet of red roses. Carefully, they carried the awkward load up the stairs to the door.

“Hit the bloody clamour, will you, bloke?” one of them asked me.

I obliged and stepped aside as they waited for the front door to open.

“Set the flowers by the piano,” the butler told them, letting them into the house.

I stepped into line behind the delivery men and followed them through the door, but the butler reach out a hand and grabbed me.

“Not you,” he said, pushing me back through the door.

“MOTHER!” I screamed at the top of my lungs. “MOTHER!”

The poor butler panicked. He tried to use force. He was stronger than me, but I was determined to stay in the house. With all of my might, I shoved him out through the front door. The surprised fellow bellowed as he tumbled down the stairs. He landed in a most undignified manner.

Sweating, I locked the door.

“MOTHEEEEEERRRR!” I screamed, running along a hallway into the salon.

The large room looked like an art gallery. Pop-art paintings covered all of the walls. Suspended from the high ceiling, a mobile hung in mid-air. An abstract sculpture, made out of a collection of garbage, was awarded an honored place by the window overlooking the park. Guests were gathered in all corners, by the art-deco bar, by the sparkingly polished piano, by the lavishly laid out buffet. A theater-type, wearing a tilted beret, a bright yellow scarf, and puffing on long cigarette holder, reclined in an oversized chair.

“MOOOOOTHEEER!” I called out again.

For a moment everything stopped. Not only Darcel Darceau, but all of the guests remained frozen, as if posing for a painting. Everyone stared at me. Then, after a few surreal seconds, the limping, disheveled butler rushed over to grab me.

“Sammy! My baby!” Gloria Singer called out.

She stood like a movie star in the middle of the circular stairwell, dressed in a long, flowing house robe, her arms spread wide to welcome her son. She was a very pretty woman, with a look of fun in her eyes. I suppose that was why Dad had married her. Everyone turned toward the staircase. The butler braked to a halt.

“What an entrance!” Sam's mother exclaimed. “Oh, Sammy, what an actor! I love it.”

For a moment, she seemed to lose balance, as if she were drunk. Laughing, and with a big grin on her face, she hurried downstairs to embrace me. As if they were attending a theatrical performance, all of the guests started to cheer.

“Darling, how are you?” she asked.

“I'm fine, Mom, now that I got by your guard dog.”

“My guard dog?” she said in surprise. Looking around, her gaze stopped on the butler.

“Oh, Winston, you mean. He's precious. I hired him away from the Prime Minister.”

“He tore my jacket,” the butler said indignantly, holding up his torn jacket pocket.

“Oh, we'll get you a new one,” my mother said. “Don't be a poor sport.”

Once again, she laughed with a strange, hysterical cackle. It certainly wasn't a normal laugh. Though I hate to say it, the truth is, if someone needed psychiatric attention, it was my mother, not me.

“I suppose I forgot to add your name to the list,” she said in a loud voice, as if they were on stage. “With so many violent crimes and rapes in the city, I can't let all of London tramp in here now, can I? But you must be thirsty. How about a drink?”

Red in the face, Winston brushed off his jacket, straightened his shoulders, and limped out of the room.

“Beautifully played!” the man with the scarf and beret said as Gloria escorted me toward the bar. She introduced him as Barry Blair, the director of the new play. “Beautiful, just beautiful,” he repeated. “A marvelous entrance!”

As if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, everyone resumed their conversations, except for a motionless figure who sat cross-legged in a corner of the room by a fern. He was dressed in a loin cloth. His olive skin and features were clearly of an Far Eastern origin. If not for the authentic look of his flesh, he could easily have passed for a statue.

“Who is that in the corner?” I asked my mother.

“That's Raji, the Dali Lama's personal emissary. He's teaching me how to meditate.”

“You meditate?” I asked.

“I find it so soooooothing,” she answered.

“I meditate too,” I told her.

“Splendid. We'll do it together. What fun!”

The bartender already had a drink waiting for my mother. The clear liquid looked like water, but knowing my mother, I was sure it was something much stronger.

“What about you, sweetie? What would you like? I'm having a Bombay Gin.”

“Soda is fine,” I answered.

“Soda? What is soda?” his mother asked playfully. Once again, her laughter pierced the room. “Are you taking your medication?” she suddenly wanted to know.

“No, I haven't had to for almost two years.”

“Well that's good news to a mother who worries night and day about her baby boy.”

With a smile, she bent forward to give me a kiss. “I'm so happy you've come. If I act silly, it's because I'm so nervous. With the play opening tonight, I'm a mess.”

“It's going to be a smash hit, love,” the director assured her, giving her a peck on the cheek.

“That's what all directors say” the woman with the Shirley Temple curls chimed in.

“Well, darlings, it better be a big hit,” Gloria Singer said. “I've invested a million dollars! Which reminds me. How is your father?”

“Dad's fine. The same as usual.”

“Wonderful, wonderful. How I love that man.”

“I'm so frantically jealous,” a voice said.

Vladimar Bostrok, the world's most celebrated ballet dancer, leaped through the air, spun in a circle and landed in front of me and my Mom. Gallantly, he took hold of her hand and kissed it.

My mother giggled. “That tickles,” she said.

A small bell tinkled and the chief house woman led a half-dozen kitchen maids into the room. Each wore a mini-skirt and apron and carried a tray over her head. One tray held pastries, another hors d'ouvres, a third tray held caviar and shrimps.

“A little snack before the curtain goes up,” Gloria Singer announced.

“Who can eat on opening night?” the director asked.

“I can, can't you?” she asked me.



The guests converged on the food. Across the salon, in the dining room, a woman sat alone at the large dining-room table, writing what looked like a letter.

“Who is that?” I asked.

“Oh, the poor, sweet thing,” Mom said, following my gaze. “She's from Iran. Her husband is in prison. They arrested him because he is Jewish. I'm dedicating the profits from tonight's performance to publicize her cause.”

“Your mother has a heart of gold,” the director said.

It was true. My mother was very good to strangers. Once, she had raised a lot of money for Africans starving in Biafra. Another time, she had auctioned off paintings to raise money for homeless refugees in Afghanistan. On another occasion, she had donated her prize-winning racehorse to a hospital doing research on AIDS.

Once again, the chimes rang through the house. All eyes turned toward the entrance of the salon. I recognized the man immediately. He was England's most distinguished actor, Arthur Thames, the star of dozens of classic movies and Shakespearian plays. Holding his arm was a much younger woman. Dressed in Singer jeans and a denim shirt, she looked like she could be the actor's hippie daughter.

My mother's eyes twinkled.

“I'm sure you recognize, Arthur,” she said. “The fantastic woman he's with is Candy, the number one soap star in England.”

Like a king and queen, the couple strode into the room. Everyone applauded. Everyone rushed over to greet them.

“Actually,” my mother went on in a whisper, “she's married to Arthur's co-star in the play, but she and her hubbie haven't been getting along.”

A guest sat down at the piano and played the theme song to one of the actor's award-winning movies. Cleverly, he made a musical transition to the song from Candy's soap opera, “The Palace Maid.”

“Come, I'll introduce you,” my mother said, grabbing my shirt

sleeve.

“Gloria!” the actor called out, as if he hadn't seen my mother in years.

“Arthur, how grand!” she exclaimed.

People stepped aside as the actor rushed forward to give her a hug.

“My son, Sammy,” she said. “He flew in today in time for the opening.”

“I took a boat, Mom,” I corrected.

“Plane, boat, what's the difference?” she replied with a laugh.

“What counts is you're here!”

The actor held out a hand. I was never crazy about movies, but I must have seen his rendition of Hamlet three or four times. He had also played Othello, Macbeth, and Kings Richard the Second, Arthur, and Lear. Then suddenly, the soap-opera star stood before me at his side.

“Meet Candy!” my mother called out. “Great Britain's favorite pastime.”

Everyone laughed. The actress stared at me with eyes so blue, I turned away blushing.

“Isn't he a cute one, now?” she said in a thick cockney accent.

For some reason, I felt my old feeling of nervousness. Never one for parties and pretty women, I was anxious to get away. Over in the corner, the yogi continued to meditate as if he were completely alone.

“Heavens! Look at the time!” my mother cried out with a laugh.

“Two hours to curtain and I am not even dressed!”

Tilting her head back, she raised her glass to her lips, took a long swallow and finished her gin.

“Come, Sammy. I'll show you your room. Then you're on your own. Eat, sleep, be merry. Feel free to do whatever you want. You are going to have a wonderful time here in London. It's the only cultured place left in the world.”

“Maybe that's what I'm missing,” I thought. “Culture. Maybe

that's what I need. Some genuine, meaningful culture. Maybe that's what I am searching for – my tradition and past.”

After all, England was loaded with it. Compared to America, England was the real thing. Everything in America was passing and new. Instant culture. Pop tradition. In America, you didn't have culture, you had advertisements and movies. Sure, I reflected, there was George Washington's Birthday, Thanksgiving, and the Fourth of July, but instead of having any real meaning, they were turned into bargain-priced shopping days at the malls. Who knew what it said in the Declaration of Independence? Who even cared?

My mother showed me to a bedroom that looked like a museum display, decorated with antique English furniture and paintings of fox hunts and old country mansions. There was a quill pen on a writing table and a leather-bound set of Shakespeare which had been published before the US was born. In a corner of the room stood a full set of armor, as if a knight were guarding over the chamber. “Now this is tradition,” I thought. I sat on the canopied bed, holding a volume of Hamlet in my lap. “To be or not to be, that is the question.” I had read the play five or six times and memorized long passages by heart. After all, the young Danish prince hadn't had such a normal childhood either. He too had been known to hear voices. Good thing for Hamlet that Uncle Ed hadn't been around in those days. The pill pusher would have put the jittery prince on haldol and lithium too.

“Surely,” I thought, “if I'm searching for roots, I am sure to find them in England.”

After all, America had been around for only two-hundred years. England had been around for a thousand! The first Pilgrims on Plymouth Rock hadn't been Americans – they were English. Maybe the reason I had felt so different as a kid was because I simply didn't belong in America. Maybe England was the place I could really feel at home. After all, my mother had moved there. For all of her craziness, maybe she had discovered a secret that applied to me as well. Maybe we were Englishmen at heart. That

would explain everything.

We rode in a long limousine to the theater. I hadn't brought any dress clothes with me, but my mother told me not to worry – I could wear whatever I liked. Photographers snapped pictures as we disembarked from the car. Vladimar Bostrok, the dancer, and Darcel Darceau, the mime, escorted Mom into the ornate building. Shirley Temple grabbed my arm and walked with me toward the entrance, as if we were London's new pair. Hundreds of people were milling about in the lobby. The excitement of opening night filled the air. With the joy of a little girl, Shirley pointed to the famous faces in the crowd.

“Oh look, there's Mondego, the painter. There's Claude Winestock, the head of BBC. There's Franco Garcia, the Spanish poet and his Japanese wife. There's the Duke of some place or other. And there's Trevor James, the nasty critic from the London Times.”

While other people collected stamps or back issues of National Geographic, my parents collected celebrities. I wasn't impressed. I had grown up surrounded by rich and famous people. Besides their big egos, I knew they were human like everyone else.

“Oh look!” Shirley shrieked. “There's Wango.”

Other women screamed. Wango was the latest British rock star. He was blond, tall, and incredibly thin. Tonight, like every night, he was dressed in black motorcycle boots, black leather pants, and a black leather jacket. He always wore black sunglasses and a dozen black scarfs around his neck which he would throw to his adoring fans.

“I have to get a scarf!” Shirley said, shoving her way through the crowd.

Hysterical women scratched their way forward to catch one of the scarfs that Wango flung through the air. I squeezed my way to the side of the lobby to get away from the wild stampede. Shirley snatched one of the scarfs out of the air and swooned to the floor.

“Help! Stand back!” people shouted. “She's fainted!”

The mob cleared away and photographers rushed in to snap pictures of the overwhelmed fan. I knew she was acting. Maybe one of the directors in the crowd would notice her and give her a role in a film. Just like in fairytales, the rock star knelt down beside her and gave her a kiss. Magically, her eyes opened and she smiled, instantly cured. Then, to the cheers of the crowd, Wango lifted her in his arms and carried her into the theater. Everyone applauded. It was as if the performance had already begun.

The lights over the doors to the hall of the theater soon began flashing and people started streaming inside. Ushers stood at the doorways, collecting the tickets. I patiently waited on line, but when I finally reached the door, the usher refused to let me into the hall.

"Ticket, please," he said.

"I don't have a ticket," I answered, flustered.

"You can't see the play without a ticket."

"But I've been invited. I mean, I came here with my mother, Gloria Singer, the producer of the play."

"That's a jolly good line, isn't it?" the usher said, not believing my story.

"Keep the queue moving," a man behind me called out.

I glanced all around, but I didn't see anyone I knew. Most of the theater-goers were already inside, waiting for the play to begin. No doubt, in all of the commotion, my mother had forgotten to reserve me a ticket.

"I'll buy a ticket," I said.

"All sold out, bloke," the usher replied, shoving me to the side.

The stage lights flashed on and off over the doors to the hall. The last people were herded inside. The theater doors closed, leaving me alone in the lobby. I rushed from one door to the next, trying to open them, but they were all locked.

"Damn it," I said.

Outside, it was drizzling. Theater marquees sparkled with a twinkling glow. "All the world is a stage," Shakespeare had

written. It was certainly true in London, I thought. It was true in Beverly Hills. Maybe it was different in other families, but my mother and father lived life as if they were actors on stage. I didn't want to be like my parents. I wanted to be real.

The rain continued. After an hour of aimless walking, I realized that I was lost. And soaking wet. So I hailed a taxi and gave the driver my mother's address. Winston, the butler, opened the door. Leaning on crutches, he gave me a sneer and stepped aside in disdain, still blaming me for his fall.

The house was uncharacteristically quiet. Everyone had gone to the play. I stood in the deserted parlor in front of the large fireplace.

"Would you like me to light you a fire, sir?" the butler asked, not letting his bad feelings interfere with his work.

"That would be nice," I answered. "I got pretty wet in the rain."

Swinging awkwardly along on his crutches, the butler hobbled over to the fireplace and pushed a button on the wall. Instantly, the logs in the fireplace burst into flame. A glowing red fire filled the chimney, but the fire gave off no warmth.

"It's artificial, sir," Winston said. "The logs are not really logs."

I shivered. What was the world coming to, I thought, when you couldn't even get warmth from a fire? Funny, but in a way, it was just like my mother's love.

"I can pour you a hot bath, if you like," Winston offered.

It seemed to me that the butler was trying to make up for our afternoon spat.

"That's all right, Winston. You don't have to bother. And about breaking your foot, I'm truly sorry."

"So am I," the Englishman responded with a sour look on his face. "I'll fetch you a tea."

Pivoting on his crutches, and trying to look as dignified as he could, the butler retired from the room. As I turned back to gaze at the fire, a figure caught my eye. In the corner of the dark room, in the same exact position in which he had been sitting hours before,

the Dali Lama's disciple continued his meditation. Curious, I walked over to have a closer look. In a way, the yogi reminded me of the guards at Buckingham Palace, who also remained motionless for hours on end. But while the bobby stood at rigid attention, Raji was relaxed. A feeling of tranquility seemed to radiate from the Tibetan as he sat cross-legged by the fern.

Instinctively, I sensed that he could guide me on my search. I envied his serene, peaceful expression.

"That's how I'd like to be," I thought. The Buddhist didn't have to go to the theater to be entertained. He was happy with sitting alone on the floor.

The yogi must have sensed me sit down beside him. Without changing the direction of his gaze, he smiled.

"Breathe more slowly," he told me. "Let your mind be quiet. Listen to the sound of your breath."

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Then I crossed my legs in a lotus position and rested my hands on my knees.

"Forget what you learned in the past," Raji said. "Concentrate on nothing at all."

"I have a mantra," I told him.

"Forget about it. Think about nothing."

I closed my eyes and imagined an endless black hole.

"Don't use your imagination," the yogi instructed. "Trust in your being. Don't try to do anything. Just exist. Let your mind go. Don't try to control it."

I tried to empty my mind of all the garbage that had been stored there from birth, but it was an impossible job.

"Never be discouraged," the Tibetan said. "Difficulty in the beginning leads to supreme success. Patience works wonders."

The butler reappeared in the parlor, escorting a housemaid who carried a cup of tea on a saucer. Seeing Raji and me on the floor, she silently set the tea down on the nearest table and withdrew unobtrusively from the room. Poor Winston shuffled after her on his crutches.

“A person needn't journey around the world to find himself,” the guru said softly. “He must journey within to discover his essence.”

“Yes,” I answered, sensing that this mystical being had some kind of spiritual radar that zoomed in on my secret longings and fears.

“A seeker must learn to be quiet in order to hear the voice of the universe all around him.”

“What about my voice?” I asked. “How can I hear that? How can I know what's really me? Who I really am?”

“Your voice is like all the others. To be free, a man must abandon his ego and merge with the cosmos. To find yourself, you must lose yourself. This is the road to Nirvana.”

I sighed a deep sigh.

“Slowly,” the yogi said. “You want to reach the end of the journey too fast. We begin life as a tadpole. Then in the womb, we grow into a frog. When we are born, we crawl on all fours. Finally, we walk and taste the pleasures of pride. To attain the bliss of Nirvana, we must learn to go backwards until our entire existence is smaller than a point in the mind.”

“I'm eager to learn,” I said.

“Where is your mother?” the yogi asked.

“At the theater. The play isn't over.”

Raji raised his arms over his head and started to breathe very rapidly by flexing the muscles of his stomach in and out. Suddenly, he stopped hyperventilating and held his breath for a minute. Then he exhaled deeply and started the cycle again.

“Your mother is a very kind woman,” he said when he finished.

Rolling over onto his back, he lifted himself into a backwards shoulder stand.

“She is trying to help the Dali Lama,” he said upside down.

The wiry disciple then lowered himself into a perfect inverted bridge, and finally into a picturesque cobra, as if he didn't have a bone in his body.

“I would like to meet your father,” he said.

“My father?” I asked in surprise. I was unable to imagine the two



of them together, their worlds were so far apart.

“Yes. The Dali Lama is opening peace centers all over the world, and we think your father can help.”

“My father thinks that yoga is nonsense.”

“I do not speak about yoga. The Dali Lama is not a gymnastics instructor. Mankind is on the verge of destruction and chaos, and only the message of the Dali Lama can save it.”

The exiled Tibetan stood up on his feet. He was small and undernourished. With a fluent motion, he reached into his loin cloth and slid out a business card which he set in my hand:

Raji Rajun

Executive Emissary

Dali Lama Enterprises

At the bottom of the card were a telephone number, an e-mail address, and fax numbers in London and New York.

“Your karma has brought you here so that you can help the Dali Lama,” Raji asserted.

“I can speak to my father, but I can't promise you anything,” I said.

“Speak to him with all of your heart.”

The Executive Emissary stared at me with his piercing black eyes. He reached down and picked up a telephone from the nearby glass table.

“Now?” I asked.

“There are famines, earthquakes, and wars in the world every moment. Only a lazy man delays.”

That was certainly true, I thought. And if I could help a man like the Dali Lama, what greater accomplishment could there be? So I put in a call to my father. Raji sat down on the sofa and took a sip of my tea. In a few moments, one of my father's secretaries answered the phone. I immediately recognized the cold, professional voice.

“Hi, Dorothy,” I said.

Hearing me on the line, the voice melted into honey.

“Hello, doll. Where are you calling from?”

“London.”

“How gorgeous. Say hello to the Big Ben for me.”

“I'd like to speak to my father.”

“He's in an important meeting.”

What else was new?

“Can I give him a message?” Dorothy asked.

“Tell him that the assistant to the Dali Lama would like to speak with him. He's here with me now.”

“Will do, doll,” Dorothy said. “Hang on one minute.”

“The Executive Emissary,” Raji corrected.

“Sorry,” I told him, hoping he wasn't offended. The doorbell chimed all over the house. Winston's crutches could be heard down the hallway on his wounded way to the door.

“Hello, beautiful,” Dorothy said, back on the line. “I spoke to your father and he said to have the fellow send a brochure to the office, describing his organization.”

“Can't I speak to him?” I asked.

“Call back later. He's in a big meeting, really. You know I'd patch you through if I could.”

I told Raji my father's reply.

The guru frowned. “You didn't speak with all of your heart,” he said, disappointed.

“I guess I still have some learning to do. Maybe you could teach me.”

“I would like to, but I am flying to Copenhagen tomorrow. I have a meeting there with a very rich man. From there, I'm off to Sweden. Then I have to meet up with the Dali Lama in Brussels.”

“It was awful. It was awful,” the Jewish woman from Iran kept repeating in the hallway.

“Don't worry, Sarah. Everything will be all right,” the butler said, escorting her into the parlor. “I will fetch you a cup of hot tea.”

Raji wrapped his Tibetan robe around his naked body as the Jewish woman came into the room. She sat down at the other end

of the couch, a safe distance away from the yogi. Holding her hands tightly around her purse, she gazed forward with a look so distraught, it caused me to shiver.

“What's the matter?” I asked.

“You weren't there? At the theater?”

“No,” I answered. “I didn't have a ticket, so they wouldn't let me in.”

“Such a surprise. So unexpected. What will be now with my husband?”

“What happened?” I asked. Even the yogi seemed curious.

“The evening started out so wonderfully,” she said. “Before the play, your mother stood on the stage and told everyone about my husband. She looked so beautiful in the light – like an angel. She said how important it was for everyone to give money. Then she called me up to the stage and everyone applauded. She gave me the microphone, but I was so overwhelmed, I only could cry. The audience cheered even louder. When your mother hugged me, everyone rose to their feet. At intermission, in the lobby, people handed me checks. There were boxes for donations, and people waited on line to put money into the slot.”

Winston returned with the housemaid, who set a hot cup of tea on the table near the wife of the persecuted Jewish prisoner.

“How was the play, Madam?” the butler politely asked.

“Oh, I really can't say. I didn't understand it so good. The actors spoke very fast, and my English is not very practiced.”

“Your English is fine,” I told her.

“There was a bench on the stage with an actor sitting on it,” she related. “The man that was here before the play. Then another actor came by and started bothering him. They spoke about all kinds of things – about books, and politics, and women – I don't remember it all. England is such a different world for me, with so many different ways and customs. But the people in the audience laughed, so it must have been funny. Only at the end, it was horrible, horrible.”

“Drink your tea,” the butler said, leaning on his crutches.

When she picked up the saucer, the cup clattered on the plate. Trembling, she raised the tea to her lips. The telephone rang and Winston answered.

“She isn't at home,” he said, hanging up.

As soon as he set the phone down, it rang again. Once again he said the lady of the house wasn't available.

“What happened at the end?” Raji asked.

“At the end, one of the actors pulled out a gun. They fought over it, just like they had fought over the bench. Then the gun went off and the older of the two, the man who was here, fell to the stage. The gunshot was loud, very loud. It echoed all over the theater. There was blood on the stage. Of course, nobody thought it was real. Then your mother cried out. She stood up in her seat and she screamed, ‘NOOO!’”

With trembling hands, the Jewish woman set the cup of tea back on the table. Everyone waited for her to continue. Even the aloof Winston stood riveted. The telephone rang again, but this time the butler didn't bother to answer.

“Then the other actor raised the gun to his head. ‘Candy!’ he cried. ‘I love you!’ Once again, your mother screamed out, but he pulled the trigger. It was awful. The shot was so loud. Now both of the actors were lying dead on the stage. Blood was all over. Your mother yelled out ‘Close the curtain!’ The audience applauded. Nobody knew that the gunshots were real. They must have thought that your mother was a part of the play. The curtain came down and the audience continued to clap. Your mother ran up on the stage. There were murmurs and shouts, then the curtain rose in the air, and there were a dozen people on stage bending over the bodies. ‘They are dead!’ someone yelled. ‘The bullets were real!’ People screamed. A woman in the audience fainted. Suddenly there was silence. Everyone was in shock. ‘It can't be,’ someone said. ‘This must be a part of the play.’ Someone grabbed your mother and dragged her offstage. Then the director ran forward

and yelled out to the audience, 'The art of violence! For the first time in history! A suicide and murder on stage!'"

I listened in shock. The way the distraught woman told it, I felt like I were a part of the audience. The telephone continued to ring, but everyone ignored it.

"When the director said it, there was silence. Then someone in the balcony shouted out, 'Bravo!' Another man yelled out a cheer. Someone in a black leather jacket stood up on a chair and screamed out, 'I love it!' All of a sudden, everybody in the audience began to applaud. Soon everyone was standing up on their feet, giving the director a standing ovation. He bowed and made a sweeping gesture with his arm toward the dead actors. A policeman ran forward and grabbed him. 'The art of violence!' he yelled out with great fervor. 'A mirror of the society we live in! The theater of life!'"

"You mean the director put real bullets in the gun without the actors knowing?" I asked.

"I don't know," the woman answered. "The police took him away. I tried to find your mother, but she was gone too. So I came back here, not knowing what to do."

"If you people don't mind, I would like a drink," the butler said, looking white in the face. He hobbled over to the bar and grabbed a hold of the bottle of Bombay Gin. After downing a few gulps, he picked up the ringing phone.

"Yes, madam," he said, nodding his head. "Yes, madam. Of course, madam. I'll tell him. Certainly, madam, I will."

We all looked at Winston and waited.

"That was your mother," he said. "She's at the airport. She's flying to Scotland for a few days of rest."

"That's all she said?"

"She asked me to buy tomorrow's newspapers and save them for her in the house."

"It was awful," the Jewish woman repeated. "I don't know what will be with my husband now. Who will help me to free him?"

She gazed at me, but I didn't know what to answer. All I could think of were my mother's words before we drove off to the theater.

"You are going to have a wonderful time here in London," she said. "It's the only cultured place left in the world."

#### Chapter Four

#### PARIS

Overnight, the play became world famous. "MURDER IN THE THEATER!" the London Times headline proclaimed. "Not since Macbeth has blood so stained the London stage," the drama critic wrote. Television news and all the morning papers were filled with stories about the theatrical murder and suicide. Scotland Yard was investigating. The director had been arrested, but after a long night of questioning, the police concluded that he had not been involved in the play's tragic climax. The shocking dénouement turned out to be a lover's quarrel instead. After doing away with his rival on stage, Candy's jealous husband bowed to the crowd and blew off his very own head. Police were looking for Gloria Singer, who disappeared right after the show. But no one suspected that she was involved in the shocking affair. Rather, the police wanted her for general questioning.

I read all of the articles on the ferry ride to France. Which was more strange, I wondered? A theater filled with people who stood up and applauded a crazed act of homicide; or a boy who locked himself in his closet to escape a different kind of violence at home? England, I had decided, wasn't the place for me. If adultery and murder were examples of English culture, I wasn't interested. I was searching for something else.

Before leaving the townhouse in London, I called my father on behalf of the Jewish woman from Iran.

"Have her send a brochure," Dad said.

"She doesn't have a brochure."

"Tell her to print one. You can't raise money without a brochure and a video. And have her set up a website too."

“She doesn't have time. Her husband's in prison. The Iranians could execute him at any moment.”

“They want two thousand golf jackets in Chicago!” Ralph Singer barked at some worker.

“Dad, did you hear me? He's in prison. He's innocent. They arrested him because he's a Jew.”

“There are a lot of Jews in prison. I can't help them all. I have my hands full getting the President re-elected. But for your sake, I'll send a check to your mother's address. You just stay out of trouble. Don't get involved with extremists. And tell your mother that her play got great news coverage here. If she wants to bring it to America, I'll back her, though I don't know how we are going to convince actors to blow out their brains every night.”

Without my mother in London, there was no reason for me to stay in the city. Surely in France, I thought, I would find what I was missing. Surely, in Paris, I would discover true culture. Paris was the city of beauty. The city of art. The city of the French Revolution and triumphant world-shaking ideals. There, in Left Bank cafes, Hemingway had sat discussing the deep meanings of modern man's plight. True, the famous novelist had also blown out his brains in the end, but that was after he had written so many good books. Like his old man of the sea, Hemingway had ultimately lost it, but I felt confident that if I could catch it, I would never let it go.

The boat docked at Calais, a short train ride to Paris. Just saying the name gave me shivers. Paris, the city of lights. The city of Albert Camus, Sartre, Ionesco and Beckett. The city of Hugo and Balzac. The studio of Cezanne, Degas, and Rodin. The city of Pablo Picasso and Arpege perfume. Home of the Mona Lisa. Belle Paris. Where Ralph Singer's world-famous jeans, “Parisians,” got their name.

“Going to the beer festival?” a strapping youth asked me as I descended the ramp of the boat. His name was Hans, from Denmark. We had exchanged a few words on the crossing.

“Beer festival?” I asked.

“Sure. The Calais Beer Festival. People come from all over Europe.”

“To do what?”

“To get drunk and have a good time.”

“Why not?” I thought to myself. “Why not?”

Wasn't experiencing new things what traveling was all about? And wasn't I looking for a taste of the world? What did it matter if I reached Paris a few hours later? I had no deadlines to meet. No tests to take. No teachers to please. I was free to do what I wanted. To have fun. To relax. To get drunk and be a part of the world.

Carrying backpacks over our shoulders, the blond Dane and I walked along the Calais dock toward the city. A Mercedes drove by and the driver rolled down his window.

“Heil Hitler!” he yelled.

My body froze. The cry echoed in my ears.

“Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!”

They were the first words I heard on French soil. For some reason, I thought of the Jewish woman from Iran and her husband who was sitting in prison.

The Mercedes swung around, and the driver called out again, “Heil Hitler!”

“What's happening?” I wondered. True, I was a Jew, but I didn't look particularly Jewish. I mean, I didn't have a big nose or anything. Nor did my blond Danish friend.

“He's probably drunk already,” Hans said with a grin.

I tried to shrug it off, but an uneasy feeling stayed with me. Like I said, I never thought about my Jewishness much. Even with Sarah, the Iranian woman, I didn't sympathize with her because she was Jewish, but because her husband had been innocently thrown into jail. That was a universal injustice. Anyone could see the unfairness in that. Of course, I was proud that so many writers and Nobel Prize winners were Jewish, but if you asked me what I was, I would have answered, “An American,” with no second thought.



In fact, I wasn't aware of being Jewish at all. But when the Frenchman in the Mercedes screamed out "Heil Hitler!" something clicked in my head, as if somebody were trying to get my attention.

The feeling returned later that night. The beer festival was held in a gigantic tent, big enough to hold thousands of people. Everyone was gulping down pitchers of beer, and at Hans' spirited urging, I followed suit. Hans dragged me to a long table where a group of local girls were sitting. A band from Berlin was playing loud German music, and everyone in the tent was singing along, "Ienst, deist, tries," to the beat. I mean it was like being in downtown Berlin. Suddenly, a punky-looking youth at the next table stood up and screamed, "Heil Hitler!" Then a man at another table stood up and echoed his cry, "Heil Hitler!" As if on command, people all over the place started rising to their feet, shouting "Heil Hitler!" One by one, all of the young people at my table, Hans included, stood up and yelled out the chant. As I sat in stunned silence, hundreds of beer-drinking Frenchmen jumped up in unison and joined in the Nazi salute. Many of the young people were laughing, but just as many had a mad, frightening look in their icy blue eyes. If there was ever a time I felt like running into a closet, it was then. Trembling, I rose to my feet. As the mob kept shouting, and as the band kept playing a strident German march, I grabbed my backpack and hurried out of the tent.

My heart was pounding.

"Where are you going?" a tender voice asked.

It belonged to a pretty blond girl who had been smiling at me in the tent. I had avoided her glances, but now she was standing right by my side, looking like the star of a French movie. For a moment, I felt I was dreaming. The beer was playing games with my head. A wild roar of shouting and music thundered from out of the tent.

"To Paris," I said.

"Oh, oui?" she said, eyelashes twitching. "Take me along."

"Take you along?"

"Oui, Oui," she said, nodding her head. French perfume floated in

the air around her. I felt I was going to faint.

“You speak English?” I asked.

The girl shrugged. “A little.”

“I learned French in school,” I babbled. “But I forgot most of it. If you don't use a language, you forget it.”

She smiled at me like no one had ever smiled at me in my life. “It doesn't matter,” she said. “I like you.”

“You like me?” I asked.

The French girl nodded her head. “From the first moment I saw you.”

“She likes me,” I thought. From the first moment she saw me. It happened that way in the movies. Maybe that was the way it happened in France. I walked away from the tent to escape the deafening noise. Sure enough, she followed after me, as if we were permanently attached.

“I don't even know your name,” I said.

“Brigitte,” she answered.

Was I dreaming, I wondered? Was this a real person, or an angel who had fallen to earth from outer space?

“My name is Sam,” I said.

She smiled and stood there waiting for my command. The music from inside the tent shook the earth beneath our feet.

“Why is everyone singing in German?” I asked.

She looked at me as if she didn't understand the question.

“I thought the French and the Germans were enemies. You know, the war, la Grande Guerre.”

“Non, pas maintenant. C'est finit. Maintenant, nous sommes amies,” she answered, smiling at me happily. “Now we are friends.”

I nodded. Now what? What was I supposed to do? The truth is, I felt awkward with girls. I felt self-conscious with them. Maybe because my hands shook because of the medicine I had to take. But even afterwards, when my dose was reduced, I never felt relaxed in their presence. A few times, to convince people that I was normal

like everyone else, I had spoken to a female or two. And once, I had taken a girl to a movie. My father had been so happy, you would have thought I had won a Nobel Prize.

“Please take me to Paris with you,” Brigitte begged.

“Have you ever been there?” I asked.

She shook her head no. Her eyes stared at me in anticipation, as if I held a ticket to the world. It was hard to believe that someone could grow up just three hours from Paris and never once visit.

“I guess not everyone in the world is a millionaire,” I reasoned in my head. Probably, in her eyes, I was a prince on a white stallion, the rich American who was going to sweep her away from her poor village and clothe her in diamonds and furs. I was the star of her dream movie, as much as she was the star of mine. With bubbles of beer still bursting in my head, I wanted to believe that this French film could come true.

“What about your parents? Don't you have to tell them?” I asked.

The girl looked sorrowfully down at her feet.

“You don't have parents?” I questioned.

Brigitte shook her head no.

“You're an orphan?”

She nodded.

“Where do you live?”

“In the orphanage.”

My heart sank. How awful. How lonely. My heart reached out for this tormented creature. The beer, the smell of her perfume, and her sing-song French accent, all swirled together to convince me that I was falling in love.

That was it! That was it! Suddenly, an explosion went off in my head. Suddenly, I realized that love was the answer. That's what I was searching for. The thing I was missing was love. That's what I needed. Didn't everyone? Was that so unusual? In a way, both of us were orphans. Both of us were alone.

“How old are you?” I asked.

“Dix-sept ans,” she answered.

Just a year younger than I was. Two voices argued back and forth in my mind, as if they were playing tennis.

“What are you doing with girls?” one voice questioned.

The other voice was my father's. “Take her to Paris,” he urged. “Be a man.”

I couldn't make up my mind.

“If I take you with me, when will you go back to Calais?” I asked.

“Whenever you say.”

She stood on her tiptoes, waiting for me to say yes.

“All right,” I decided. “Let's go.”

Smiling broadly, she reached out to hold my hand.

Woaaa, I thought, stepping back. That's going too fast.

“Let's just be friends,” I said. “Without holding hands.”

She pouted as if I had stepped on her feelings.

“Come on,” I told her. “There's a train at ten o'clock. Maybe we can still catch it.”

Since I didn't know the way to the train station, she had to lead the way. I bought two tickets, and we sat on a bench with ten minutes to spare. She was one happy smile, but I couldn't think of a darn thing to say. Conversation didn't come easy to me. Plus, I didn't know her, and I couldn't ask her questions about her parents. I didn't want to make her feel bad by asking about the orphanage, so I sat quietly with a frozen grin on my face. To break the silence, I tried to remember something in French. A children's poem jumped into my head, and I recited it word for word. “Une, deus, trois, je vais dans le bois....” She laughed when I reached the end of the rhyme. Then, before the train set out, I got up to go the bathroom. When I returned, she was still there, the prettiest sight I had ever seen in my life.

During the journey, Brigitte stared out the window at the dark countryside as if it were daylight outside.

“Have you ever been on a train before?” I asked.

A look of innocence filled her face as she shook her head no.

“It's incredible,” I thought. This simple train ride was one of the

most exciting things in her life.

“Will you take me to America?” she asked.

“Let's get to Paris first,” I answered. But I said to myself, “Wow!”

It seemed to me that she was ready to marry me, right then and there on the train. Like a little girl, she edged closer on the seat and rested her head on my shoulder. I almost passed out. In a short time, she was sleeping. I didn't move. I hardly breathed. Except for my mother and nurses, I had never touched a girl in my life. The scent of her perfume clouded my head, convincing me that I was in love.

When the train arrived in Paris, I woke her. It was almost an hour past midnight. I figured we would walk around the city till dawn. Maybe sleep on a bench in some park. I wasn't going to take her to a hotel, that was for sure.

Once again, when we got off the train, I had to go to the bathroom, to rid myself of the beer I had drunk. This time, when I returned, Brigitte was nowhere in sight. Not by the train, not on the platform where I had left her, not in the train station lobby, nor outside on the street. The love of my life had vanished, as if she had never existed.

“Oh no!” I moaned, rushing back inside the station. Up and down the platforms I searched, but the girl was gone. Lost without a trace. Steam poured out from trains, as if they were exhausted from their journeys. I was exhausted too. Maybe I had said something to hurt her. Maybe I had acted too square. Maybe she had just wanted a free ticket to Paris. Maybe her name wasn't Brigitte and she wasn't an orphan at all.

A profound loneliness, as dark and as cavernous as the Paris train station, swept over me. Once, when I was ten years old, our neighbors' daughter, Sally, would come over to play at our house. One day, to be friendly, I invited her into my closet to see my special place. Frightened, the girl had run off. I sat in the closet and cried. For years after that, I hadn't spoken to any more girls. Now

Brigitte had left me. Just like my mother had left me. Just like my father barely found the time to answer the phone. I had to come to Paris, the city of love, to discover the absence of love in my life.

“Love, love, love,” the Beatles sang. “Love is all you need.”

Well, I had learned my lesson. Love doesn't last. Like the French girl from Calais, love was here today, gone tomorrow.

“IN G-D WE TRUST,” I said aloud, reminding myself of a love which never ended.

With a sunken heart, I made my way out of the station. I was crazy tired, but I didn't want to sleep. So I walked and walked and walked. For a while, I stood at the base of the Eiffel Tower, looking up at the top, but I wasn't impressed. There were buildings much taller in America. I came to the Arch of Triumph, and thought, what's the big deal? As I walked along the Champs Elysées, mannequins stared out at me from the windows of expensive boutiques. There were Yves St. Laurent fashions, Arpège perfumes, Cartier watches, Gucci handbags, and yes, wouldn't you know it, a store window dressed up with Ralph Singer's bargain-priced sportswear.

It was late, but there were still lots of couples on the street. Cars and taxis streaked by. The smell of freshly baked bread filled the air. Exhausted, I sat at a table in an open cafe. I didn't spot Hemingway or Samuel Beckett, but among all the bohemians and tourists, there was probably a serious artist or two.

Then suddenly, I saw her. In a corner, sitting with a group of Paris hippies was Brigitte, looking at home with the crowd. She glanced over at me without batting an eye and kept on flirting with the guys at her sides.

I sat frozen, not knowing what I should do. A waiter came by and stood by my table, holding a small pad in his hand.

“Un Perrier,” I said, ordering a glass of French mineral water.

“Quoi?” the Frenchman asked.

“Un Perrier,” I repeated in my best French accent.

“Quoi?” the waiter repeated, as if he didn't understand.

“Un Perrier,” I said again, rolling the “r” and lifting up my voice at the end of the word as if I were another Yves Montand.

The uppity waiter looked at me with a puzzled expression as if I had spoken Chinese.

“Un Perrier!” I yelled, drawing a few curious looks from the neighboring tables.

“Oh, je comprends,” said the Frenchman. “Un Perrier!”

“That's right. Un Perrier. Just like I said.”

“Si vous plait,” the waiter answered with a bow.

“Si vous plait, my you know what,” I said when the smug character walked away.

Who did he think he was – Charles de Gaulle? So what if I didn't speak French like a native. Was that a reason to make me feel like a piece of uncivilized dirt? If that was the way things were in France, the waiter could drink his precious water himself. Without waiting for him to return, and without giving Brigitte another glance, I stood up and walked out of the cafe. “Who needs either of them?” I said to anyone who wanted to hear.

“Monsieur, votre Perrier!” the waiter called out when I was a good distance away down the street.

I kept on walking without turning back.

“Cochan!” the waiter shouted, calling me a pig.

“Look who's talking,” I mumbled.

“Heil Hitler!” the waiter yelled out.

That was the third round of “Heil Hitlers!” in less than a day.

“Am I in France, or the Third Reich?” I wondered.

Quickly, I strode through the chilly night. Were the French people half Doberman that they could tell a Jew by his smell? And so what if I were Jewish, what difference did it make? Jews were no different than anyone else. At least, that's what I thought back then.

Before long, I came to the Louvre, the most famous museum of art in the world. A wide concrete staircase led up to a cobblestoned plaza. The complex of grand, stately buildings housed some of the greatest creative achievements of man. A palace of civilization.

From ancient man till today. Somewhere inside was the famed Mona Lisa. Maybe she held the secret. Maybe she could whisper to me the answer I was searching to find. Millions of people had found something extraordinary in her smile. Maybe Sam Singer would too.

At that hour of the night, the plaza was deserted. A black African worker swept up litter, and a few sleepless pigeons scavenged for crumbs. Slipping my backpack down to the ground, I sat on the ledge of a small fountain and splashed some water onto my face. In the center of the small pool, a stream of water splashed out from a naked cherub, as if he were taking a pee. To tell you the truth, I was surprised to find such a ribald figure outside an institution as revered as the Louvre. I mean if a person were to behave that way in the plaza, the first passing gendarme would surely arrest him. But, I reasoned, if the statue was here at the Louvre, then it was obviously a work of serious art.

“Hey, dude,” I heard someone call.

The voice belonged to a black man, not the African cleaning the plaza, but a hip-looking American Negro, with a short beard, sunglasses, and a saxophone slung over his shoulder.

“Hang onto my horn while I join our brother here,” he said, handing me his musical instrument.

Wobbling as if he were drunk, he stood up on the ledge of the fountain and faced the cherub. When at the Louvre, do as the cherubs do. I moved away to avoid getting splashed. When he finished, the musician washed his hands in the fountain and took off his sunglasses to rub water on his face. He gazed my way with two bloodshot eyes and reached out for his saxophone. Skillfully, his fingers began to dance over the keys. A sad, soulful melody sounded from the horn, as if from the depths of his being.

“Summertime, and the livin' is easy....”

I knew the words of the ballad. It had been written by Gershwin for the musical “Porgy and Bess.”

“Hush little baby, doooon't you cry.”



When the jazzman finished, he looked over and grinned.

"A concert at the Louvre, now that's real jazz," he said. "Have a seat, white brother. Admission is free."

I sat down beside him. Including the cherub, we made up a trio.

"You ever wonder why it is that street sweepers are always black?" the saxophonist asked, motioning to the worker in the plaza.

"Not really," I said.

"Well, I'll tell you. It's because the black people are cursed."

When I was silent, the jazz musician went on with his sermon.

"You can read it right in the Bible. That's right. In the Bible. Noah's son Ham did somethin' a man doesn't do to his father, and the L-rd cursed him right there on the spot. From that day on, all of Ham's children were born black men and slaves."

Long black fingers reached into a shirt pocket and pulled out a crumpled cigarette. I knew right away it was grass.

"Damn," he said, straightening the joint.

I looked around to make sure that no policemen were watching.

"Hey brother, can you spare a light?" the black man asked.

"I'm sorry, but I don't smoke," I answered.

"Don't smoke?" the Negro answered astounded. "Are you from outer space? Get with it, boy. Get social."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a pack of matches. Setting the joint at the edge of his lips, he struck a match and lit the tip of the cigarette. Inhaling deeply, a smile shone over his face. A sweet, pungent aroma rose in the air. Then, as if he were playing his saxophone, he blew a cloud of smoke into my face.

"The best cannabis that Paris has to offer," he said, offering the marijuana my way.

The truth is, I had only tried smoking grass twice in my life, once with my brother, and once at a dormitory party in college, when everyone was smoking and I didn't want to seem like a nerd. I had held the smoke in my lungs like everyone else, but I had felt nothing at all. While my friends all got stoned, I stayed as straight

as a ruler.

“You don't want to smoke?” the musician asked when I didn't reach out my hand. “Don't tell me that you got a hate against black people too?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” I stuttered.

“Then take it, boy, fast. You're wasting my weed.”

“What the heck?” I thought. I had set out to experience the world, hadn't I?

I reached out and took the joint from the outstretched black hand. The saxophone player was probably the closest I was going to get to meeting any real bohemian type in Paris. Plus, I didn't want to cause any racial scene, not when I was the only white guy in sight. So I took a long puff on the grass. Once again, the saxophone player started to play. Not knowing what to do with the cigarette, I took another deep drag. This time, when I inhaled the marijuana, I saw a stop light go off in my brain.

“Finish it, bro,” I heard the musician say. “I'm doing just fine where I am.”

The lit end of the joint was getting close to my fingernails. When I took another long hit, I heard a crackling of seeds. When I exhaled, smoke seem to pour out from my nose, as if I had turned into a dragon. Glancing at the cherub in the fountain, I cracked up with laughter. Suddenly, the little pisher looked hysterically funny.

“Hey!” I called out as the saxophone player zigzagged away with his music.

The black man held up his hand. “You finish it, man,” he said, continuing to play on his horn.

“Keep cool, brother,” I shouted, waving goodbye.

“Elijah's the name,” the musician called back, raising up a fist in a final salute.

Across the Louvre plaza, a young couple stood by a distant wall, overlooking the glittering city. Wouldn't you know it! It was Brigitte! And who was she with? The nasty waiter from the cafe! Deciding to give her a piece of my mind, I hurried over, planning

to tell them both off. But when I reached them, I saw that it wasn't Brigitte and the waiter at all. The surprised couple gazed at me questioningly.

"Sorry," I said, realizing that the marijuana was playing games with my mind.

Shaking their heads, the couple walked on.

You would have thought that I'd start feeling lonely, but all of a sudden, I felt as happy as could be.

"Yaahooo," I shouted out.

I was stoned! Finally. For the first time in my life. Welcome to the hip generation.

Sometimes, the medications which I had been fed had spaced me out of my mind, but this sensation was different. The marijuana made me feel... yes, that was it exactly... just like Simon and Garfunkel had sung... it made me feel "groovy." The street sweeper glanced over at me and turned disinterestedly back to his work. Apparently, I wasn't the first American tourist he had seen stoned in Paris. Happily, like a ten-year-old kid, I ran back to the fountain and jumped up onto the ledge. Holding my arms out for balance, I walked quickly around the circular base. Around and around the fountain I ran. Missing a step, I pirouetted in a slow-motion ballet over the water and fell into the fountain with a splash. Laughing, I climbed out of the drench. My clothes were soaked. My backpack was dripping. My wallet was soggy with water.

"Singing in the rain. I'm singing in the rain," I sang, dancing around the fountain like Gene Kelly.

Suddenly, a heavy exhaustion fell over my limbs. With two hours to kill before sunrise, I looked around and spotted a modern sculpture in the plaza garden, a great stone hand modeled after the famous hand of the sculptor Rodin. With a chuckle, I walked over and climbed dizzily up into the palm. Kicking off my wet shoes, I lay back as if I were reclining in a convertible sofa. "IN G-D WE TRUST," I thought, feeling secure in the comforting hand. Closing

my eyes, I dreamed I was soaring through space.

When the museum opened in the morning, I was the first person on line. Giggling with the knowledge that I was stoned, I bought a ticket with my credit card and strode into the impressive, classical lobby. I decided to start my tour with the ancients, ready for a voyage through history. Certainly the geniuses whose paintings and sculptures filled the galleries of the Louvre, creators of the world's most sublime works of art, certainly these gifted men, the most noble homeo-sapians to have ever stood upright on earth, certainly they had THE ANSWER. Certainly they knew what was the real MEANING OF LIFE. Certainly they had uncovered the PURPOSE OF LIVING.

Ladies and gentlemen, step right up to the magical mystery tour. Hop aboard the yellow submarine. Fasten your seat belts for a journey on our incredible time machine. Ten seconds to lift off... four, three, two, one... blast off!

Gallery One was devoted to Primitive Man. Slabs of rock fifteen thousand years old. Cave drawings. Deers, antelopes, warriors ravaging their kill. Great, great, great grandpa, the hunter, was hungry. So was I. Maybe it was the grass, but I was dying for food. Keeping an eye out for a coffee shop, I time-warped on into the next gallery, five thousand years later. The hall was filled with statues. Little statues, bigger statues. Little gods, bigger gods. The search for divinity had started. Once ancient man's stomach was full, he began to think about where he had come from. There were gods from Africa, Mesopotamia, and Peru. Gods from temples and from the burial chambers of kings. Statues with heads, and heads without statues. And lots and lots of fertility gods, round naked women from all over the world.

"The first Barbie dolls," I thought with a laugh.

Apparently, my laughter was louder than I thought. Two over perfumed and very properly dressed ladies glanced over at me with disapproving frowns.

"One doesn't laugh at great art," one of them said in a snobbish

French accent.

I was sick and tired of all the French phonies I had met.

“I used to make junk like this out of mud,” I told them. “If this is great art, then I am a great artist too.”

“Never in my life!” I heard one of the old crows exclaim as I headed out of the hall.

The next towering doorway brought me to “Early Civilization” and “Egypt.”

“Spooky,” I said with a whistle. The place was like a graveyard. Tombs and more tombs. Mummies and dummies. Nefertiti’s and Pharaohs. Everyone seemed to be hung up on death.

Strange, I thought. With so many creative artists, why didn't somebody invent women's clothes? It seemed that in all of ancient Egypt, there wasn't a tailor to be found.

Still stoned on the grass, I heard a voice sound in my ears. “This is your pilot speaking. You are now flying high over Greece.”

Next stop – the world of Greek art. Pots and pans, pans and pots. Obviously, the early Greeks spent lots of time in the kitchen. But wait, something new! History progresses. Not only is man eating, procreating, and worshipping gods, he and his gods have gone off to war. Walls filled with killings, murder, and rape. In other words: civilization!

Surely in “Later Greece” things would get better, I thought. But wait – in the next gallery, to my dismay, man had discarded his clothing completely. The Singer Fashions company would have gone out of business in Athens. Everyone walked around naked. Kings and queens, gods and goddesses, warriors and athletes, all of them stood naked and proud. Nobody had any clothes on at all!

To tell you the truth, I was dumbfounded. Blushing, I gazed down to the floor. Like I said, I was always kind of modest. Even as a child, I didn't like to get undressed if my brother was in the room. Later in high school, I felt uncomfortable changing into my gym suit in the locker room with all the other guys, and after sports class, I never showered until I got home. When it came to women,

by L.A. standards, I was a creature from outer space. Though beautiful models were a part of my youth, as common as orange juice, I never got used to seeing women scantily dressed. In a way, I felt as embarrassed for them, as I did for myself.

So, to put it mildly, I was blown away by all the nudity I found in the Louvre. Averting my gaze from all of the unclad Grecians, I hurried into the next chamber. Rome. What a relief. At least here in the palaces of the Caesar, the people wore robes. No wonder. Christianity had arrived on the scene. I wasn't a big fan of religion, but at least the saints pictured in the mosaics and frescoes were men and women of the cloth.

As I took in the ecclesiastical paintings, a teacher led a group of schoolchildren through the gallery. Letting my imagination run freely, I wondered what the kids must be thinking as they were led on the museum tour. First, man had worshipped all kinds of gods. Then, disgusted with his gods, man threw off his clothes and worshipped himself. Now, after Rome had slaughtered all enemies, mankind had gone off to church. On the walls of the Louvre, there were baptisms, gospels, trinities, icons, annunciations, nativities, virgin Madonnas, temptations, crucifixions, last suppers, and judgments wherever you looked. Nobody smiled. Eyes told a story of suffering, darkness, and pain. Gallery after gallery, painting after painting, depression, depression, depression. On the wall, a concise history of the era explained that Christianity had conquered the world. Once again, women were stripped of their clothes, but now it was in the name of religion. Sanctioned pornography, approved by the Church. Sin and be saved, sin and be saved, sin and be saved....

“What's the difference between this museum and a dirty magazine?” I wondered. So far, at least to my way of thinking, it was just plain straightforward lewdness in the name of GREAT ART.

Believe me, I needed a break. I was starving. Little by little, as the marijuana wore off, I felt I was parachuting back down to

earth. Finally, I found a cafeteria and purchased a plate of greasy French fries. Wolfing them down, I tried digesting what I had seen. If art was man's way of grappling for meaning, then for at least half of world history, man had been fixated with religion and sex. Like a giant movie screen, the walls of the Louvre depicted a battle between two raging forces. Eager to see who would win, I finished the French fries and hurried back on my tour.

The next stop in the voyage was Islam. "Where were the Jews?" I wondered. Apparently, the curators of the museum had decided that they had nothing to do with either religion or art. If you ask me, Islamic art wasn't very inspiring, but at least you could look at it without turning red. By the thirteenth century, the warring Moslems had conquered half of the world. But as soon as Mohammed had died, orgies were back on the walls. So here, with half of world history behind me, and another half of the Louvre to go, mankind was still caught in a war between Heaven and Hell.

Exhausted from the miles of walking, I kept on my mission, determined to solve the great riddle. Once I understood from the world's greatest artists what life was truly about, I would set my path on that course.

Certainly, I thought, the Renaissance would do away with all that. I had studied about the grand epoch in prep school. It had been a time of social rebirth, intellectual revival, religious and political change. But to my horror, the galleries were splattered with more bloody crucifixions, more embarrassing statues, more pornographic nudes. True, the artwork was finer. The figures burst from their canvases with a remarkable life, but everybody walked around nude. Fed up with church, everyone had ripped off their clothes.

To tell you the truth, I felt sick to my stomach. Standing next to me in the gallery, a scholarly-looking professor with glasses and a tiny goatee lectured a group of university students with notebooks. With a serious expression, he pointed to a large canvas which pictured Christian soldiers carrying off half-naked women to rape.

“Look at the wonderful attention to detail,” the professor exclaimed with a tone of great praise. “Look at the realism. The almost photographic sensuousness. The vitality of robust expression. We feel that we ourselves are engaged in the passionate battle.”

Honestly, I didn't do it on purpose, but listening to the guy made me sick. The greasy French fries I had stuffed down for breakfast rose up in my throat. Before I could control it, all the food I had eaten burst from my mouth with an incredible force. The vomit arched through the air like a cannonball and exploded in the art professor's face. Students cried out in revulsion. Ketchup dripped down the poor guy's goatee as if he were wounded. Behind him, the famous painting was splattered with grease.

Man, you should have seen the look of surprise on the professor's face. With one of his fingers, he wiped an undigested French fry off the rim of his glasses. I bolted from the room as fast as I could. Leaving the students to shake the vomit off their notebooks, I raced through the rest of the Renaissance like a bat out of Hell. In my rush, I forgot the Mona Lisa. A small crowd was gathered around some painting, but I didn't stop to see it. Who knows? Maybe it's not such a big deal after all.

I kept walking briskly, certain that the cops or the museum security were hot on my tail. Hurrying through the age of Baroque, you could tell that the power of the Church had lessened and political freedom was on the rise. To be sure, there were still naked angels and orgies, but a gallery of wonderfully drawn portraits showed that artists were beginning to think about other matters as well. Once again, women wore clothes. The inner man was becoming important. Life itself was a subject for study. Scenes from nature and from the home graced the walls of the seemingly endless museum.

It seemed like mankind had crawled out of the Dark Ages. Man's focus was turning away from heaven and hell to investigate what was happening on earth. But all I could think of was finding the



exit before the French-fried professor had me thrown out by force.

In my rush, I only got a glimpse of the French masters, but it was enough to make me blush and keep my eyes glued to the floor. Ingres, Delacroix, Courbet and Monet were back in the brothel. Heaven had been abandoned completely. Painting after painting, however skillfully drawn, were, to be truthful, nothing but elegant smut.

True, there were Millet, Corot, Daumier, and Van Gogh – they were good painters, but Renoir was a threat to society, and Gauguin was as debauched as the Greeks. For once and for all, religion had vanished. Immorality was a respected subject for art! The modern world had freaked out completely. By the time of Picasso, a nude didn't even look like a nude. An atomic bomb had exploded, shattering all of life into pieces. Paintings were backwards and sideways and hung upside down. Finger-painting had made a big comeback. Scribbling was lauded. Graffiti and comic strips were considered great works of art. Ordinary junk thrown out on the street was piled up on the museum floor. Nothing had any meaning at all.

Reaching the museum exit, I felt super wiped out. History had come full circle, like a cat chasing after its tail. The paintings of Picasso were no more advanced than the primitive paintings engraved on cave walls. In the neck-and-neck race between heaven and earth, heaven was definitely the loser. The fertility goddesses of old took the prize. If you went by the artists at the Louvre, the main thing on man's mind was sex.

What an incredible bummer. I mean, growing up in Hollywood, I knew that already. I didn't have to spend a day at the Louvre to be taught about the birds and the bees. Sure, at the famous French museum it was packaged in a fancier wrapping, but it was smut all the same. Wasted, I staggered out of the door of the Louvre. For the first time in hours, fresh air filled my lungs. I walked off into the Paris sunset, wondering what was left to believe in? Politics? I had learned from President Bill Boston that politics was the

craving for power, dressed up in flags and balloons. Business? My father had taught me that business was the science of taking money away from the poor. Theater? Thanks to my mother, I had discovered dead bodies lurking behind the curtain of the touted English stage. And the Louvre was a fig leaf for porn.

Suddenly, a tremendous lightning bolt lit up the sky. A crashing of thunder echoed over the city. Rain started to pour down in pellets. People on the street scurried for shelter. Another flash of lightning pierced through my consciousness like an electric shock through my brain. I stood on the sidewalk, gazing up at the heavens.

“Is that You up there, G-d?” I called out to the clouds.

Another blast of thunder shook the Paris street.

“Where are You hiding?” I yelled.

Certainly G-d wasn't in the theater district of London. He wasn't in the Louvre. Why was He so hard to find? I knew He existed. In my closet, I sensed He was there. But I couldn't spend my life in a closet. Certainly neither could G-d. Both of us had to come out of the darkness. We had to meet someplace. But where?

In the distance, over the rooftops of Paris, the towering steeples of Notre Dame stretched toward the tempestuous heavens. Of course, I realized, as a bolt of lightning flashed through the night. That's where G-d was hiding – in the world's most famous cathedral!

I mean, religion might be phony, but G-d Himself was real. Sure, I knew He was everywhere, but I figured, just like everyone else, He must have a home base too. Impulsively, I ran out into the street. I held up my hand and tried to flag down a taxi, but they all sped by in the rain carrying passengers. So I started to jog. I ran from the Right bank to the Left, and from the Left Bank to the Right. Bridges stretched over the Seine. The water in the river raced swiftly in the storm. By the time I reached Pont Neuf, I was drenched. A bolt of lightning leaped out from the sky, illuminating Paris like an El Greco painting.

The rain was still streaking down in blasts of gusty wind as I stood panting for breath before the towering cathedral. Notre Dame looked like a nightmarish fortress against the dark, gloomy sky. Its gothic steeples jutted up toward the heavens like missiles. Its flying buttresses gave it the look of a warship. Like watchdogs, the famous gargoyles sprang out from its towers as if poised for attack.

It seemed strange. Instead of making me feel closer to G-d, the awesome structure made me feel like running away.

“Sanctuary! Sanctuary!” I shouted out, recalling the famous line from the movie.

What a movie! Like I said, I had never been crazy about films, but *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was the best. Not the Walt Disney version. Nor the remakes with Anthony Quinn and Lon Chaney. It was Charles Laughton's *Quasimodo* that I would never forget. I suppose I identified with the tormented cripple. His loneliness and pathetic smile, his searching eye and tender heart which nobody detected. And *Quasimodo* too had a closet of sorts – the bell tower, where he could hide from the hostile world.

“Sanctuary! Sanctuary!” I yelled, stooping over like the immortal bell-ringer of old. To tell you the truth, I was still pretty stoned.

A crowd of tourists climbing off a bus looked over at me as they hurried to get out of the rain.

“There's *Quasimodo*!” one of them called out in fun.

I didn't know if they were headed for late or early mass, but I decided to join them. I fell into line with the sightseers as they dashed out from the rain. The tour guide blew a whistle and everyone looked up at the gory Last Judgment which was sculpted on the front facade of the church. After a brief explanation, the guide led the way through the great iron doors. If the exterior was foreboding, the inside was even more ghoulish. The walls of the nave ascended to a dizzying height. Great barrel vaults extended the length of the ceiling. Stain glass windows surrounded the apse. A feeling of gloom hung in the air like a shroud. The tour guide called the building a classic in French Gothic design. Lecturing, he

led the way up the central aisle to the statue of the Virgin Mary in the choir.

“Please, no photographs,” he said. “You can purchase a souvenir book on the way out.”

After giving people a few minutes to pray, the guide herded the group back out to their bus. I lingered behind in the shadows. Candles flickered in an alcove devoted to individual prayer. The iron door closed with a clang, leaving me all alone in the cavernous cathedral. I gazed up at the statues of saints who seemed to be guarding the chamber. The place was so spooky, I wouldn't have been surprised if Quasimodo himself swung down from the upper gallery on one of his bell ropes.

“HELLO,” I called out. “ANYBODY HOME?”

“ANYBODY HOME? ANYBODY HOME?” came the echo throughout the great hall.

I walked along the pews toward what looked like a stage. When in Rome, I thought, do as the Romans do. Imitating the tourists, I bowed my head and prayed.

“Please G-d, help me find You. Please G-d, I know that You are there. Help me. Talk to me. Let me know that You're listening.”

I shut my eyes and stayed as quiet as I could, but I didn't hear a peep in return. Opening my eyes, I looked at the Virgin.

“I don't suppose you hear me, do you?” I asked. The Virgin Mary was as silent as the stone out of which she was chiseled.

I gazed up at a statue of the famous crucifixion. “How about you? Do you hear me?”

The lifeless figure on the cross didn't answer. I wasn't surprised. It seemed pretty stupid to expect an answer from wood.

Moving on, I walked over to a statue that could have been Peter or Paul.

“What about you, pal? Can you tell me the way to the boss?”

“Perhaps I can help you,” a voice behind me said.

I nearly jumped out of my skin. I turned and saw a priest standing a few feet away. Funny, but the guy looked exactly like one of the

statues, with the same stony stare. He wore a head covering and the gown of a clergyman, just like the statue of Paul.

"Maybe," I answered. Instinctively, I glanced toward the door. The priest kept staring at me, waiting for some explanation.

"I'm looking for G-d," I told him.

"G-d?" the cathedral keeper answered with a tone of question in his voice.

"This is a place of worship, isn't it?" I asked.

"It is and it isn't. These days, it's mainly a place for tourists to visit. But right now, the cathedral is closed."

"I'm from America," I said.

"I gathered from your accent," the man answered without the trace of a smile.

"I've come a long way."

"A pilgrim."

"In a way."

"Would you like to confess?"

"Confess what?"

"Your sins."

"My sins?"

"Yes. Sins are what separate a person from G-d. His son offers the way to forgiveness."

I thought for a moment. I was looking for G-d, not His kid. What help could you expect from a statue, or from a guy who had gotten himself nailed to a cross? If he couldn't help himself, how was he going to help me? Especially since he had been dead for the last two-thousand years. But having come all the way to Notre Dame in the rain, I figured I might as well give confession a try. Why not? No one in France knew me. No one could see me. If it helped, fine. And if not, I had nothing to lose.

The priest led me to a confessional booth and disappeared into the cubicle next door. I sat in the small, dark chamber, feeling that I had journeyed back to my closet.

"Begin, my son," I heard the clergyman say from behind the

partition.

I didn't know what to tell him.

"Have you been with women?" the disembodied voice asked.

"No," I replied.

"Never?"

"Never."

"You're from America?"

"Beverly Hills."

"And you've never been with a woman?"

"That's right," I replied. "They make me feel nervous."

"I see," the voice said.

For a moment, the cathedral keeper was silent.

"Do you steal?" he finally asked.

"No."

"Do you curse?"

"No."

"Have you taken the L-rd's name in vain?"

"Not that I know of," I said.

"Do you lie?" the voice asked quickly, as if to catch me off guard.

"I try not to," I answered.

"But you have."

"Maybe."

"Say a Hail Mary," the clergyman commanded.

"Hail Mary," I said, immediately feeling I had done something wrong. In a way, it sounded like "Heil, Hitler." I was determined not to say it again.

"Do you believe in the Trinity, the Father, the son, and the holy ghost?" the faceless voice asked.

"No," I replied, telling him the truth.

"Say twenty Hail Mary's," the stern voice demanded.

"I can't."

"Why can't you?"

"Mary is just a statue," I said.

"Just a statue?"

“That's right. And the son business is a lot of baloney.”

In the sudden stillness, I could hear a rumble of thunder outside the cathedral.

“How can a Catholic boy say that?” the priest finally asked.

“I'm not Catholic,” I said.

“A Protestant even.”

“I'm not a Protestant either.”

There was a deathly silence. I heard the door to the confession booth open. Then the clergyman yelled.

“GET OUT OF THIS BUILDING YOU STINKING DIRTY JEW!”

“GET OUT OF THIS BUILDING YOU STINKING DIRTY JEW!”

“GET OUT OF THIS BUILDING YOU STINKING DIRTY JEW!”

His curse echoed off the walls. It rang through the confessional booth like a Bose stereo speaker. Every statue in the cathedral seemed to be yelling:

“YOU STINKING DIRTY JEW!”

“YOU STINKING DIRTY JEW!”

“YOU STINKING DIRTY JEW!”

The cathedral keeper was trembling. Raising an arm, he pointed his finger to the door. A crack of lightning sounded on cue. With a wrathful expression, he cursed me again.

A chorus of statues sang out behind him, led by JC on the cross and backed up by Peter, Paul, and Mary.

“YOU STINKING DIRTY JEW!”

“YOU STINKING DIRTY JEW!”

To tell you the truth, I was happy to leave. The place gave me the creeps. And the priest was out of his marbles completely. If anyone belonged in a psycho ward, it was him. Outside, as another angry bolt of lightning flashed in the night, the cathedral took on a nightmarish glow.

One thing was certain. Wherever G-d was hiding, it sure wasn't in

Notre Dame.

Chapter Five

ROME

Ralph Singer had always taught his children to go straight to the top.

“Don't waste your time with assistants,” he preached. “Go to the boss.”

That's why, before giving up on religion, I decided to talk to the Pope. After all, the priest, or bishop, or whatever he was in the Notre Dame Cathedral was only a clerk in the organization. I knew from my Dad that if I wanted real answers, I would have to go right up to the top of the totem pole.

Noise and pollution that was Rome. Cars honked at each other in an endless traffic jam. But it was a pretty city, an outdoor museum filled with sculptures and magnificent fountains. I asked the taxi driver to drive by the famous Roman Colosseum on the way to the Vatican. In a couple places, the high, stone walls were crumbling, but, thanks to restoration work, the impressive amphitheater was still on its feet.

“Do they use the stadium for bullfights?” I asked the driver.

“Bullfights?” he laughed. “You've got your country's confused. They have bullfights in Spain.”

“What about soccer games? The Italians like soccer, don't they?”

“Yeah, sure. It's the national sport. But they don't play here.”

“What about gladiator fights?” I said in jest.

“Ha ha, that's a good one,” the taxi driver laughed. “It would probably bring a lot of tourists. In fact, it wouldn't be a bad idea if they threw a few Jews to the lions each day.”

That ended that conversation. Glued to the dashboard was a small, plastic Jesus. For a moment, I thought I heard the roar of a crowd as Pontius Pilot held up his hand thumbs down, ordering the death of a Jew.

The taxi driver looked at me in his rear-view mirror. “You're not a Jew, are you?” he asked.



“No,” I answered, not wanting to take any chances.

“I didn't think so, going to the Vatican, you know what I mean. Don't get me wrong. I don't have anything personal against the Jews. It's just that they want to take over everything. I can't stand them. You know what I mean?”

“I've always believed that G-d loves everyone the same,” I answered.

“Except for the Jews,” he insisted.

I sat in silence the rest of the trip and paid the fare without leaving a tip. Suffering the driver's abuse was bad enough, I didn't have to make him rich.

“Fungul!” the driver called out, holding up his middle finger. “I get better tips from Jews!”

A few times in grade school, I had been called a dirty Jew, but that was just the way kids cursed when they got mad – like calling a black kid a nigger, or a Puerto Rican a spic. But this guy was different. The Italian taxi driver really had a thing against Jews. His hatred ran deep, as if the blood of his little plastic savior was fresh on the cross.

“If this was a sample of Rome, what's the Vatican going to be like?” I thought, walking cautiously into the Vatican complex, the fortress of Christianity, and the bastion of the Church.

The rows and rows of massive buildings had the formidable look of the Pentagon. For a moment, as I followed a sign toward the Sistine Chapel, I had the feeling that I had wandered into a military compound.

“Nonsense,” I told myself.

I mean, hadn't I grown up with Christians? They were as nice as everyone else. It wasn't right to let one rotten apple spoil the barrel. So what if the taxi driver was prejudiced? People were entitled to their opinions. That didn't mean that all Christians were enemies.

Talk about statues! The Sistine Chapel was a miniature Louvre. Statues of Peter, Paul, Mary, John, Matthew, and Luke. Enough saints to make up an army. And paintings! Who could count them?

But the thing which blew me away was the ceiling. Michelangelo's masterpiece. It was bonkers. Genius. Absolutely real. In the center of the Story of Creation, there was a vision more profound than anything I had ever seen. It was the painting of paintings, the scene of scenes, the moment of moments, a white\_ bearded figure coming out from the clouds, reaching down to earth with an outstretched finger to endow man with life.

I couldn't believe it. I sat down on the floor. I fell onto my back and stared up at the ceiling.

"IN G-D WE TRUST," I said under my breath.

It's hard to describe, but the focus of all of my being centered on one incredible detail on the ceiling – the hand of G-d reaching out to give life to man. If one image in the world could express my most inward desire, this was it. My gaze zoomed in like a movie-camera. Instinctively, my own hand reached up, like Adam, to touch the outstretched finger.

"Excuse me, please," a voice called out.

A security guard towered above me, blocking my view of the ceiling.

"If you are tired, there are chairs in the lobby," he said.

"I'm not tired," I replied. "I'm looking at the ceiling."

"I'm afraid you will have to look at it on your feet."

I sat up reluctantly. In truth, it was a much better perspective from the floor. After all, that's how Michelangelo painted the ceiling – lying on a scaffold on his back.

"How long did it take him?" I asked, standing up.

The guard didn't answer. Art history wasn't his department. There were cassettes and headsets in the lobby for people who wanted educational tours.

"Twenty-two years," a different voice replied. It belonged to a bishop, or a cardinal, or priest of some sort. Not the same one from the Notre Dame Cathedral, though he could have been his twin.

"That certainly is a long time for a painting," I said.

"Indeed it is," the bishop agreed.

“Today, I bet paintings don't take more than a day.”

“People are in a hurry,” the bishop observed.

I nodded. The two Italians stood eyeballing me like I was a thief.

“Perhaps I can help you?” the clergyman asked.

“Maybe,” I said. “I'd like to see the Pope.”

The security guard seemed to stiffen. At the mention of the Pope, his shoulders stood up like a Doberman's ears. For a few seconds, the bishop was silent. His eyebrows rose up over his eyeglasses, reminding me of Uncle Ed.

“The Pope?” he asked in surprise.

“That's right,” I answered. “This is the Vatican, isn't it?”

The guard and the bishop exchanged a brief look.

“It is,” the bishop agreed.

“Well, he lives here, doesn't he?”

“Yes, he does. But I am afraid he doesn't have private audiences.”

“I only want to ask a few questions.”

“Perhaps I can answer them. Would you like to step into my office?”

“No, thank you,” I said. “I really want to see the Pope myself. I won't take up much of his time.”

The bishop glanced at the guard once again and smiled. “Well, it is an unusual request, but I can pass it along to the proper department. Why don't you come with me to my office, and I will make a phone call or two.”

“Thanks, but I want to look around a bit more,” I told him.

“Of course,” the bishop said. “I'll go and make the calls while you look around.” The Vatican official turned to the security guard. “In the meantime, you'll help our friend....”

“Sam.”

The bishop smiled. “You'll help our friend, Sam.”

“Of course,” the guard said.

“If you don't mind, I'd rather look around alone,” I told them.

“Certainly,” the bishop answered. “I understand. You go ahead. The guard will bring you to my office when you finish.”

The guard nodded his head.

“Sam who?” the bishop asked.

I wondered if I should give them a phony name. You see, I didn't want an audience with the Pope just because I was the son of Ralph Singer. But I figured if they asked for my passport, they'd find out the truth for themselves.

“Sam Singer.”

“Fine, Mr. Singer,” the bishop said with a statue-like smile. “I'll see if I can set up an appointment.”

“And run my name through the Interpol files,” I thought, flashing him back the same phony grin.

The bishop walked away. The security guard retreated to a corner of the church where he kept a careful eye on me while I stood looking up at the painting.

“Please, G-d, if you are here, help me to find You,” I said under my breath. I felt kind of bad praying in a church in the Vatican, but I was really inspired by the Michelangelo painting.

A few minutes later, the bishop returned.

“I made a few phone calls,” he said. “The guard will take you over to our Tourist Office. Perhaps they can help you there.”

The security guard led me out the building and down a narrow cobblestone alley. The shortcut led to a big plaza surrounded by four-story buildings, each a block long. Pigeons scurried about everywhere, looking like miniature nuns. The architecture was definitely Roman, featuring columns, corinthes, and friezes. High atop one building was a terrace which I recognized from television. That's where the Pope stood when he blessed the throngs of pilgrims who gathered for holidays and special events. But instead of entering the Pope's palace, the security guard led Sam into another, less grandiose building. A sign on the entrance read Vatican Security Services.

“What's this?” I asked.

“Standard procedure,” the guard answered.

Inside was a complex of crowded, bustling offices. The place was

as well-staffed and equipped as FBI Headquarters in Washington D.C. Most of the workers wore the official security uniform of the Vatican City Police. The guard led me down a long corridor, past a large computer room, and several rooms filled with closed-circuit TV's. A dozen security agents sat facing the monitors, which watched over the Vatican's hidden catacombs and treasures.

I was taken to a stark interrogation room. A blank-faced inquisitor sat at a plain desk, flanked by a security guard who stood as rigid as the bobby at Buckingham Palace. Another guard, at least seven feet tall, stood posted at the door. Up on a wall, a closed-circuit camera was aimed down at my head.

"Your passport," the Inquisitor said.

I handed over the document. The Inquisitor glanced at it with an experienced eye and passed it on to the guard, who clicked his heels and strode out from the room.

"Empty the contents of your pockets on the table," the Inquisitor commanded.

"What are you looking for?" I asked.

"Weapons," the Inquisitor answered bluntly.

"I don't have any," I replied, feeling a drop of sweat form under my armpit.

Obediently, I put my wallet and some coins on the table.

"What do you have in your backpack?" he asked.

"The usual."

"What does that mean?"

"Underwear, socks, pajamas, deodorant, a camera. Nothing more dangerous than a toothbrush."

"Empty it all on the table."

With a frown, I began pulling my belongings out of the pack. The Inquisitor nodded to the guard at the door. The giant strode over to the table and passed a metal detector over my body, from my shoes to the top of my head.

"What's this?" the Inquisitor asked as I took out my palm-size video.

“A video camera.”

The Inquisitor picked it up and nodded in appreciation.

“What kind of pictures does it take?” he asked.

“Broadcast quality,” I answered.

“Why does a tourist need broadcast quality videos?” the Inquisitor wanted to know.

“To remember things better,” I said. “Excuse me for asking, but am I being accused of some crime?”

“Not in the least. But you can understand our concern. We cannot let just anybody in to see his royal Excellency, the Pope.”

“I suppose not,” I replied.

The security guard reappeared with my passport.

“No problems,” he reported, handing it to the Inquisitor, who returned it to me.

“Fine,” the Inquisitor said. “From our point of view, you can go about your business.”

“You've arranged for me to meet with the Pope?” I asked.

“I'm afraid that isn't in my jurisdiction. You'll have to go to another office for that.”

I nodded. At least I was getting closer. A different security guard escorted me across the plaza to the Tourist Office.

“I'd like to meet with the Pope,” I said.

The clerk looked at me strangely. “I'm sorry, but we only deal with guided tours of the Vatican,” he explained. “To arrange an audience with the Pope, you will have to speak to another department.”

“Which one?” I asked.

The man suggested the Vatican City Municipality Office which handled all local functions. That office was located at the other side of the Vatican complex, a twenty-minute walk away.

“Is there a bus I can take?”

“Yes. It stops right outside in the plaza. Departures every half hour.”

I decided to walk. On the way, I saw lots of pigeons and priests.

The pigeons searched the cobblestones for the bread crumbs which the priests would scatter from the pouches they wore on their wastes.

A clerk in the Municipality Office told me in not very good English that they only dealt with Vatican residents. He suggested that I try the United States Consulate to the Vatican.

The Consulate was located just outside the entrance to the ecclesiastical, another twenty minute walk in the opposite direction. At the Consulate, they spoke better English, but they told me that they only dealt with the Vatican on a country-to-country basis and didn't get involved in personal requests, even from American citizens. A friendly worker flipped through the official Vatican Directory and suggested that I go straight to the Pope's office. That made sense, I agreed. After another long walk, I reached The Ministry for Pontifical Affairs. It was located in a four-story building which was connected to three other four-story buildings. The receptionist referred me to the Confessional Department which was housed at the far end of the second wing of the complex. When I got there, they said they would gladly arrange for a confessional with a Vatican priest.

"I don't want to confess," I told them. "I want to talk with the Pope."

"I'm sorry, sir, but we don't deal with the Pope in this department."

I looked at my watch. It was nearly four-o'clock. Determined, I walked all the way back to the receptionist, who told me to try the Department of the Pope's Secretary.

"That sounds more like it," I said, climbing the marble staircase to the very top floor. The department turned out to be an entire floor of offices. I stuck my head into one and asked the first secretary I saw.

"Excuse me," I said. "Can you tell me how can I arrange to meet with the Pope?"

"Meet with the Pope?" the woman asked with surprise.

“That's right – with the Pope. This is his office, isn't it?”

“Yes, it is. One of them. But we deal only with countries, not with individuals.”

“I see. Well then, who deals with individuals?”

“You can try the Confessional Department.”

“I've been there.”

“Then I suggest you try the Tourist Office.”

“I've been there too.”

“I have an idea. Go to Room 4110 and ask Gina. She should know.”

I thanked her and went looking for Gina in Room 4110 down the hall. Gina had left for the day. Her co-worker suggested that I speak with Cardinal Alexis, the Vatican Administrative Secretary, one floor below. The Cardinal was away in Milan. His secretary sent me down another flight of stairs to Archbishop Mastrelli, Coordinator of Papal Affairs.

“I'm sorry, but the Archbishop is engaged,” his secretary said.

“I'm sorry, too,” I responded with an edgy tone of voice. “I've been here all day, getting passed from office to office like a pizza that nobody ordered. I want to see someone in charge!”

Hearing my outburst, the Archbishop appeared in the door of his office. He stood calmly, with a Leonardo de Vinci smile painted on his face. He was an elderly man, dressed in a skullcap and a long red robe. With the chain and silver crucifix hanging down from his neck, he could have passed for the Pontiff himself.

“What seems to be the problem?” he asked the flustered secretary.

“This young man would like an audience with the Pope,” she said.

“So would I,” he answered. “I've been on the waiting list to see him for three years.”

“Three years?” I asked.

“That's right. The Pontiff is very busy. Unfortunately, with all of the problems in the world, he doesn't have time to grant individual



audiences, except on the rarest occasions when Presidents or Prime Ministers come.”

“I wanted to ask him some questions.”

The Archbishop nodded. “Yes. Life is indeed confusing these days. Everyone has uncertainties. Perhaps I can help.”

“I came here to ask the Pope.”

“If anyone has the right answers, it's him,” the stately man nodded. “Why don't you write him a letter?”

“It's not the same thing.”

“Of course not. Well, I am truly sorry, but now I must get back to work. Why don't you try our Confessional Department? I understand it's very good.”

“I've been there,” I answered. “I don't want to confess. I'm not looking for Jesus. I'm looking for G-d.”

The secretary's mouth opened wide. “Blasphemy!” she declared.

The smile disappeared from the Archbishop's face. Instinctively, as if in self-defense, his hand clutched at his crucifix chain.

“Jesus is G-d,” he whispered, clenching his teeth.

Normally, I wouldn't have answered. I mean, why get people peeved off? It was easier to mind your own business. But I was fed up with all the run around I had been getting all day.

“Jesus is dead,” I declared. “I'm looking for a G-d who is living.”

Their mouths hung open in shock.

“Obviously, I'm wasting my time at the Vatican,” I said.

The Archbishop shuddered and angrily closed the door to his office. The secretary trembled as if she had been left alone with the devil himself. She stood up from her desk and stepped defensively back toward the window.

“How could you say that?” she asked.

“It's true,” I answered. “How can a dead man be G-d?”

The secretary shuddered. “How can you say such a thing?”

“Why not? I don't work here. I'm not on salary. I'm not getting paid.”

I wasn't trying to hurt anyone's feelings, but I sure was ticked off.

Anyway, was I ever surprised when she fainted. With a crash, she fell to the floor.

To tell you the truth, I had my own problems – I didn't need hers. All I knew was that I had to get out of the building before they threw me into a pit with hungry lions. I suppose I should have tried to help her, but I bolted instead. Finding G-d wasn't so easy. Once again, I had come to the wrong address. The Pope's look-alike called out behind me, but I was already out the door. At the top of the stairway, as a security guard came running my way, I hopped onto the bannister and slid down the long railing to the ground floor. I ran out of the building just as a bus was pulling away. Quickly, I banged on the door till it opened. Out of breath, I stood beside the driver as the bus drove away.

“Oh Hell,” I said, as I gazed down the aisle.

It was a busload of nuns. Fifty of them. All of them were staring my way. Out the bus window, I saw security guards rush out of the building.

“Sanctuary,” I said. “Sanctuary.”

Holding my finger to my lips, I walked down the aisle as the bus drove away.

“Sanctuary,” I repeated, not sure they spoke English.

“Sanctuary.”

I suppose they gazed at me in wonder as I got down on my hands and knees and crawled under the legs of two nuns about my own age. There were gasps and some nervous young giggles.

“Shhhh!” I whispered, curling into a ball under the seat.

“Hey, are you crazy?” the bus driver called as I disappeared out of sight on the floor.

“Keep driving,” the head nun commanded, seeing security guards run after the bus in the distance.

The young nuns continued to giggle. To tell you the truth, I felt like tickling one of their stockinged legs, but I overcame the temptation.

“Quiet!” the head nun barked to silence the laughter. “It is our

duty to help all souls seeking refuge, whatever their reason.”

The bus turned several corners. I felt like a fugitive, escaping the Nazis. With every jolt, my head banged on the floor. Suddenly, the bus braked to a stop and a security guard stepped aboard.

“Yes, what is it?” the head nun snapped in a stern schoolteacher's voice as the guard stared at the busload of women.

“Sorry, sister. Wrong bus,” he said curtly. Blushing, he climbed back down the stairs.

The head nun glared at the driver. Obediently, he swung the door closed. The nuns applauded, enjoying the dash of adventure. I sighed in relief as the bus sped out of the Vatican.

## Chapter Six

### INDIA

“Now what?” I wondered, more in the dark than ever. With the exception of the dollar, G-d wasn't in Beverly Hills. He wasn't to be found in London. And He wasn't in France. He wasn't even lurking in the frescoed hallways of Rome. G-d wasn't in politics, nor in the theater, nor in the Louvre Museum, nor in the world's most famous church. So where was He? NASA had sent dozens of astronauts into space, and they hadn't spotted Him there. Neil Armstrong had walked on the moon, but he hadn't found much more than some rocks. So where was G-d hiding? In my closet? In such a small space? G-d had to be bigger than that!

“Surely, I'll find G-d in India,” I decided.

Recalling the guru, Raji, and his aura of peace, I phoned my mother in London. She gave me a phone number in Bermuda, where Raji was meeting a wealthy casino owner on behalf of the Dali Lama. Raji gave me the address of a Buddhist monastery in the village of Sarnat and told me to go straight there.

“Beware of false teachers,” he warned. “Do not be misled on the way.”

“I won't,” I assured him.

“Not every path leads to the castle,” he said cryptically. “Not every wise man knows the great truths.”

So, with renewed hope, I set off on my own passage to India. I still sensed the voice of G-d calling inside me, but with all the static around me, the only place I could hear it was my closet. That was OK for a kid, but for a grown man, even I had to admit, that was crazy. Certainly in India, I figured, I would find the peace of mind which I needed to discover MY MAKER.

My first stop, Calcutta, seemed the very opposite of what I was looking for. It was the dirtiest, noisiest, most overcrowded city I had ever seen in my life. The streets were congested with old cars and buses, bicycles and hand-drawn carts. The buses were so jammed, people rode outside on the fenders, hanging on for their lives. If someone fell off, the driver didn't bother to stop. What did it matter? Eight-hundred million people less one.

Poverty and sickness were everywhere. I couldn't tell if people were sleeping on the street or simply dead. Children sat on the street curbs as if they had no place to go. A crowd of them gathered around me and stuck out their hands. Beggars greeted me wherever I went. Yet at every movie theater, long lines waited outside. People didn't have money for food, but they lined up in droves to see the latest film in order to escape the squalor around them.

Indian music blared out from every shop door. Women singers with high-pitched voices were clearly the rage. A dizzying aroma of incense, cumin and exotic spices pervaded the air. Women workers carried heavy bags on poles which they balanced on the back of their necks. I spotted some modern-looking women in Western dress, including a few Singer fashions, but most of the women wore the traditional Indian sari and hood. A Brahma bull suddenly appeared on the sidewalk, giving me a good scare. The beast lumbered along leisurely, without any owner in sight. People hurried by without paying any attention, as if a bull on the street were a perfectly normal phenomenon. "That's right," I remembered. To the Hindus, the humped Brahma was holy.

I stopped at a kiosk for a glass of fresh juice squeezed from a

sugar cane stalk. With all the flies on the cup, it was hard to find a place for my mouth. With my credit card, I could have spent the night in the Calcutta Hilton, away from the frenzy on the street, but I decided to keep traveling, without getting sidetracked, just as Raji had advised. I found the American Express office in the city and withdrew five-hundred dollars in Indian money. At the train station, I bought a ticket to Varanassi, which was a short distance away from the Buddhist village of Sarnat. Here too, there were beggars all over the station. It looked as if an A-bomb had hit the city, and all of the survivors had gathered in the last standing building. People huddled around the bonfires blazing on the train platforms. Emaciated figures in tattered clothing stared into the flames with eyes belonging to other worlds. They weren't travelers. For them, the Calcutta train station was home. I was surprised. I mean, India was supposed to be THE spiritual place. To tell you the truth, if poverty and filth were signs of spiritual elevation, I was pretty turned off.

“Headed for Varanassi?” an Indian man in his late twenties asked.

He was dressed in a long orange robe, the kind the Hari Krishnas wore in L.A. His head was shaven clean, and he had an earring in one of his ears. I had read enough to know that the red spot of dye in the middle of his forehead represented the Buddha's third eye.

“That's right,” I answered.

“So am I,” the Indian said with a friendly smile.

I smiled back.

“That's what we call crossing karma. Obviously we have something to learn from each other. Let's hurry to the platform so that we can get a seat before they're all gone.”

I hurried after my new acquaintance, glad to have someone to talk to.

“My name is Veranishani, but you can call me Jack,” the Indian said, dropping his Indian accent.

“Jack?” I asked in surprise.

The bald-headed traveler smiled again. It was the big euphoric

smile of a seeker who has discovered the light.

“You're an American?” I asked.

“You got it,” he said “My folks live in Philly. But I've been on the road for years.”

Using a good Philly straight-arm, Jack shoved some beggars aside. Like a blocker, he cleared a path toward the edge of the platform and squeezed into the horde near the edge of the tracks.

“Not too close to the front,” he advised. “You can get pushed in front of a train. I've seen it happen more than once.”

“You live in Varanassi?” I asked.

“No way. Too many tourists for me. I live in Reshekesh. That's the real thing.”

“I'm headed for Sarnat,” I told him.

“Sarnat? You're wasting your time. That's Buddhism. Strictly for amateurs. Take my advice. Study with the Swami instead.”

“The Swami?”

“You haven't heard of Swami Rama?” he asked in a tone of amazement.

Embarrassed, I shook my head no.

“He's the greatest. If you want to experience the real thing, you've got to meet him. I mean, he cares about mankind. He went all over the world on a peace mission last year – you must have heard about that?”

“I don't follow the news very much,” I said to explain my being out of it.

Maybe I had seen something about a Swami on the cover of People Magazine, but I couldn't remember if it were the Swami, the Dali Lama, or some other spiritual healer.

Jack took out a small pipe from his pocket and dropped in what looked like a tiny piece of coal. Holding a match over the cup, he inhaled deeply, keeping the pungent smoke in his lungs.

With a sigh, he blew the smoke into my face. “I never smoke at the ashram, but when I'm traveling, it helps pass the time.”

He held the pipe out to me.

“What is it?” I asked, glancing nervously around at the crowd.

“Opium,” Jack replied with a grin. “There are tons of it here.”

“I’m here to clean myself out,” I said, declining the offer.

“I can dig it,” Jack replied. “Cool with me. I don’t want to mess up your karma.”

Fortunately, we managed to find seats for the long, overnight ride. Before Jack fell asleep, he related his life story. Like so many others, he had dropped out of college in order to find his true self. After a year in Paris, “being stoned out of my mind,” he had split to check out the hashish in Marrakesh. In Morocco, he had met an English woman who was heading for India. Becoming good friends, they decided to travel together. Since she was on her way to study with the Swami, he went along for the fun, never dreaming that it would change his whole life.

“The Swami put my head back on straight,” Jack insisted. “When I got to the ashram, I was all screwed up, you know what I mean? But after six months of yoga, I found harmony. Not only when I was doing yoga – I started to be mellow all of the time.”

Outside the train, the dark Indian countryside whisked endlessly by.

“Everything you do has got to be harmony,” Jack continued. “Even now, when I am talking to you, I’m in harmony. Cause I know that this is what I’m supposed to be doing right now. The Swami calls it ‘Living Yoga.’ All of life has to be yoga. Do yourself a favor. Forget about Sarnat. Come with me to the ashram.”

I wasn’t sure. On the one hand, Raji had told me to go straight to the Buddhist monastery in Sarnat. On the other hand, Jack really seemed happy. Even when he slept on the crowded seat, a big smile lit up his face. Not only on his face, I noticed. Everybody on the train seemed to be smiling. Even though people were jammed into the compartment like gefilta fish in a jar, everyone took it good-naturedly. How could they feel contented, when for me, the bouncing, crowded train ride was hell? What was their secret, I

wondered?

Finally, the train reached Varnassi. Jack said that it was India's holiest city. Even though the expatriated Philadelphian had another day's travel ahead of him, he insisted on getting off the train with me to give me a tour.

"Welcome to outer space," Jack said. "When I came here the first time with my woman friend, Brenda, I thought I had crashed on another planet."

If Calcutta tried to look like a modern, Western city, there was none of that here. For one thing, except for some tourists, everyone was dressed in saris or robes. There were as many Brahma bulls wandering the roads as cars. Every other person you bumped into looked like some kind of holy man or monk. Dark-skinned priests looking like Jamaican Rastafarians carried three-pronged spears like weapons. With their long braided hair, they reminded me of the Roman god Neptune. Jack said they were the holy men of Sheva, the god of life and death. As we walked down the main road, a man dressed in a bizarre red costume jumped up and down chattering like a monkey. Suddenly, a dozen monkeys converged on him from all directions, catching the nuts that he scattered.

"Who's that?" I asked, stopping to watch.

"Hanuman," Jack answered. "The monkey god."

I followed my guide down an alley muddied with the cumbersome droppings of a Brahma bull that walked slowly in front of us. A vendor called out to us, holding up a cup of sweet, honey milk tea. People gathered by public faucets, washing themselves in the street. Others huddled around brick ovens, baking chapati pitas. When I saw the long flight of stairs leading down to the Ganges, I experienced a deja-vu which made my body shudder. Was it a dream, or had I been here before? Then I figured that I had seen the place on television. Every documentary on the Ganges began its coverage here. Pagoda-like temples lined the upper bank. Their doorways were flanked by erotic sculptures and by statues of gods with four arms. Incense saturated the air. Its



aroma seemed to seep through the mind, breaking down barriers, bathing the brain in a spiritual vat. Musicians squatted on the ground, playing on primitive xylophones, sitars, and bells. Jack was right. It was a scene from some different planet.

Throngs of pilgrims crowded the palace-like staircase leading down to the Ganges. Down by the sacred river, dark-skinned men were stripping down to loincloths and wading into the black water. Women bathed in the river, wearing their saris. Mothers carried naked children in their arms to dunk them in great celebration.

“Pilgrims come here to bathe and seek purification for their sins,” Jack explained. “People who are dying come here to cleanse their karmas before their next reincarnations. The god of the river grants forgiveness and assures a person new life.”

I could hardly believe my eyes. The pilgrims who weren't bathing were scrubbing their clothes, washing off the dust of their journeys. Whipping sounds echoed in the air as men beat their wet robes over rocks in the river. Two women stood clutching a long, unfurled sari between them, letting the wind dry the wet silk. They stood holding the cloth in the air with a patience that transcended time, as if they were content to stand there forever. To me, they were symbols of a world without washing machines and dryers, without busy schedules and appointments to keep, symbols of a simpler, more pristine existence.

I followed Jack down the stairs toward the river.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“For a dip. Come on.”

I looked around at the Hindus in the water. Could I join them? What about all of their monkey and river gods? I was searching for one G-d, not a dozen of them. True, I was a pilgrim of sorts. I too was seeking purification and cleansing. But in this foul-smelling river? Is this where I would find it?

Jack stripped down to his jockey shorts with a big happy grin on his face. He rolled up the edges until his underpants looked like a loincloth. I couldn't help but notice the Singer Fashions emblem. It

was like my past was following me wherever I went.

"Come on," Jack called. "Don't be afraid."

A Sheva priest, emaciated from fasting, sat cross-legged on a rock, staring intently at the water. The way he grasped the three-pronged spear in his hand, he looked like he were ready to stab at a fish. Another holy man stood neck deep in the river, his eyes closed in deep meditation. He didn't flinch when a Coca-Cola can caught in a wreath of flowers knocked into his head. In addition to pilgrims, the river was infested with garbage.

"What the heck," I thought. "You only live once. Or twice. Or however many times it takes the soul to get its karma together."

"What about my backpack?" I asked.

"Just leave it," Jack answered, wading deeper into the water.

"I've got a video camera inside."

"Get spiritual, man. Forget your material world. This is India."

I nodded. When in India, do as the Indians do. If I wanted to experience new things, I would have to leave my American hang-ups on shore. I put my wallet and wristwatch in the backpack and stripped down to my pants. With so many women around, I wasn't going to take off my trousers. As I started to enter the water, the holy man on the rock suddenly thrust out his spear in my path.

"What is your name, please?" he asked.

"Sam. Sam Singer," I answered.

"And the name of your father, please."

"Ralph Singer."

I kind of expected to see the Sheva priest raise his brow in recognition. But the holy man's expression remained as somber as stone.

"And your mother's name, please."

"Gloria."

"They are divorced," the holy man said.

"How did you know?" I asked.

"Your karma is split."

"How can you tell?"

“I can see it in the river.”

I glanced down at the mirror of the water. The rippling waves indeed seemed to split up my face.

“Go to the Swami in Reshekesh,” the Sheva priest said. “But be very, very patient. What takes years to pollute, takes a long time to cleanse.”

The holy man waved his hand over my head and started to chant in a fast rhythmic hum. With a shudder, I descended into the cool, flowing water. The bottom of the river felt muddy beneath my feet. Taking a deep breath, I dunked my head and whole body. Like a fetus in an umbilical sac, I bobbed in the murk.

“If you hear me, G-d,” I thought, “please cleanse me and let me discover who I was before my parents, and doctors, and teachers, and television turned me into somebody else.”

Surfacing, I gasped out for air. A rancid stench filled up my lungs from the depths of the river.

“Fantastic, isn't it?” Jack said.

“Super,” I answered, wanting to feel a part of the scene.

Out on the river, long boats like gondolas headed downstream.

“Where are the boats going?” I asked my new friend.

“I'll show you,” Jack said with a smile.

Wading out as far as he could, Jack held up a hand and waved to one of the rowers. Obliging, the river man steered his primitive craft toward shore. A lone Indian passenger sat in the other end of the boat.

“Jump on,” Jack said, lifting himself into the rowboat. He held out a hand and helped me aboard.

“What about my camera?” I asked.

“Forget about it, man,” the loin-clothed American answered.

“I've got a credit card in my wallet,” I protested.

“Junk them, brother. They're evil karma. Stop being hung up on money. It's the biggest barrier there is to the world of the spirit. As long as you are attached to material pleasures, you're lost. Learn to live without them.”

I knew he was right. To discover who I was, I would have to stop being the millionaire's son. That was step number one.

For some reason, the Indian passenger looked sternly at me. Frowning, he motioned to the floor of the boat, where my feet rested on a long sack.

"Sorry," I apologized, moving my legs.

"His first trip to the Ganges," Jack explained to the man.

What is it?" I whispered, as the rower continued to steer his craft downstream.

"A corpse," Jack replied.

Sure enough, when I looked down, I could make out a body wrapped in a shroud. Shuddering, I moved my feet away further.

"I'm very sorry," I said, turning red.

The passenger smiled good-naturedly, as if I had stepped on a sack of potatoes, and not the guy's father.

"It's no big deal," Jack assured me. "It's just a body. The soul has already flown off to Muksha."

"Muksha?" I asked.

"Redemption. Like the Garden of Eden. And from there to another new life. Only the flesh dies. The soul migrates on to its next reincarnation. Isn't it groovy? We stay alive forever."

"Wow," I thought to myself. "That's really cool." Just because it sounds so weird, doesn't mean that the stuff isn't true.

In a short time, the boat reached its destination. Scores of large pyres were burning up on the bank. Families were gathered about their dead, chanting prayers and watching the bodies go up in flames. By the riverside, people were scattering ashes out over the water. A foul stench filled the air.

The rower navigated his craft alongside a dock, where workers gathered to lift the corpse out of the boat.

"They are untouchables," Jack said. "The lowest Hindu caste. Since death spreads impurity, only the untouchables are allowed to lift up the corpses."

"They don't bury people?" I asked, taken aback by the ghostly

scene of cremation.

“Nope. What for? Like I said, the body is just a vessel. The soul is what lasts. By casting the ashes to the river, the sins of the flesh are atoned.”

The passenger waved goodbye, and the river man began to row the boat back in the other direction. I stared at the smoke rising from the funeral pyres.

“No wonder they burn so much incense in India,” I said, more to myself than to Jack. “It's to sweeten the stink of the dead.”

Jack lay down in the boat, as if he were sunbathing. “Don't let it get to you,” he advised. “Just relax.”

My backpack was exactly where I had left it, along with my video camera and wallet. Slipping the bundle over my back, I felt guilty, as if I were carrying something impure. A steady crowd of pilgrims headed down the stairway toward the river as we made our way back to the village.

“Do yourself a favor,” Jack said. “Come with me to Reshekesh. You've got to meet the Swami. After that you can go to Sarnat if you want. There's nothing there anyway except Buddhas, and that scene is for empty heads, believe me.”

I decided that Jack was right. After all, not long ago, he had been a seeker like me. I figured that I could learn from his experience. Plus, I was on vacation. I wanted to see as much as I could. Afterwards, just like Jack said, I'd come back to Sarnat if I chose. The Swami sounded like a cool guy to meet. Maybe he really did have the answer. Why not give him a try?

The next train wasn't leaving till the morning, so we slept with the pilgrims and dogs in the street. Supper was a thick creamy tea and a slab of fried bread. Soon after finishing the tea, I felt a strong urge to go to the bathroom. Since there were absolutely no restrooms in sight, I had no choice but to squat in the woods. Believe me, a bout of diarrhea in India isn't the most spiritual experience in the world, so I hurried back to my backpack and swallowed one of the pills I had taken along for such an

emergency.

“It's a good sign,” Jack said. “Your soul is beginning to expel the sins of your body. It happens to everyone in India.”

“I thought it was because of the food,” I replied.

“That's only the physical side. Everything has a spiritual reality as well.”

Truth is, I didn't feel cleansed in the least. Not able to wipe myself properly, I decided to go back to the Ganges to bathe. Pilgrims still crowded its banks, even at night. This time, in the cover of darkness, I stripped down to my underwear. But in the middle of washing, cramps seized my belly and a rush of diarrhea once again erupted forth from my bowels.

Mortified, I gazed around to see if the other bathers had noticed what was rising to the surface of the water. Luckily, the meditating pilgrims had their eyes closed. No one noticed a thing.

“This is just great,” I sarcastically thought. “Diarrhea in the Ganges. If there really is a river god, he can't be too thrilled about me.”

The train ride to Reshekesh lasted all day. I sat by the window, watching field after field pass by. Occasionally, I got a glimpse of the Himalaya Mountains far off in the distance. Jack slept most of the way, having finished off his opium before boarding.

“If drugs are forbidden in the ashram, why do you smoke them here?” I asked my friend.

“These long train rides make me nauseous. Opium is the only thing that helps.”

I nodded, but something was bothering me. I mean, if my traveling companion had found inner peace, why did he have to smoke opium? Why didn't he do yoga instead?

“Who am I to judge?” I thought.

Before long, I was feeling nauseous myself. Sweating and fearing that I was going to throw up, I jumped up from my seat and made my way along the crowded aisle to the rear door of the train compartment. A crowd of passengers was already gathered there,

standing sandwiched together like in a packed subway car. I raised up on my tiptoes to catch a whiff of fresh air coming from the opened, rear door of the car. Suddenly, the train's whistle blew. Brakes screeched. The car jolted. I lost my balance and toppled backwards into an Indian carrying a big straw basket and flute. On impact, the lid of the basket flew off and a cobra sprang out onto the floor of the train. Passengers screamed. People leaped onto occupied seats as the snake slithered away down the aisle. Finally, with a groan, the train came to a stop. Passengers knocked into me, pushing me back toward the door. As if lifted by a powerful wave, I found myself flying out of the compartment. Before I knew it, I landed on the platform of a station. Boarding passengers shoved forward to get by the passengers getting off. The train's whistle blew. Wheels screeched and started to roll down the tracks.

"There's a snake on the train!" I hollered out in vain.

Flustered, I watched the train move slowly out of the station with the cobra loose on board.

"It's all because of my screwed-up karma," I thought.

What about Jack? What about the other passengers? What about my camera and wallet in my backpack on the train? Looking around, I saw that I was stranded in some small outdoor station. On a sign was the name of a town I couldn't even pronounce.

"Would you like some water?" a kindly voice asked.

It belonged to a man who looked like an elderly beggar. His clothes were tattered and his face was unshaved. Sitting down on the platform beside me, he held out a flask.

"This is all I have in the world, but you are welcome to it," he said in a calm, gentle manner.

"Thank you," I said.

I took a few sips and handed the flask back to the man.

"Drink more. India is a poor country, but we have water to spare."

Thirstily, I drank down most of the contents. Thankfully, my nausea had passed.

“Do you feel better?” the old man asked.

“Yes, thank you. I got sick on the train.”

The man nodded. For a moment, he gazed at me deeply. I felt myself shudder. They were eyes that had seen everything, knew everything, a gaze as ancient as time itself.

“You're an American,” the man said with a smile.

“Yes,” I answered.

Like in Calcutta, there were lots of homeless people hanging around the small station. The wind whistled along the tracks. The train heading for Reshekesh was no longer in sight.

“I was in America once,” the Indian said. “In Chicago. My company sent me to learn banking. For almost thirty years, I managed a bank in New Delhi.”

I looked at the old man in surprise. With his soiled clothes and unkempt hair, he certainly didn't look like a bank manager.

“Yes, I know,” he said. “I don't look like a bank manager. But a bank manager is only a job. A title. A part of the material world. Fleeting, like everything else.”

“Where do you live now?” I asked him.

“I live in my body. This is my home,” he said, pointing to his chest. “Like a turtle, I take my house with me wherever I go.”

“Don't you have a family?” I asked.

“Certainly. A wife and five lovely children. But it's been four years since I've seen them.”

“That's a long time.”

“A twinkling of the eye,” the Indian answered with a gleam. Seeing that I was confused, he explained. “You see I am a practicing Hindu. We believe that a man passes through four stages in life. First, as a young man, he must go to a guru and learn all of the Veda writings. Then, he must marry and raise children, educating them in the Hindu way. Then, when a man is a grandfather, he dedicates himself to a life of meditation. Finally, when his time nears to depart from this world, he leaves his house and becomes a Sanrasi – a wandering beggar, with nothing of his



own, just like he was when he came into the world.”

“You're a Sanrasi?” I asked, not knowing what else to say. I tried to picture my father giving up everything to go forth in the world as a beggar, but the image didn't fit. To tell you the truth, to my American way of thinking, the custom sounded foreign and cruel, but at the same time I felt that there was a powerful beauty to it.

“Today, I was supposed to meet you,” the Sanrasi said.

“Tomorrow, who knows what fortune will bring? A Sanrasi wanders the earth, waiting for the day of his death, like a worker waits for his salary.”

“I am traveling to Reshekesh to meet the Swami,” I said.

“If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him,” the mystical figure replied.

“Excuse me,” I asked, not understanding.

“If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him,” the old man repeated. “Give up the idea that someone has all the answers. What does the Swami know more than anyone else? Everything you need to know is inside of you already.”

“But you yourself learned from a guru. You said so yourself,” I noted.

“Yes, it is true. In the beginning, a teacher helps clear the mind of distraction. But no one can tell you the answer. The secret is that there is no secret. Before a man is enlightened, he awakens, eats, goes off to work, returns to his family and sleeps. After enlightenment is attained, a man awakens, eats, goes off to work, returns to his family and sleeps. The same as before. The secret is that when you are hungry, you should eat; when you are tired, you should sleep. Don't try to lose yourself – be yourself.”

This old man was really gifted with wisdom, I sensed. It was true – a lot of people tried losing themselves in one thing or another. Being oneself was a lot harder.

“If I don't go to Reshekesh, then where should I go?” I asked in confusion.

“It makes no difference. Every path leads to the same destination.

There are no shortcuts. Everything is planned. The main thing is to always keep searching, even after you have discovered the truth.”

The old man peered down the tracks as if he were expecting a train.

“Where are you traveling to?” I asked.

The old man smiled. “Wherever my feet lead me.”

“Maybe I can come with you,” I suggested, sensing that I could learn a lot from this spiritual being.

“If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him,” the Sanrasi repeated. “Don't ever forget.”

With a groan, he rose on his feet.

“Your flask of water,” I said.

“You keep it,” the old man answered. “Now, I truly have nothing at all.”

He bowed and walked down the platform. I watched him disappear from the station. Funny, but now that I had lost my backpack on the train, I too had nothing except a few bills in my pocket. In my own way, I had become a Sanrasi. Circumstances, or fortune, or the EYE peering out of the pyramid, had stripped me of the things that made me Sam Singer. That night, just like the other beggars, I slept huddled around a bonfire, without even a blanket to warm me.

“What would my father say,” I wondered. “If he could see me now?”

I reached Reshekesh late the next day. Where else could I go? My wallet and credit card were somewhere with Jack. Reshekesh, the “City of Wise Men,” had been made famous by the Beatles, who visited there during their mystical phase. Situated on the banks of the Ganges, it had a serene atmosphere, like a mountainside retreat, far more peaceful than the spiritually charged Varanassi. A narrow metal bridge, no wider than a pathway, spanned the wide river. Women dressed in flowing saris walked along the riverbank carrying great bundles of grass on their heads. Here too, pilgrims could be seen bathing in the reputedly holy water. A steady stream

of penitents, dressed in an assortment of togas and robes, descended and ascended its banks.

I walked along the main road. Signs leading to the mountainside village pointed toward a maze of ashrams which newcomers could choose from. There was the “College of Meditation,” the “University of Yoga Science,” the “Institution of Higher Karma,” the “World Central Ashram,” the “Academy of Universal Redemption,” and a Buddhist retreat called “Harmony Estates.”

I took a deep breath. A cloud of incense seemed to hover over the mountainside, a mixture of dizzying, intoxicating scents. Seeking directions, I approached a young, baldheaded monk who was staring out at the river.

“Excuse me,” I said, interrupting his meditation. “Can you tell me how to get to the ashram of the Swami?”

Slowly, the meditator turned toward me as if parachuting back down to earth. Re-entering his body, his eyes focused on the creature before him.

“Looking for Veranishani?” he inquired in an accent which I couldn't place.

“For who?” I asked.

“For Jack.”

“That's right,” I answered happily, recalling Jack's Hindu name.

“He asked me to keep an eye out for you.”

“How is he?” I asked, worried that he had been bitten by the snake on the train.

“He is how he is,” the solemn figure responded. “I'll take you to him in the ashram.”

Without further small talk, he headed off up the trail toward the woods. I wanted to ask him how he could have been keeping an eye out for me in the middle of his deep meditation, but I figured a guy as spiritual looking as him could see through his third inner eye.

“Where are you from?” I asked, being friendly.

“You mean before I came to India?”

“Yeah.”

“Israel.”

“Israel? Hey, that's great!” I said.

“What's great about it?” the ascetic youth wanted to know.

“I mean... well, I'm a Jew too.”

The noble figure in yellow nodded his head. “Well, I'm an Israeli,” he said, as if to make a distinction.

“How long have you been in the ashram?” I asked.

“Two years.”

“Do you study with the Swami?”

“Not yet.”

“Not yet?” I said in surprise. “You've been here two years and you don't study with the Swami?”

“Not everyone gets to study with the Swami,” he said.

“Why not?” I asked.

The Israeli raised a finger to his lips. “If you ask too many questions, you can't hear the answers,” he said.

I wasn't sure what he meant, but I figured it was time to keep quiet. We walked on in silence, away from the quaint, rustic village, up a path that led into a forest.

“I've never been to an ashram,” I confessed a bit nervously, though I was eager to meet up with Jack.

The Israeli didn't answer. He led the way stoically, very seriously playing the part of the monk. We passed through a grove of tall trees and came to the arched gateway of the “Academy of Universal Redemption.” I was surprised to see a group of young women lingering beside a stone fountain. In the middle of the fountain, a multi-armed goddess emerged from the pool. The girls, who were obviously students, wore Indian costumes which seemed either too big or too small. One girl kept swinging the upper fold of her sari back over her shoulder as if trying to get it to fall into place. A fat girl swatted at a pestering fly. Another girl chattered away in an unmistakable Brooklyn accent. Seeing us walk up the path, they immediately stopped speaking. All of their gazes fell on

the tall, handsome Israeli.

“Hi, Boaz,” the girl from Brooklyn said as he walked by without deigning to give them a glance.

“His name is Mohatama, not Boaz,” the fat girl teased.

Without breaking stride, the serious disciple led the way through the gate. Behind us, I could hear the girls from America giggling. I looked at Boaz, but his studied solemnity didn't flinch. He led me along a pathway of carved elephants, cobras, and Hindu gods.

Finally, we came to a dormitory building. Boaz led the way up a flight of stairs to a large room filled with straw mattresses, sheets, backpacks and books.

“Veranishani sleeps here,” Boaz said, pointing to a mat.

Sure enough, my backpack lay beside it.

“You rest up from the journey. I'll find him and tell him you've arrived at the ashram.”

I thanked him and watched him walk gracefully out of the room. “Wow,” I thought. He really had his act together. I wondered if I could ever get to be as mellow as him.

Tired, I sat on the floor. Inspired by the environment, my legs naturally crossed into a lotus position. Having studied some yoga in L.A., I didn't feel totally at a loss in my new surroundings. My wallet and camera were still in his bag, along with all of my other worldly belongings. A book, written in English, lay on Jack's mattress. It was a large paperback with a picture of the Swami on the cover. The title was *The River of Harmonious Living – Teachings of the Swami Rama*. Looking around the Spartan quarters, I noticed the same book on most of the beds.

“It must be a bestseller,” I thought.

“Hey, brother!” Jack called, rushing into the room. “What happened to you?”

I stood up and we gave each other a hug. After being so long away from home, it was good to see a familiar face. I told him about feeling nauseous and getting pushed off the train.

“I was the one who knocked over the basket with the cobra,” I

confessed.

Jack laughed at the recollection.

“What the heck happened?” I asked.

Jack smiled. “Luckily, a Sheva priest was on board. He stabbed the snake with his spear as it took off down the aisle.”

I laughed along with him, relieved that I hadn't caused a disaster. I could picture the holy man proudly holding up the impaled snake on his spear for everyone on the train to see.

“I've got some good news and some bad news,” Jack said. “The bad news is that my woman friend, Brenda, split without saying a word. The good news is that there's a new batch of college girls from the old U.S. of A. But you're not here for that, are you?”

Blushing, I shook my head no. “Actually, I only came for my backpack,” I said. “I still want to go to Sarnat to study.”

“Forget about Sarnat. You're here. This is where your karma has brought you. Don't you understand that?”

I wasn't sure, but Jack was persuasive, and the ashram seemed like a pretty interesting place. Plus, I was curious to meet the Swami. After all, how many Swamis do you get to meet in a lifetime? So, sitting down on a mat beside Jack, I decided to try the life of a yogi for a week at the Academy for Universal Redemption.

Chapter Seven

RESHEKESH

The yogi wore a pure white dhotis, the traditional Hindu garb. All the time he spoke to us, he played with a string of beads in his hand.

“Only one week at ashram?” he asked in a high-pitched, musical tone.

His name was Yogi Gara. Jack said he was in charge of new students. He was small and wiry with a perpetual smile on his face.

“That's right,” I said. “I'm traveling.”

“Every man is traveling,” he answered with his knack of turning everything into an epigram.

“He wants to check the place out,” Jack explained.

“Americans always want to check things out,” the yogi answered. They are very frightened people. And very spoiled.”

“I have other plans,” I told him.

“Plans are an escape from the present. The past is no longer. The future hasn't come. The moment must be lived.”

I nodded at the wisdom of the remark.

“We have a six-month course,” he said. “A one-year course. Two-year course. Lifetime course. But we have no one-week course.”

“He's my guest,” Jack said.

“No guests in ashram. Only disciples. Tourist hotel down the street.”

“The truth is, I'm searching for G-d,” I confided.

“Ohhhh,” the Indian said, nodding his head. “That is a very big project. Lifetime course. Very expensive.”

I didn't know if he was joking or not.

“Take some classes. Practice yoga. Bathe every day in the river. Drink only juice. Come back in one week,” the yogi said, like a doctor. “If you want to stay, welcome. If you want to leave, welcome. All rivers flow to the very same ocean. All paths eventually lead out of the forest. No need to despair.”

It turned out that the Israeli, Boaz, was sent for a course in seclusion, so I bedded down in his place in the dorm.

“What's seclusion?” I asked.

“Sorry, buddy,” Jack said. “One of the rules here is not to let newcomers know all the secrets. Everyone has to follow the path on his own.”

“Did you do seclusion?”

“I flunked,” Jack admitted. “When I started to hear monkeys talking to me, I bolted back to the dorm.”

To tell you the truth, I was skeptical of the paradisiacal scene. Everyone seemed so blissful, it was hard to believe it was true. But I had another six weeks before I had to start college – what did I

have to lose? I think what turned me on the most was the simplicity of the ashram. Rooms were unfurnished. Everyone sat on the floor. Meditation halls were spacious with high ceilings. They were filled with Hindu statues, and incense candles which burned day and night. The grounds were peaceful, verdant, with quiet paths leading through the forest. And to top it off, I began to enjoy my dips in the Ganges. I relished the feeling of spiritual cleansing it gave me. The other-worldliness of Reshekesh made Beverly Hills seem light-years away. Believe it or not, after a few days at the ashram, I discovered that for the first time in my life I felt happy.

Every day, I kept my eye out for the Swami. Jack said he kept to his quarters all day in a cottage at the edge of the campus.

“Doesn't he teach people?” I asked.

“Sometimes,” he replied almost cryptically. “Once a week, he gives a general lecture to everyone, but one-on-one sessions are hard to come by.”

“Well, I'm kind of curious to see him. I mean just to know that he's here.”

“Don't worry, my friend,” Jack assured. “You'll see him soon.”

Each morning at five, I would join the other beginners in a yoga class. After a half-hour hike through the dark forest, we would pay silent homage to the sun deity at the top of the mountain. Since I had not officially enrolled in the ashram, I wasn't allowed to dress like a yogi disciple. Now that I think about it, it could be that dressing differently from the others made me want to belong even more. It enhanced my growing yearning to join the joyful community around me.

After one or two classes, I realized that the yoga I had studied in America was about as genuine as my father's “Parisians” jeans were French. Sure, I had learned some positions and breathing techniques, but compared to the ashram's instructor, Yogi Baba, I was stiff as a board.

I would have progressed a lot faster if it weren't for the fat girl,



Patty. Whenever we had to do a difficult posture, she would giggle, preventing me from concentrating on the mantra. More annoying than that, whenever we had to do a shoulder stand or an inverted bridge, she would sit in her place and stare at me, as if I were the Swami himself. I found her so distracting that I asked the instructor to put me in some other class.

“That is up to Yogi Gara,” the gentle-voiced instructor said.

Not wanting to make waves, I stuck out the first week with the fat girl hot on my trail. My afternoon class was far better. It was an individual session with Yogi Baba, and I could feel myself improving each day. Yogi Baba explained that yoga meant union. Union with the gods. The trick was to leave one's self and unite with a point of universal harmony outside of the body.

That really threw me at first. I mean, I had journeyed to India to discover who I was, and here I was being taught to leave myself behind. My teacher said that when yoga was properly practiced, it led to the cessation of all mental activity. In other words, my ME disappeared. Once self-consciousness was out of the way, you could merge with the infinite. It sounded great, though I couldn't help but wonder why G-d had given man a brain if He wanted him to be a mindless lump of clay. But since Yogi Baba was a Professor of History at New Delhi University, I trusted his vaster knowledge.

“A professor of History?” I asked in surprise when Jack told me.

“Sure. This place isn't for dummies, if that's what you think. Every few years, Yogi Baba takes a sabbatical and comes to the ashram to get back to his roots.”

So even though a lot of the stuff sounded weird, some pretty smart people were doing it with me. Every morning, after doing yoga, I would join the line of beggars who came to the ashram for biscuits and tea. For lunch, I would buy a freshly squeezed juice from one of the vendors in town on my way back from a dip in the river. I spent the rest of my time reading the Swami's book on world redemption and taking solitary walks through the woods. One day, as I strolled through the forest, I came upon the tall, statue-like figure of Boaz, lost in a deep meditation. Not wanting to disturb him, I watched for five long, silent minutes. Just like one of the sculptures in the garden, not a muscle of the Israeli seemed to move. Afraid that the sound of my breathing would shatter Boaz's trance, I tiptoed away, leaving the devoted ascetic to his solitary contemplation.

Most evenings I spent with Jack, when he wasn't off talking to the girls. There were a few dozen of them at the ashram from all over the world. Jack almost never called them by name. To him they were the Chinese girl, the Portuguese girl, the Swedish girl, the Brooklyn girl, the California girl, the Canadian girl, the fat girl, the girl from Sidney, the sisters from Belgium, and "The Fox." The Fox was from Malta.

"When she walks in her sari, she looks like the wind," Jack said with a sigh. "When she sings, the nightingales all stop to listen. I'm telling you, man, she's driving me out of my mind. I can't concentrate on my mantra. I can't meditate. The minute I close my eyes, I envision her standing before me, beckoning to me with eight arms."

Since dating was forbidden at the ashram, Jack asked her to meet him in town, but "The Fox" always refused. When he confessed his great turmoil to the Swami, the master was pleased. He told Jack that he was being tested before he could enter a higher gateway. With perseverance, the world-famous guru assured him, he could overcome his desire for the pleasures of this world completely.

“That's great,” I said, longing for a private audience with the Swami myself.

“What's great about it?” Jack asked. “I like the pleasures of the world.”

“Then why are you here?”

For a long moment, Jack was silent. “You know something,” he said. “I really don't know. Brenda wanted to come, so I came with her. Now that she's gone, I don't know what else to do. But if “The Fox” would ask me to stay here forever, I would.”

Obviously, Jack wasn't the ashram's top student. Yoga taught a person to control his senses, and Jack was losing them over the girl. Boaz, I realized, was a lot more serious in his quest.

The following evening, all of the disciples, students from India and foreigners alike, went into the village to celebrate the holiday of the river gods. According to Hindu tradition, it was the beginning of the monsoon season, when the gods go to sleep, leaving mankind in danger from torrential cyclones and floods. Fireworks lit up the night. Men dressed as tigers danced in the street. The townspeople held torches aloft in their hands as they followed the holy men toward the river. Every time that I turned around, it seemed like Patty, the fat girl, was there. When a chain of firecrackers exploded like gunshots at our feet, she grabbed my arm and exclaimed, “It's so exciting, I feel like I am going to faint.” I kind of hoped that she would. I hated the way she tagged along after me. At the first opportunity, when a crowd of Brahma bulls converged on the procession, I slipped away from her clutches, leaving her surrounded by the bellowing creatures.

Down at the Ganges, a paper-mache god was torched and hurled ablaze into the river, where barrels of oil had been spilled. The river burst into flames. The masses cheered wildly as they gazed at the raging inferno.

Back at the ashram, Yogi Gara announced that the Swami would dispense holiday blessings to all the beginners. All of the initiates eagerly gathered outside the Flower Temple. I ran to the building

to be one of the first on line. Yogi Gara instructed us to take off our sandals and wash our feet before entering the temple. Since I still hadn't been issued the ashram garb, I was still wearing sneakers. Taking a whiff of my rank-smelling socks, I tossed them into the bushes when no one was looking. It was funny. Back in Beverly Hills, when I had walked barefoot downstairs to meet the President, it had caused a big scandal. Here in the Flower Temple, it was the respectful thing to do.

After waiting for over an hour, we were told that we would enter the meditation chamber one-by-one, walk up to the Swami, bow at the waist, and wait for him to bless us. When my turn came, I was trembling. I walked up the steps of the temple between two elephant statues and entered the carved wooden doorway. In the back of the dark chamber, surrounded by candles, the Swami sat under a large pink umbrella. A long peacock feather lay at rest in his hand.

I was super uptight. A halo of incense smoke hovered by the ceiling. Like a sentinel, Yogi Gara stood by his master, holding the pole of the flowered umbrella. The Swami's face was dark like the Indian earth. His forehead was wide and smooth with a small red ruby stuck to his brow. In the glow of the candlelight, his gaunt features had the look of a skull.

With more trepidation than I had ever felt in my life, I approached the foreboding figure. Slowly, like a cobra raising its hood, the Swami lifted his gaze. When the stark, lifeless visage turned my way, I lost my footing. Stumbling forward, my toe caught under a carpet. With an uncontrolled "Ooops!" I tripped and fell down on my knees at the feet of the wise man. Trembling, I remained on all fours. Ever so lightly, I felt the feather fall on my head and withdraw. Trembling, I waited for the Swami to speak. Once again, the feather hit my head, this time more forcefully, as if pushing me on. Not knowing what I should do, I stayed on my knees, waiting for the Swami's blessing. This time, with a flick of the feather, the Swami swatted me hard on the head. Let me tell

you, for a feather, it stung. When I still didn't budge, the Swami whacked me again – once, twice, three times. Angered, the Swami shouted out something in Hindu. Man, was I scared! Not knowing what to do, I didn't do anything. When I remained frozen on the floor, Yogi Gara gave me a kick on my rump. Finally, I got the message. Scrambling on all fours like a monkey, I scampered across the chamber and took off through the temple's side door.

I was still shaking when I got back to the candlelit dorm. A blessing from the Swami was supposed to set a disciple along the true path, and here I had blown it. A touch of the feather opened the gateway to self-discovery and knowledge, and instead I got a kick in the rump. Returning to my place in the dark room, I was surprised to see that the figure sitting on Jack's mattress wasn't Jack, but Boaz, bending over a tin of burning incense.

“I blew the blessing from the Swami,” I told him.

The serious Israeli just nodded.

“I didn't understand what he wanted from me, so he whacked me with the feather five times!”

“Only a fool thinks the Swami will do all the work,” the more experienced seeker said.

“Well, sure, I know that, but I was hoping to start out on a more positive note.”

“There is no start, nor finish,” Boaz observed, sounding as cryptic as Yogi Gara.

I realized that I wasn't going to get any sympathy from him.

“Where's Jack? Have you seen him?” I asked.

“He's gone.”

“Gone?” I repeated, astounded.

“His girlfriend Brenda wrote him a letter from Thailand. She invited him to join her, so he left.”

“I thought he was finished with her,” I said in surprise.

“Jack is a faker. His mind isn't pure. His motives stem from the lower forces.”

“Nobody is perfect,” I answered, defending my friend. “Probably

not even you.”

Boaz looked at me sharply, piqued by the barb. I was immediately sorry I had said it. I mean, I always try to be nice to people. But ever since the Brooklyn girl had quipped that the Israeli thought he was G-d's gift to the world, I too had detected a wall of conceit in his manner.

With a strong, sudden motion, Boaz stood up on his feet. With his tall, muscular build, he looked like he could pick me up by my hair and fling me into the Ganges.

“I think I'll sleep outside tonight,” he said. “Suddenly, the karma in this room is polluted.”

Boaz bent down and picked up his mat. Stripped of his usual calm, he strode out of the dorm. Suddenly, I felt all alone. There was nobody else in the room. Jack was gone. Boaz was angry with me. Nobody knew where I was, what I was doing, if I were dead or alive. My parents were so involved with their own lives, they probably hadn't thought about me for weeks. My brother didn't care. For a dizzying moment, I felt abandoned, like an orphan alone in the world. I felt like a child, a baby, without an identity of my own. All of a sudden, I didn't know who I was or where I was going. To college? For what?

Panicking, I thought of my closet. I wanted my closet. I needed my closet.

“IN G-D WE TRUST. IN G-D WE TRUST,” I repeated to myself like a mantra.

I tried to remember the feelings and smells of my closet at home, but the sense of profound loneliness remained.

“G-d, are You there?” I said in the darkness. “Are You there? Do You hear me?”

The dorm room was silent. Mats were spread out all over the floor, but there was no one in sight. Fireworks sounded in the distance from the celebration in the village. Who was I? What was I? Where was I? Why was I? Suddenly, a freaky thing happened. I started to cry. I don't know what happened, but I lost it completely.

A monsoon of tears poured out of my eyes.

"You are here?" a voice asked, startling me. It was Yogi Gara, a dark figure in the doorway.

"Yes," I answered softly, so he wouldn't know I was crying. But I guess he had heard me.

"Crying, like flowing water, cleanses the soul," he remarked.

Taking a deep breath, I brought myself under control.

"You have made a decision?" the always happy voice queried out of the blackness of the empty dorm.

"A decision? What decision?" I asked.

"Either you become a disciple at ashram and find harmony and bliss, or continue to wander in the darkness of your egotistical living. The Swami wants to know your decision."

"The Swami?" I asked.

"He says he is ready to teach you."

"Teach me?"

"Yes. After the proper preparation. Our six-month beginner's course is eight-thousand dollars. One year disciples course, with a graduating diploma, fifteen- thousand dollars. American currency. Payment up front."

"It's cheaper than college," I thought. So what if it was a business like everything else? Yoga instructors had to eat too, didn't they?

"If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him," the old Sanrasi had said.

"Go straight to Sarnat," Raji had warned me.

"IN G-D WE TRUST," I heard a voice say.

"The money goes to give food to the poor people," Yogi Gara said, as if reading my mind.

That was true. I had witnessed the long lines myself. If my father's money went to feed starving people in India, what was the matter with that? Besides, where else in the world did I have to go? Beverly Hills? London? To an expensive New England college, where I would have to pretend to be like everyone else?

"Yes, I've decided," Sam answered. "I want to stay at the

ashram.”

“Welcome,” the Yogi said happily. “Decisions clear trees from the forest. Difficulty at the beginning. Furthering through perseverance. Daylight comes after the darkness.”

“A stitch in time saves nine,” I felt like saying. “Hi diddle diddle, the cat had a fiddle, the cow jumped over the moon.”

Like a shadow, the Yogi disappeared from the doorway. A great drowsiness overcame me. I sank down to the floor in exhaustion. Outside the window, a burst of fireworks lit up the Reshekesh night.

## Chapter Eight

### LIFE IN THE ASHRAM

When Yogi Gara told me that I would have to give up all of my possessions, including my video camera, I didn't protest. Disciples had to be free of all material attachments, the Yogi explained. The true seeker had to liberate themselves from all desires for the physical world.

“Westerners are looking in darkness for material prosperity,” Yogi Gara said with a smile. “They ignore the eternal and thus have nothing to take with them when they leave this world for the next.”

I could vouch for that. As the son of Ralph Singer, I had grown up in the most material world possible. Yet, for some reason which I cannot explain, I always sensed that there had to be more to life than mansions, fashion shows, and luxury cars. So when I enrolled in the ashram, I was happy to enter a world where the spiritual life was placed first. But when Yogi Gara commanded me to throw my credit card into a pile of burning garbage, I instinctively balked.

“My credit card?” I asked.

Yogi Gara nodded with one of his happy, Cheshire-cat smiles.

I knew I was being tested. Doing without my camera wasn't the end of the world, but destroying my American Express card? It was my lifeline, the source of my freedom and food. In a funny kind of way, it was like an umbilical cord, connecting me to my



father, my country, my faith. In a very real sense, the credit card was my religion – as it said on the dollar, “IN G-D WE TRUST.”

“As long as a man clings to illusions like wealth, he can never find the truth,” Yogi Gara declared.

So my credit card went up in flames like a sacrifice to the gods. When it came to paying tuition, I was allowed to use the telephone in the ashram office to call my father in New York. His secretary, Dorothy, patched me through to the yacht of the President in the tropical waters off Key West.

“Eight-thousand dollars for what?” my father asked.

“To study in an ashram for six months,” I answered.

“In a what?”

“An ashram. A yoga academy. I have a chance to study with the Swami.”

“The who?”

“The Swami. He's famous all over the world.”

“There are a lot of charlatans all over the world,” my Dad replied in his usual cynical manner.

“He's not a charlatan, and eight-thousand dollars isn't so much for six months.”

“What about college?” my father wanted to know.

“I'll start next semester, that's all. Please, Dad,” I pleaded. “I need it. It's so peaceful here. I think it can help straighten me out.”

There was a pause over the wire. “All right,” my father said. “If you think it can help. Give the details to Dorothy, and I'll have the cash wired. Stay well. I have to get back to the President. The poor guy's really fallen hard for you-know-who. She's here with us on the boat.”

Some things never change, I thought. The President was still collecting models, and my father was still collecting Presidents. Yogi Gara was right. People in the West were wasting their lives, chasing after transitory illusions, the way a kitten chases after its tail.

In his role as ashram director, Yogi Gara escorted me to the local

Barclay's Bank in Reshekesh to pick up the money. With tuition paid, intensive studies in Brahmanism, Vedanta, and yoga could get under way. First, Yogi Gara gave me a haircut. With a scissors and razor, he shaved my unruly hair down to the scalp. Next, he outfitted me with a T-shirt and the loosely fitting white slacks of a beginning disciple. Since I would be practicing yoga extensively during the first part of my training, I was expected to look like a yogi. In the evenings, and whenever I was invited to meet with the Swami, I was required to wear a simple white gown and a turban. Instead of shoes, I was fitted with an old pair of sandals, two sizes too big. Yogi Gara said he would buy a better fitting pair in the city, but he never did. Since there were no mirrors at all at the ashram, I didn't catch a glimpse of myself until I passed a store window on my way to immerse in the Ganges. For a moment, I couldn't believe that the reflection in the window was me. Instead of the American Sam Singer, a baldheaded Indian youth stared back at me and bowed.

"It's Halloween," I said with a giggle, feeling like I was off to a masquerade ball.

"Wow, do you ever look spiritual," Patty exclaimed with a whistle the first time she saw me in my official ashram garb. "How about coming over to my place and doing some yoga with me?"

I blushed. Unlike my former friend Jack, I wanted nothing to do with the girls at the ashram. In fact, I avoided them like poisonous snakes. Like I've already said, women made me nervous. Maybe because my hands always shook from the medicine, I always felt self-conscious with them. Patty was especially bothersome. Instead of becoming mellowed out after a yoga class, she would joke loudly with me and try to draw as much attention to herself as she could.

"You act like I'm an untouchable," she said to me one day in the lunch room.

"What?" I stuttered, not knowing how to answer.

"I won't bite you, you know."

“I have to go meditate,” I said nervously, eager to get away.

“Oh groovy,” she said. “When you close your eyes, be sure to think about me.”

Holding up her arms, she gave a shake of body as if she were twirling a hoola hoop around her waist. Later, when I tried to meditate under a tree in the woods, the image of Patty appeared, dancing before me like some kind of fat fertility goddess. When I admitted my dilemma to Yogi Baba, the yoga instructor smiled reassuringly and said that I was just being tested.

“When a man strives after muksha,” he said, “all of the lusts of the world gather to stand in his path.”

“Whenever I close my eyes, she's there,” I confessed.

“Litter will cling to a pole in a stream,” the yogi said, “but the flow of the river carries it off. The same is true with bad thoughts. Don't resist them, and they will float away on their own.”

I tried it and the strategy worked. The next time the image of Patty interfered with my mantra, I kept relaxed and the distracting figure of the fat girl receded in my mind like tumbleweed blown over a prairie.

Along with my new wardrobe, I was bequeathed an Indian name. The Swami called me Samran. Not in person. Yogi Gara passed the name on to me. I still wasn't ready for individual sessions with the reclusive guru. Yogi Gara said that before a disciple was ready to learn with the Swami, a long course of preparation was needed.

“Time only exists in the imagination,” Boaz told me one day when I impatiently complained about the time that had passed without being invited to meet with the Swami.

“What does that mean?” I wondered. “Time only exists in the imagination.” Like all of the other clever sayings the instructors were wont to say, it sounded profound, but it left me more confused than before.

Twice, I had seen the ashram leader strolling through the woods, engaged in deep contemplation. Another time, I saw him in town being introduced to a bus load of tourists. I never saw him at the

river because the Swami bathed in the middle of the night, when disciples had to be in their dorms. Dance night was the only other time I got to see him. Every two weeks, the beginners had to perform a dance before the Academy's spiritual master. In dance class, we learned the lyrical movements and the Indian words of the songs. I enjoyed the rehearsals, but they gave Patty an excuse to bump against me whenever she could.

"Oh sorry, Samran, how clumsy of me," she would say with her devilish grin.

Tiptoeing back and forth in front of the stoic Swami, we would wave our arms in the air like tree branches and bow down like willows. All during the performance, a sitar player who looked like Ravi Shankar sat on the floor and strummed out exotic Indian chords which sounded like hysterical crying.

"There can be no world without music," the musician told me one evening. "The sun needs music. The trees need music. The wind and the grass all need music. People need music to live. Everyone has his own music. If you want to be happy, you must listen to the music that is playing inside of your soul."

When I tried to follow his counsel, all I could hear were the songs of Barbra Streisand, Stevie Wonder, Michael Jackson, and the rest.

"Where is MY music?" I wondered.

Before my first month was out, I felt physically and mentally drained. With each passing day, I found it harder to get through the grueling schedule. Boaz told me to be patient. "Furthering through perseverance. Difficulty at the beginning," he said.

"I've heard that already," I told him.

"Repetition brings understanding. The first part of the course is designed to break down your ego. The self has to die."

"What's left when that happens?" I questioned.

"Harmony," Boaz answered.

After his initial aloofness, Boaz seemed to take me under his wing. I was happy to have a friend at the place. Especially someone as serious as the Israeli. Even though we were supposed

to detach ourselves from our emotions, I still enjoyed communicating like a normal human being.

“Harmony with what?” I asked him.

“With the universal essence.”

I wasn't sure what that meant, but it sounded worthwhile.

“In order to fill an urn with water, the urn must be empty,” Boaz explained.

If emptying out was the goal, then I was getting there fast. For one thing, the ashram didn't have civilized toilets. You had to do your business in an outhouse in the woods. Since I suffered from bouts of diarrhea, running to the bathroom in the darkness of night became a draining routine. And that wasn't the only problem. On the rare occasions when there was hot water in the shower room, it took ten minutes to heat up. While Boaz, the muscular Israeli, could step under a stream of chilly water without the trace of a shiver, I hated cold showers. In fact, the ashram was the exact opposite of the pampered lifestyle which I was used to in America.

Boaz, or Mohatama, as he preferred to be called, reassured me that personal hardships were a necessary phase of a disciple's training. For two months, I was kept on a juice, tea, and vegetable diet. Twice a week, I was required to fast. To get my breakfast in the morning, I had to wait on line with the beggars who flocked to the ashram for puffed puris bread and ghee butter. One day a week, I was forbidden to talk. Saturdays, I had to spend the whole day in seclusion in a hut in the woods.

“I will not!” I protested when Yogi Gara ordered me to return my blanket to the storeroom.

“This is Samran yelling, or Sam, the spoiled American boy?” the Yogi asked with a smile.

“How am I supposed to sleep without a blanket?” I asked, unable to contain my frustration. “If you haven't noticed, it's cold here at night.”

“Don't think of the cold,” the Indian Superman replied.

“Don't think of the cold? You've got to be kidding! Even with the

crummy blanket, my feet feel like they're freezing at night.”

“Don't think of your body. Learn to live in your mind.

Concentrate on your concentration.”

It drove me crazy when they told me stupid riddles like that. But since the yogi seemed a lot more at peace than I was, I did what he said. I solved the problem of the blanket by simply not sleeping. For nights on end, I sat in a corner and shivered. Feeling sorry for me, Mohatama-Boaz offered me his blanket, but I was determined to keep to the strict rules of the ashram. I knew that I wouldn't make progress if I clung to my old pampered ways.

One day, I came across Yogi Baba resting on a mattress of nails.

“Doesn't that hurt?” I asked him.

“What?” the dark, turbaned Indian asked.

“The nails.”

“What nails?”

“You don't feel any nails?” I asked in amazement.

“Maybe my body does, but I don't,” he answered.

“You mean you and your body are different?”

“I am my spirit. My body is the same as my clothes.”

I was impressed. I mean, they were real nails. Not only that, I had heard that the Swami could levitate. That was a trick I was anxious to learn. But for the moment, I was concerned with simply staying healthy. Without a blanket to curl up in, and with attacks of explosive diarrhea at night, I was on the brink of exhaustion. Plus the lousy ashram diet and the weekly fasts weakened me to the point of starvation.

One day, while I was meditating in a lotus position, I swayed over on my side and fainted to the ground with my legs still locked like a pretzel. Luckily, Boaz was near. He lifted me into a wheelbarrow and rolled me all the way to the medical clinic in the village. For over an hour, I laid unconscious in the wheelbarrow in the crowded out-patient ward. Finally, a doctor came over and stuck an intravenous needle into my vein.

“Dehydration,” he said.

I had dehydrated from all of the diarrhea. Apparently, it wasn't the first case the doctor had seen. "The Ashram Syndrome," he called it.

"When you get used to the food and the water, the diarrhea will stop," the doctor assured me when I opened my eyes.

It did. After several months at the ashram, I could survive a whole day without having to race to the outhouse. In fact, I came to like the spicy curry dishes. Strangely, instead of feeling weaker from the weight I had lost, I felt stronger. I sensed that a great cleansing was taking place in my body, as if all of my cells were being replaced. Slowly, I felt the poisons seep out of my system: the uppers and downers I had been forced-fed as a child, the Coca-Cola, thick sirloin steaks, bubble gum, pretzels, and Hershey candy bars.

Along with the physical renewal, I experienced a spiritual rejuvenation as well. Studying with Yogi Baba, my yoga techniques improved every day. My muscles became more and more limber. Sitting with my legs spread, I was able to bend over and touch my head to the ground. I slipped into difficult postures which I had never been able to do in L.A. I could hold positions almost as long as the most advanced student, and I ceased feeling dizzy when I stood for lengthy times on my head. During sessions of seclusion in Harmony Grove, I finally succeeded in blocking out worldly distractions. Finally, I was able to lose myself in a meditative trance.

My brain was being cleaned out. Files and discs of my past went flying off into the trash bin.

"Just like Windows," I thought.

But I could never seem to let go completely. Always, even in my deepest meditations, I knew I was Sam Singer. I always knew I was meditating. I was always in control, always aware of my thoughts, as if I were watching myself on closed-circuit TV.

"Remember the Vedanta," Yogi Baba coached. "Transcend the limitations of your ego and merge with the unity of the universe."

Silently, I repeated the Vedas which we had studied in class.

“Let yourself go,” Baba said.

“I’m trying.”

“Don’t try.”

I struggled to center all my being outside of my body, in the universal unity beyond time and space.

“Just be,” Baba urged softly.

“Just be,” I silently repeated.

“Trust in the Brahman,” he urged.

That always caused me to step on the brakes. Trusting in the Brahman was a stickler. I mean, in the first place, trusting wasn’t easy. Maybe because of the relationship I had had with my parents. Maybe because of the doctors and their experimental drugs. On top of all that, trusting in Brahman always felt strange. Maybe because of that first dollar bill which my father had given me, with the message “IN G-D WE TRUST.” Unable to trust in Hindu deities, I always came to a point where my mantra got stuck. My Third Eye shut closed. In other words, I was stuck like a Brahma bull in the mud, half in my body and half out of it.

“”Forget about yourself,” Yogi Baba exhorted. “Think about universal harmony.”

I would squeeze my eyes shut and try to focus on the oneness of existence, but the more I thought about oneness, the more I thought about my closet and the afternoons I had spent climbing up the windy Malibu cliffs.

One day in a Veda class in the Temple of Incense, Yogi Baba told us to keep our eyes shut for the duration of the meditation.

Opening an eye for a peek, I saw the Swami come into the meditation hall and walk in front of the beginners. He waved his long ostrich feather in the air like a general inspecting his troops. When the stern-faced master reached the fat girl, Patty, he shook his head disapprovingly at her pathetic position. Stopping by Samantha, the beautiful girl whom Jack called “The Fox,” the Swami smiled and nodded his head at her correct, graceful posture.



As the wise man came closer, I pretended to be lost in a deep meditation. Suddenly, blows struck my forehead. Once, twice, three times, the feather whipped me hard on my skull.

“Stop pretending!” the Swami barked.

That ended the meditation. Everyone was surprised to see the Swami right there in the hall. He stood in the doorway with an angry look on his face.

“You Westerners think about yourselves all of the time!” he shouted. “Think about Atman instead!”

After the class, my ego was shattered. I felt like a bug. Boaz said that self-annulment was a very high level, but I remained sullen all night.

The next evening in the dining hall after dinner, the American girls started singing old Simon and Garfunkel songs. An hour earlier, they had been chanting Vedic melodies in the Himalaya Temple, and now they were singing “Scarborough Fair.”

With a disapproving frown, Boaz stood up from the table where he and I had been sitting in silence, eating a sparse vegetarian meal.

“You Americans are like children,” he said. “This place is like summer camp to you, that's all.”

“What's the matter with a little fun?” I asked, following Boaz's lead.

The lyrics of “Mrs. Robinson” escorted us toward the door.

“Yoga is just a game with them, can't you see?” the serious Israeli remarked.

I had to admit, the American girls did look a little silly, dressed in their saris and beads, with little red dots on their foreheads. Was I like them, I wondered, trying to be someone I wasn't? But what was the big crime in liking Simon and Garfunkel? Sometimes I felt the same way, suddenly overcome with a craving for a MacWhopper with ketchup and fries. But I knew that Boaz was right. That's why I tried to avoid the Americans at the ashram, sensing that if I wanted to undergo a real transformation, I would

have to stay away from people who attracted me back to my past.

“Yoo-hoo, Boaz,” the girl from Brooklyn called. “Don't you know any Simon and Garfunkel songs? They're Jewish too.”

“Boaz isn't Jewish,” Patty said. “He's Israeli!”

“He's Israeli?” another girl teased. “Then why does he try so hard to pass himself off as a yogi?”

All the girls laughed.

“They're idiots,” Boaz said when we were outside the building. The stoic Israeli was uncharacteristically red in the face.

“They were just teasing you, Mohatama,” I said, calling him by the name he preferred. “The girls really like you, can't you tell?”

“Yeah, I can tell. I met lots of American girls in Israel. They all think they are star actresses on ‘Love Boat.’”

I had to laugh. The Israeli was right. Americans turned everything into a movie.

“Why don't you join them?” Boaz asked, heading off toward Harmony Grove for his evening meditation.

“I never really liked Simon and Garfunkel,” I answered. “I mean, I guess they're all right, but I was never into the scene.”

“I used to like them,” Boaz confessed. “In Israel, I used to play the guitar. I knew most of their songs.”

I was surprised to hear this rare pearl of information. On several occasions, I had tried to get Boaz to talk about Israel, but he ignored my questions with a wall of silence, as if that part of his life were closed.

“You can't cut yourself off from your past life completely,” I said.

“There is no past,” Boaz answered. “No past and no future. The only true moment is now.”

It was one of those clever expressions that took the place of real answers.

“What about your parents?” I asked. “Don't you ever think about them?”

Boaz walked on in silence. “Yes, sometimes I think about them. Occasionally I write them a letter.”

“I bet they miss you?”

“They're accustomed to my being away.”

Once again, the Israeli fell silent, as if he were hiding some secret. The gravel sounded under our feet as we walked along the forest path. A full moon shone brightly between the branches of overhanging trees. The eyes of a three-headed statue of Brahma seemed to follow us as we walked toward the grove.

“I was in the army for three years,” Boaz continued, unexpectedly overturning another piece of the puzzle. “Sometimes, I didn't get home for weeks.”

“Really. The army?” I said, impressed. Everyone had heard of the Israeli army. “What was it like?”

Boaz glanced down at me like a giant looking down at a flea.

“Did you do any fighting?” I asked.

“I don't want to talk about it,” Boaz said flatly.

With longer strides, he hurried on ahead into the tranquil, grass covered glade. Boaz paused by an elephant statue and bowed, then sat in his favorite spot by the trunk of a large frangipani. Crossing his legs, he breathed deeply and sat with his back erect, tilting his brow toward the sky.

“Why did you come to India?” I asked him. “Were you looking for G-d?”

Boaz opened his eyes and stared at me peevishly.

“Running away from G-d is more like it,” he answered. “I had my fill of G-d in Israel.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“In Israel, you can't get away from G-d. The religious won't let you. According to the rabbis, everything you want to do is forbidden. This is forbidden, that is forbidden. G-d wants you to do this, G-d wants you to do that. If you don't dress like they dress, eat what they eat, keep all their laws and believe in the Torah, then you're treif.”

“Treif?” I asked.

“You don't know what treif is?”

I shook my head no.

“Are you sure you're a Jew?”

“Of course,” I replied.

To tell you the truth, I felt piqued. I realized that Boaz was right. I had studied history, philosophy, literature, economics, and science, but I had never studied about being a Jew. To me being Jewish was gefilta fish, bagels, and Caribbean cruises. Listening to the Israeli, I was intrigued to learn that the Jewish people had their own culture and laws.

“I came here to get away from all that,” Boaz continued, unlocking his legs from their lotus position. As he did, pent-up emotions seemed to burst free from his heart. “I came here to get away from the rabbis, the peace talks, the terrorist bombings, and the religious fanatics of Gush Emunim. I was fed up with being a Jew. After three years in the army, I was tired of having people tell me what to do. I wanted to take off, clear my head, hang out and be free, with no obligations, no responsibilities, no connections, no commanders, no guilt trips, no past. Do you know what I mean?”

“Sure,” I replied. “I was sick of America too.”

Once again, Boaz crossed his legs into a lotus, as if locking the doors to his past. He retreated into his usual silence. Once again, he morphed back to being Mohatama.

I sat down in the garden, a short distance away. When I tried to slip into a meditation, the memory of a Simon and Garfunkel song rang in my ears.

“Are you going to Scarborough fair, parsley, sage, rosemary, and thyme?”

“When am I going to hear the real sounds of silence?” I wondered.

The next morning after the first meditation of the day, Yogi Gara told me that the Swami wanted to see me. I was amazed. I wondered if he was planning to teach me some secrets to help me along. Or, then again, maybe he was going to kick me out of the ashram for being such a big fake. I was trembling when Yogi Gara

brought me to the simple white cottage at the edge of the woods. The yard looked out over a clearing, down the hill toward the Ganges. The Swami was sitting on a mat on the lawn, his hands on his knees, his vacant eyes staring out at the river. An empty mat was spread out beside him, as if he were waiting for someone to join him. A pot of incense burned on the grass, sending up an aromatic column of smoke. Without looking at me, he motioned for me to sit down. Nervously, I assumed the best yoga posture I could.

“In meditation, one must be brave,” the master taught without lifting his gaze from the river. “People are afraid that if they let their minds go, if they give up control, if they give up their selves, they will discover something frightening. The paradox is that in order to discover yourself, you have to be willing to abandon yourself completely.”

His gaze shifted my way. It's hard to describe the look on his face, but his expression was as somber and cold as a corpse, as if his soul had run away from his body.

“How is your learning?” he asked, ever so slightly turning his head to avoid a bothersome fly.

For a moment, I couldn't form words on my lips. The Swami seemed so detached from the world, I was astounded. The fly seemed less impressed. It buzzed around the Swami's nose, as if looking for a spot to make a landing.

It's funny. Finally, my chance had come. But now that I was seated in front of the Swami, I didn't know what to say. “I... well... you see... that is, I don't really know if I am making much progress,” I stuttered.

“Progress is an illusion,” the wise man answered. “Brahman is not something you reach. It exists every moment, at every stage. Is this clear?”

“Well, sort of. I mean, intellectually I can understand it, but it's harder to feel.”

The Swami's head twitched as the fly fluttered into his eye. To

tell you the truth, I was surprised to see an insect pestering the Swami at all. Holy men were supposed to be so pure that flies weren't attracted to them at all.

“You are trying too hard to succeed,” he said. “Yoga is not a contest with a clock to beat. It isn't a game with points. You have to give up your Western ideas.”

I nodded and took a deep breath to relax. The fly once again hovered over the Swami's nose. The fiery eyes of the guru darted back and forth, watching the insect, as if ready to roast it to a crisp.

“How long have you been here?” he asked.

“Almost six months now,” I answered.

The Swami didn't reply. Six months, I realized, were nothing. In the presence of the wise master, I felt like a spoiled brat. I was at the very beginning of my path, and yet I wanted to reach NIRVANA NOW.

“Progress is an illusion,” the Swami declared. “All advances give birth to new challenges. All solutions breed new problems.”

I nodded. Sure he was right. He really had all the answers, I could tell.

Suddenly, the Swami opened his lips, jerked forward and trapped the fly in his mouth without raising his hands from his knees. Smiling, he bent over sideways and let the fly drop to the grass in a thick glob of saliva.

“Americans expect muksha too fast,” he said, staring at me.

His cobra-like eyes peered through me, making me feel like the fly in the grass as it struggled to escape from the holy man's spit. Muksha meant redemption – the redemption of the soul from the chains of this world to a state of spiritual freedom. After six months at the ashram, I didn't feel I was getting any closer to the goal.

Summoning up my courage, I asked the Swami a question.

“How long have you been practicing yoga?” I asked the world-famous teacher.

The Swami gazed back toward the Ganges. “Five hundred years,”

he answered.

“Five hundred years!” I thought.

“You mean in past reincarnations?” I asked.

The Swami didn't answer. With a swift, fluid motion, his body uncoiled. Gracefully, he rose to his feet, indicating that the meeting was over.

“The secret is not to fear,” he said. “You must learn not to fear.”

“How do I do that?”

“First,” the Swami said. “You must master the Tiger Trail.”

“The Tiger Trail?” I said. “What's that?”

## Chapter Nine

### THE TIGER TRAIL

“The Tiger Trail? With real tigers?” I wondered as I watched the Swami walk barefoot back to the white cottage. Later, at the ashram office, I told Yogi Gara what the Swami had said. The yogi smiled, nodded, and told me to come to the office first thing the next morning.

“What is the Tiger Trail?” I asked Boaz when I met up with him in the dorm.

Boaz looked at me with a cryptic grin. “The Tiger Trail? No disciple who has traveled it and returned is allowed to disclose its secrets.”

“You've done it?” I nervously asked.

Boaz nodded in silence.

“Is it dangerous?”

For a moment, the Israeli was silent. Then he said, “Only for those who are afraid.”

The next morning, I reported to the ashram office at precisely six o'clock. Yogi Gara was waiting. Carrying a cloth sack over his shoulder, he led me out of the ashram courtyard, through the gate, and down the narrow path leading back to the village.

“I have a few questions,” I shyly admitted.

“Questions are easy. Answers are difficult,” came the witty reply.

“Why is it called the Tiger Trail?” I asked.

“That answer is easy. It is the trail tigers walk.”

“How long is it?”

“A day's journey.”

“Where do I eat on the way?”

“Wherever you like.”

“There are hotels?”

“No hotels.”

“Guest houses?”

“No guest houses.”

“Another ashram, a village?”

The Indian shook his head. I followed him down the hill to a road where an old Ford station wagon was waiting.

“The driver will take you to the start of the trail,” Yogi Gara explained. “You are to walk to the end. There you will discover a beautiful grove of peach trees. You are to pick two ripe peaches and return with them to the ashram.”

“That's all?” I asked.

“That's all.”

Yogi Gara handed me a sack filled with wafers and a bottle of water.

“This is enough for two days. There are brooks along the way and plenty of fruit on the trees.”

“That's all I get to take with me? What about a gun?” I asked.

“Indian law forbids shooting tigers.”

“That's great,” I said. “I'm very glad for the tigers. But what am I supposed to do if I see one?”

“Don't be afraid,” the yogi answered. “Tigers are frightened of men. But if they sense that a man is afraid, then they mistake him for an animal and are likely to attack.”

I gazed back at the yogi's smiling expression. Was he nuts, I wondered? Were all of these people crazy? To tell you the truth, I felt like chucking the sack of wafers into the woods and continuing on down the road to the train station. But that would prove I was frightened. To proceed on my journey, I knew that I had to conquer



my fear.

“Stop worrying,” I told myself. For some reason, my old mantra flashed in my mind. “IN G-D WE TRUST. IN G-D WE TRUST.”

After all, the trail couldn't really be dangerous. These were responsible people. The ashram couldn't stay in business if its students got eaten by tigers. And certainly Boaz would have warned me if my life were really at stake.

“The worst fear is the fear in the mind,” Yogi Gara said, reading my thoughts.

With a bow, the smiling figure turned and walked back up the hill.

“Have you driven other students to the Tiger Trail?” I asked the driver.

The Indian held up his hands. Turning his head to the side, he pointed to a long, deep scar across the width of his neck.

“Oh, great,” I said. “You can't talk.”

The driver frowned. “Oh boy,” I thought. The ugly old wound looked like it could have been caused by the claw of a tiger.

“IN G-D WE TRUST,” I repeated, opening the back door of the car. On the dashboard, mounted on a small magnetic base, was a little Brahma god with four arms. As the car headed up the mountain, I could make out the Ganges snaking through the forest hillsides below. After three hours of noisy radio music, the station wagon came to a stop on a misty precipice. Back down the winding mountain road, the world had disappeared in a cloud. I gazed out at the jungle, thinking that it wasn't too late to turn back.

“That's the trail?” I asked, motioning to a narrow path that led into the dark forest.

The driver nodded his head.

“Well, thanks for nothing,” I said, slinging the sack of wafers over my shoulder.

With a wave, the driver put the car in reverse and made a slow turn, careful not to back off the cliff.

“What the hell are you doing?” I said to myself as the station

wagon began to drive off. "Are you out of your mind?"

"Hey! Wait!" I yelled, as the car's rear lights vanished into the cloud hanging over the mountain.

For a while, I waited out on the road, half-expecting the car to return, as if it were all some kind of prank. But the battered old Ford didn't appear. A profound stillness fell over the precipice. Suddenly, I was alone with my thoughts and the distant sounds of the jungle.

"Oh brother," I moaned. "Why didn't I go home to college like my father wanted?"

There was no one around to answer my question. Difficulty at the beginning. Furthering through perseverance. The worst fear is the fear in the mind. I knew all of the right expressions, but they didn't keep my heart from pounding.

"IN G-D WE TRUST," I said aloud as I took my first step into the forest. "The worst fear is the fear in the mind," I repeated as I walked along the trail. "There is nothing to fear, but fear itself." Franklin Delano Roosevelt had said that, or was it Winston Churchill? I wasn't sure.

"IN G-D WE TRUST."

"IN G-D WE TRUST."

"IN G-D WE TRUST."

I said it aloud to feel less alone. But when my sandals crunched over a branch, I panicked.

"TIGER!" I screamed.

I spun around to thwart the attack, but the jungle was peaceful. There wasn't a creature in sight. Up ahead and behind me, the trail was deserted. And clean. There were none of the soda cans, cigarette butts, and candy wrappers that litter the forest trails in America. There were no skeletons either.

Cautiously, I continued on my journey. All kinds of trees bordered the path; trees with small leaves, trees with broad leaves, trees with nuts, and bushes covered with berries. Vines hung down from the jungle ceiling, just like they did in the movies. Suddenly,

I heard a crashing of foliage and a loud thud on the path.

“TIGER!” I screamed out in fear.

But it was only a coconut. Gazing up, I spotted a monkey high up in a palm. The creature flashed its teeth in a smile, barked, and shook another coconut down from the tree. Instinctively, I raised my hands to safeguard my head. The nut crashed through the foliage and bounced off my elbow.

“Ouch!” I yelped out in pain.

With a surge of adrenaline rushing through my system, I quickened my pace. Soon, I was running. Breathing hard, and satisfied that the danger was behind me, I settled back to a crisp walk. Before long, there was a break in the forest. I came to a clearing. A vast grove of banana trees stretched out before me.

“Too bad they're not peaches,” I mused.

Since the sun was high in the sky, I decided to rest and have a quick lunch. Snapping a few ripe bananas off of a cluster, I sat down in the shade of a broad-leafed tree.

“I wonder if tigers eat bananas,” I thought, taking a cautious look around the peaceful grove.

Suddenly, a few feet away, a patch of tall grass started to move.

“SNAKE!” I yelled out, remembering that India was infested with cobras.

I leapt to my feet and bolted across the grove in a sprint. At the far end of the field, a trail led the way back into the forest. This time, I snapped off a low branch to use as a stick. At least if a tiger appeared, I would have some kind of a weapon. Plus, with the stick, I could prod the leafy trail to make sure there were no venomous vipers camouflaged in the shade.

Before long, I heard the sound of rushing water. Hurrying along the trail, I found myself facing a cascading waterfall. The path continued up the face of the fall, up a rocky cliffside to a vine-covered wall some one-hundred feet over my head.

“IN G-D WE TRUST,” I said, starting off.

I don't mean to sound like a braggart, but the climb was a cinch.

The techniques I had mastered in Malibu, scaling its cliffs, had trained me for this ascent. True, the scenery along the Pacific coastline was different, but the search was the same. If finding G-d meant climbing cliffs and risking my life for a few stupid peaches, that was the price I would just have to pay. Tugging on a vine to make sure it was sturdy, I began to shimmy my way up the face of the thundering waterfall. With water and spray all around me, I gripped onto the slippery branches and pulled myself up.

"The only fear is the fear in the mind," I reminded myself as I approached the top of the cliff.

"I made it!" I said with a deep breath when I made it to the peak. But my relief was short-lived. Standing up on the precipice, I gazed out at a formidable sight. In front of me was a beautiful pool. Rising over its emerald waters was another roaring waterfall, towering hundreds of feet toward the sky.

"You've got to be kidding," I said.

No doubt the water flowed from the snow-covered peaks of the Himalayas, all the way down to the Ganges. Difficulty at the beginning. Furthering through perseverance.

"If others have done it, so can I," I told myself, psyching myself for the climb. Once again, I set off up the trail, scrambling over rocks and pulling myself up vines, as if I were getting ready to bang. Up and up I climbed as if I were going to grab hold of the sky. Hoisting myself up to a ledge, I gazed out beyond the halo of clouds circling the mountain. In the distance was a postcard panorama of India. The view was magnificent, but if G-d were around, I didn't see Him. For safety sake, I edged back a step from the cliff. To be truthful, heights made me dizzy. I could handle the Malibu cliffsides all right. But standing on a ledge a mile up in the air made my head spin.

It took me a few seconds to realize that I wasn't alone. First, I heard a chirp and then a full-fledged shriek. Just above my head, a baby eagle stuck its beak out of a large nest in the rocks.

"Uh oh," I said out loud.

All I needed now was for mamma eagle to come flying home, flapping her big eagle wings.

“Shhh!” I whispered, trying to quiet the stupid bird.

The baby eagle squawked bloody murder. Quickly, to get the hell out of there, I scrambled up the path. Without looking back, I climbed the rest of the way up the mountain. In record time, I reached the lip of the waterfall. A racing stream cascaded out over the cliff. The trail continued through a carpet of moss which spread over the floor of the forest. Glancing down at the bank of the stream, I noticed tracks leading their way to the water. I wasn't an expert on wildlife, but the paw prints sure looked like a tiger's to me.

“The only thing to fear is fear,” I told myself, running off upstream.

Soon, the trail disappeared into the river. Looking around to make sure that none of the logs in the water were crocodiles, I decided to cross over the brook before the tiger came back for a bath. Wading into the waist-deep current and holding my sack in the air, I forded the ice-cold stream. Once again, I was back on the trail, heading deeper and deeper into the dark Indian forest.

“Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil,” I said aloud.

It was a prayer that Beulah, one of the black housekeepers who worked for our family, was fond of reciting. For years, she had been my private nurse maid. Every night, the black woman would read me a Psalm or sing a soothing Baptist hymn before giving me a kiss and tucking me in bed. When my mother found out, she fired her for poisoning my head with religion.

Suddenly, a roar shook the dark forest. That is, I thought it was a roar. Thinking back on it now, maybe it was the wind, or the waterfall, or a wild boar or something. But I was convinced it was a tiger.

“Help me, G-d!” I called out to the treetops.

Why didn't G-d stop hiding? Why didn't He say something? Or

give me some sign? Is this what G-d wanted me to be doing – walking through the Himalayan woods with a stick and sandals, dressed up like Mahatma Gandhi?

Once again, the forest suddenly cleared. I stood paralyzed in my tracks. Up ahead was a gaping ravine. A long, narrow rope bridge connected the two sides of the mountain. In the distance, on the plateau across the way, sparkling in the late-afternoon sunlight, was a fairytale grove of fruit trees.

“Peaches,” I said.

Big shiny peaches. As real as could be.

But the ravine. How was I going to cross it? On the rickety rope bridge? No way.

“Forget about it,” I mumbled aloud. “There's no way I'm crossing that bridge. Not for all the ripe peaches in the world.”

Edging toward the cliff, I gazed down at the terrifying chasm below.

“No way. There's simply no way that I'm going to cross over that bridge.”

The flimsy rope bridge swayed in the wind. Its wooden slats creaked as it moved. The other side of the cavern was a long thirty yards away.

In my mind, I heard Boaz's voice. “If it were simple, it wouldn't be a test.”

That was easy for him to say. He was an Israeli. A trained soldier. Everyone knew the Israelis were brave. But I was an American. I had never even been in the Boy Scouts, let alone in a real army.

“Is this it? The end of the journey?” another voice spoke in my brain. “Are you going to give up? Are you going to stay a quitter all of your life? What's the big deal? A bridge is a bridge. So what if it's made out of string. So what if it sways like a hammock. Other people have made it. If not, it wouldn't be standing. And you've come all this way. You can't quit now. Just don't look down. Just don't look down, look down, look down, look down.”

Once again, the roar sounded behind me. The tiger was getting

closer. Slowly, cautiously, I inched my way out onto the swaying bridge. My heart pounded with every squeak. The bananas I had eaten rose up in my throat.

“Just don't look down. Just don't look down,” he repeated. “The worst fear is the fear in your mind.”

Slowly, plank after plank, I inched forward, clutching onto the vibrating ropes. My legs felt as limp as a puppet's. My arms shook with each rocking motion. Another step. Another step. “Help me G-d, please,” I thought, too frightened to speak.

When I took a tiny glance earthward, the world seemed to flip upside down. For a moment, I thought I was skateboarding. The bridge wouldn't stop swaying. The tighter I held on, the more it swayed. My stick slipped out from my sack and tumbled into the abyss far below. I was completely alone. There was no one to help me. If I fell, no one would know.

“IN G-D WE TRUST. IN G-D WE TRUST,” I repeated, clutching on to my childhood mantra.

I saw the tiger back on the cliff. At least it had the sense not to step out on the bridge. That is, I think I saw a tiger. Who knows?

Somehow, my feet inched forward. The bridge swayed back and forth. Amazingly, miraculously, I crossed. Still in one piece, I stood on the other side. Looking back, I glanced down at the dizzying canyon.

“I made it!” I said in delight. “I made it!”

For the first time in a very long while, I felt proud of myself. I felt strong. I felt brave.

With a joyous shout, and a jump, and a hand raised in triumph to heaven, I started to run toward the peach grove – the beautiful, beautiful peach grove. But to my horror, as I ran toward the trees, I saw that the peaches weren't peaches at all – they were apples!

I let out a curse. Either my eyesight was failing, or I was going crazy. But before my disappointment could really sink in, I heard a fierce barking. A giant black dog came hurtling through the orchid. Growling, teeth barred, it seemed to fly in the air without touching

the earth. Instinctively, I raised my hands in defense.

As much as I was afraid of tigers, I was more afraid of big black dogs. With one last bound, the maniacal creature leaped for my throat. Wildly, I swung at it with my sack, deflecting its course. The water bottle bounced off its head. The dog wailed, fell to the ground, then sprang up and snatched the sack in its jaws, ripping it out of my hands.

Terrified, I crouched in a karate position and let out a scream, looking as fierce as I could.

For a moment, the dog stared at me puzzled, then barred its fangs and growled, ready to spring. Before I could finish saying, "IN G-D WE TRUST," a shrill whistle sounded. The dog's head jerked, and its ears stood on end.

"Rapu san," a voice called out crisply.

At the sound of the command, the dog forgot about me and ran off like a flash. Coming through the apple grove was an old peasant holding a staff.

I let out a sigh of relief that could have been heard all over India.

As the farmer approached, the dog pranced around him like an obedient puppy. Reaching me, the man stood gripping his staff like a weapon he knew how to use. His gaze fixed slightly over my head. Looking at him closely, I realized that he was blind.

"Hello," I said. "Do you speak English?"

"A little," the man answered. "In India, everybody speaks a little English, because of the British who ruled in our country."

The dog sat tamely by his master, contentedly wagging its tail.

"Not many Americans come here," he said. "You must be from the ashram."

"That's right," I answered. "They told you that someone was coming?"

"No. They never tell me. I have no telephone here. Just a small cabin, big enough for me and the dog. Together, we watch over the orchids. The peaches are over here. I'll show you."

As if knowing the way from memory, the blind watchman led the



way through the apple orchid to a grove of ripe peaches. Stopping, he lashed out with his staff and knocked a branch to the ground as if he could see its exact location.

“Try one,” he said. “The best are shipped to the city where they get a good price.”

I took his advice. The peach was juicy and incredibly fresh. A burst of sweetness filled up my mouth. Since evening was falling, the watchman invited me to spend the night in his cabin. He said there was no point in trying to go back in darkness – I would surely get lost.

The Spartan dwelling consisted of a table, two chairs, a kerosene lamp, and a wood-burning stove. There were two mats spread on the floor by the wall, one for the watchman and apparently one for the dog. Moving around in the cabin as if he could see, the blind man lit the lone lamp and boiled water for tea.

“Are there really tigers in the forest?” I asked.

“Not in this part of India,” the watchman said.

“Then why is it called the Tiger Trail?”

“A man who conquers his fear is a tiger. That is why they call it the Tiger Trail.”

I sighed. All that effort for nothing, I thought. But then again, what did it matter if there were actually tigers or not? I thought that there were. And hadn't I succeeded in overcoming my fear? That was the lesson the Swami wanted to teach. The worst fear is the fear in the mind. Finally, I understood.

“It must get lonely up here all alone,” I said to make conversation.

“Lonely?” the man asked. “I have never felt lonely. I am connected to the earth, to my trees, to the sky, to the wind. I have fruit to eat and water to drink. I have whatever I need.”

I glanced around the small cabin. It was so simple. So plain. Yet this man said he lacked nothing. Surely, a man such as this must know the secret of living.

“I'm looking for meaning,” I told him.

“Meaning?” the old man asked. “What is that?”

Needless to say, I was taken aback. “You know – meaning,” I fumbled.

The blind man was silent.

“You mean there is no meaning?” I asked.

The blind man just stared into space.

“Well, it's not just that I'm looking for meaning,” I admitted. “I'm looking for G-d.”

“G-d is all over,” the watchman answered. “In the clouds, in the rain, in the ground. The orchard is G-d. The forest is G-d. The river is G-d. He speaks in the sound of the birds and the wind. You are G-d. I am G-d. G-d is everything. The sun, and the moon, and the stars. We should worship all things. This is the beauty of Brahman.”

I was tired. Tired of trails. Tired of Brahman. Tired of holy rivers and cows. The truth is, I had set off to find one G-d, not an army of them. All I wanted to do was sleep. The blind man rolled out a third mat and I laid down next to the black dog. In the morning, I said goodbye to my host and headed back toward the narrow rope bridge, with a few prize peaches in my sack. I wasn't thrilled about having to cross the chasm again, but this time, I didn't feel the same fear. I had crossed the bridge once; I could do it again. This time, I let my body sway with the planks, without offering resistance. I felt like a new person, filled with self-confidence.

The blind man waved from the other side of the chasm.

“Watch out for monkeys!” he called. “They can smell peaches a mile away.”

“Great,” I thought. “Monkeys.”

But at least monkeys were small. Monkeys weren't tigers. Monkeys couldn't eat you alive. Waving to the blind man, I called out an Indian farewell. With the sack of peaches slung over my shoulder, I headed back into the forest. Crossing back over the stream, I found the alternate trail which the blind man had

suggested I take. The path wound along the slope of the mountain, bypassing the difficult vertical descent down the face of the waterfall. The detour added extra time to the journey, but with the peaches safe and sound in my sack, I no longer felt in a rush. On the way down the mountain, I caught myself whistling and actually enjoying the hike. I didn't believe that the forest was G-d, but it was a beautiful creation all the same. Deities, I decided, weren't for me, but at least I was in the right ballpark now that I had discovered a more spiritual world.

Not having to worry about tigers, I was able to enjoy my walk back down the mountain. The sun rose high in the sky over the trees of the forest. Sitting in a peaceful glade, I finished my wafers and closed my eyes to meditate in the cool forest shade. I focused on my inner third eye and concentrated on the harmony around me, but every sound of the forest echoed in my ears, distracting free contemplation. Soon, I became exhausted from the effort. As I began drowsing off, I heard a rustling in the leaves. Opening my eyes, I saw a mongoose rise up on its hind legs like a squirrel. Its little nose twitched.

"Riki tiki tavi. Riki tiki tavi," it squeaked, just like in Kipling's famous story.

"I bet you like peaches," I said.

I stood up and chased the creature away with a growl. Frightened, the mongoose bolted off into the bush. That was the end of my rest. Where there were mongooses, there were bound to be snakes. No doubt, cobras liked peaches too.

"You'll rest when you get back to the ashram," I promised myself.

Now my task was to bring the two ripe peaches to the Swami. That would prove I had mastered my fear. Swinging the sack over my back, I began jogging down the trail, hopping over rocks and branches. Even though I had taken the long way down, I reached the edge of the forest long before sunset. Suddenly, just as I glimpsed the road between the trees, I heard a wild screeching. As if in a slow motion, a monkey swung down on a vine, heading

straight for me. Before I could defend myself, the flying chimp snatched the sack off my back and ran screeching away into the forest.

“My peaches!” I shouted, running after the varmint.

Branches scratched my face as I chased after the monkey. Suddenly, I burst into a glade where an army of monkeys were waiting.

“An ambush,” I thought.

The simians hopped up and down, flashing their teeth. Some threw stones. Others charged forward brandishing sticks. The forest echoed with their furious chatter. The monkey who had stolen the sack opened his jaws and bit into a peach with a smile. Another monkey turned the sack inside out and threw the other peaches into the air. A basketball team of miniature gorillas leaped off the ground to snatch them.

“Hey!” I shouted.

The mob of snarling monkeys froze and suddenly charged me. Screaming, they pummeled my body with sticks.

“The hell with the stupid peaches,” I thought, running away as fast as I could. I tripped over a stump, fell flat on my face, and took another few whacks on the back from the apes. Scrambling to my feet, I sprinted toward the road, hollering at the top of my lungs.

“Help! Help!” I shouted.

To my good fortune, an open truck was winding its way down the mountain. I raced in its path and stood on the road, frantically waving my arms. The driver braked to a halt.

“Monkeys!” I yelled, out of breath. “Hundreds of them. They're after me!”

The way the driver looked at me, I could tell that he didn't speak English. With a flick of the hand, he motioned for me to climb in the back of the truck. It was already loaded with peasants riding down the mountain to the markets along the Ganges. Nobody gave me a look as I squeezed into the crowd of bodies and baskets. In India, what difference did another passenger make? If there wasn't

any room in this world, there would be plenty of room in the next. Back by the edge of the woods, the monkeys jumped up and down on the road like cheerleaders celebrating a victory. I was returning to the ashram without peaches. The forces of the forest had won.

## Chapter Ten

### THE SWAMI

Along bouncy ride later, I climbed down from the truck in Reshekesh.

“Now what?” I thought. “How can I face the Swami without any peaches?”

But what difference did it make? I had found them, hadn't I? That was the main thing. So what if I had lost them on the way? What did that have to do with the test? The main thing was that I had conquered my fear. I had learned that the worst tigers were the ones in the mind. Yet I still felt uneasy. In a way, I had failed. Without having peaches to bring to the master, my accomplishment wasn't complete.

Just then, as I turned up a street toward the ashram, I spotted a cart load of peaches parked in front of a shop. The owner of the cart had gone into the shop to talk business with the storekeeper. The solution to my dilemma was simple. I could buy two peaches and present them to the Swami as if they had come from the grove at the end of the Tiger Trail.

So far so good. But there was one problem. I didn't have any money. I had set out the day before without a coin in my pocket. I gazed at the unattended cart of peaches, wondering if I should steal them. The truth is I had never stolen anything in my life. Yet if I waited, I wouldn't have a chance. The cart owner would be back on the street any moment.

“How can I give stolen peaches to the Swami?” I thought.

Surely, the Swami would know. Not only people had karma – peaches had karma too. For sure, the karma of a stolen peach wasn't the same karma as a peach plucked straight off a tree. No, I decided, it wasn't right to steal, even if it meant flunking the test.

The cart owner emerged from the shop, smiled broadly, grabbed a ripe peach and held it out for sale.

“Good, good,” he said in nursery-school English.

“How does he know that I'm an American,” I wondered? After all, I was dressed like an Indian, tanned like an Indian, poor as an Indian, with the look of a downtrodden beggar. Maybe it was because I didn't have the contented smile on my face that Indians naturally seemed to possess.

“No, thank you,” I answered in the local Indian jargon. With a slight bow, I turned and walked on toward the ashram.

When I told Yogi Gara about my unsuccessful adventure, the Indian's look transformed into a frown of grave displeasure.

“Go to your quarters,” he said.

“But I want to see the Swami,” I responded.

The yogi shook his head no.

“Why not?” I demanded.

“You can't see the Swami without bringing peaches.”

“That's not fair!” I protested.

“The river learns to accept its fate. So should you.”

“I'm not a river,” I said in frustration.

“Do not be discouraged. Furthering through perseverance. You reached the peach grove. Many disciples don't get that far. Patience in the beginning. Remember, you have only completed the first half of the course.”

“The first half of the course?” I asked.

“Your six months at the ashram are up,” Yogi Gara said with a grin.

That meant that if I wanted to continue, I had to come up with more cash. So as the yogi stood smiling beside me, I phoned my father from the office of the ashram.

“Another eight-thousand dollars?” my father exclaimed. “For running around in a loincloth and eating berries off trees?”

“It's cheaper than college, Dad,” I answered. “Look at it this way. If I came back to the States, you'd have to buy me a car. To get me

something fancy enough to park in our driveway, you'd have to spend a good fifty-thousand dollars at least.”

Apparently, my reasoning made sense. The next day, my father wired another eight-thousand dollars. Yogi Gara accompanied me to the bank to collect it.

“This will help us buy food for the poor people,” he said.

Reluctantly, I handed over the money. I was beginning to have my doubts about the ashram, but I didn't know what else to do. Maybe Yogi Gara was right. Maybe I was too impatient. For almost twenty years, all kinds of garbage had been crammed into my head. I couldn't expect to be cleansed of it all in one day.

I began to take more advanced yoga classes. My meditations became longer. Yogi Baba gave me a new mantra.

“Concentrate on it all day,” he said.

I repeated the strange Hindu words constantly in my mind, trying to block out everything else. Having undergone the Tiger Trail and mastered its lesson, my meditations became more intense. When I felt like I was losing myself, I no longer put on the brakes. “IN G-D WE TRUST,” I reminded myself whenever I felt afraid. My body underwent changes too. The constant yoga exercise seemed to release the knots in my muscles. All of my joints seemed to open. Pockets of trapped, poisoned energy were freed. One day, after a deep relaxation, the world seemed to vanish. For the first time in my life, I could sense a spiritual reality all around me. The material world disappeared like a mist which suddenly lifts from the peak of a mountain. In a flash of insight, I realized that the ground, the trees, the sky, and my very own body were all garbs covering the spiritual truth of the universe. In a moment of recognition, I understood that the physical world was an illusion, like the set of a Broadway play. It was like walking behind the facade of a cowboy town in a Hollywood studio and discovering that all of the buildings were fake. Yogi Baba was pleased.

“You must strive every moment to unite with the Atman, the universal consciousness, the invisible all,” he said.

In a deeper meditation, while I was bathing in the Ganges, with only my head sticking out of the water, I realized that Sam Singer wasn't Sam Singer. One day, Sam Singer would come to an end, and only my karma would last.

In the meantime, I was trapped in Sam Singer's body. After each new spiritual high, I was still the same Sam. I still had to eat; I still had to sleep; I still had to go to the bathroom. On the one hand, this world wasn't real, and on the other hand, if someone stepped on my toe, it hurt.

Strangely, instead of feeling enlightened with my great new spiritual awareness, I felt depressed. I felt that I didn't belong in this world, and yet I couldn't shed my body completely and become attached to the next. I had discovered universal harmony, but I hadn't found peace.

"There has to be something more than abstract contemplation," I thought.

After all, I wanted to find my soul, not lose it. For some reason, the knowledge of universal consciousness didn't satisfy me at all.

"You should be happy," the Swami said when I confessed what was in my heart.

I hadn't received a summons to see the reclusive guru. I had gone on my own, defying the rules of the ashram. I found him standing on his head on the lawn outside of his cottage. A beer belly stuck out of his loincloth, as if he had a secret passion for noshing on pretzels at night.

"But I'm not happy," I protested

"But you should be," the upside-down Swami insisted.

"The only time I am happy is when I meditate."

"Then always meditate. Don't ever stop. When you eat, when you bathe, when you walk through the woods, even when you talk with people, you must never stop meditating."

I got down on the grass and lifted myself into a head stand so I could talk face-to-face with the Swami.

"Are you meditating now while you are talking to me?" I asked.



“I never stop meditating,” the master answered. “That way I am not troubled by anything that occurs in this world. You see, I am not really in this world at all.”

“Where are you?” I asked.

“I am united with the spiritual all.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a flash of white silk rush out the back door of the cottage and disappear into the forest. Though I was standing upside down on my head, I could tell it was Samantha, “The Fox,” the prettiest girl at the ashram.

Seeing my eyes dart back and forth, the Swami gave a quick look toward the forest.

“She does my cleaning, that's all,” he said after a pause.

What did he mean by “that's all,” I wondered? I don't know if it was from my surprise at seeing Samantha, or from the blood draining down to my head, but I became dizzy as hell. Unable to sustain the inverted position, I dropped my knees to the ground and raised myself back to my feet. Like a snake, the Swami retracted his body into a ball, then uncoiled and stood facing me, only inches away.

“You are to spend a week in seclusion in the forest,” the Swami concluded, looking uncharacteristically red in the face. “Total isolation will help you achieve a constant meditative awareness.”

“A week in the forest?” I said.

The loin-clothed Swami draped his body in a robe. “Maybe it will help you remember not to come to the Swami without being invited.”

“Am I being punished?” I asked.

The Swami didn't answer. All he said was “A week in the forest alone.”

## Chapter Eleven

### ISOLATION

Whether it was punishment, or a spiritual lesson, I didn't know. Once again, I was sent off into the forest with a sack of wafers and a few pieces of fruit. The isolation hut was at the edge of the

ashram estate, a half-hour walk from the main campus. Yogi Gara made the rules clear. Visiting an ascetic was forbidden. I was to spend my time in total seclusion. No telephone, no radio, no color TV. A water well and an outhouse were situated nearby in the woods. The hut itself was a single room with a shuttered window, a kerosene lamp, a mat to sleep on, and a wood-burning stove. Not exactly like Beverly Hills. But I didn't care about that. I had grown accustomed to living without material comforts. I was used to eating small portions of food. And sleeping on the ground no longer disturbed me. I wasn't afraid of tigers. I wasn't afraid of wolves. I wasn't worried that a snake would creep under the door while I was sleeping. What bothered me the most was the loneliness and the silence of the forest.

The first morning, after lighting a stick of incense, I had a tranquil meditation. In a way, the hut reminded me of my bedroom closet back home; only it didn't have the same smell of my grandfather's old cantor's gown. When my meditation was finished, I went for a walk along a peaceful path which circled through the surrounding glade. After eating some wafers, I meditated again. In the afternoon, to shatter the quiet, I started to speak to myself. Since it was winter, I made sure there was enough wood in the stove for the evening. Before sunset, I taught myself how to adjust the kerosene lamp. After another meditation, I shut the door of the hut and unfolded the blanket I had brought from the dorm. Lamplight flickered psychedelically against the walls of the tiny chamber. Since reading material was forbidden, I had nothing to do. Calmed by my evening meditation, I retired for the night. Lying in the darkness, I thought about the Swami. I thought about "The Fox." I wondered where my friend Jack was. I wondered if my mother was producing new plays. Realizing that my mind was wandering all over the world, I did some Kundalini breathing exercises and slipped into another meditation until my thoughts became stilled. In my mind's eye, I saw a great pool of light and experienced an inner union with the forest. My consciousness filled with oneness

and with a longing for G-d, whom I could never seem to reach, no matter how peaceful I felt. In my dream-like state, I came to a window of endless horizons, but I didn't know how to go through it. Exhausted from the effort, I drifted off to sleep.

On the second day of seclusion, my meditations were even deeper, but I was still left with the elusive feeling of floating in outer space. Instead of discovering my most inner being, I felt more and more lost. I had planned to repeat yesterday's schedule, but a heavy rain kept me imprisoned in the hut. Monsoon season had started. Keeping the stove burning, I chanted the Veda incantations which I had learned by heart, spent an hour doing yoga, and meditated without interruption until my stomach reminded me that it was time to eat lunch. To pass the boredom, I sang out loud and did the dances I had learned for the Swami. Then, with a torrential rain still pounding down on the roof of the hut, I paced in endless circles, trying to meditate while I walked around and around. As best as I could, I remained in a state of expanded consciousness all through the day, while walking, while eating, while keeping the embers of the fire alive. There was nothing to disturb me from achieving total tranquility except for the chill and my thoughts. Around and around, around and around, walking for hours and always returning to the very same spot.

Not wanting my clothes to get soaked in the rain, I remained in the hut the whole day. But during the evening, cramps seized my bowels, and I had to rush to the outhouse through the downpour. My sandals splashed through the mud. Rivulets of rain streamed down my head. By the time I reached the roofless outhouse, the rain had seeped through my pants. I did my business in pitch darkness, but as I pulled up my trousers, I slipped.

“Yeeeeh!” I screamed out.

My feet flew out from under me and I fell to the ground, smack into the foul-smelling hole. With a yell, I scrambled up to my feet, but when I stepped forward to run from the outhouse, my pants caught in my sandals. With an “Ooff,” I plummeted out the door,

face-down into the mud and the rain. By the time I got back to the hut, I was covered with filth. Stripping, I hung my clothes on the branch of a tree and returned to the hut in my loincloth. Chilled to the bone from the cold and the rain, I wrapped myself in my blanket and sat hunched over the flames of the fire.

“This is the absolute pits,” I said with a shiver. “If I don't go crazy, I'm going to die of pneumonia.”

I spoke out loud so that I wouldn't feel so alone. Slowly, the warmth of the stove heated my body. Miraculously, I was able to sleep, but nightmares and terrifying crashes of lightning kept waking me all through the night. Finally, morning arrived. The rain had stopped, but my clothes were still soaking wet on the tree.

“Don't worry. The sun will dry them,” I assured myself, trying to see the bright side of things. I considered going back to the ashram, but I didn't want to be known as a quitter. I had survived the Tiger Trail; I could survive the isolation hut too.

Unfortunately, the sky was cloudy throughout the day, so my clothes didn't dry. In the meantime, I went back to my previous routine of meditating and walking in circles inside of the hut. Swathed in my blanket, I felt more like an American Indian chief than a yogi. Maybe it was because of my chills, maybe because of the fever I felt, or maybe because my ego was totally crushed, but it happened. Deep in a meditation, I felt myself fly out of my body. At first I thought I was hallucinating, but then I could sense it was real. I was out! I was free! I was flying through horizons of endless bright light.

“This is Mission Control in Houston, counting down for a launching at Kennedy Space Center... five, four, three, two, one....!”

It was a hundred times greater than the freedom I had felt on the bow of the ship sailing to England. Physical words can't portray it. Come evening, all I had to do was close my eyes, and I would fly off on a celestial trip. Sometimes, I would find myself up by the ceiling. Other times, I would be soaring over trees, gazing down on

the world from above. But like the dove which Noah had freed from the ark, after flying and flying, there was nowhere to go. There was no place to land. Flying was fun, but it didn't lead anywhere. No matter how far I flew, no matter how fast, the universal consciousness flew faster, always remaining out of my grasp. Exhausted, I plunged back down to earth, crash-landing back into my body, like a space capsule splashing into the sea.

When I opened my eyes, the hut was shrouded in darkness. Night had descended. Disoriented, I remembered where I was. My clothes were still hanging outside on a tree. Then, as I reached for the kerosene lamp, I heard a knock on the door.

"Samran, are you there?" a voice called.

It was Patty. The door of the hut swung open, and the fat girl filled up the frame. Seeing her, I nearly fainted. The kerosene lamp fell out of my hands to the floor. I think I would have felt calmer if a tiger had been at the door. In the darkness, all I could see was her round, robust outline, blocking the doorway. True, since coming to the ashram, she had lost a few pounds, but she was still twice my size. Instinctively, I pulled the blanket tightly around me to hide the fact that I was only wearing a loincloth.

"You poor thing, all alone," she cooed. "I brought you some food and a flask of hot tea."

I could hear my teeth chatter. I glanced at the window and wondered if I could unhook the latch of the shutter and climb outside to safety before she could grab me.

"Ever since they sent you out here, I haven't stopped thinking about you," she said in a voice thick with worry. "Poor baby. It must be so lonely. I know how you feel, because I'm lonely too."

"Oh dear G-d, no," I prayed.

My eyes darted around the hut. Maybe if she came through the door, I could somehow get by her.

"I know I laugh a lot, but that's to cover up my loneliness," she said, going on with her life story. "Is it my fault I'm fat?"

I was too nervous to answer. I had to think of a plan. Without the

lamplight, the hut was pitch black.

“Everyone here talks about harmony and union, but I feel so alone. You know what I mean, Samran?”

I edged toward the window as the fat girl continued to babble.

“I know that deep down our souls are united,” she said. “Destiny has brought us together. You're the only person who can understand me in the world.”

Like a Sumo wrestler, Patty took a threatening step forward. I struggled to think of something to save me.

“Aaaahhh!” I yelled with a scream. “Watch out for the snake!”

The fat girl cried out in terror. Desperately, I jumped to the window and fumbled with the latch. As quick as a grizzly, the fat girl scurried across the floor of the hut and grabbed a hold of my shoulders. Her grip was like iron, pinning me down where I stood.

“Oh Samran,” she exclaimed.

Futilely, I tried to shove her away. In the struggle, the blanket fell off my shoulders. Her arms locked around me. With a grunt, she toppled me down to the floor.

“My baby,” she cried.

“The snake,” I groaned as the weight of her body knocked out my breath.

“Oh, stop kidding,” she said with a laugh.

Her bulk had me pinned to the mat.

“Let me go!” I cried out.

“Finally, I've got you all to myself,” she said, trying to give me a kiss.

Frantically, I shook my head back and forth. Don't get me wrong. It wasn't because she was fat. I just didn't like girls. I mean, I didn't dislike them, but kissing seemed like something married people should do. With superhuman strength, Patty locked me in a bear hug. I didn't want to hurt her feelings, but what could I do? Like an animal, I opened my jaws and bit down on her wrist. My teeth sank into her flesh. At first she didn't react, as if she didn't feel a thing, but when my teeth struck her bone, she let out a roar and let go. I

leapt to my feet and raced out of the hut in my loincloth. I never ran so fast in my life.

That was it. I was finished. I could handle no more. I was fed up with fat girls and sacred cows. I mean, running around half naked in the middle of the night – was this godliness?

My lungs felt like bursting when I got back to the dorm. Putting on a pair of dry trousers, I noticed that the mat that Boaz slept on was missing. In its place was a note pinned to a neatly folded blanket. I lit a candle and read the brief letter.

“Dear Samran,” it began. “I have decided to go back to Israel. You have surpassed me. You are an honest seeker while I merely pretend. Good luck on your path. The world is a big place, filled with many adventures. Maybe one day, we will meet. If you ever get to Israel, here is my address. May the Atman be with you.”

The note was signed Boaz. At the bottom was the name of a kibbutz and the P.S. “I am leaving you my blanket.”

Suddenly, I felt terribly lonely. Patty wasn't the only lonely person in the world. I was lonely too. Lonely and confused. In fact, I was more confused now than when I had arrived at the ashram. I had come to India to sort out an existential dilemma, and now I was more confused than ever. I mean, life had to be more than just floating off into space. So without waiting for an invitation, I ran off to talk with the Swami.

I knocked and knocked on the door of his cottage for several minutes until he appeared. He answered the door in a bathrobe. Maybe he had been meditating. Maybe he had been sleeping. In either case, the Swami didn't look pleased about having an uninvited guest in the middle of the night.

“I have a question?” I said. “If life is just an illusion, then what is the point?”

“The point is what you have to unite with,” the Swami explained with the usual Hindu riddle.

The Swami's stony expression said that the conversation had ended. But I wasn't ready to wish him goodnight.

“There's got to be more to living than just sitting in a lotus position and floating empty-headed into space.”

“Not floating!” the Swami answered, raising his voice. “Uniting with the Atman. Merging with the oneness of creation.”

“Yeah, I've heard that a thousand times here,” I retorted. “I want to know something else. After you are merged with whatever you are supposed to be merged with, then what do you do?”

“You don't DO anything, stupid!” the Swami yelled, losing his temper. “You simply are.”

The guru's eyes were on fire. Lucky for me, he didn't have his ostrich feather in hand to give me a good thrashing. For somebody who wasn't troubled by anything in the world, he sure looked pretty teed-off.

“That's probably why everyone is starving in India,” I told him. “Nobody gives a damn about anyone else. Everyone is off flying through outer space. You care more about holy cows than you do about people. I thought I'd discover the secret of life when I came to India, but all I've encountered is phony ashrams and death.”

When he tried to close the door to his cottage, I shot my hand forward, keeping it open. In the candlelight inside, I spotted a water pipe, a TV set, and what looked like my video camera set up on a tripod.

“If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him,” the voice of the wise Sanrasi from the train station whispered in my ear.

“There are lots of charlatans in the world,” my father had warned.

The Swami was furious. His eyes bulged from their sockets like a cobra ready to strike.

“How dare you, you stupid little Jew!” he thundered. “Do you know who I am? I'm the Swami Rama. If the world doesn't listen to my teachings, it will be destroyed in its sin.”

The Swami's eyes flashed like a crazy man's. All of a sudden, his veneer of transcendental serenity was lost.

“I warned them,” he ranted. “It's all written in my book. I traveled all over the world to teach the unenlightened the way. But no one



wanted to listen. Just like nobody listened to Hitler. Just like nobody listened to Stalin. They too were visionaries; men of great truth and courage. But the fools of the world didn't listen.”

His eyes glistened. His chest heaved up and down. Not since my last trip to Bellevue Hospital in New York had I witnessed a psychotic outburst like this. The Swami's mask of otherworldliness seemed to peel off his face like layers of paper mache. Underneath was a totally different expression – a face filled with anger and wrath. Waves of poisoned karma poured forth from the doorway of the cottage, polluting the air on the porch. Behind him, in the doorway to the bedroom, stood Samantha, “The Fox.” Observing my startled expression, the Swami turned toward the girl.

“She's just cleaning,” he said.

Then with a look of hatred, he slammed the door in my face.

“If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him,” I thought in a flash of long overdue understanding.

## Chapter Twelve

### MECCA

It didn't take me long to pack my meager belongings into my backpack and hurry out the gate of the ashram. Just after dawn, I boarded the first train leaving Reshekesh. I was sick and tired of India. Where I was headed, I didn't know. I figured I'd formulate my plans on the way. Fortunately, the early morning train wasn't so crowded, so I was able to find a seat. I traveled for nearly two days. The last stop on the train was Calcutta. After months and months in the secluded ashram, I was overwhelmed by the noise and congestion of the city. Without a rupee in my pocket, I walked into the American Express office in the center of the frenzied metropolis. A half-hour later, after a telephone call to Dad's office, I left with three-thousand dollars and an order from my father telling me to come home.

“Home....” E.T. had said longingly after he had crashed-landed on earth. “Home....”

Outside on the street, across from a noisy intersection, I spotted

the Hilton Hotel. Wanting to get away from the nerve-shattering roar of the city, I entered the elegant lobby and arranged for a room. After a long hot shower, steak dinner, and a beer, I stretched out in the incredibly soft double bed. It was the first real bed I had slept on in ages. Resting back on two fluffy pillows, I switched on the cable TV and started channel hopping over the globe. The world seemed to be as messed up as it had been a year before when I dropped out of circulation. There was another war in Yugoslavia, a beauty contest in the Philippines, an AIDS scandal in the English Parliament, a new Clint Eastwood movie, a terrorist bombing in Israel, a mass pilgrimage to Mecca, and a heavyweight boxing champion on trial for murder. Before long, the remote control slipped out of my hand. The beer in my head and the comforting embrace of the mattress worked like a soothing Jacuzzi. Watching a National Geographic documentary on the Galapagos Islands, I drifted off to sleep, thinking that maybe I should check out the place where Darwin concocted his theory. Maybe I would find my roots there.

When I awoke in the morning, the TV was still blabbing away. CNN was reporting from Saudi Arabia, site of the ongoing Hajj. Millions of pilgrims were flocking to the city of Mecca. From my tour of the Louvre, I remembered that Islam had dominated world history for centuries. According to the CNN correspondent, Islam was still one of the world's most widespread religions today.

“Maybe in Mecca I can find what I'm searching for,” I thought to myself. I was in that part of the world anyway – why not give Islam a try?

To tell the truth, that morning, when I looked at myself in the mirror of the hotel room, I felt embarrassed. I mean because of my bald head and all. I had to face facts – my adventure in India had been a charade. All along I had been playing a part, just like Boaz and Patty and all of the others.

I showered again, soaping my body from head to toe in order to wash off any last stench of India. At the Calcutta Airport, I

boarded a British Airways jumbo to Saudi Arabia. Opening the flight magazine on the aircraft, I discovered an illustrated article about the famous Hajj pilgrimage. Three million pilgrims were expected that year during the Islamic month of Makkah. The Hajj, the writer explained, was the fifth pillar of Islam, to be performed at least once in a devotee's lifetime. The rites of the Hajj began from the legendary black stone, Ka'bah, considered the House of Allah. The site, Islam's holiest place, was located in the grand plaza of a huge mosque called the Masjid Al-Haram, one of the most beautiful mosques in the world. The accompanying photograph of the plaza, taken at dusk, with its picturesque minarets, transported me back to A Thousand and One Nights, which I had read several times as a boy.

I was impressed. At least from the picture, the city of Mecca had a magical charm. This time, I felt sure I was on the right track. With the same optimism I had felt at the beginning of my journey, when I had sailed past the Statue of Liberty, leaving the skyscrapers of Manhattan behind, I looked keenly forward to my visit to Mecca. Like all the other Hajj pilgrims, I would surely come closer to G-d.

What difference did it make if they called G-d Allah? Like Shakespeare said, "What's in a name?" As long as He was real and not a cow, or a statue, or a transcendence that could never be reached. No matter what all the psychiatrists and gurus might say, I had experienced G-d in my closet. I knew He was real. But where was He hiding? Doctors didn't know. Teachers didn't know. Artists didn't know. All the bishops and yogis I had met didn't know either. So I figured, why not give the Arabs a chance? I mean, after traveling this far, what did I have to lose?

I checked into the finest five-star hotel in Mecca, but when I inquired about the Hajj, I was told that only Moslems could participate in the religious festivities.

"Only Moslems?" I asked.

"That's correct, sir," the desk clerk affirmed.

I was astounded. I mean, as an American who had grown up in the land of religious freedom, this was a slap in the face.

“Now what am I going to do?” I mumbled, walking across the lobby.

No sooner had the words left my mouth when I spotted a familiar face. It belonged to Barry Blair, the English director who had directed my mother's ill-fated play. I had met him in London on opening night.

“Of course,” he said, when I introduced myself. “Of course, I remember. How is your enchanting mother?”

“I suppose she's OK,” I responded, not really sure.

It turned out that Blair was in Mecca making a documentary of the Hajj to be aired on BBC. He and his crew had obtained special permission to film all over the city. The very next day, they were scheduled to film the mosque plaza itself.

“Can I come along?” I asked.

“Positively delightful,” Blair said. “Be my guest. In fact, I could use another man on my crew.”

That night, Rex Thornton, a local English guide sporting a safari jacket and hat, gave the film crew a lecture with slides, describing the rites of the pilgrimage. Having heard that liquor would be a tough item to find in Mecca during the religious festivities, the Englishmen had brought along their own stock of gin, which they sipped on all through the presentation.

The first photograph of the “Station of Abraham” showed a small black stone, called the “Haj-e-Aswad,” which Abraham had supposedly placed in the Ka'bah with his very hands. I had always thought that Abraham was the father of the Jews, but since I had never studied the Bible, I didn't question the authoritative guide. The next series of slides showed scores of pilgrims circling the structure in seven circumambulations called “Tawaaf.” With a laser dot pointer, Thornton illustrated how the worshippers proceeded in radial circles until they reached the Ka'bah for “Salaat” prayers. Standing, bowing, prostrating themselves, and

sitting before the stone, worshippers recited praises to Allah. The postures were accompanied by verses from the Koran, which, Thornton said, had been transmitted to Muhammed by the archangel Gabriel. In between slides, the conscientious lecturer distributed abridged copies of the translated text to everyone in the crew.

“The circling of the Ka'bah continues day and night, rain or sunshine, all through the month,” Thornton said, concluding the show.

The next morning, I dressed in an Ihram, the ritual Hajj costume that the film crew was required to wear. Every male pilgrim had to don the seamless white sheets of cloth instead of his regular clothing. After a hearty Western-style breakfast in the hotel dining room, Thornton escorted the hungover group on a bus to one of the hills overlooking the mosque. Down below, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims had already gathered to pray at the Ka'bah. A mountain range rose in the background, giving a painting-like touch to the scene. While the cameraman filmed away, Thornton explained that the picturesque plaza was filled day and night with devotees who came from the four corners of the globe to heed Muhammed's call for world brotherhood.

Blair decided that he wanted Thornton on camera, so the crew had to wire him with a radio mike for the shot. My job was to hold a reflector to give added light to the close-up.

“When we circle around the Ka'bah, we know that we are walking in the same place that the Prophet Muhammed and his companions, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus walked,” the guide explained to future BBC viewers. “When we climb the hills to the north, we know that these are the same hills where Hagar found water for the infant Ishmael. Here, in the waterless desert of Saudi Arabia, we can miraculously drink from the very same Biblical well. For a small fee, pilgrims can buy flasks of the water to take home to their family and friends.”

“I heard that every year dozens of people get crushed,” Blair said

off camera.

“It happens,” the guide agreed. “With so many people trying to get close to the Ka'bah, it gets pretty rough down there, so let's stick together. For safety sake, we'll stay on the outer circles. Only the most fervent Moslems get close enough to the Ka'bah to touch the holy Abraham stone. So you'll have to use your zoom lens if you want to get close-ups.”

Following the experienced Thornton, and holding onto a long yellow rope like schoolchildren out on a field trip, the crew made its way down to the crowded plaza.

“Let's keep together,” Thornton called out, raising a megaphone in the air over the heads of the throng.

I had to stand on my toes to see the Ka'bah in the distance, over a hundred yards away. A sea of humanity separated me from my goal of touching the Abraham stone. With an encouraging smile, Thornton herded the film crew into the throng. Not wanting to take a chance of damaging the camera in the frenzy surrounding the Ka'bah, the experienced guide steered the group to the outer circle of pilgrims on the fringe of the plaza. That might be close enough for Blair and his crew, I thought, but I wanted to get in on the action.

“What the heck,” I figured. “I'm here. I might as well go for it.”

Letting go of the rope, I pushed my way into the next ring of worshippers. Thornton called out to me through his megaphone, but I ignored him. Soon, I couldn't see the film crew at all. Thousands of Moslems pressed around me from every direction. The mob surged forward like a creature with a will of its own. I felt myself lifted up and carried along with the flow. With each circle, the Ka'bah got closer. The regal-looking black structure towered over the crowd. I was deafened by the thunderous shouting of prayers. Finding myself in the vortex of the Hajj, I felt like I would be crushed. Every time I tried to move to an inner circle to get closer to the stone, an elbow jabbed into my side, shoving me away. Fanatics pushed their way forward with all of

their might, as if touching the Ka'bah were the most important thing in the world. The crush of the crowd was unbearable. Horrified, I watched as a man fell to the ground and was trampled by thousands of feet. No one stopped to help him. Nobody could. The crowd moved like an unthinking beast. Bodies pressed against me on every side. My hands were pinned to my chest. My legs hardly moved, yet I was carried around and around with the wave of humanity as the prayers and the chanting continued. There was no point in resisting. Closing my eyes, I merged with the mob and shouting out praises to Allah. Sweat soaked through my clothing. Perspiration broke out on my forehead.

“Allah akbar! Allah Akbar!” I shouted along with the frenzied millions.

Not having the brute strength to push my way to the stone, I was gradually thrown out of the frantic inner circle. Suddenly, a great roar rose up from the plaza. Eyes turned away from the Ka'bah toward the great mosque. Above the masses, like a helium balloon in a Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade, a giant paper-mache bust of the United States President bobbed in the air. Beside it was another giant face that I didn't quite recognize, but by its exaggerated, Pinocchio nose, I could tell it was a Jew. The new Prime Minister of Israel, I guessed, with a feeling of fear in my stomach. Yes, that's who it was. The face was familiar from the CNN report on the bombing in Israel which I had seen in Calcutta on the hotel TV. An echoing voice boomed out over the loudspeaker of the mosque. It shouted and ranted, delivering a vehement speech. The sea of Arabs responded in deafening cheers. “Itbach al Yehud!” they screamed along with the thundering voice from the muezzin. “Slaughter the Jews!”

A wild panic seized my heart. A pain gripped my chest. I felt I couldn't breathe. In the distance, by the mosque, American and Israeli flags were set ablaze and raised in the air on long poles.

“Oh, brother. Two strikes against me,” I thought, lowering my head toward the ground. My nose was a lot smaller than

Pinocchio's, but besides being Jewish, I was an American too.

Like the flash of a sword, the holy Hajj transformed into a riotous jihad. Hatred filled the eyes of the Arabs surrounding me on all sides. The diatribe from the mosque loudspeakers continued to blare over the plaza. The flags went up in flames. "Itbach al Yehud!" the pilgrims shouted in unison. I didn't have to be a linguist to know that "Itbach al Yehud!" wasn't good news for the Jews.

Frantically, I raised my head to see where I was. For the slightest part of a second, my eyes met the furious glance of the Arab beside me. The man's black pupils grew big with surprise. His nose seemed to sniff at the air. A crazed look flashed on his face. I glanced back at him with a pleading expression, but the Arab raised his head to the sky and shouted out "Yehud!" Before the Arab could unpin his hands from the crunch of bodies around him, I burst into the next outer ring. Wildly, the Arab reached out to grab me, but a pilgrim got in the way. "Itbach al Yehud!" the Moslem cried out again. Heads turned. People shouted.

"Great odds," I thought in dismay. "Two million Arabs against one frightened American Jew."

This was something that happened to Harrison Ford in the movies – not to the son of Ralph Singer.

Terrified, I battered my way through the frenzied rabble into the next ring of pilgrims. Churning my legs and tucking my head into my shoulders, I charged forward like a fullback bursting into a line of grizzly defenders. A hand grabbed my loose-fitting Ihram, but I managed to spin away.

"Please G-d, get me out of here," I prayed more fervently than anyone had ever prayed at the Hajj.

Further away from the Ka'bah, I found some foot room to move. Shouts of "Itbach al Yehud!" filled the air. The deafening cries echoed over the plaza. Doused with kerosene, the paper-mache figures of President Bill Boston and the Israeli Prime Minister burst into flames. A mighty roar went up from the celebrants of



brotherly love.

Suddenly, I had a brainstorm. I froze in my tracks. Instead of fleeing, I stopped. I stood in the crowd like every other pilgrim. The Arab who had spotted me was nowhere to be seen. Hundreds of people had gotten between us. If I stayed calm and collected, I could disappear back into the mob. My Moslem garment made me look just like everyone else. Keeping my head toward the ground, I focused on my very first mantra and took deep relaxing breaths. "IN G-D WE TRUST. IN G-D WE TRUST," I kept repeating to myself. Sure enough, nobody grabbed me. Nobody noticed the American Jew in the crowd.

Soon I found myself in the outer ring of pilgrims on the way out from the plaza. Thornton had said that the message of the Hajj was world brotherhood. Apparently, after they had killed off all of the infidels, the Moslems would love everyone left. Wringing with sweat, and keeping my head toward the ground, I followed the legs of the pilgrims leaving the plaza. Islam wasn't for me. When I looked back toward the mob, I caught a glimpse of Blair, camera in hand, sitting on a crewmember's shoulders, filming the demonical scene.

I walked without stopping. The roar of the loudspeakers grew mute in the distance.

"Funny," I thought. I had to travel around the world and nearly get lynched to discover that I was a Jew.

### Chapter Thirteen

#### TEL AVIV

Returning to my hotel from the Hajj, I kept my head down so no one could see my features. Crossing the street, I walked straight into a lamp pole. BOOM! Maybe it was that whack that knocked things around in my brain. What was I doing in Mecca? What had I been doing in India and Rome? I was a Jew. Peek-a-boo. I see you.

As if overnight, I realized that I was a Jew. What I mean is, I understood that a Jew is different from everyone else. It had taken a million frenzied Arabs to do it, but finally, the recognition had

sunk in. Hamlet and Oedipus had their secrets. Now the secret of Sam Singer was out of the closet too. I could stop pretending. I could finally be myself – as soon I got out of Saudi Arabia. Of course, I had known I was Jewish all of my life, but I never had really felt it. How was a Jew supposed to feel, I wondered? How was a Jew supposed to think? I didn't know. No one had ever bothered to tell me.

I bought an International Herald Tribune at the airport. There were rumors of war in the Middle East. Like always, the Israelis and Arabs were stalled in peace negotiations. Violence had broken out on highways throughout the West Bank, killing a van-load of Jewish settlers and wounding many more. The Israeli Army had answered with attack helicopters in order to quell riots at major checkpoints. Arabs throughout the region were up in arms. As a precaution, the United States Consulate in Saudi Arabia had advised American citizens to leave the country. The airport was jammed with oil company representatives and State Department officials looking for flights to New York. When I asked a ticket clerk for a ticket to Israel, he looked at me like I were a creature from the moon.

“We don't fly to Israel,” he said coldly.

“Oh,” I answered, trying not to look Jewish. “Well, can you tell me what airline does?”

“No one does. Not from Saudi Arabia.”

“Oh,” I replied, nodding my head. “Of course not.”

Smiling, I walked away from the counter. Friendly guy, I thought. Great place, this Saudi Arabia.

Noticing a bank of telephones along the wall, I put in a collect call to my father. Luckily, I caught him at home before breakfast.

“Where the hell are you?” Ralph Singer asked.

“I'm calling from the airport in Mecca.”

“Mecca? Don't you know that they're burning effigies of the President there?”

“Yeah, I saw them.”

“And you let them get away with it?” my father asked.

“There were a million Arabs there. What could I do?”

“You could have flown home from India like I told you. I want you to get your ass the hell out of there. I want you to come home today.”

“I thought I'd stop off in Israel,” I told him.

“Israel? Are you crazy? There's practically a war there.”

For a moment I couldn't answer. One of the old rules of the house was not to call me crazy. From the silence at the other end of the line, I could tell that my Dad remembered it too. He had broken the family taboo. But I wasn't upset. Live and let live. That was the past. Let bygones be bygones. My parents had tried the best that they could.

“While I'm in the Middle East, I figured I might as well see some of those trees we had planted in Israel.”

“Well you figured wrong. I want you in college and that's the last word.”

“It's still the beginning of summer vacation,” I protested. “I still have three months before the semester begins.”

There was another moment of silence at the other end of the line.

“Please, Dad,” I begged.

“I don't want you to get into trouble.”

“I won't get into trouble, don't worry.”

“How's your health?” he asked.

“Great. I've never felt better. Traveling does me wonders.”

Once again, my father was silent.

“The Presidential election is coming down to the wire,” he said.

“The situation in the Middle East could tip the whole race. If the President's too soft, he'll lose the Jewish vote. If he's too hawkish, he'll lose the Conservatives sitting on the fence. The Republicans are spending a fortune to push their candidate into the White House. I've laid out another five million dollars for Billy's campaign. With all the action, I've hardly had time to think about business.”

“You love all the action,” I reminded him gently.

“I guess I do,” my father admitted.

“I'd just get in your way if I came home now,” I added. “I'll be fine, Dad, don't worry.”

Finally, my father agreed. But he wanted me back in the States by the middle of August.

“No problem,” I told him.

“I'll have Dorothy priority mail your new credit card to the main American Express office in Jerusalem. Don't forget to pick it up.”

“I won't, Dad,” I promised.

“While you're there, try to find yourself a good-looking Israeli girl,” he advised. “They're charmers.”

“I love you, Dad,” I said, hanging up.

By eleven o'clock that evening, I was in Tel Aviv. From Mecca, I flew to Istanbul, Turkey. A short hop later, an El Al flight took me to Ben Gurion International Airport. I couldn't believe my ears, hearing passengers speak Hebrew on the plane. Even the stewardesses spoke in the Biblical tongue. I didn't understand what they were saying, but I loved hearing the rhythmical melody of their speech. The Hebrew songs featured on the music channel of my courtesy earphones went straight to my heart. As if mesmerized, I played the same track of Israeli hits over and over again during the flight, erasing all the old tapes in my brain.

“Da da da da da, I'm going to Israel,” I sang out loud, smiling happily at the passengers who glanced over my way.

To top off my joy, the snack on the flight was a bagel. Whoever dreamed of eating bagels and lox on an airplane? In fact, whoever heard of a Jewish airplane, with a Jewish pilot, and Hebrew signs in the toilet? I was blown away.

At the Ben Gurion Airport, I bought a telephone card from a machine on the wall and phoned the number that Boaz had left me. A man answered with a sleepy “Shalom.” I apologized for calling so late. It was Boaz's father. Speaking in broken English, he said that Boaz had left the kibbutz and was living in Tel Aviv. With a

grumble, he got out of bed to look for his son's new number.

Boaz sounded really happy to hear that I was in Israel.

"Samran! Ma nishma? You split too?" he asked.

"Difficulty at the beginning," I answered.

"Furthering through perseverance," Boaz replied.

We both laughed at the memory of how we used to talk at the ashram.

Boaz gave an address and told me to hurry over in a taxi.

"It should take no more than twenty minutes. You can sleep here with us. There's plenty of room," he said.

The Israeli lived on the fourth floor of an old walk-up building across the street from Tel Aviv's modern seaside hotels. We hugged in the doorway like long-lost friends. "It's a miracle," I thought. That morning in Mecca, I had nearly been lynched, and here I was embracing my Israeli pal in downtown Tel Aviv.

"This is Yosi," Boaz said, introducing me to a tall, good-looking guy with an earring in his left lobe. "This is his place. We grew up together on the kibbutz."

Yosi spoke English even better than Boaz. He wore Singer jeans, a Lacoste designer shirt, and his hair was stylishly combed, as if he were headed for a night on the town. Boaz grabbed my backpack and carried it into a sixties salon, featuring posters, black light, and pillows thrown all over the floor. A stick of incense was burning on a low coffee table. Beside it, a thin line of smoke rose from a tightly rolled joint of marijuana.

"Hey, don't waste it," Yosi said. With a practiced motion, he lifted the joint to his lips and took a long hit. Boaz was next. He closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, as if he were meditating in Harmony Grove. When Boaz held it my way, I shook my head no.

"It's good stuff," Boaz said, exhaling the pungent smoke.

"No thanks," I replied.

"This isn't the ashram. You don't have to worry about Yogi Gara."

I smiled and shook my head no. Being stoned at the Louvre had

been a real downer. I didn't want to make a habit of it. Drugs, whatever form they came in, were poison. Most of my life, I had struggled to get off them, so I didn't want to take any chances on getting hooked again now.

After another long drag, Boaz gracefully collapsed into a lotus position on a pillow on the floor. I noticed that Boaz himself was wearing the jeans that my father had made famous all over the world. It seemed strange to find the former ascetic dressed in hip jeans in such a bohemian pad. There were movie posters on the walls, an old-fashion jukebox, and a revolving black light that had been popular in the days of The Doors. It was obvious that Yosi and Boaz were trying very hard to be cool.

"I don't know about you two, but I've got a date," Yosi said, slipping a Singer jacket over his shoulder, just like they did in the ads.

"We'll meet up with you later," Boaz told him. "After we catch up on old times."

"I'll be at Planet Hollywood," Yosi said at the door. "Hey, I've got an idea. Why don't we fix Sam up with Mimi? She likes guys with bald heads."

"Oh no, not Mimi," Boaz joked.

"Tell her a few spiritual stories about India," Yosi told Sam, "and she'll agree to marry you on the spot."

The roommates laughed. I suppose a bit nervously, I passed my hand over my still shaven head. My hair would take months to grow back. In a way, my time in India seemed like a dream. But so did being with Boaz in Tel Aviv. I couldn't help but wonder, when was I going to wake up?

After Yosi took off, Boaz sat in a lotus position and lit up another joint. He rolled over in laughter when I told him about my week in seclusion and Patty.

"I love it," he said. "I love it. What a phony place the ashram is."

When I told him about my midnight visit to the Swami and how the guy had freaked out, Boaz had another bout of the stitches.

“That's great,” he said with tears in his eyes. “That's so great.”

When I told him about Mecca, he laughed so hard, he rolled over, clutching his sides in pain.

“That's great,” he repeated. “That's so super great.”

When I asked him what he was doing in Tel Aviv, he said he was working at the Diamond Exchange.

“Yosi's got an uncle there who owns a very successful company. Right now, I'm just delivering messages and goods, but I could become a buyer in less than a year. If things go right, I may go with Yosi to the International Diamond Show in Las Vegas in another few months.”

He said it as if going to Vegas were the greatest thing in the world. I had been there a few times with my father. To me, the garish, noisy, desert metropolis was absolutely the pits, a place where poor people gambled away all of their money, and where the rich could experience every vice if they were willing to pay the right price.

“What about the kibbutz?” I asked him.

“The kibbutz is a dinosaur of the past,” Boaz answered. “Who wants to be a farmer? Let's face it, my friend – money is the name of the game. If you are poor, you're a nobody.”

I was surprised how much Boaz had changed. He sounded more like my father than the wise disciple whom I had met by the Ganges.

“Come on,” Boaz said. “Let's go partying.”

When I said I was tired and wanted to sleep, Boaz refused to listen.

“Your first night in Tel Aviv and you want to sleep? Where's your spirit, Samran?”

Forcefully, Boaz pushed me out the door. Although it was after midnight, there was a lot of traffic on the street. Boaz led the way down an incline past the modern hotels toward the beach and the Mediterranean Sea.

“Take this, just in case we get separated,” he said, handing me a

key to the apartment.

Planet Hollywood was lit up like a birthday cake. Next door was a busy MacDonald's. Funny, I thought, finding a Planet Hollywood in Israel. After all, this was the Holy Land, wasn't it? And I was looking for G-d, not for Sylvester Stallone. The same noisy disco could have been in Paris, New York, or L.A. The same people. The same fashions. The same looks. The only difference was that here in Tel Aviv, the people spoke Hebrew.

Walking through the bright, split-level lobby, I averted my gaze. Girls who were dressed up like models walked back and forth on parade. What was the difference between Sunset Boulevard and Israel, I wondered, feeling a profound disappointment. Sensing my lack of enthusiasm, Boaz grabbed my arm and dragged me into the deafening disco. Yosi spotted us through the barrage of flashing strobes and colored lights. He was sitting with three girls who looked like they were dying to get out on the dance floor. One of them wore a Levi's denim jacket. Another wore the Singer denim vest. The third wore a plain oriental costume like a sari, as if she were hanging out on the banks of the Ganges.

"Boaz, Sam!" Yosi called out, standing up to greet us. "Meet my friends, Rachel, Mimi, and Devorah."

I stood stiffly by the table. Boaz tugged at my hand and pulled me down into the seat beside the girl dressed up like a Hindu."

"Sam ba achshav m'Hodo," Yosi said to the group in Hebrew.

"Hodo!?" Mimi asked. A smile lit up her face. She looked at me as if I were Rocky Balboa himself.

"Anglit," Boaz said. "He only speaks English."

"You've been to India? How wonderful," Mimi cooed. "It's such a spiritual place."

Boaz laughed. He grabbed the hand of the girl called Devorah.

"You want to dance?"

She was out of her seat before he finished the question. Boaz led her to the strobe-lit dance floor and raised up his hands toward the battery of lights up by the ceiling. As if praying to some primitive



god, he began to jump up and down like a monkey. The flashing lights broke up his movements into a mad series of convulsions and jerks. I couldn't believe this was the Boaz of old. He reminded me of the monkey men I had encountered in India. All of the passions which he had repressed in the ashram exploded like a bursting volcano. Yosi and Rachel joined the throng on the dance floor. The pounding music roared in my ears. The throbbing beat shook the floor, rattling my legs.

Mimi said something to me, but I couldn't hear her words.

"What?" I asked.

"Were you in Varanassi?" she shouted.

"Yes," I answered.

"Oh, you can't know how fascinated I am by the East. Tell me about it. I can't wait to go."

She gazed at me like I knew all of life's secrets. Behind her, on the dance floor, body parts flailed in the air. The strobe light froze faces in contorted spasms. The scene looked like Picasso's "Guernica" or a tribal rite meant to cast away demons. Boaz shook his head wildly as if he were trying to batter his brain into oblivion.

"Do you want to dance?" Mimi asked.

She was a pretty girl, there was no question about that. And my father would have been proud if I had swept her out onto the dance floor. But I shook my head no. My whole body was rumbling from the thunderous beat of the disco.

"You're not into it, are you?" she said.

I didn't know what to answer. The last thing I wanted was a deep conversation. Impulsively, I stood up from my chair. I had to get out of the disco. After the near riot in Mecca, the cries over the mosque loudspeakers, the maniacal mobs, and the frenzied pushing and shoving, I couldn't deal with more hectic crowds. Without saying goodbye, I forced my way through the mob, ran upstairs, and hurried out of the lobby. Almost immediately as I ran away from the disco, the sound of the sea helped to calm me. Walking along the beachfront, I stared out at the waves as they broke onto

shore. A jet descended toward the city on its way to the airport. In the distance, lights from the Hilton Hotel lit up the harbor like a beacon. The Tel Aviv shorefront was pretty, but it wasn't much different from any other port in the world. Where was the holiness? Arriving in Israel, I had expected to find prophets riding on camels. Instead, I ended up in a Hollywood disco. Disillusioned, I headed up the road leading back toward Yosi's apartment.

I opened the door with the key which Boaz had given me. An unfinished joint of marijuana and ashes of the incense were still on the floor. I grabbed a pen lying near the telephone and scribbled a hasty note. Leaving the key by the phone, I grabbed my backpack and headed back out the door. I didn't want to be there when Boaz and Yosi returned. Who knew who might be with them? If I had wanted discos and parties, I could have flown back to L.A. Down on the street, by the United States Consulate, I flagged down a taxi.

"L'an?" the driver asked me in Hebrew.

"Jerusalem," I answered.

"At this hour of the night, it will cost you a hundred dollars," the driver responded in not-so-bad English.

"No problem," I said, just wanting to get out of the city.

"If it's no problem for you, it's no problem for me," the driver answered. "Yerushalayim, here we come."

## Chapter Fourteen

### JERUSALEM

I told the driver to take me to the Wailing Wall. I didn't know why. I had heard that the Wall was a spiritual place. Whenever somebody had visited Israel, people always asked, "Did you get to the Wall?" "How was the Wall?" For some reason, my father had a picture of the Wall in his office, even though he had never been to Israel. He had given some money to some yeshiva in Jerusalem and received the framed picture as a gift. Probably because of that picture, when I saw the Wall, I felt I had been there before. There is no other way that I can explain it. To tell you the truth, I didn't even know what the Wall was. Obviously, it had been a part of a

building. What kind of building, I didn't know. Probably, a palace, I thought.

The soldier at the security gate looked through my backpack and asked if I were carrying a gun.

A gun? What a strange question. I had never held a gun in my life.

“No, sir,” I answered respectfully, impressed at meeting a real Israeli soldier.

He motioned me forward with a flick of his hand. I'm not kidding when I say that everything turned into slow motion. As if in a dream, I approached the Wailing Wall plaza. Even though it was three in the morning, there were people milling around; old women in long skirts and kerchiefs, and Orthodox Jews in black coats and hats. The Wall was illuminated with a shimmering light which seemed to glow from within. The massive stones seemed to vibrate as if filled with a life of their own. Men prayed at one side of a barrier, and women on the other.

“I've been here before,” I said to myself.

I couldn't shake the feeling. Looking at the giant stones of the Wall, I felt awestruck. I felt overwhelmed. I felt a sensation which I had never experienced in India, nor in Mecca, nor in Rome. I felt a holiness in the air, as if it were something tangible that I could reach out and touch. Staring up at the Wall, I felt an overpowering presence all around me. Suddenly, I knew. This was the place. Behind this Wall. This was where G-d was hiding.

I walked across the plaza, pulled by a magnetic force. An old woman, a beggar, thrust out a hand. I reached into my pocket and handed her a bill. She thanked me profusely, blessing me, holding out her hand for some more.

Without stopping, I headed straight for the Wall. The closer I got, the more I felt something pulling me forward. Another beggar held out a hand, but this time, I passed him right by. Like a space capsule docking with its mother station in space, I rushed forward to touch the great chiseled blocks of the Wall. Little paper notes

were crumpled up and stuffed into cracks between stones. As my fingers embraced a boulder, a shudder swept me like a wave. A current, as real shock therapy, charged through every pore in my body. Like a heart, the stone seemed to beat. I felt a pulse, as if the Wall were alive. It felt like my hands were connected to sockets of spiritual energy. Call it a miracle, or whatever you want, but the trembling I always had in my hands disappeared. The tremor that the anti-depressants had caused simply vanished. I was healed.

A sob seized my chest. I pressed my forehead against the soothing Wall. Tears streamed down my cheeks.

“Please G-d, heal my head,” I prayed. “Purify my brain of all of the poisons.”

It is hard to describe, but I was seized by a mixture of sorrow and joy. Sorrow for the past, and joy for the present. More than anything, I felt enveloped by an ocean of love. A love I had never experienced. Tears poured from my eyes. My fingers gripped the cracks in the stones, unwilling to let go. No one disturbed me. No one came over to tell me to stop. No one told me that I was insane. Other people stood facing the Wall, praying as fervently as I was. There was a soldier in uniform, a man in a wheelchair, a dark-skinned Jew with side-locks and a beret.

Suddenly, an old man with a beard and black hat came shuffling over, barking out something in Yiddish and pointing excitedly to my head. Instinctively, my hands shot up to my uncovered scalp. Quickly, I zipped open my backpack and pulled out a baseball cap. Satisfied, the man nodded his head. Behind him, at the end of the Wall, I noticed an archway with a golden light shining inside. Curious, I walked forward, still in a trance from the other-worldliness of the place. I entered what looked like a cave. The ceiling was arched in a vault. Yellow spotlights bathed the cavern in a moon-like glow. To my surprise, the Wall continued, stretching the length of the chamber. A few Hasidic figures stood leaning forward, motioning with their hands, as if arguing with the stones. The massive boulders looked melted, as if they were made

out of wax, as if they had withstood a fire of incredible fury. Large wooden arks and bookcases filled with prayer books and large Hebrew texts spanned the tunnel-like enclosure. At the end of the chamber, an old, white-bearded Jew sat on the ground by the Wall. He was dressed in a long prayer gown which looked incredibly like the prayer gown hanging in my closet back home. Sobs shook the old man's broken, bent-over frame. With a mournful, weeping voice, he wailed out a prayer from the depths of his soul.

I thought of my grandfather. Watching him, my whole body trembled. Dropping my backpack, I sat on a chair by the Wall. Suddenly, I was back in my closet. I felt the same feeling. I smelled the same smell. For the first time since my childhood, I felt the presence of G-d all around me.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. No one noticed. No one cared. I cried along with the rabbi. Tears of wandering. Tears of exile. Tears of pain. Tears of being so lonely and lost for so many years. I didn't know a soul in Jerusalem, but I sensed I was home. Sitting next to the old rabbi, I sensed I belonged. I sensed the G-d of my forefathers was near.

Without knowing it, I drifted into a deep soothing sleep. I didn't notice the old rabbi leave. I didn't even notice when someone placed a small booklet of prayers in my lap. I awoke to a loud chanting. "Yehay shmay rabbah...."

What looked like a convention of rabbis had gathered to pray a short distance away. I had never seen so many Hasidim in one place in my life. They all wore phylacteries and had prayer shawls draped over their heads. In the tunnel, I couldn't tell if it were night or day. In my lap was a booklet with a picture of a crown on the cover. Inside, the Hebrew prayers were spelled out in English – something called the Tikun Clalli. As I stood up, a man hurried over, holding out a pair of tefillin. With his beard and black hat, he looked like a rabbi too. I shook my head no. But the man was insistent. He wouldn't take no for an answer.

"It's good. It's good," he said in an English that was as broken as

his teeth. "One minute. That's all. Say 'Shema Yisrael.'"

"Why not?" I thought. I had no other appointments to keep. When in Jerusalem do what the Jerusalemites do. I had tried crazier things in India and Mecca. Why not join the crowd in a place that felt like home?

Happily, the man strapped the small black box over my bicep and set another small box on my head. He pronounced the Hebrew blessings slowly, so that I could repeat them. Then he handed me a prayerbook and pointed where to read. But I had long ago forgotten the little Hebrew I had learned as a boy.

"No problem, no problem," the man said, still flashing his two missing teeth. "You know Shema?"

I shook my head no.

"Say, 'Shema... Yisrael... Hashem... Elokenu... Hashem... Echad.'"

I repeated the words after my patient instructor. The truth is, as I said it, the prayer came back to me from deep in my memory. When I finished, the man unwound the black strap from my arm. An impression of tracks remained in my flesh as if an Israeli tank had run over me.

"Last night, there was a rabbi here praying," I said, pointing to the far corner where the old man had sat.

"Nu?" the man responded.

"You know him?" I asked.

"Everyone knows him. Rabbi Dov Ber HaCohen. He's the Tzaddik of the Kotel."

"Why was he crying?"

"Oh," the tefillin man said. "Don't you know? He cries for the Beit HaMikdash."

"The what?" I asked.

The man gave me a strange look. His hands waved in front of him, as if he were trying to pluck something out of the air.

"The Temple," he said with a smile, happy to have remembered the word.

“What Temple?” I asked.

“The Beit HaMikdash,” the man repeated, pointing toward the other side of the Wall.

“There's a Temple on the other side of the Wall?” I guessed, trying to decipher his clues.

“Not now,” the man said, waving a hand to indicate a long time ago.

Suddenly, I somehow remembered that the Wall was part of an ancient Jewish Temple. But I still didn't understand why the old man had been so broken up. If the Sinai Temple where I had been bar-mitzvahed in Los Angeles had been destroyed, I would have been happy, not sad.

“Go to yeshiva,” the man said with a smile. “Learn.”

Returning the tefillin to their sack, he walked off looking for another customer for his wares. I reached down and lifted my backpack over a shoulder. Strangely, even though I had only slept for an hour or two, I didn't feel tired. I didn't feel hungry either. Outside the tunnel, daylight was beginning to shine in the sky. Groups of Jews prayed around tables set up in front of the Wall. I found a stone bench at the back of the plaza and sat down to watch. Birds, disturbed from their sleep by the prayers, flew in darting circles over the heads of the worshippers. There were Jews with black hats, and Jews with knitted kippahs. There were Jews with dark, golden faces, the color of earth, and Jews who spoke Hebrew with American accents. Across a partition, women huddled by the Wall, offering their silent supplications. An aura of reverence surrounded the place. Men carried Torah scrolls out from the tunnel. People hurried to kiss them. Curious, I stepped up to a table to watch as a scroll was opened and read. I knew this was my heritage, my religion, my past, but I couldn't understand a word they were chanting. I didn't know how to read Hebrew. I didn't even know how to pray. My mother was Jewish. My father was Jewish. My grandfather had been religious. In pictures, he was always wearing a hat. But he had died when I was a child. My

father changed his name from Cohen to Singer and worked on the Sabbath to advance his business. So my brother and I had grown up without knowing a thing.

To tell the truth, I didn't know what to think. I mean, Christians were religious. Moslems were religious. The Hindus had their own brand of religion, too. I had learned in my travels that they were all based on lies – maybe Judaism was too. Who said that rabbis had any better answers than bishops and monks? If someone wore a hat and grew a long beard, did that make him closer to G-d?

Returning to the stone ledge, I sat in a lotus position with my back to the low wall. Out of habit, I began to breathe deeply. Without even thinking about it, the mantra in my mind switched from “OM” to “SHAL-OM.”

“Shalom.”

“Shalom.”

“Shalom.”

Startled, I opened my eyes. A blaze of brilliant sunlight shone off of the Wall. Blinded, I squinted up at a figure. An hour had passed in a wink. Once again, I had dozed off to sleep.

“Are you an American?” the voice said.

I looked up into the face of a rabbi.

“That's right,” I answered.

“Visiting the country?”

“Yes.”

“Where are you from?”

“Los Angeles.”

“Lots of pollution there.”

“Yes, there is,” I agreed.

“If there is physical pollution, that's a sign that there is spiritual pollution as well. Everything in the physical world has a spiritual base,” the rabbi explained.

I nodded my head. It made sense. After all, Hollywood wasn't the most moral city on earth.

“Would you like to learn a little Torah in yeshiva?” the rabbi



asked with a smile.

“I don't think so,” I answered, wary of ashrams and teachers.

“Yeshiva?” I thought to myself. What a dumb idea. I'd more likely go on a trip to the moon. No one I knew had ever learned in a yeshiva. Sure, I liked the vibes of the Wall, but I couldn't picture myself looking like these pious Jews. The beard and the hat and the ritual fringes that hung down from their trousers were the antithesis of Hollywood cool. Not that I paid much attention to looks. But having been raised in a world of chic fashion, I couldn't imagine myself with sidelocks and a baggy black suit.

“Take my card,” the rabbi said. “If you change your mind, you can call me day or night.”

Smiling, he handed me his business card. Just then, his cell phone rang.

“Excuse me,” he said, walking off. “Have a nice trip.”

I glanced at the card and stuffed it into my pocket, along with the booklet of prayers I had found. Grabbing my backpack, I stood up, figuring I'd better get something to eat. Not knowing exactly where to go, I headed back toward the street, near where the taxi had left me. Up the hill, opposite the Wall, modern buildings were squeezed in between ruins from the past. Pausing at a water fountain for a drink, I eavesdropped as an Israeli guide explained the sights to a group of baseball-capped tourists. “Florida Baptist Mission” was inscribed on the back of their T-shirts.

“The ancient Jewish Temple was burnt down by the Romans in the year 70 A.D,” the guide said in an Oxford-sounding English. “The Western Wall that you see here in front of you is the only remnant still standing. The Temple Mount is the holiest site in Jewish tradition. The Dome of the Rock Shrine which you see in the background was built over the razed debris of the Temple in the seventh century by a follower of Muhammed, the Caliph, Omar, who conquered Jerusalem from the Byzantines. Israel captured the Temple Mount from the Jordanians in the Six-Day-War, and allowed the Moslems to continue to pray there. Though

the Jewish Temple has been destroyed for nearly two-thousand years, devout Jews throughout the ages have prayed for its rebuilding three times a day. Wherever Jews are in the world, they pray toward the direction of the Temple. For the Moslems, the site marks the place where their prophet Muhammed is supposed to have ascended to heaven on a fabled winged horse. However, when they pray, they face away from the Temple Mount toward Mecca, their holy city.”

I listened in fascination. I realized that I knew absolutely nothing about the Temple. I knew nothing about Jerusalem. In fact, I knew nothing about the history of the Jews. In school, I had studied ancient history, but there had hardly been a mention of Israel. Christ had lived in Bethlehem – that's about all that I knew.

The group's pastor stepped beside the guide and called out in a rich southern baritone, as if he were delivering his best Sunday sermon.

“Friends, listen here,” he said, enthusiastically waving a Bible in the air to get their attention. “We are going up this holy mountain to see this awesome site, and remember, ladies and gentleman, brothers and sisters, this is not just the Temple Mount where Jesus overturned the moneychanger's tables; this is not just the place where King Solomon was granted great wisdom; this is not just the place where King David composed many of his inspiring Psalms; this is not just the place where Abraham sacrificed Isaac; this place, ladies and gentlemen, in the words of the Scripture, Genesis 28:17, and Isaiah 2:2, right here in this book; this hallowed place is none other than the House of the L-rd. The House of the L-rd, brothers and sisters. The House of the L-rd.”

That's all that I had to hear. Listening to the pastor's inspiring words, I trembled. Everyone cheered. I slipped into line as the guide led the group up the narrow incline leading to a gate in the Wall. With my baseball cap, I looked just like one of the Baptists. A Black woman started singing a song, and the others joined in.

“Oh when the saints,

Oh when the saints,  
Oh when the saints go marching in,  
We will long to be in their number,  
When the saints go marching in.”

Two Israeli soldiers sat at a security station, guarding the entrance to the Mount. They hardly looked up from their newspapers as the guide led his troops toward the archway. But when my turn came to enter the small passageway, a soldier sitting by the entrance stuck out a boot in my path.

“Atah itam?” he asked.

“Sorry?” I said, not understanding.

“Are you with them?”

“That's right.”

The soldier gave me a look.

“Do you have a passport?”

“Sure,” I said. I slid open a zipper on my backpack and took out my passport. The soldier glanced at the picture.

“Take your hat off please.”

I obeyed orders. The soldier looked surprised to see my completely bald head.

“Backpack,” the soldier's partner said, reaching out a hand. I swung the lightweight bag off my shoulders. There wasn't much in it save for a pair of pajamas, some underwear and socks, and a few slacks and shirts. I had never gotten my video camera back from the Swami.

“Israeli I.D?” the first soldier asked.

“I don't have one,” I said.

The last few Baptists were making their way through the archway. The soldier nodded and glanced down at my feet. I looked down at the leather sandals that I had purchased in India.

“Is something the matter?” I asked.

“No. Everything's fine. You can go in, but you'll have to leave your bag here.”

The other soldier stuffed my bag under a table.

“They probably make spot checks,” I thought to myself, wondering why I had been singled out from the others. Maybe it was because I was the only one in the group who wasn't wearing a T-shirt. Quickly, I hurried to catch up to the tour. Passing through the archway, I came to a cobblestone courtyard. Suddenly, it happened again. Everything turned into slow motion, as if I had entered a different world. A grove of tall trees blocked a clear view of the Mount, but even without being able to see it, I felt something unreal. A small stone building stood in the middle of the walkway where the group of tourists had gathered. The guide was pointing to an Islamic Museum which stood in front of the el Aksa Mosque.

Though I was in earshot, I didn't hear the guide's speech. I couldn't. A dizziness had overwhelmed me the moment I had stepped foot on the Mount. For a moment I swooned, as if I would faint. Then, like a wind, the dizziness passed and an indescribable lucidness filled up my brain. It was a sensation ten times more powerful than the holiness I had felt at the Wall. It was more powerful than any drug they had fed me. In a flash, all of my confusion and uncertainty vanished. My past disappeared. It was as if a hand had placed an oxygen mask over my nostrils, filling me up with a burst of pure air. In a moment, all of the discs were erased. All of the websites, and modems, and therapies, and TV programs all vanished. There was only Sam Singer and G-d.

There was no doubt in my mind. No question. This was the place I'd been looking for. This was the place I belonged.

The group of Baptists strolled along the archways of the massive sixteenth-century mosque. A bunch of Japanese tourists wearing floppy, red tennis hats stood under a colonnade, listening to a Japanese guide explain about the history of the site. My feet moved over the cobblestones, but my head was in the clouds. Like my out-of-body trips in India, my soul seemed to soar into the sky. It was as if a helicopter had whisked me up and away for an aerial tour of the Mount. Even though the grove of trees still blocked my view of

the golden domed shrine at the top of the mountain, I saw the whole plaza spread out before me sparkling with light.

I squinted up at the crystal blue sky. The sunlight was blinding. A trail of wispy clouds rose like a staircase toward heaven.

Exhilarated by the celestial feeling, I started to sing. I wanted to pray, but I didn't know what to say, so I started to sing instead. I raised my hands to the sky like the Baptists and sang out with all my heart.

“Oh when the saints,  
Oh when the saints,  
Oh when the saints go marching in....”

The old Negro ballad was the only thing that came to my mind. The words were unimportant. It was the feeling that mattered. And the only way I could express my great joy was to sing.

In my rapture, I didn't notice the sound of the whistles. I didn't see the Wakf guards running my way. All I knew was that one minute I was singing and then BAM, someone hit me from the side and smashed me to the ground. With an “OOFF,” I crashed to the pavement. Luckily, my arm cushioned the blow. Arab shouts filled the air. Angrily, I pushed my tackler away and scrambled to my feet. Two Wakf guards came running. One barked into a walkie talkie. The other blew on his whistle. In the distance, Israeli policemen came charging my way. I didn't know what was happening, but I didn't want to stick around to find out. Without waiting for an explanation, I bolted. I ran past the mosque into an open courtyard. The Wakf guards cried out and pursued. One tripped on a cobblestone. His walkie talkie flew out of his hand and went sliding like a hockey puck over the plaza. Whistles shrieked. People shouted. Blue-uniformed policemen charged forward, holding their firearms in front of their chests. Behind them, green-uniformed soldiers appeared on the Mount.

I had never been a great athlete, but I always could run. Adrenalin pumped through my veins like it never had in my life. For all I knew, the policemen were coming to kill me. What for? Why me?

What had I done? I burst through the grove of trees and came out on a wide cobblestoned path. Now I could see clearly the octagon shrine which sat in the center of the Temple Mount. Its great golden dome sparkled like a small sun. But I didn't have time to take in the scene. The cops were hot on my tail. Arabs dressed in long white gowns stopped to watch the chase. As I sprinted along a straightaway, I caught a glimpse of the Baptists who were also watching the action. Suddenly, up ahead, two Israeli soldiers appeared. Like an Olympic hurdler, I leaped over a hedge and headed away from the shrine toward the far wall at the other side of the compound. One of the Israelis caught a boot in the hedge and rolled head over heels into a ditch. The other soldier bounded over the terrain like a gazelle. I could hear him pounding the turf behind me.

“Atzor!” he yelled. “Atzor!”

My lungs screamed out for air. My heart thundered. Up ahead, a towering wall cut off any chance of escape. Nor could I see any gate. Before I could cut back in another direction, I was smashed once again from behind. This time the butt of a rifle jabbed into my back. I went down with a groan. The soldier pinned me to the hard rocky ground. He twisted my arm behind my back and pulled until I hollered in pain.

“Al tazooz!” the soldier commanded.

“I'm an American,” I gasped.

“Shtok!” the policeman yelled.

Other boots raced up. Policemen huffed and puffed out of breath. The guy that turned out to be a Druse soldier hauled me to my feet.

“Atah mishoogah?” he shouted. “Ma atah oseh?”

I knew what the word “mishoogah” meant. That's what my parents had called me when I had prayed to G-d in my closet.

Another policemen with a khaki uniform and a bushy mustache fastened a pair of handcuffs over my wrists.

“Are you sure he's a Jew?” he asked the others.

The soldier who had tackled me shook his head dumbly and

shrugged.

"I'm a Jew, of course," I volunteered, certain that here, in Israel, my religion would be to my favor.

"Then you are coming with us," the cop said in an authoritative manner.

"What did I do?" I demanded to know.

"You're under arrest."

"What for?"

"For praying on the Temple Mount. For resisting arrest. For endangering public safety."

It seemed like a lot of charges to me. It sounded like I was in serious trouble.

"I didn't pray," I protested. "I was singing, that's all."

"Tell it to the judge," the arresting officer answered.

The Wakf guards backed away when the Israeli policemen took over, but in truth, it was hard for me to tell who was who.

Defiantly, I stood up for my rights.

"This is a holy place, isn't it?" I asked.

"So?"

"So what's the matter with praying?" I wanted to know.

"Don't play the innocent," the commanding officer said gruffly, giving me a shove. His moustache seemed to twitch as if he were getting excited.

"Watch out," I said, really peeved. "I'm an American. I know my rights. You don't have any jurisdiction over me."

"We'll see about that," the Israeli answered.

"Other people are praying," I protested. "Go arrest them too."

"They aren't Jews. They can do what they want."

"What?" I asked, not comprehending.

"HaYorum hazeh, hoo amiti?" one of the policemen asked.

"Ma petome," the commander answered.

"A Jew isn't allowed to pray here?" I asked, bewildered.

"Boker tov," the Druse soldier quipped.

What was he talking about, I wondered? "Boker tov" meant good

morning. That much Hebrew I knew.

“Hoo b'emet lo yodaya,” another policeman observed.

“That's right, kid,” the commander answered. “A Jew can't pray on the Temple Mount.”

“That's ridiculous,” I said. “If a Jew can't pray, why is it called the Temple Mount? What else are you supposed to do in a temple but pray?”

“That's the law.”

“I don't believe it. It can't be. What about freedom of speech? What about freedom of religion? Israel is a democracy, isn't it?”

“This isn't America,” the cop answered. “If you want to pray, go there.”

I stared at the policemen around me. They all looked perfectly serious. None of them smiled. None of them grinned. The handcuffs were serious too. They cut into my wrists when I moved. A crowd of Arabs started shouting and pointing toward the exit, yelling for us to get out. Not far away, the Japanese and Baptists had gathered, curious to see how the fracas would end.

If I had learned one thing in America, it was that a man was free to stand up for his rights.

“You mean to tell me that a Jew isn't allowed to pray at the site of the Temple?” I asked in genuine disbelief.

Before answering, the officer's eyes made a sweep of the Mount, as if to see what the gathering Arabs were doing. “That's correct,” he said.

“That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard in my life,” I blurted out.

“Let's go,” the Israeli ordered, tired of the small talk.

I shook my head no. “I'm not leaving. You don't have any rights over me.”

“That's it. Grab him,” the commander angrily ordered.

Before I knew it, I was lifted into the air. Two policemen held my legs, and two held my arms. Roughly, they carried me across the plaza.



“Let me go! Let me go! You can't do this to me! I'm an American!” I yelled.

Sensing a cause of free speech, the Baptists escorted me toward the exit, as if they were marching in a rousing Dixie parade.

“Oh when the saints,  
Oh when the saints,  
Oh when the saints go marching in.  
We will long to be in their number,  
When the saints go marching in.”

The Americans applauded me as the soldiers whisked me off of the Temple Mount, back through the passage to the Jewish side of the Wall. They dragged me down the ramp and dumped me near a sign stating that all visitors should respect the sanctity of the site. Another soldier threw me my backpack. Bruised and battered, I lay sprawled out on the ground. A Temple Mount cop slid a key in the handcuffs and my aching wrists were freed. Laughing, the soldiers and policemen headed back up the walkway to their posts.

“The hell with them,” I thought, muttering a rare curse.

Indignantly, I headed back up the mountain. Who did they think they were? They couldn't act that way to me. I was an American. Not only that, my father was an intimate friend of the President. One phone call from me and the hotshot Israeli commander would be out on the street looking for work!

The soldier at the gateway frowned when he saw me coming. The commander paused and turned back. I strode forward as if no one were there. Bracing myself, I walked straight for the archway.

“Arrest him,” the commander ordered. “Maybe he'll cool off after a few days in jail.”

Once again, I found myself in the air. The two Israeli guards lifted me up off my feet.

“I'm an American!” I shouted, “I know my rights! The President of the United States is going to hear about this!”

My feet pedaled in the air as if I were on a bicycle. The soldiers hustled me back down the incline and shlepped me across the plaza

toward a police van. After a shove and a kick in my butt, I was locked inside the rear coop of the vehicle. A hand threw my backpack inside. All of my screams didn't help. When the vehicle swerved in a sharp circle, I went sprawling onto my back. After a short, bouncy ride, the van stopped, and policemen hauled me out of the wagon. As far as I could tell, I was still inside the Old City's walls. Before I could look around, the cops dragged me into a building that looked like a crusader fortress. Treating me like a criminal, they confiscated my passport and shoved me into a small windowless room.

"Sit here for a while," a cop said, closing the door.

Agitated, I paced back and forth in the cubicle. The room reminded me of the lock-up rooms in mental wards, only there the walls were padded. When no one came in to interrogate me, I sat down on the small bench to wait. But after a few minutes, I was back on my feet, pacing.

"IN G-D WE TRUST," I said out loud. "Difficulty at the beginning works complete success. Furthering through perseverance."

I thought about Boaz and wondered what his reaction had been to the note which I had left in his Tel Aviv flat. I thought about my father and how he would react if he knew that his son were in a Jerusalem jail. To calm down, I sat on the floor, crossed my legs and started to breathe deeply in a Kundilini pose. But before I could slip into a meditation, the door opened and the police officer who had arrested me on the Temple Mount appeared with a tall, aging police officer who looked like the actor, Mel Gibson.

"Nu?" he said, as if bored.

"Praying on the Temple Mount, resisting arrest, and endangering public safety," the Temple Mount commander reported.

The police-station detective glanced over at me with an experienced gaze.

"I wasn't praying and I didn't resist anything," I said. "I was minding my own business."

Mel Gibson nodded with the same tired expression that the famous Jewish actor was known for. I couldn't get over the resemblance.

"What were you doing?" he asked.

"I was singing," I answered.

"Singing?"

"That's right."

"Shtuyot!" the Border Police commander retorted. "He was praying with his hands in the air."

"I was singing," I insisted.

"What were you singing?" Mel queried.

"When the Saints Go Marching In," I answered. "You can ask the Baptist tourists from Florida. They were singing it too. With all due respect, the policeman here wasn't anywhere near me."

Mel looked over to the Temple Mount commander. "Did you hear the kid praying?"

"I didn't," the cop admitted, "But I got a call from the Wakf guards saying that someone was praying with his arms in the air."

"To tell you the truth, I don't know if singing is illegal," the precinct detective responded. "I'll have to check it out."

"When we ordered him to halt," the cop said, "he took off like a gazelle."

"Is that correct?" Mel asked, turning back to me.

"I didn't know what they were saying. Sure I ran. They were charging at me with guns."

"That's a natural reaction," Mel admitted. "He's a tourist. I think you over-reacted, Aharoni."

"He refused to leave the Mount when I commanded him to," the commander named Aharoni insisted. Once again, his moustache twitched nervously.

"Why should I have left?" I challenged. "I didn't do anything wrong."

Mel Gibson nodded. "B'seder," he said. "I get the picture. If you don't mind, Mr. Singer, we'll run a check on your passport. You

wait here, and I'll come back soon.”

Once again, the door closed and I was left alone. Funny, I thought. The whole time that the police were interrogating me, my hands hadn't shaken. Usually, in tense situations, my childhood tremor got worse. I didn't know if it was because of touching the Wall, or because I felt surer of myself now that I was in the land of the Jews. Whatever the reason, the tremor was gone.

When it became clear that the police were in no hurry to release me, I sat back down on the floor and folded my legs into a lotus position to meditate. Across the way, a pink nose and a pair of whiskers stuck out from a hole by the floor.

“Great,” I muttered. A rat. The Israelis really knew how to make a guy feel at home. Not taking any chances, I unlocked my legs and sat up on the bench, a safe distance away from the floor. Though the interrogating room wasn't a particularly relaxing environment for achieving a state of serenity, I had learned at the ashram to put physical discomforts out of my mind. Soon, the walls of the police station melted away, and I was back on the Temple Mount, flying around above the towering dome. When the door opened, I awoke from my flight. The detective who looked like Mel Gibson stood in the doorway, holding my passport in hand.

“Have a nice rest?” the officer asked.

“Five star,” I answered, wryly.

“Your passport's all clear.”

“What were you expecting to find?”

“With the situation the way it is in Israel, we can't be too careful. The Temple Mount is a sensitive spot. Just stay away from it and enjoy your tour of the country.”

I stood up from the bench. The rat had disappeared back into its hole.

“This is your first trip to the country, am I right?” the detective asked, forcing his lips into something that was supposed to look like a smile.

“That's right.”

Mel Gibson's Israeli double flicked through my passport.

“England, France, Italy, India, Saudi Arabia – that's a lot of traveling for a kid. We had to make sure you weren't a terrorist.”

“A terrorist?”

“Unfortunately, Israel attracts them.”

“What convinced you that I'm not?” I asked.

“I didn't say you weren't,” the detective answered. “This time, we're giving you the benefit of the doubt.”

“Great, thanks a lot,” I said.

I had been labeled a lot of things in my life, but never a terrorist.

Mel handed me my passport. With a small wave, the detective sauntered away down the corridor. My backpack lay on the floor in the lobby of the station. Grabbing it, I stepped outside onto the cobblestone street. Directly opposite me, an old Ottoman tower rose up over a stone moat that belonged to Crusader times. Across the way, there was a youth hostel, a restaurant, and a post office. The Old City courtyard was crowded with tourists, merchants and Arab schoolchildren. Israeli soldiers with green uniforms and rifles patrolled the street, surrounded by donkeys and priests. Jewish mothers pushed baby carriages through the jam up of cars and taxis. I stopped a black-hatted Jew who was rushing to get through the mob.

“Which way to the Wailing Wall?” I asked.

“Follow me,” the man answered. “I'm on my way to Mincha.”

I thought he said Munich. I didn't know what he meant. Munich in Israel, I thought? Nonetheless, I followed after him. I had traveled around the world to find G-d, and now that I had, I wasn't going to lie down like a possum and roll over. Tough Israeli soldiers or not, they didn't scare me. I knew my rights. America had been founded on religious freedom. Hadn't anyone in Israel heard of Plymouth Rock? The bold pioneers of America had been willing to take on the whole British navy to uphold their beliefs. No government in the world had the authority to ban prayer or to

tell a man how to worship his Maker. In America, a Christian could pray in a temple, and a Jew could pray in a church. If Arabs could pray on the Temple Mount, then so could a Jew. Anything else was discrimination, as plain and simple as that.

“How can it be that in Israel, in the middle of Jerusalem, at the site of the ancient Temple, in the very spot where the House of G-d had stood, that a Jew wasn't allowed to pray?”

It didn't make sense. It was racist, undemocratic, and completely absurd.

I followed the Orthodox Jew down a narrow, stone stairway into an Arab Kasbah. Shops lined both sides of the walkway. Merchants in caftans sat on wicker stools, calling out “Hallo, hallo,” to tourists as they passed. There were carved animals for sale, carpets, beads, postcards, drums, sheepskin coats, Christian souvenirs, water pipes, kufiyahs, T-shirts, and bulging sacks filled with aromatic spices, coffees, and nuts. A Bedouin woman wearing a veil passed by balancing a tray of sweet pastries on top of her head. A Coptic priest walked along conversing with an Ethiopian prelate who was dressed up in a black skullcap and frock. I felt like I was back in Mecca. A barefooted Arab boy coaxed a donkey up an alley by swatting its rump with a twig.

The smell of barbecued lamb sizzling on a rotisserie reminded me how hungry I was.

“Later,” I thought, hurrying to keep up with the rushing, Madhatter Jew.

“I'm late, I'm late, I'm late for an important date,” his steps seemed to say.

Leaving the crowded market, the Hasid turned to the right, hurried past a security checkpoint guarded by Israeli soldiers and raced down a wide flight of stairs to the open plaza in front of the Wall. “Two paths diverged in a snowy wood,” I thought, remembering the famous Robert Frost poem as I parted ways with my escort. Stubbornly, I headed back toward the rampway leading to the Temple Mount gate. The same two soldiers were on duty.

"You again?" one said.

"That's right," I answered with a determined look on my face.

I tried to appear calm, but my stomach felt jittery. Though I knew I was morally right, I had never been a big hero. And the Israelis looked tough.

"What do you want?" the second soldier asked, gruffly.

"To go inside like everyone else."

"What for?"

"To take pictures," I said, holding up the panoramic Kodak I had bought at the airport in Mecca.

The Israelis didn't seem convinced. One of them picked up his walkie-talkie and had a quick conversation in Hebrew. After receiving his orders, he told me that I could proceed on inside.

"Leave your bag here," he ordered.

"And no praying," the other soldier reminded.

One point for me, I thought, walking into the archway. In the distance, Arabs were kneeling on the ground, praying in front of the el Aksa mosque, their heads bowed toward Mecca, their rumps facing the site of the Temple, as if they were desecrating it. Two Wakf guards stood at attention, waiting to accompany me on my walk. Hurrying to join them were Aharoni, the mustached, Temple Mount commander, the Druse Border policeman, and two khakied soldiers.

Once again, I felt my knees weaken. Whether because of the crowd of policemen or the spiritual high of the Mount, I started to swoon. In a way, I felt like I was out of my league, a little lost kid who had wandered out onto the playing field at Yankee Stadium during the World Series. What was I doing making trouble for the Israeli police? What craziness had lodged in my head?

"You were warned to stay away from here," Aharoni said.

"IN G-D WE TRUST," was my answer.

"Don't play games with me," Aharoni threatened.

"I'm not breaking any law," I replied.

"We'll see about that," the Israeli answered. This time his

moustache and right eye simultaneously twitched.

“I HAVE A DREAM!” I heard Martin Luther King call out in my ears.

“LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS,” the Declaration of Independence decreed.

“FOURSCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO, OUR FATHERS BROUGHT FORTH ON THIS CONTINENT A NEW NATION, CONCEIVED IN LIBERTY AND DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL,” Abraham Lincoln had declared to the Gettysburg crowd in his famous address.

The words spewed out of my mouth. I had memorized them in grade school. The Israeli policemen and Wakf guards listened to every word, trying to understand what the hell I was saying.

“He's praying,” someone said.

“No he's not,” another answered.

“All men are created equal,” I passionately repeated, quoting the immortal words of America's fourteenth President, the emancipator of the slaves.

“He's out of his mind,” the Druse observed.

When I moved on, the crowd moved with me. Everyone was staring at me, watching my lips. Between the cypress trees, I could see the golden dome and the great octagon shrine with its shining Persian tiles. Arabs began to congregate to see what was going on.

“Let's go, Singer,” the commander said. “Take a picture and get out of here before I have a riot on my hands.”

I held up the camera and took a snapshot of the Temple Mount commander. Then I took a picture of the Druse and of the crowd of Wakf police.

“Okay, wise guy, let's go,” Aharoni ordered.

I glanced at the angry commander. Arabs were converging from all directions. Everyone was staring at me. This was it. This was the moment. I didn't know why, but I sensed it. History had brought me to this time and this place.



“Move it, Singer, out of here,” the nervous voice said.

I no longer saw them. I was in a world all my own. A feeling swept over me that I couldn't control.

“Singer!” the cop yelled.

Yes, I was a singer. Hadn't my grandfather been a cantor in shul?

“Singer!” the cop warned as I opened my mouth.

Singer, that's right. That was the name that my father had chosen from all the names in the world when he decided to stop being a Cohen. That was the name he made famous all over the globe.

“Singer!” I heard the police commander yell, so I started to sing.

“Oh when the saints,

Oh when the saints,

Oh when the saints come marching in....”

“You're endangering the safety of the public,” the commander roared, grabbing me by the collar.

I pulled away, but the furious commander held fast to my shirt. With a grunt, he shoved me down to the ground. My camera went sliding over the cobblestones. Once again, I was lifted into the air. “Let me go,” I screamed. In a run, four policemen carried me out from the Temple Mount.

“Wait!” Aharoni yelled.

The huffing policemen set me back on my feet in the archway.

“I never want to see you back here again,” the commander warned, shoving me forcefully against the stone wall. My head flung back and crashed into a rock. For a moment, the earth flipped upside down. I saw bursts of light like fireworks. When Aharoni stepped forward to grab me again, I threw out an arm in defense. It wasn't a punch, but a straight-arm, as if to keep an opposing tackler away. The bone at the bottom of my hand caught the oncoming policeman square in the nose. I was no Mike Tyson, but the blow startled the Israeli. Stunned, he let out a groan and crashed down to the ground. For a moment, everyone froze. I was as startled as everyone else.

“Oy vay,” I thought.

I had knocked out an Israeli policeman!

Chapter Fifteen

HAR HABAYIT

This time, the trip in the van was much longer. After the jolting ride, I was pushed through the courtyard of the Russian Compound, Jerusalem's No. 1 jail. After a rude fingerprinting, a pair of cops shoved me through an iron door into the slammer.

"At least they put me in a cell with a rabbi," I thought as the guard locked the cell door behind me.

The rabbi looked up from the book he was reading. He was about forty-years old with a long beard that looked like it had never been trimmed. A big colorful yarmulke covered most of his skull.

"Atah b'seder?" he asked.

His eyes were at once keen and caring. He stood up from his cot and stepped over to me. My head was still bleeding.

"I don't speak Hebrew," I replied, wondering what a rabbi was doing in jail.

"Then speak in English," the prisoner answered in a clear California accent.

Needless to say, I was surprised. With his long beard and deep black eyes, the prophet-like character looked as Israeli as could be.

I collapsed down on the vacant cot in the sparse, barren cell.

"What happened to you?" my cellmate asked.

"A policeman smashed my head into a wall."

"What for?"

"I don't know," I said, checking my hand to see if the bleeding had stopped. "I guess he didn't like the song I was singing."

"A doctor should have a look at that," the rabbi observed. "You may need some stitches."

"I'll be all right," I insisted.

Wincing, I lay back on the cot.

"You were singing a song?" the rabbi inquired.

"Yeah, on the Temple Mount."

"The Temple Mount?" the rabbi asked in surprise.

“It's really something up there. Incredible. When I started to sing, they grabbed me and hauled me away. For good measure, one of the cops smashed my head into a wall.”

“Did he have a big, bushy moustache?”

“Yeah. You know him?”

“Do I know him? He's arrested me three times. His name is Aharoni. A real sweetheart of a Jew.”

I sat back up on the cot. The effort made me dizzy. My head was starting to throb, as if a sledgehammer were pounding inside.

“You've been arrested three times?” I asked.

“This is the fourth.”

“What for?”

“For praying on Har HaBayit, like you.”

“Har HaBayit?” I asked.

“The Temple Mount,” the rabbi said. “It's called Har HaBayit in Hebrew. The Mountain of the House. The House of G-d. You feel it when you're up there. Like you can reach up and touch the sky.”

“Hey, this rabbi is hip,” I thought to myself. That was exactly the feeling that I had – that you could reach up and touch the sky. But I couldn't continue on with the conversation. My head was spinning too fast. Exhausted, I fell back on the cot. I woke up when I heard my cellmate yelling for a doctor and shouting “Police brutality! Police brutality!” A policemen hurried into the lock-up.

Once again, I conked out. I came to when a police medic was bandaging my head. When my senses returned, the rabbi was sitting on my cot, reading aloud from a large book, the size of an encyclopedia. He held a small cellular phone to his ear.

“Look at Rashi,” he barked. “Look at Rashi.... That's it,” he said with a smile. “Now you've got it. Go over it by yourself. We'll continue tomorrow with the Tosafot. Say goodnight to your mother for me.”

The rabbi from California flipped the phone closed. “That was my oldest son,” he explained. “He's beginning to study the Talmud. I try to learn with him every day.”

“They allow telephones in jail?” I asked.

“Yeah, sure. Sometimes they hassle you about tefillin, but telephones are fine. It makes it easier for them to listen in on your conversations.”

“How long did I sleep?” I asked.

“Two hours,” my cellmate answered, closing the Talmud.

With a wince, I sat up on the cot. When I raised my hand to my head, I felt the medic's handiwork. The bandage covered most of my head, like the knitted yarmulke that the rabbi was wearing.

“A police medic bandaged you up,” my new friend informed me. “He said you didn't need stitches. But if you want to get out of here, tell them your head hurts. They'll have to transfer you to the hospital. Conditions are a lot better there.”

“You seem to be an old hand at this. Maybe you can tell me. Why did the police arrest me? It doesn't make sense.”

“How long have you been in Israel?”

“Not even a day.”

“A day?”

“To tell you the truth, it does seem a lot longer,” I had to admit.

“You're a tourist and they grabbed you?” he asked.

“Twice.”

The rabbi looked impressed.

“Join the club,” he said with a grin. “My name is Yosi.”

He reached out and extended a hand.

“Sam. Sam Singer.”

Yosi sat down on the cot.

“It's kind of funny to meet a rabbi in jail?” I told him.

“A rabbi? No, no, I'm not a rabbi,” Yosi answered with smiling eyes. “What makes you think that?”

“Well, your beard and your yarmulke.”

“In Israel, lots of people have beards and big kippot. It's not like in America, where people are afraid to look like real Jews.”

I had never thought about it that way, but Yosi was right. All the Jews that I knew in America tried to look just like gentiles – even

the rabbi at my bar-mitzvah. Every time I had met him, his clean-shaven face wreaked with Singer cologne.

“You used to live in America?” I asked, forgetting about the pain in my head.

“A long time ago. I've been in Israel ten years, but it seems like ten lifetimes.”

“Where were you from?”

“New York, L.A. I used to direct movies in Hollywood.”

I suppose I reacted with a look of surprise. With his beard and black eyes, Yosi looked more like Abraham Lincoln, or one of the Smith Brothers, than a Hollywood filmmaker.

“You name it,” he said. “Malibu, Beverly Hills, Venice, Greenwich Village, SoHo, Times Square, Broadway, Off-Broadway. For thirty-three years, I lived the Great American Lie, chasing after riches and fame. Thank G-d, the Almighty opened my eyes and brought me home to Jerusalem.”

“I live on Rodeo Drive,” I said, not bothering to mention the Riverdale mansion and the holiday homes in Cape Cod and Cannes.

Yosi whistled. Rodeo Drive wasn't for paupers. “Then we have two things in common,” he said. “Beverly Hills and a jail cell in Jerusalem. I don't know about you, but I'd much rather be here.”

I looked at my passionate cellmate. His statement sounded like an exaggeration to me, but judging from the intense look in his eyes, I could tell that he meant it. Suddenly, the Biblical figure jumped up, walked to the door of the cell, peered down the corridor, and hurried back to the cot.

“Listen,” he said. “They'll probably come to get you soon. We'll have time to talk later. Remember my name. Yosi ben Zion. It used to be Sorkin, but when I became a baal tshuva, I changed it to something more Jewish. I live in Bet-El. It's a settlement in Yosh – what they call the West Bank. If you need a place, you can stay with us. I have a wife, Baruch Hashem, and six kids.”

Yosi ben Zion. Bet-El. The West Bank. A wife and six kids. I was

a bit overwhelmed. Norman Mailer, the Jewish American writer, had eight kids, but he also had had seven or eight wives. And, come to think of it, they all had been gentile. But what was most amazing of all was the flash that I had. Yosi Sorkin! A bell went off in my brain. Yosi Sorkin! If this bearded, twinkly-eyed Yosi was the filmmaker, Joseph Sorkin, then I had seen one of his New Wave movies when I was a kid. In fact, my father had chipped in with the financing!

“First, tell the police that you want a lawyer,” Yosi advised. “Benny Friedman is his name. I’ll write down his phone number. He handles our court cases. We’ll pay his fee. They won’t push you around so much if they know you’ve got legal counsel behind you. Tomorrow night, his daughter is getting married, so he’s a little hassled now, but I’ll tell him to help you out.”

I tried my best to follow. Benny Friedman, court cases, we’ll pay his fee. It sounded like I was in serious trouble.

“In a nutshell,” he explained, his black eyes shining like pearls. “When Israel became a state, it inherited a lot of the old Mandate laws, some of which were in effect since Ottoman times. The law insures the status quo of Israel’s holy places. Like anyone else, a Jew is allowed access to the Temple Mount. But here’s the catch. In the statute, the word “access” is mentioned, not prayer. While there is no law forbidding Jewish prayer on Har HaBayit, neither is the right to pray specifically stated. Until now, the courts have ruled against all of our attempts to pray on the Mount, claiming that it endangers public safety. In other words, they’re afraid of the Arabs. Even though we conquered the Temple Mount during the Six Day War, our government leaders all act as if the holiest site of our nation, the site of the Temple, may it soon be rebuilt, is still in the hands of the gentiles.”

I caught the general drift, even though I couldn’t follow all of the details.

“Look,” I said. “To tell you the truth, I don’t know much about law. I know even less about Jewish history. All I wanted was to get

close to G-d, and for that, they put me in jail.”

“They put you in jail for a lot more than that. Every Jew who prays on the Mount brings the Mashiach a little bit closer. We are struggling to build G-d's Kingdom on earth. That means rebuilding the Temple. The Temple is our heart. We're like zombies without it.”

“If that's the case, I'd think that the government would want Jews to pray there.”

“A healthy government would, but we are still all screwed up from the galut. Look, when the Temple gets built, everybody on earth is going recognize G-d as their King. People in power don't want that.”

“Sheket!” a prisoner called out from a neighboring cell. “Save the speech for Mabat.”

The born-again filmmaker laughed.

“What's Mabat?” I asked.

“Wow, you really are out of it, aren't you? Mabat is the main TV news. The media is against us too. Let me give you a little warning. You'll meet a lot of people who think that the Third Temple is science fiction, but they'll see the light soon.”

Like a pinball machine, my head felt on the verge of TILT from the barrage of warnings, prophecies, and blows it had suffered on my first day in Jerusalem.

“Listen,” I said. “When the cop shoved me into the wall, I stuck out my hand to defend myself. He walked right into it.”

“You hit him?” Yosi asked, coming back down to earth.

“I didn't mean it,” I said. “But it ended up that way. He went down like a sack of potatoes.”

“You hit Aharoni?” Yosi repeated, amazed. “Oh, man, that was pretty stupid. Though he sure has it coming to him.”

“I thought he was going to kill me.”

“Demand a lie detector test!” the former filmmaker said, as if coming up with an idea for a script. “If you're telling the truth, you've got nothing to worry about. Aharoni will go bonkers. In the

meantime, I'll talk to my friends. We'll claim police brutality.”

“I appreciate this,” I said.

“Hey, forget it. It's a mitzvah to help a fellow Jew.”

Down the corridor, a door opened and a guard appeared.

“Don't let them break you,” Yosi whispered. “Remember that Rabbi Akiva, the Baal HaTanya, and Yosef Mendelevich all sat in prison for the truth of the Torah and Zion.”

I hadn't heard of any of them. Nor did the guard seem to think that he was escorting some kind of national hero. With a growl, he shoved me down the hall on the way to another round of questioning.

When the guard pushed me into the interrogating room, the police captain who looked like Mel Gibson shook his head back and forth as if I had spoiled his evening plans. A plainclothes detective in a denim shirt with rolled up sleeves sat at a desk, smoking a cigarette. The ashtray in front of him was loaded with butts.

“I thought I told you to stay away from the Temple Mount,” Mel said.

“It's a free country,” I answered.

“This is Israel, not America,” Gibson observed.

Aharoni, the Temple Mount commander, stood at the back of the room. He toyed with his black-and-blue nose, as if to coax it back into place. Three of the arresting policemen came in and stood in the doorway behind me.

“Praying on the Temple Mount, endangering the public safety, resisting arrest, and assaulting a police officer. Not bad for a kid who has been in the country less than twenty-four hours. What do you have to say for yourself?” the chain smoker asked.

“I wasn't praying,” I answered with a wince as a pain shot through the back of my skull. “I didn't endanger anyone; I didn't resist anyone; and I only stuck out my hand to protect myself after the police officer smashed my head against a stone wall.”

“He smashed your head against a wall?” Gibson asked.

“That's right,” I asserted.



Both Gibson and the precinct detective turned to the Temple Mount commander.

"He fell down while trying to flee," Aharoni responded with a noticeable twitch.

"I did not," I protested. "That's a lie!"

"He fell while resisting arrest?" the detective asked.

"While forcefully resisting arrest," the Temple Mount commander insisted.

"He's lying!" I countered. "I demand to be given a lie detector test! Give him one too. We'll see who's telling the truth!"

The commander's eyes flashed angrily. Gibson frowned and turned away to pick up the telephone on the desk. The detective put his hand on the receiver, preventing Wally from making the call.

"I want to tell my wife that I'll be late," Gibson said.

"Not now," the detective said, crushing his cigarette stub into the small cemetery of butts in the ashtray. Immediately, he started to light up a new one. In the very same motion, he turned to the policemen by the door.

"The prisoner hurt his head while he was running away?" he asked them.

"That's right, lieutenant," one of them said.

"Yes, sir," the second answered.

The third policeman, the Druse, hesitated. His eyes darted from his buddies to Aharoni. "I didn't see what happened," he answered.

Aharoni's moustache twitched nervously.

"They're all lying!" I declared. "I demand that all of them be given polygraph tests."

"You don't demand anything. You're the prisoner," the lieutenant explained.

"Go to the entrance tunnel leading up to the Mount. Look for yourself," I challenged. "You'll find my blood splashed all over the wall – if they haven't washed away the evidence."

I was trembling. I didn't like liars. Policemen who were liars were

even worse. They threatened the very pillars of society.

“Do you have witnesses?” the lieutenant asked.

“Yes,” I said. “Those policemen. Give them polygraph tests.”

“We give polygraph tests to suspects, not to policemen,” Gibson retorted dryly.

“He's seen too many movies,” the lieutenant quipped.

“I demand to see a lawyer,” I said. “Benny Friedman.”

At the mention of the lawyer, the detectives exchanged looks.

“You've got a lot of demands for someone who is facing five to ten years in prison,” the Temple Mount police commander maintained.

“Okay, Aharoni,” the detective lieutenant cut in. “Write up your report, get the others to sign it, and I'll take care of the rest.”

Aharoni shot an intimidating glare my way, put on his cap, and strode out of the room. The other cops followed him out.

“How do you know Benny Friedman?” Gibson asked.

“I don't, but I want him as counsel.”

Gibson frowned, anticipating a long, drawn-out evening.

“How does he know about Friedman?” he asked the lieutenant in Hebrew.

“He was put in a cell with Yosi Ben Zion.”

Gibson's eyes shot up to the ceiling. “Who was the genius who did that?”

I didn't know any Hebrew, but that's what I figured they said. The lieutenant didn't answer. He took a long puff on his cigarette.

“Look, Ari, this is going to ruin my whole night,” Gibson continued, knowing that I couldn't understand. “I promised my wife I'd meet her at our boy's school to meet with his teachers. If I don't get there, she'll kill me. I think this kid is telling the truth. You know that Aharoni can get pushy. Benny Friedman would love a police brutality case. Why give him a platform? The kid is just a stupid tourist looking for a spiritual high. Let's just scare him and call it a night.”

“I'm not worried about the Druse, if that's what you're thinking,”

the lieutenant answered. "He knows that if he rats on Aharoni, he won't have a job."

"Look at the kid," Gibson said. "He's practically peeing in his pants. Let him go find a hotel and sleep it off. If he causes us any more trouble, we'll get a court order to throw him out of the country."

The detective shot a long stare my way. I really was trembling. Not because I was worried about being locked-up in jail. I just didn't feel well. My head was still aching, I hadn't slept soundly the previous night, and my nerves were frayed from the hectic events of the last forty-eight hours, ever since the near riot in Mecca.

"Okay, kid," the lieutenant said, standing up. "Maybe you're telling the truth. Maybe you're not. But you look like an intelligent fellow. There are five million Jews in Israel, and six-hundred million Arabs surrounding us. They think the Temple Mount is theirs, and they are willing to go to war to prove it. The smallest match on that mountain can start a very big fire. Understand?"

I nodded yes.

"Good. Now you don't want to be the match to start that fire, do you?"

I shook my head no.

"You don't want to see anybody getting killed, isn't that right?"

"Of course not," I answered.

"That's good. Isn't it, David?"

So Mel had a name after all, I thought.

"That's right," he said, looking down at his watch.

"So we are going to give you one last chance. Go find a hotel. Get a good night's rest. And if you want to pray, stick to the Kotel. If we catch you up on the Temple Mount again, we'll have to kick you out of the country. Is that understood?"

"I understand," I replied. "But I still think it's a violation of my right to free religious expression."

"Think whatever you like, but stay away from Har HaBayit, Okay?"

“I'll try,” I agreed to finish with the meeting.

“Good. It's always a pleasure to deal with a smart person like you.”

Gibson smiled. Without formal goodbyes, he walked out the door.

Compulsively, the lieutenant lit up another cigarette.

“That's bad for your health,” I told him.

“I know, but I can't stop. My wife says it's going to kill me.”

“Maybe she's right.”

“Maybe she is. But I'm too set in my ways, you know what I mean?”

“If a person really wants to change, he can,” I said, thinking about Yosi, the born-again Hollywood filmmaker.

“Maybe yes. Maybe no. Just do everyone a favor and keep away from Har HaBayit, all right?”

“I hear you,” I replied, not wanting to make a promise I wasn't sure I could keep.

The lieutenant told me to wait while he took care of some paperwork. After an hour, a policeman handed me my passport and told me that I could leave. Picking up my belongings, I hurried away from the police compound and walked down a hill to what looked like the main street of town. Evening had fallen hours before. I felt suddenly hungry. Stopping at a sidewalk cafe, I ordered a bagel and lox. Checking through my bag, I discovered that only my camera was missing. It had slipped out of my hands when the police had tackled me up on the Mount.

While I was wolfing down an extra bagel, a group of American teenagers came into the small shop to eat. The boys all wore yarmulkes, and the girls all wore long skirts. They laughed and giggled and told silly stories about their schools back in the States. Compared to Yosi's speech about rebuilding the Temple, their jokes about teachers and dorm pranks seemed immature. It was funny, but even though they were Americans, I felt out of place. I didn't want to think about college. I sensed that something big was going on in Israel, and I wanted to check it out. Back on the street,

with food in my stomach, my batteries felt recharged. Gazing in a bright shopfront window filled with souvenirs for tourists, a big colorful kippah caught my eye. Entering the store, I tried it on and studied myself in a mirror. The skullcap was so big, it almost covered my bandage. I walked out to the street a new man. If I could dress up like a Hindu, then why not as a Jew? Holding up an arm, I waved down the first empty taxi that passed.

“Har HaBayit,” I told the driver.

“You mean the Kotel?” the driver asked, giving me a look.

“Yes, that's right,” I replied, sitting back in the seat as the driver stepped on the gas.

I don't know why, but I had to go back. Ever since I had stepped on the Temple Mount, I couldn't forget the feeling I had. I couldn't put the Temple Mount out of my mind. That's where I wanted to be. Not in a Hilton Hotel. Not in the Sheraton or the Hyatt. I can't describe the feeling. I just had to return.

After passing through the security check leading to the Kotel, I walked straight to the ramp leading up to the Mount, only to find the gate locked. The soldiers had abandoned their posts. The fenced pathway was deserted. Up by the Wall, the dark archway was sealed. I stood there, feeling that someone had slammed a door in my face. People headed toward the brightly lit Kotel, but I wanted to pray on the Mount. I wanted to be out on the playing field, as it were, and not in the bleachers. Struck with a wild idea, my eyes scanned the rooftops bordering the Wall. A minaret rose like a missile over an old stone building. Nearby, a guard tower peered out over the complex. Wire fencing stretched across the roof closest to the Wall to prevent someone like me from climbing up to the Temple Mount. In the distance, on the other side of the Wall, the dome of the shrine sparkled like a fairytale pot of gold.

“No chance from here,” I decided.

There were too many lights, too many people. Not only that, but directly across the cobblestone plaza was a police station. Turning in the opposite direction, I surveyed the part of the Wall which

stretched under the el Aksa mosque. Backtracking through the security gate, I strolled along a walkway bordering an archeological park. Down below in the gardens, broken columns from Roman times had been reassembled. An ancient cobblestone streetway had been uncovered and repaired. Across the yard, a cluster of ruins bordered the wall of the silver-domed mosque, almost reaching the roof. I figured that I might be able to scale the jagged stone wall, but it looked like a leap of several yards from the top of the ruins to the rooftop. Behind me, a steady flow of people disembarked from buses. The passageway leading to the Kotel was almost as busy as Jaffa Street in town. In any event, the gate to the archeological gardens was locked.

Not to be discouraged, I headed out the arched gate to the street outside the Old City wall. Clusters of houses twinkled down below in the valley. Stars shone overhead. The glittering scene reminded me of the children's stories I used to watch on TV during Christmas. For all I knew, the sparkling village down in the Biblical valley was Bethlehem.

Powerful spotlights lit up the mountainside in the distance. What looked like tombstones covered the whole broad face of the hill. I can't explain why, but a feeling of holiness seemed to ooze from the landscape. The lighting was so dramatic, I figured that Moses himself must be buried somewhere on the hillside. At the summit of the mountain, a hotel shone like a crown.

Following the Old City wall down the hill, I came to a breach where the wall veered suddenly inward. Across the way, over a rubble of boulders, walkways, and ruins, a wide stone stairway led up to the brightly lit Temple Mount wall. In Malibu, I had scaled higher ascents. And the waterfall cliff in India had been just as steep. Some fifteen feet off the ground was a window with bars, and above the window was a crumbling archway which a person could stand on. Above the archway was a ledge. Adjacent to it, a long step away, was the roof of a building that extended out from the mosque like a buttress. There, by a floodlamp, two cables ran

up the face of the wall to the roof of the mosque. As fortune would have it, the cables passed in front of a series of windows which had latticed gratings. Footholds abounded. The climb wouldn't be easy, but it wasn't impossible. For an experienced snapper, the ascent was for kids.

"You can make it," I said aloud, as if giving myself a pep talk.

"The worst fear is the fear in the mind."

"IN G-D WE TRUST."

But the truth was, even though I had done my share of climbing, the assault would be a risky adventure. Plus, there was a guard booth on the roof of the buttress, though no one seemed to be stationed inside. The entire area looked deserted. The only real obstacle was scaling the first fifteen feet up the wall to the first window grating. To do that, I would need either a ladder or a rope with a hook. Since I didn't see any spare climbing equipment in sight, I decided to dismiss the fanciful whim and trudge back up the hill to the Kotel.

Entering the tunnel at the far end of the Wall, I walked through the vaulted chamber and took a seat facing the great, ancient stones. Once again, a familiar sensation embraced me. I had the feeling that I was back in my childhood closet, surrounded by the comforting hug of the past. Within minutes, I was sleeping. My new yarmulke resting on the Wall as if it were a pillow. Once again, no one disturbed me. No one told me to go away. I looked just like all the other Jews, hunched over, merged with the Wall.

Some time later, I awoke to the sounds of lamentations and weeping. It was the same old rabbi I had seen the previous night. He was back at his spot on the floor, dressed in his prayer robe and slippers, sobbing over the loss of the Temple. He looked so broken and sad, I began crying too. I cried without knowing why I was crying. Tears poured down my face. Sobs shook my body. I guess I was making such a racket that even the aged rabbi glanced over, curious to see who was making all the noise.

I cried myself to sleep. When I awoke in the morning, my head

was still resting on the Wall. My back was stiff from bending over all night.

Already, the early morning prayers had begun. The worshippers glowed in the golden light of the tunnel like the figures in a Rembrandt painting. Outside in the cool air, I washed my hands and face from a faucet. Looking up, I noticed a wall of telephones. I walked over, but they didn't take coins. A soldier talking on the neighboring phone seemed to understand my dilemma and handed me a plastic card to insert in the slot. When I got a dial tone, I called the telephone number that Yosi Ben Zion had scribbled on a piece of scrap paper.

"Shalom," the sleepy voice said.

"Is this Benny Friedman?" I asked.

"That's right," he replied in a distinctly American accent.

"The lawyer?"

"That's right."

"My name is Sam Singer. Yesterday, I was in jail with Yosi Ben Zion. He gave me your number. I'm sorry to call so early in the morning, but I thought maybe you could help him get out of jail too."

"I'm glad you called," the lawyer responded, suddenly alert. "I have to get up anyway. We've got a wedding tonight. Yosi spoke to me already. He's being released this morning. Where are you? Where can we meet you?"

"I'm at the Kotel," I said.

"Good. Hang around for a while. We'll come get you around nine o'clock."

"Where should I wait?"

"We'll find you, don't worry," Benny assured. "Nobody gets lost at the Wall."

Sure enough, a few minutes after nine, I spotted Yosi hurrying toward the Wall, followed by a roly-poly figure wearing a suit. Benny Friedman was puffing by the time they crossed the plaza. He had a short beard and sported a small black kippah. Like a



friendly bear, he grabbed my hand and almost pulled my arm out of its socket.

“Welcome to Yerushalayim,” he said with the same happy gleam that Yosi had in his eyes. I wondered if it was something shared by every American who came to live in Jerusalem.

“I’ll be right back,” Yosi said. “I just want to check-in with the Wall.”

“So your Ralph Singer’s son?” Benny asked, cutting straight to the point.

“How do you know?” I asked in surprise. I hadn’t told anyone in Israel, not even the cops.

“Yosi put two and two together. He’s got a great mind. Thank G-d he’s not wasting it anymore in Hollywood.”

The overweight lawyer tugged at his belt to pull up his pants.

“I don’t suppose your father makes a size that would fit me, what do you say?”

Before I could answer, the jocular fellow gave me a swat that almost knocked me off balance.

“How about a piece of gum?” he asked, holding out a stick of Wrigley’s.

Nervously, he glanced at his watch.

“My daughter’s getting married tonight, and I have a court case at ten. Breach of contract. Boiler plate stuff, but a man has to make a living, right? The Temple Mount business I do for the mitzvah. On a volunteer basis. But to build a serious movement, you need big money. There’s no way around it.”

I nodded my head. Yosi came back and held out the strings of tzitzit which stuck out from his pants. He called them his cables.

“I’m ready,” he said. “I plugged my cables into the Wall and got my spiritual batteries charged for the day.”

Grabbing me by the arm, he started to lead me away. I snatched my backpack and hurried along to keep up. Churning his arms like the wheels of a locomotive, Benny, the lawyer, strode along beside us, moving at a surprisingly quick pace.

Outside the Old City wall, Friedman's Mitsubishi van was waiting. The windshield was smashed. A large rock lay on the front seat.

"Not again!" the lawyer groaned. "I knew I shouldn't have parked here."

"Kapara," the filmmaker said.

"Who did it?" I asked.

"Arabs," Benny answered. "It's the third time this year."

I looked around, but the only Arab I saw was a man selling sodas out of a push cart. With the kefiyah he was wearing, he looked capable of smashing a window or two.

"Maybe he saw something," I said. "Why don't you ask him?"

"Chaval al ha'zman," Benny answered in Hebrew. "It's a waste of time?"

Brushing the shattered pieces of safety glass off the front seat, the lawyer invited us to climb aboard. He gunned the engine and lurched away from the curb. Making a crazy U-turn, he sped down the hill and turned a sharp right, blaring his horn and growling at the oncoming drivers, who quickly veered toward the sidewalk to avoid a crash. The van raced down the hill, flying over bumps in the road. When Benny took a corner too fast, I went sprawling against the front door. Yosi sat calmly as if he were used to driving with a maniac at the wheel. He didn't even flinch when a rock went skidding over the roof of the van. Benny whipped a gun out from a shoulder holster and aimed it out over the wheel.

"Comanche's!!!" he hollered, hitting the gas.

"This is the City of David," Yosi explained as we flew down the hill. "King David's palace was here. This was the heart of Jerusalem. Until a few years ago, it was Judenrein. Now, thank G-d, some rich Jews have been buying up property and handing it over to us. There are about thirty Jewish families living here now."

From the look of the place, it could have been Saudi Arabia. Arab schoolchildren, Arabs on donkeys, Arab drivers, Arab toddlers playing in the street. The only thing that looked Jewish was an

Israeli flag waving on top of the building where Benny braked sharply and parked, bringing the roller-coaster ride to a halt.

“I'm off to court,” he said, keeping the motor running. “I'll see you all at the wedding.”

He left us at the bottom of the valley. Looking up, I could see the Temple Mount wall in the distance. On a nearby rooftop, a Jew wearing a tallit and tefillin stood praying beside the Israeli flag. His striking red hair blew in the wind like the furls in the Magen David.

“That's Ariel Tzur,” Yosi said. “He's the founder of the Temple Mount Brigade, a movement of activists who are trying to get the Government of Israel to allow Jewish prayer on the Mount. He's praying on his roof because of a court order barring him from entering the Old City.”

I followed Yosi up the stairs leading to an old two-story house that was in the midst of a low-budget renovation. Jewish workers waved greetings as we stepped over the scaffolding and construction debris. Inside, the house was surprisingly homey. The walls had been plastered; the new tile floor retained its original shine; wood trimming around the windows and doorways created a warm, house-in-the-country impression. Otherwise, the place had the look of a war zone. A tricycle and a baby carriage were overturned on the floor; books were sprawled out on almost every table and couch; architectural drawings were draped over a chair; and it looked like an army platoon had eaten breakfast in the kitchen.

“Ariel has ten kids,” Yosi explained.

“Ten kids?” I asked in surprise.

“Ten, eleven, something like that. His wife works for the City of David Reclamation Committee. As soon as she gets the kids off to school, she heads off to work. I'll put up some coffee.”

“Ten kids!” I thought. Not even black people in America had ten kids.

I grabbed the one seat in the kitchen that hadn't been splattered

with cornflakes and milk. Yosi went straight to the cupboard and started to prepare coffee as if he were in his own home.

“What's that building?” I asked, pointing to a framed picture on a wall. In fact, there were drawings of the same building on nearly every wall in the house.

“The Beit HaMikdash,” Yosi answered, giving me a strange look.

From his reaction, I guessed it was something I should have known, but, like I said, I had never learned anything about Israel. Studying the picture, I could see it was obviously something very special, towering over the rest of Jerusalem.

“It was built where the gold dome is today?” I asked.

Yosi didn't answer. “Hadashot,” he said, flicking on a radio.

After six tiny beeps, an announcer broadcast the news in Hebrew. Yosi listened intently as he waited for the water to boil. When a baby started screaming in another room, Yosi didn't flinch. When the baby's cries grew hysterical, I looked around for someone to help. Suddenly, like Zorro dressed in a cape, Ariel Tzur bounded into the room, his tallit billowing around him.

“One minute,” he said, crossing the room in the direction of the screaming baby.

Moments later, he was back, carrying a baby in his hand like a melon. Feeling the familiar touch of his father, the child stopped crying.

“Baruch haba,” he called out.

With the sweeping, dramatic gesture of an actor on stage, he set the baby down on some kind of portable rocker. I immediately understood why Yosi had paired up with the charismatic Israeli. He had the presence and flare of a Hollywood star.

“Welcome, welcome, welcome to the City of David,” he exclaimed.

I stood up to meet him. Opening his arms wide, Tzur greeted me like a long lost brother. He hugged me with genuine feeling.

“Excuse my English,” he said. “It is not very good. I never liked English in school. Why should we speak English? We are Jews.

Hebrew is our language. But we are still in galut. Our bodies are here in the land of Israel, but our heads are in Poland.”

I nodded as if I understood.

“Excuse me, please, but I am in the middle of my prayers,” Tzur continued. “Yosi will fill you in and then we can talk.”

“Where should I start?” Yosi asked.

“Bereshit,” Tzur answered. “In the beginning, yes?”

Reaching out his two hands, the red-bearded settler grabbed a hold of my head.

“We have to take off this American head and put on a Jewish head in its place.”

Like a mime, he pretended to unscrew my head and set it down on the table. With a smile, he lifted a new invisible head onto my shoulders.

“Usually, like with our good friend, Yosi, the... hashtallah,” he said, searching for the right English word.

“Transplant,” explained Yosi.

“Yes, the transplant takes years, but with you, Mr. Shmuel Singer, we will do it in twenty-four hours.”

Yosi laughed. He set down a cup of hot coffee on the table in front of me and pushed over a plastic container of sugar. Then he took out a tray of cake from the oven and set it on the already crowded table.

“You know, my name wasn't always Singer,” I said. “I mean, my father's real name was Cohen, but he changed it.”

“Shmuel Cohen!” Yosi exclaimed. “That explains it!”

“Explains what?”

“Your feeling for Har HaBayit. You're a Kohen. A Jewish High Priest. Your ancestors served in the Temple. And Shmuel, do you know who he was?”

I shook my head no.

“He was the prophet in King David's time. A Kohen like you. Together, they discovered the precise place of the altar.”

I was going to ask what the altar was, but Yosi continued.

“Lesson One,” he said. “In the beginning, G-d created the heaven and the earth. You know that, right? A lot of people don't. I didn't, and I went to some of the best schools in America.”

All the time that Yosi spoke, Ariel Tzur paced the room, reeling off verses of prayer in great, heartfelt fervor. While he prayed, he answered the telephone, rocked the crying baby, searched through the debris for a pacifier, cleared the dirty dishes away from the table, sent off a fax, handed the baby to me, and went outside to yell instructions to the workers.

I was trying my best to follow Yosi's cram course in Jewish history, but when Tzur handed me the crying two-month old baby, I froze. The truth was, I had never held a baby before in my life. I sat paralyzed, afraid to drop it and afraid to hold it too hard. Sensing my predicament, Yosi scooped up the baby and balanced it on his shoulder, burping it with an experienced touch. When Tzur came back, he removed his tallit and tefillin and took the baby inside to change.

“Keep going,” he told us, leaving the room.

Yosi told me about Adam HaRishon. He told me about Noah. He explained how a special connection to G-d was passed down through a chain of select men until it reached Avraham. Yosi taught me about Lech Lecha; about the promise of the Land of Israel; about bondage in Egypt and the Exodus. Jumping up on his feet, he described the revelation on Mount Sinai the way a director would describe a scene to his crew. He told me that I was a part of G-d's chosen nation, chosen to bring the word of G-d to mankind. He spoke about Moses and Joshua, about Kings David and Solomon. With his hands sculpting the air, he told me about the First Temple and its tragic destruction; and about the Second Temple and its bitter demise. He described the horror of exile, the persecutions, assimilations, and holocausts. Like a master storyteller spinning his yarn, Yosi told me about the prayers and the longings of Jews all over the world for Jerusalem and the Temple. He spoke about the French Revolution and what happens

to a Jew when he tries to replace his head with the head of a Frenchman, Englishman, or American WASP.

All through the three-hour lecture, Ariel Tzur paced through the house like a lion, scrambled eggs, quieted the baby, answered telephones, and reminded Yosi of things he forgot. I listened with all of my might. The more Yosi talked, the more I realized that I knew absolutely nothing about being a Jew. I had learned about literature, American history, science, mathematics, psychology, economics, social studies and art, but no one had ever taught me about Abraham! I had been Americanized, and pasteurized, homogenized and sedated to be like everyone else, but suddenly, in this upside-down house, deep in the City of David, I was finding out who I was. I wasn't supposed to be like everyone else. I truly was different. I was a Jew with a special mission on earth.

No wonder I had never fit in. I didn't belong in Beverly Hills! I didn't belong in America! That's why I had taken refuge in my closet.

"A Jew isn't supposed to look like Barbie and Ken dolls," Yosi explained as Tzur's kids started to charge into the house after school. "Jews are supposed to wear tzitzit and kippot, not Singer fashions. We aren't supposed to grow up speaking English and French. We are supposed to speak Hebrew. Instead of learning about George Washington and Betsy Ross, G-d wants us to learn about Abraham and Sarah. He wants us to eat differently, act differently, think differently, and aspire to attain different things."

"And the thing we are supposed to want more than anything else in the world," Tzur declared, pointing out the window toward the Old City, "is the Temple. To go up to the House of the L-rd and stand in His holy place. Isn't that right, kids?" he asked. "Tell our friend Shmuel what you want most in the world?"

The kids stared at their father, not understanding a word of his English.

"Ma atem rotzim yotar m'kol dvar b'olam?" Yosi translated into Hebrew.

“Chocolate!” the six-year old answered.

“Popcorn!” the seven-year old shouted.

“Coca-Cola,” the eight-year old said.

“The Beit HaMikdash!” the ten-year old twins answered on cue.

“Hurray!” the father called out, lifting them both in the air and swirling them around.

Like in the climax of an opera, he fell dramatically onto the couch.

“Cut!” Yosi yelled out. “Print it! We've got a take!”

Laughing, Tzur rolled to the floor. Yosi cracked up with him. I didn't know whether I was surrounded by lunatics or true pioneers.

Wearing a kippah that covered his head, Tzur's six-year old ran up to his father and held out a note.

“Hurray!!” Tzur cheered, reading the message. He stood up, grabbed his son, and swirled him around too. “It's from his teacher. He says that Moshe knows all of his prayers by heart!”

With a proud paternal smile, Tzur gave the boy a kiss and carried him over to the stove. A big piece of chocolate cake was the prize.

“What a difference,” I thought.

When I had showed a talent for prayer as a child, my parents had dragged me off to a psychiatrist! When the sedatives they gave me turned me into a zombie, they gave me uppers. When uppers made me too high, they gave me downers instead. When downers brought me too low, they put me on anti-depressants. When anti-depressants made me hyper, they tried a combination of experimental drugs.

“Be normal,” they urged me. “Why can't you be like everyone else?”

And here, in the Ariel Tzur's house, the prayers of the children were rewarded with sweets!

Tzur's pregnant wife came home from work and baked two homemade pizzas. For a woman with ten children, she looked surprisingly young. A kerchief covered her hair, and she wore a long skirt down to her sandals. She kept busy organizing the house



and helping the kids with their homework. We men continued the discussion up on the roof, going over maps of the Temple Mount. Then Tzur flipped through some legal tomes of court cases dealing with the jurisdictional issues; cases of illegal Wakf construction; and attempts by Tzur and others to restore Jewish prayer on the Mount. In the late afternoon, as Moslem prayers echoed out from meuzzins over the hillsides, Tzur brought out the pièce de résistance which he kept stored in the small workroom he had built on the roof. It was a miniature architectural model of the Temple Mount. With one addition. A modern synagogue was positioned in the wall which bordered the southern face of the Mount.

“We have the halachic approval of several big rabbis,” Tzur said, “to build a synagogue on the extreme southern border of the Mount.”

Pointing to the model, Yosi explained that Jewish law forbade Jews from stepping foot in the area of the Temple Mount where the ancient Temple had stood, because of the supreme holiness of the site. Also, he said, that today, the special red heifer necessary for purification was missing. The proposed synagogue was to be located a safe distance from the forbidden area, along the outer perimeter.

“The only thing missing is an Israeli Prime Minister who thinks like a Jew,” Tzur reflectively added.

“And four million dollars,” Yosi pragmatically noted.

“That's how your father can do a tremendous deed for the Jews,” Tzur announced.

“My father?” I asked in surprise.

“He can have the great honor of dedicating the new Temple Mount Synagogue in his name.”

“A synagogue in the name of my father?” I murmured, somewhat amazed.

“In any name that he wants,” Tzur stated.

“Except for the bar-mitzvahs of me and my brother, I don't think I ever saw my father in shul.”

“I don't blame him,” Yosi said. “The shows the synagogues in America put on could put Broadway out of business.”

Tzur held out his cellular telephone.

“It’s worth a phone call, isn’t it?”

“Four million dollars is a big contribution from just a phone call,” I said.

“Then let's bring him here,” Tzur proposed.

The two men stared intently at me, waiting for me to agree. Their eyes shone with passion for the righteousness of their cause. I was floored.

“Let me think about it,” I said. “My father's a businessman. I don't know how keen he is on giving money away.”

“We can set it up through a recognized U.S. tax-exempt charity,” Yosi insisted.

“I don't recall my Dad giving a lot of money to anything, except the college I was supposed to go to, in order to buy my way in.”

Tzur nodded. “If that's the problem,” he said. “we have several other projects. Investments, not charity. I'm talking about real estate. If we had the money, we could buy the whole City of David. The Arabs are dying to sell. We could transform this place into the center of Jerusalem, just like it was in the days of King David. Your father could make a fortune.”

Just then, Tzur's cell phone rang. It was Benny, reminding Tzur about the wedding.

“That's right!” Tzur exclaimed, leaping up. “I forgot!”

Even though Yosi sped us through the city at a breathtaking pace, we arrived at the wedding hall late. The nuptial ceremony had ended and crowds of people were dancing in circles, men on one side of a divider, and women on the other. Both Yosi and Tzur had insisted that I come along. Seeing us enter the noisy hall, Benny rushed forward as if I were the guest of honor. The band played even louder as Benny welcomed me with a bear hug. The crowd made way and surged around us, no doubt thinking that I was a cousin or something from America. Suddenly, I felt myself rise in

the air. Yosi lifted me up on his shoulders. Tzur rose in the air alongside me. He reached out his hands and grabbed hold of mine. Then a team of strongmen grabbed Benny and lifted him up on a chair. A beaming, clean-shaven youth who looked about my age came floating through the air to join us. The crowd cheered. Obviously, this was the groom. Grasping hands with the others, I was swirled around to the loud, Jewish music. I can't really describe the sensation I had. I felt as if some centrifugal force were propelling me into the center of an atomic reactor. Circles of energy surrounded me on all sides. Like an astronaut in the movies, I was sucked out of the earth's atmosphere into a galaxy detached from time and space. Scores of happy, singing people danced around me. I felt a part of a joy which I had never known before in my life.

The dancing continued non-stop. Finally, I was lowered back down to the floor. But before I could shake the dizzy feeling out of my head, Yosi grabbed me and pulled me back into the swirl of dancing. Around and around and around and around. Song after song. Circle after circle. Dancing and dancing until sweat drenched my clothes.

"These are Jews!" I thought to myself in amazement. "All of them."

I had never seen Jews like this. I had never experienced such happiness. Mystically, I felt glued to the mass of bodies around me. I loved everyone, and everyone loved me. Snatches of Yosi's lesson came back to me. I was a Jew. I was holy. I was part of a great, loving family. I was a part of a monumental history – the history of the greatest nation on earth. Around and around I danced in a whirlpool of belonging and love. I danced and he danced until the music stopped playing. Dizzily, I staggered across the dance floor. Exhausted, I collapsed into a chair. Yosi sat down beside me.

"Some wedding, huh?" he said, smiling.

"The best," I agreed.

The truth is, I had never been to a wedding in my life. In

Hollywood, nobody bothered to get married.

Aside from the incredible happiness, the divider in the center of the hall impressed me the most. Throughout the affair, the men and the women remained on separate sides of the room. Now that was real holiness, I thought.

During the meal, Yosi seemed to be reading my thoughts.

"I used to do yoga," he confided. "It's a good way to get the body in shape, but it just leaves you flying in space. If G-d wanted us to be angels, He would have created us with wings. You hear what I'm saying? G-d doesn't want us hanging out on mountain peaks in loincloths. He wants us to be holy down here, on planet earth, in everything we do. Holy food, holy weddings, holy armies, holy courts. That's why He gave us the Torah. To teach us what He wants us to do. And the place we are supposed to do it is here in Israel."

Yosi stared at me intently.

"You know what I mean?" he asked.

I nodded. I was beginning to. I mean, to tell you the truth, this was more mind-blowing than any drug. I mean, it's hard to describe, but my feelings of happiness and belonging were real.

After the wedding, Ariel Tzur took me home with him to the house in the City of David. He handed me a pillow and blanket and dragged a thin mattress up to the workroom on the roof.

"The door to the house is open," Tzur said. "If you need anything, help yourself. If you want to call America, go ahead. For as long as you like, this is your home."

For a long time, I sat alone on the roof. The sky was lit up with stars. Millions of them. As if someone had scattered handfuls of stardust throughout the heavens. The sight of the Biblical hillsides; the sound of dogs barking; the smells of strange spices and flowers, all had a mystical pull. I tried to lie down in the cramped workroom, but I couldn't fall asleep. Scenes from the wedding, and from the Temple Mount flashed through my mind. I thought about Abraham and Moses. Could it be that Yosi's saga of the Jewish

people were true? Hadn't the Jews returned to Israel just as G-d had promised? Hadn't they triumphed in miraculous wars? Yes. Gazing out at the Jerusalem night, I was convinced. It was all perfectly real. It was all perfectly simple. The Passover story was true. But I couldn't help but wonder. Where did I, Sam Singer, fit into G-d's wonderful plan?

Time passed. I couldn't sleep. Quietly, I made my way through the house down to the dark street. Quickly, I walked past Arab houses up the steep hill. The street was deserted. Window shutters were closed. Soon, I could see the Old City wall, growing taller as I approached. Pulled by some unearthly force, I walked toward the great shining stones.

"Around the world, I searched for you," I thought, hearing the music of the old Broadway tune in my ears. I had fallen in love with Jerusalem. The city of King David. Fate had brought me here, I was certain of that. Once again, the question arose in my mind. In the great drama of Jewish history, what part was Sam Singer to play? Standing by the archeological park on the southern face of the Mount, where Tzur dreamed of building a synagogue, I looked up for an answer.

There, in a corner, between the brightly lit wall and the building that buttressed the back of the mosque, I saw a ladder leaning against the large stones. Forgotten by a workman who had been doing some repairs, the ladder was like a sign out of Heaven. I could feel my heart racing. An eternal stillness hung over the ancient site. There were no tourists around, no worshippers, no soldiers, no police.

Stealthily, I climbed over the low railing by the sidewalk and made my way into the archeological park. Signs written in Hebrew and English described the fallen colonnades, ritual baths, and Jewish houses of the past. For some reason, I recalled the weeping rabbi at the Kotel, and the smell of my grandfather's prayer gown. Climbing over stones, I imagined hearing the roar of chariots and the blaze of a ravaging fire. Hurrying along a metal walkway

suspended over the archeological excavations, I headed toward the ladder up by the wall. Breathing hard, I dropped down to rest behind a large boulder. Up the flight of ancient stone steps, the wall of the Temple Mount rose like a fortress protecting a priceless treasure inside. Through the sealed gates, Jewish pilgrims had once streamed up the mountain with their Festival sacrifices. For two-thousand years, Jews had prayed to return to this spot. And here I was, Sam Singer from L.A. To be honest, I didn't feel Tzur's passion for the Temple's rebuilding. And I didn't understand a lot of the things that Yosi had taught me. I can't really explain why I did what I did. I certainly didn't mean to start any war. I just wanted to feel closer to G-d.

Hearing a car pass by, I glanced back toward the street. I remained motionless until its rear lights disappeared up the hill. I waited another minute to make certain that no one was watching. I didn't know what I would do if I got inside the Temple Mount. I only knew that I had to get over the wall. I wanted to relive the feeling I had felt. To reach up and touch the sky.

"IN G-D WE TRUST," I said aloud, as if summoning courage for the climb.

After another lone car drove by, I sprinted up the broad stretch of stone stairs until I reached the last step. Floodlamps on the ground, shining up at the wall, cast my giant shadow over the boulders above me. Feeling like a pantomimist caught out on stage, I froze in my tracks. Once again, I glanced nervously back at the street. No one was there. No one had seen me. Constellations in the heavens were the only audience I had. And G-d. I knew He was watching. I sensed He was near.

"IN G-D WE TRUST," I repeated aloud.

It was about one-hundred feet to the top of the wall. Quickly, I ran toward the ladder. Judging by the spatula and empty pail on the step, the workman had gone off in search of cement earlier in the day and hadn't returned. Overhead, above a window in the wall, an overhanging archway was under repair.

“You can do it,” I told myself. “You can do it.”

The greatest fear was the fear in the mind, I recalled. I had traversed the Tiger Trail. I had crossed the flimsy rope bridge. I had climbed Malibu cliffs as high as the Temple Mount wall. If I set my mind to the task, if I trusted in G-d, I could do it.

Some people struggle all of their lives to earn recognition and fame. Others come across it in a minute, as if completely by chance. I suppose I was destined to be one of the latter. Not that I hadn't struggled. In my search for the truth, I had struggled against parents, and teachers, and doctors and peers. I had journeyed around the world, and risked my life in the process.

Quickly, I climbed up the ten foot ladder. From there, I hoisted myself up to the window. Since I was lightweight, I had always been good at chin-ups. Grabbing onto the grill over the window, I reached up to the arch that was undergoing repair. Resting my feet on a cross bar, I pulled myself up to the ledge of the arch. The masonry held. I was able to stand. Now, some thirty feet off the ground, I reached up to a narrow stone ledge. My sandals searched for cracks between the boulders. Finding a toe hold, I pushed myself higher, but I didn't have the strength to pull myself up to the ledge. When my arms began to feel heavy with muscle fatigue, I reached out and grabbed the branches of a bush that was growing out from the wall. Luckily, its roots were set deep. The branches held fast. Dragging myself up, I curled a leg over the ledge. With a groan, I yanked myself into a standing position and pressed my body flat against the Temple Mount wall. My hands trembled as they clutched the large stones. Careful not to look down, I edged toward the roof of the buttress. Inch after inch, I shimmied along the wall, feeling the warmth of a floodlight caress my face as I neared the rooftop projector.

“Please G-d,” I prayed, falling sideways toward the parapet of the building that jutted out from the back of the mosque. My hand grabbed the railing, and with a Samson-like grunt, I hauled myself up over the bar. I was safe! I had made it to the roof of the building

bordering the mosque. Heart pounding, I lay on the roof, waiting to catch my breath. My muscles felt limp. Perspiration ran down my forehead. I eyed the security tower on the other side of the rooftop, but nothing stirred. Raising my head, I made sure that the guard booth was empty. Then I sat up and gazed back down toward the archeological park and the dark, empty street. Lights sparkled in the valley across the way where Tzur lived with his family. The cemetery on the mountain looked both peaceful and chillingly stark. Looming above me, another fifty feet to go, was the roof of the mosque and the Temple Mount.

I looked up and studied the cables hanging down from the roof. It was almost as if someone had thrown them over the top of the wall to assist me in my climb. They were connected to the floodlight on the buttress that projected light out over the southern face of the Mount. A few feet above me was a ledge, then a long oblong window whose decorative lattice was perfect for foot holds. A small round window was the next stop on the way. From there, I could snapple up the cables to the roof of the mosque. From that height, if I slipped or let go, Jerusalem would be the last stop on my spiritual journey.

Carefully, I placed an ear next to the electric cables. To my relief, I didn't hear even a hum. With the tip of a finger, I touched the rubber-coated insulation. A slight vibration, nothing more. Encouraged, I seized a cable and gave it a tug. Above me, the cable tightened along the wall and held firm.

"Keep your eyes on the wall," I said to myself.

"The greatest fear is the fear in your mind," I reminded myself once again.

"Though I walk through a valley of death, I shall fear no evil," I said in the very city where King David had written his Psalms.

Once again, I gazed back at the deserted road to make sure that no one was watching.

"Okay, Tarzan, do your thing," I said, grabbing onto a cable.

Leaning back like a mountain climber, I walked up the wall,



hand-over-hand up the cable. I felt my yarmulka slip off my head, but I didn't dare reach up and grab it. Like a leaf, it floated through the air and landed without a sound on the stone stairway far below. Two more tugs and I reached the first ledge without straining for breath. I grabbed the window sill and pulled myself up. The holes in the lattice made the climbing a cinch. Up I went as if I were scaling a ladder. The archeological park was a dizzying ninety feet below. Another ten feet to the top. Just another ten feet to go. I could sense the roof of the mosque just above me. Placing my feet in the top row of holes of the decorative grating, I reached up for the last window, but it remained just inches beyond my grasp. Stretching, my fingertips touched the sill, but I couldn't get a firm hold. The effort pulled me off balance. With a desperate stab, I grabbed the cables and pulled them close to my body. Wrapping my legs around the wires, I let go of the lattice and swung out over the wall. In gymnastics class in high school, I had beaten everyone to the ceiling in the rope climb. Now, inch by inch, I jimmied my way up the cables.

The rest is history. Of course, I only experienced things from my point of view, but after everything was over, people filled me in on what took place.

For several long seconds, the Arab streetcleaner was stunned. He stood on the road by his push cart, clutching his broom, gazing up at the figure on the wall. At first, he thought I was an Israeli commando. Then, mistaking the bandage on my head for a kippah, he decided that I was a settler who was trying to blow up the mosque.

I didn't hear the streetcleaner's cry. I didn't see him race up the street. All of a sudden, I felt one of the cables give way and rip out from the roof. Instinctively, as the floodlight went black, I slid down the other cable. I mean it was either that or plunging straight down to my death. But the second cable also flew out from the roof. Reaching out desperately, I grabbed a hold of the window lattice and let go of the cables as they toppled down from the

mosque. Swinging like a monkey, I latched onto the metal grate and pressed against it with all of my might. My feet wedged into the lattice holes. Heart pounding, I hung on for my life. I was alive, but my climb of the Temple Mount had come to an end.

As I said, what happened from that point on became history. The streetcleaner alerted an Arab family who lived across from the Old City wall. The man of the house telephoned a PLO connection, who in turn awakened the Wakf. Within minutes, the loudspeakers in muzzeins throughout East Jerusalem were announcing the “Israeli assault” on the mosque. In the name of the Mufti, Arabs were to congregate on the Temple Mount to repel the Zionist invasion. In the meantime, the streetcleaner had run to the Israeli police station by the Kotel. While loudspeakers in Jerusalem's mosques were calling for jihad, hysterical sirens sounded all over the city. Israeli police cars and army jeeps raced to the scene. Buses speeded Israeli paratroopers to the sight. Searchlights were focused on my way. Sniper rifles were aimed at my back.

I heard all the raucous, but I didn't dare look down. I pressed my body against the metal lattice and prayed. When Yosi described the scene later, he made it sound like an action-packed movie. Down below, Arabs filled the street. Police formed a human barricade, pushing them back. Police horses galloped to the scene like a well-rehearsed cavalry charge. Police and TV helicopters roared over the Old City. Suddenly, a great light beamed down on me from out of the sky as if all of heaven were watching. Thanks to CNN, the unfolding drama was broadcast live to all of the world.

Up on the Temple Mount, Moslems hurrying to defend the el Aksa Mosque charged the Israeli police station, trapping the outnumbered policemen inside. Israeli soldiers arrived on the scene in full battle gear. Temple-Mount Commander Aharoni shouted orders to the troops of Border Police that were bussed in to quell the growing riot. Out on the street, soldiers were firing gas cannisters at the mobs of Arabs who had come up from Silwan to throw stones. Sipping on a hot cup of coffee, Gibson climbed

sleepily out of his car and trudged over to the sidewalk where the army commander on duty was arguing with a police captain. Gibson later told me that the commander wanted to let one of his sharpshooters take me down from the wall.

“Are you crazy?” the captain argued. “He may be wired with explosives.”

Detective Gibson reached over and borrowed a pair of binoculars from an officer standing nearby. Adjusting the lenses, he focused in on the wall.

“Singer,” he said. “It's Singer.”

The army commander looked over.

“You know him?” he asked.

“Call off the snipers,” Gibson barked. “It's just a mixed-up kid from the States.”

A soldier in the archeological garden held up his hand and gave out a call. Keeping a safe distance away from the wall, he signalled for the boys from the bomb squad. Other soldiers formed a radius around the area, clearing the site. Sirens blared as cars carrying the Minister of Police and the Mayor of Jerusalem arrived at the scene. Though dawn was still several hours away, the area looked just like rush hour. Crowds were streaming down the hill from the Old City. Among the bystanders was Rabbi Dov Ber HaCohen, the Tzaddik of the Kotel. He had been in the middle of his nightly midnight prayer when the news came that a Jew was trying to scale the southern wall of the Mount. Staring up at me as I clung to the lattice high up on the wall, the Rabbi recited a verse from King David's Psalms.

“For Thy servants take pleasure in her stones and cherish her very dust.”

Not far away, Ariel Tzur was being interviewed by a CNN News crew against the background of the brightly lit wall. Other film crews hurried over to get the passionate settler on tape.

“He wants to pray on the site of the Temple, that's all,” Tzur explained in his Biblical English, as camera lights flashed in his

face. "Isn't it absurd that in Jerusalem a Jew can't pray where Kings David and Solomon, and all the great Jewish prophets prayed in the past?"

"The site is also holy to the Moslems," the TV reporter challenged.

"If a thief steals your house, who does the house belong to?" Tzur asked in response. "To the thief or to the original owner? Let the Moslems pray in Mecca. The Temple Mount belongs to the Jews."

"Even if it means jihad?" the reporter shot back.

"Of course. By all means. Let there be war. If the Russians demanded control of New York, wouldn't every American be ready to fight?"

"That's true," President Bill Boston said. "The man has a point."

He was watching the special live report from Jerusalem in the Oval Office, while waiting for the nightly CNN Election Report to begin.

The on-the-scene reporter turned away from Tzur and stood facing camera with the tiny figure of you-know-who in the background. "Police sources say that the mysterious Spiderman climbing the Temple Mount wall is an American tourist, Sam Singer, from Beverly Hills, California."

"Sam Singer," the President exclaimed as the camera zoomed in on a close-up of me on the wall. "Well I'll be a hog in shit. I know that boy. That's Ralph Singer's son. Get me Ralph on the phone this minute!"

Back in Jerusalem, flashing his I.D., Gibson had made his way past the soldiers blocking the entrance to the archeological garden. Carrying a bullhorn in his hand, he headed up the stone stairway toward the wall. Before he reached the top step, a barrage of stones flew down like hailstones from the Temple Mount. Inside the yard, Arabs were throwing bricks and rocks over the wall at the Israelis below. Soldiers fired tear gas over the wall in retaliation, hoping to drive the rioters away. Smoke filled the air. Helicopters roared overhead, searchlights flashing. Throughout the Moslem sections

of the city, mosque loudspeakers continued to cry out, “Slaughter the Jews!”

“Singer, come down!” Gibson called out through the bullhorn.

I recognized the voice of the laid-back policeman.

“I can't!” I yelled back, my eyes burning from the smoke of the tear gas.

“You got up there!” Gibson yelled.

“I hurt my knee,” I called back.

It was true. My knee had twisted when I had latched onto the metal lattice guarding the window high up on the mosque.

“Try!” Gibson urged.

I pulled out a foot from one of the lattice holes and searched for the hole down below. Slowly, I lowered myself down a rung, but a pain shot through my knee, making me shudder.

“I can't,” I called down.

Another rainstorm of rocks showered down on the archeological park, as if fired out of catapults on the Mount.

“Umph,” Gibson groaned as a brick smashed into his back. The blow knocked him down to the ground. Quickly, he stumbled down the stone steps, out of range of the homemade missiles.

The eyes of the Mayor and the Minister of Police looked frantic. A decision had to be made. The bomb squad couldn't search the site under the barrage of rocks flying down from the wall. On the Mount, the police station had been torched and policemen were trapped inside. Normally, in a situation like this, the Prime Minister would make the decision to send troops into the Mount or not, but the leader of the country was away on an economic mission in Japan. The Minister of Defense was next in line, but in the crazy world of Israeli politics, the Prime Minister had kept that portfolio for himself. And the Minister of Police was a former lawyer who had never held an army command in his life.

So it was the jumpy Aharoni who made the decision. Dutifully, he had waited for directions from the political echelon, but hearing that his men were trapped in the burning police station, he ordered

the troops at the Temple Mount gate to prepare for attack. When orders didn't come from the powers that be, he gave the command to charge. A hundred of Israel's toughest paratroopers stormed through the archway. A mob of rioting Arabs were waiting to greet them with lethal volleys of automatic fire. Firing rubber bullets, the Israelis forced a retreat. In the first blast of fire, eight Arabs were wounded. More gas cannisters exploded, turning the Temple Mount into a battleground of fire and smoke. While the riot unit chased after the stone throwers, a commando team charged the police station to free the Israelis inside. Firing live ammunition, they smashed through a throng of screaming Arabs, who fled to the other side of the courtyard. Six Arabs were killed, a dozen wounded. Within minutes, the wail of ambulance sirens filled the Old City.

Aharoni raised the face guard of his riot helmet. "Sterilize the Mount!" he yelled out to his officers as the Arabs regrouped and charged at the Israeli soldiers. A fierce round of fire drove them back across the yard.

"Clear the Mount! Clear the Mount!" soldiers called out through bullhorns.

While Jerusalem was waking up to the sound of ambulances, across the ocean, my father sat at the edge of a chair in front of a giant, wall\_size television screen in his Beverly Hills office.

"Ralph, you're not going to believe this. Turn on CNN News right away," the President had told him over the phone.

A helicopter flying over the Old City of Jerusalem filmed the burning battlefield below. Ambulances rushed the wounded to hospitals. And there, stuck to the Temple Mount wall like a fly, was Ralph Singer's youngest son, Sam.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed, standing up from his chair.

"From the information we have at this time," the CNN reporter explained, "the Jewish zealot is unarmed. Yesterday, the eighteen-year-old American from Beverly Hills, California, was arrested twice for trying to pray on the Temple Mount, a site holy to both

Moslems and Jews.”

When the camera zoomed in to a close-up of the “zealot” who was causing the riot, my Dad must have flipped. It was me, all right, bald and bandaged, but me all the same, looking tired and frightened as I clung to the window lattice, seventy feet off the ground.

“Hold on,” my father called out, as if I could hear him, thousands of miles away.

My older brother, Wayne, hurried into the office. He stared open\_mouth at the screen.

“Is that Sam?” he asked.

My father nodded.

“Where is he?”

“Jerusalem.”

“How the hell did he get himself up there?” Wayne wanted to know, sitting down on a couch to watch the mind-boggling footage.

The live CNN broadcast switched to an Arab in charge of Jerusalem affairs for the Palestinian Authority.

“This new Israeli attack on the Temple Mount will bring the whole Middle East to war against the Zionists,” he warned. “This time, we will reclaim all of our land.”

“Get me the President on the phone!” Ralph Singer barked in confusion.

“He's still on the line,” Wayne answered.

My worried father reached over to the coffee table and lifted the receiver.

“Bill? Are you still there?” he asked.

“One second, Mr. Singer,” an aide responded. “The President is speaking to the Israelis right now.”

My father kept his eyes glued to the giant Sony screen. Hovering over the roof of the mosque, a rescue helicopter carefully moved into place, swinging a rope ladder my way.

“Since when did your boy become such a snapper?” the

President quipped, coming back on the line.

“I don't want anything to happen to him, Bill,” my father replied with concern.

“I just spoke to the Israeli Prime Minister in Tokyo. We'll get the boy out of there, don't worry. And I called Arafat and warned him to call off his jihad.”

“Why the hell did they arrest him for praying?” my father said angrily as he watched me reach out for the rope.

“It's a powder keg up there,” the President answered, eyes glued to the Oval Office TV.

“What kind of Jewish country is it?” Ralph Singer barked.

“You're the President of the United States. Don't Americans have rights?”

“My State Department people are working on the proper response. This is a sticky matter. We've got an election coming up, remember? Get me a couple million dollars for ads in all the papers explaining whatever position we take. I'll call you back later.”

The President hung up the phone. My father, and hundreds of millions of viewers all over the world, watched as I grabbed ahold of the rope ladder. One hand, then the other. When I had a firm grasp on the rescue device, the hydrolic lift in the helicopter began to raise me up through the air. Clouds of smoke billowed up over the Temple Mount. The shooting had stopped, but the sound of ambulances could still be heard in the distance. I dangled on the rope ladder as the aircraft hovered safely away from the silver dome of the mosque. To tell you the truth, I was glad the whole thing was over. Hands reached down from the door of the helicopter, and soldiers lifted me aboard.

On the other side of the world, my father fell back exhaustedly into his chair.

“Thank G-d,” he said with a sigh of relief.

“He's crazy,” Wayne said. “Absolutely, certifiably nuts.”

The news broadcast returned to the regular Nightly Election Report. For the moment, the Temple Mount drama was over.



## Chapter Sixteen

### HOME AT LAST

That morning, Arab riots erupted on highways near Ramallah, Bethlehem, Hevron, and throughout the Gaza Strip. Thousands of Arabs mobbed Israeli Army outposts. At an outpost near Shechem, two Israeli soldiers were killed. In the city of Hevron, wild mobs attacked the Jewish quarter, firing rifles that the Israeli government had given to the Palestinian Police. Yasir Arafat claimed that he was trying to quell the disturbance, but his soldiers stood by and watched as the mobs filled the streets. Palestinian policemen even joined in the shooting. By eleven o'clock in the morning, dozens of Arabs had been killed and wounded, and five Israelis were dead.

Of course, I only heard about all this later. Handcuffed and surrounded by soldiers, I was brought to the top security ward of a psychiatric hospital in Jerusalem, where I was placed under round-the-clock guard. Longtime patients gathered in the corridor of the general ward to see the new inmate. Some were dressed in street clothes, others wore hospital robes, while others still wore their pajamas.

"Greetings good friend!" one called out in perfectly clear English. "I'm the Messiah."

"Don't listen to anything he tells you," another patient shouted. "He's crazy. I'm the real Messiah."

A squadron of soldiers stood all around me, waiting for the hospital authorities to direct them to a room.

"They're both nuts," a man with a bushy beard and burning eyes called over from the doorway of the ward.

"Shut up, Moses," another called out, giving Moses a shove.

I was surprised that they all spoke in English. I wondered if they too had been tourists like me. A patient in pajamas and slippers slid over my way. "Who are you, fellah?" he asked.

"Sam Singer," I answered. "My father is one of the wealthiest men in the world. He'll get me out of here soon."

The patient turned toward his buddies. "His father is one of the

wealthiest men in the world,” he told them.

For some reason, everyone laughed.

“My father is wealthier than your father,” a patient shouted.

“My father is wealthier than everybody's father put together,” another one claimed.

Soon all the patients were arguing. A white-jacketed attendant hurried over and started pushing the crowd back into their ward. I was herded into a doctor's office and shoved into a chair. During the interview, a few high-ranking cops and government officials ease-dropped in the back of the room. A uniformed soldier wearing a red beret and a chestful of medals stood at attention. The psychiatrist wore a knitted kippah and glasses. He had a neatly trimmed beard.

“How did you get that head wound?” was the first question he asked.

“The other day, I went up to the Temple Mount and started to sing,” I replied. “When the police dragged me away, the commander, Aharoni, smashed my head against a wall.”

The doctor glanced over to the Minister of Police who was listening by the door.

“I see,” the psychiatrist said. “Did a doctor take a look at it?”

“No. A medic bandaged it, that's all.”

“Well, we'll have a doctor take a look at it soon. Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore,” I said, turning around to take in the small audience behind me.

“I'd like to ask you some questions, do you mind?” the shrink inquired politely.

“No,” I answered. “Go ahead.”

“What were you doing climbing the wall?”

“I wanted to get inside the Temple Mount.”

“What for?”

“To be close to G-d.”

“Why didn't you wait for the morning?”

I thought about the question and shrugged. “I didn't feel like

waiting, that's all."

The psychiatrist nodded.

"The morning before when I went up there, I wasn't even praying. The police arrested me when I started to sing with some tourists. I was the only person arrested – apparently because I'm a Jew. Let me ask you, Doctor, does that make sense to you?"

"Whether it makes sense to me or not, that is the law. Do you understand what you've caused?"

"I'm sorry if someone was hurt. If this was really a democracy, it wouldn't have happened. In a democracy, people have rights. If an Arab can pray on the Mount, why can't a Jew?"

The psychiatrist didn't have an answer. For a moment, he glanced up at his distinguished audience, which included the Chief of Staff of the Israeli Army.

"Tell me," the doctor inquired. "Have you ever been hospitalized for psychiatric reasons before?"

"Yeah," I replied. "As a kid."

"Is that so?" the psychiatrist asked with interest.

"A few times."

"What for?"

"My parents thought I was weird."

The psychiatrist kept nodding his head as if it were attached to a spring.

"Weird in what way?"

"I used to pray to G-d in my closet."

"And your parents didn't approve?"

"They wanted me to be normal, whatever that is."

"Did you take medication?" he asked.

"Yeah," I answered. "A lot."

"Do you remember what kind?"

"Haldol, Prozac, Thorazine, Ritalin, and five or six anti-depressants."

"You were depressed?"

"Not at the beginning, but I sure was after the psychiatrists got

through with me.”

The doctor flinched as if he had been slapped in the face.

“Nothing personal, mind you,” I said. “I was just trying to answer your question.”

“Of course. Feel free to say what's on your mind.”

“It isn't easy with such a big audience,” I answered, glancing back at the crowd by the door. “Who are they all?”

“Doctors, policemen, government officials.”

“I want to see a lawyer,” I said. “And I want to talk to the United States Ambassador to Israel. I'm an American, and I know my rights. The Israeli government is persecuting me because I'm a Jew.”

“That's ridiculous!” the Minister of Police blurted out.

“Then how come an Arab can pray on the Temple Mount and I can't?”

“That's the law,” the flustered cabinet member shot back.

“That's discrimination,” I said.

“This isn't a trial,” the psychiatrist cut in. “I myself am not an expert in the law, but I'm sure the Israeli government has good reasons for enforcing its statutes. The police will want to ask you questions, and I'm sure they will let you speak to a lawyer, but right now, just tell me, are you taking any medication at this time?”

“No,” I answered. “Nothing at all. I haven't taken any of that poison for years. I learned to keep quiet and mind my own business, that's all.”

“Until last night,” Israel's top Army commander commented, striding out of the room.

A mob of journalists were waiting for him outside the entrance to the ward.

“No comment. No comment. No comment,” he repeated in answer to their barrage of rapid-fire questions.

More journalists and TV crews were waiting outside on the street, where a lively demonstration had formed. Most of the crowd were settlers and religious people from Jerusalem. Hastily-made

placards read: "FREE SAM SINGER!" Another sign said: "JEWS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!" When the Chief of Staff strode out from the hospital, Ariel Tzur started yelling, "JEWS HAVE RIGHTS TOO! JEWS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!" Following his cue, the crowd started chanting, "JEWS HAVE RIGHTS TOO!"

When the psychiatrist finished talking to me, the Israeli Police took over. The psychiatrist closed the door of the room and walked over to the nurse's station to make a telephone call. While he was speaking, the saintly Tzaddik of the Kotel, Rabbi Dov Bear HaCohen, shuffled over my way in the slippers he wore over his arthritic, swollen feet. With his prayer gown, he might have passed for one of the patients in the ward, if not for the holy gleam that lit up his face. Though the police guards had been given orders not to let anyone into the ward, no policeman or soldier would dream of denying the revered rabbi entrance. In addition to his great devotion to Jerusalem, he was respected by everyone in the country for his selfless good deeds. Not a day passed when he didn't visit some hospital or prison to bring assistance and cheer to the sick and down-and-out.

"Shalom, Rabbi," the psychiatrist said, putting the phone down to greet him.

"I want to see the Singer boy," the venerable sage responded.

Once again, the inmates on the floor gathered at the door of the ward to see the revered figure. No one made any jokes. No one called out. They all stood in respectful silence.

"Right now, the police are interrogating him," the psychiatrist answered.

"Why did they bring him here?" the rabbi wanted to know.

"He seems to have a history of mental disease."

"If he is mental, then so am I," the white-bearded, ninety-year-old tzaddik replied. "I want to pray on the Temple Mount too."

"Of course, I understand, but there are political questions here that must be considered."

"Nonsense," the rabbi said, dismissing the doctor's rebuttal with a

wave of the hand. "Halevai that every Jew had such a yearning to get close to G-d."

The psychiatrist nodded.

"Until he is released, I'm staying with him. Lock me up too," the rabbi exclaimed, holding out his hands, ready to be handcuffed.

The inmates cheered. The police guards looked as startled as the psychiatrist.

"This isn't a prison," the doctor answered.

"Fine. Then I simply will wait in the ward with the others," the old man insisted.

He shuffled closer to the doctor and whispered in his ear.

"Between me and you, it's the Jews who don't want to pray on the Temple Mount that need treatment, not the ones who do."

Without further ado, the Tzaddik of the Kotel walked into the mental ward. As the cheering patients made way, the rabbi shuffled through the entrance and plumped himself down on a chair.

Outside on the street, hundreds of protesters had gathered to demand my release. Wrapped in a white and blue prayer shawl, the flamboyant Ariel Tzur stood on the roof of a van, shouting through a megaphone. Camera crews from all over the world filmed his passionate speech.

"What great crime did the Jew, Sam Singer, commit?" he shouted out in his theatrical English. "The crime of wanting to pray on the holiest site to the Jewish nation. Arabs pray there. Americans pray there. Japanese tourists pray there. But when a Jew prays there, he is arrested. Today, if Judah the Macabee were alive, he would be arrested by the Israeli Police! If King David were living, he would be thrown into an Israeli prison! If Rabbi Akiva were living, he would be labeled insane. We demand the immediate release of the prisoner of Zion, Sam Singer! Free the Prisoner of Zion, Sam Singer! Free Sam Singer! Free Sam Singer!"

The crowd joined in the chant. "Free Sam Singer! Free Sam Singer!"

Continent to continent, coast to coast, all across the globe,

television viewers heard the cry to free Sam Singer.

Little did I know that I had become an international celebrity. More than that, I had become the symbol of a cause. Already, the photograph of Sam Singer clinging to the Temple Mount wall was being printed in every newspaper in the world. On the way to the press, Time Magazine yanked its cover-story on President Bill Boston for a picture of me instead. That week, my picture would grace the covers of Newsweek, People, US News and World Report, Sports Illustrated, Soldier of Fortune, and every important international weekly from Australia to Sweden. While the police were grilling me on the top floor of the mental hospital in Givat Shaul, my photograph was being printed on posters at a printing press down the street. One of Tzur's enterprising followers was even printing my picture on T-shirts with the caption, "If I Forget Thee O Jerusalem." Not since Neil Armstrong's boot had stepped on the moon had a photograph received such worldwide attention.

Under the threat of a full-scale Middle East war, Israel's Prime Minister was flying back home from Japan. The Israeli cabinet was sitting in an emergency meeting. The Minister of Police and the Army Chief-of-Staff raced to join them after listening to my story at the hospital. Israel's military forces had been put on maximum alert, and Air Force jets were already in the sky, keeping a close watch on Israel's shrinking borders. It was clear to everyone that Yasir Arafat wasn't about to give in. He was using the riots as a bargaining chip to get more concessions from Israel in the unending Israel-Arab peace talks. This time, he had the armies of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Iran, Libya, and Egypt standing behind him, all of them threatening war unless the city of Jerusalem was put under international control.

"I say we call up the reserves today, as a preventative measure," the Minister of Transportation urged. A former military commander, his opinion carried a lot of clout.

"I agree," the Minister of Housing assented. "We don't want to be caught off guard like we were at the outbreak of the Yom Kippur

War.”

“Do you realize how much money it costs to call up the reserves?” the Minister of Finance asked. “More than the education budget for a year. Why break the Treasury if it isn't needed?”

“If the rioting keeps up, it's going to be needed,” the Minister of Transportation insisted. “For the first time in our history, gentlemen, we are facing a new military reality. If war breaks out, we will be fighting not only enemies from outside the country, but heavily armed Arabs from within. The border is no longer ten minutes away like it was in '67. The border is one minute away. Surrounding Jerusalem alone, there are several armed divisions in Bethlehem and Ramallah. Not to mention the weapons and ammunition the Arabs have smuggled into East Jerusalem. Even with the reserves, the Arabs have us strangled on all sides.”

“We've been through crises before,” the Minister of Arab Affairs commented in his know-it-all manner. A former Prime Minister, he was a leading architect of the Oslo Agreement. “This crisis will pass too,” he maintained. “Let's not make a mountain out of a mole hill.”

Since the Foreign Minister was on the plane with the Prime Minister, the Israeli cabinet was paralyzed. It was up to the Chief of Staff to give the assessment that would influence the decision which the Prime Minister would make in the air.

“If an all-out war breaks out, given the complicated situation that the Transportation Minister described, I have to say that based on a conventional Israeli response, we are looking at one to five hundred of our soldiers being killed in the first two weeks of combat.”

“One to five hundred?” the Minister of Communications stammered.

“That's correct,” the no-nonsense army commander replied. The cabinet room was suddenly silent.

“What about the peace agreement?” the Minister of Health asked in all innocence. “I mean, we do have a peace agreement, don't



we?”

“If there's a war, you can use it to wipe your bottom,” the straight-talking Transportation Minister answered.

Nobody spoke, not even the staunchest diehards of Oslo. Suddenly, the lauded peace agreement seemed worthless, as if it had been written with vanishing ink.

Finally, the former Prime Minister spoke up. “Of course we have a peace agreement. Hypothetical figures are meaningless. When are people going to realize that the Arabs want peace as much as we do?”

Faced with ongoing reports of Arab riots breaking out all over the country, no one in the room took the proclamation for anything more than the ravings of an over-the-hill politician trying to save his place in history.

“That's the prognosis with a conventional response,” the Chief of Staff continued. “If we hit Damascus, Cairo, Ammon, Beirut, and Gaza with all that we have, we could end the war in two days and drop our losses to under a hundred.”

“Are you talking about nuclear bombs?” the Minister of Education wanted to know.

“No,” the close-lipped general answered. “Everything but.”

Back at the mental hospital, I was given a mild sedative and handcuffed to a bed. The old rabbi continued his sit-in on the ward, refusing to leave until I was set free. Outside on the street, the demonstration had grown. Posters with the picture of me on the wall bobbed up and down in the air. Benny Friedman, Yosi Ben Zion, Ariel Tzur, and the rabbinic leadership of the Temple Mount Brigade were meeting in the lawyer's Mitsubishi van. The former filmmaker had a brilliant idea. Calling an old friend in Hollywood, he had gotten a hold of Ralph Singer's unlisted number. Talking into the van's telephone speaker, he waited as Dorothy put my father on the phone.

“Yes?” Ralph Singer said.

“Hello, Mr. Singer?” Yosi began.

“That's right. Who's speaking?”

“This is Joseph Sorkin in Israel. I'm a friend of your son.”

“The filmmaker?”

“That's right.”

“What the hell is going on there?” Ralph Singer shouted.

“The police are holding Sam in a mental institution. I have a lawyer who is willing to try to free him, but it is going to cost money.”

“How much?”

“He's the top in his field.”

“How much?” the businessman wanted to know.

“A hundred-thousand dollars,” Yosi answered.

The faces of the activists lit up with smiles. Except for the face of Ariel Tzur. He was dead serious.

“If he frees him, I'll give fifty thou. If not, he only gets ten.”

“His fee is one-hundred thousand. No other serious lawyer in Israel will take on the case.”

“All right,” my worried father agreed. “Have him work fast. I want my son out of that nut house. It's liable to cause him a set back. Get the head of the institution to call me. Tell him I'll donate a wing if they let my son go. And keep me informed every hour. Charge all of the phone calls to me.”

Yosi said goodbye and started to chuckle.

“Why didn't you tell him a million?” Tzur asked.

“Slowly, slowly,” Yosi countered. “First let's get the kid freed. Then we'll have his father buy us the Moslem Quarter.”

Everyone laughed. Though the situation was as serious as could be, if you didn't keep your sense of humor in Israel, you could indeed go out of your mind.

In Washington, the President was meeting with his closest advisors to come up with an official response to the latest Middle East crisis. The death toll was escalating in Israel, and White House reporters were clamoring for a statement from the Oval Office.

“Why do I have to make a statement on this one?” the President asked, knowing that his reaction to such a hot issue could win or lose him the election, barely two months away.

“Because you're the President,” his foreign-affairs advisor observed.

“So?”

“The nut case who tried to scale the wall is an American citizen.”

“So?”

“So you can either demand his extradition, or not interfere.”

“If I demand his extradition?”

“Then you can pull the Christian Zionist vote away from the Republicans,” the President's top election advisor maintained.

“We're talking about some twenty million people. That in itself could win the election for you.”

“It could lose the election too,” the Vice-President noted. “If you seem to be siding with Israel, the Arabs could put a freeze on their oil and the price of gasoline goes up. That hits our voters where it hurts them the most. In their pockets.”

“If I could say something,” the foreign-affairs advisor interrupted. “What are we running here? The United States government or an election campaign? I suggest the matter be judged on the issues, not on the number of electoral votes.”

Everyone stared at him as if he were the one who belonged in a mental ward.

“We've made a lot of progress on the Middle East peace tract since I've been in office,” the President said. “I'd like another four years to wrap it up. That means winning this election.”

“I beg your pardon, Mr. President,” the Jewish Secretary of State interjected, “but if war breaks out, your achievements and the peace that we all cherish are finished. I suggest that we focus on preventing a war.”

“OK, Morris. How do we do that?” the President wanted to know.

“By pressuring Israel to give in to the Arab demands for an international Jerusalem. You may lose twenty million Christian

Zionists, but you'll be gaining one-hundred million normal-headed Christians and Catholics who would love to get a piece of Jerusalem too."

"We'd be sure to lose the Jewish vote," the President's election advisor protested.

"There are five million Jews in this country and three-hundred million Protestants, Catholics, and Christians. Whose vote do you prefer?" the Secretary of State replied in his cold, analytical way.

"It seems to me that Morris is right," the President concluded. "When you think about it, Jerusalem as an international city has a lot of appeal."

"What about Ralph Singer?" the campaign finance manager asked. "We're counting on some more contributions, and he wants his son extradited."

Everyone faced the Secretary of State to hear his opinion.

"When things settle down, we can open a private channel to arrange his son's release," the crafty negotiator replied.

"Okay," the president decided. "You speak to the press. I want my involvement played down. Let's feel the water before we jump in. Order some polls. Let's find out what the American people are thinking."

Wanting to low profile the issue, the Secretary of State sent the State Department spokeswoman to meet with the press. In her dry, nasal accent, she informed the hall filled with reporters that America was keeping a close eye on Middle East developments. The President had spoken with the leaders involved and every effort was being made to de-escalate the crisis.

"Do you foresee U.S. intervention?" the Times reporter asked.

"No," the spokeswoman answered. "As you know, in situations like these, the President prefers the parties involved to reach an agreement on their own."

"How does the President feel about the Arab world's demand to make Jerusalem an international city?" the CBS newsman inquired.

“The United States continues to maintain that the final status of Jerusalem should be decided through negotiation, and not through violent action on either side.”

“What about the Singer boy?” the Washington Post reporter queried. “Will the State Department demand his extradition back to the United States?”

“The State Department has a standard policy regarding the criminal actions of Americans abroad. If Mr. Singer has violated Israeli law, he may have to stand trial in Israel.”

My father was watching the press conference on TV. When the State department spokeswoman said what she said, he stood up from his desk. He couldn't believe what he had just heard on the television.

“Why that ungrateful snake,” he swore under his breath.

“Who?” Wayne asked.

“The President. He isn't going to help Sam.”

On the TV screen, the correspondent for the Miami Herald asked the next question. “We have heard that the Jewish Spiderman, as he's been called, has a history of psychiatric disorders. What can you tell us about that?”

“I think your information is as accurate as ours on that one,” the spokeswoman answered.

The CNN reporter was given the next nod.

“It isn't a secret that Sam Singer's father is one of the President's leading supporters. Won't that influence the State Department's decision to demand extradition?”

“Absolutely not. America's foreign policy isn't a horse race. We don't play favorites. Believe it or not, there are things more important than election results.”

The reporters enjoyed a good chuckle.

“That dog!” Ralph Singer said, fuming that the President had betrayed him.

A few minutes later, as the President was working out in the White House gym, an aide hurried over with a telephone in his

hand.

“Ralph Singer on the line,” the aide told him.

Without stopping to pedal his exercise bike, the President grabbed the phone and greeted his friend with a cheerful Texas hello.

“Hey, Ralph, what's going?” he asked.

“You tell me, Bill,” my father said calmly.

“Our people are in touch with the right channels. Don't you worry about your son.”

“That's not the impression I got from the State Department.”

“We just floated a decoy. Like duck shooting. To keep the reporters off guard.”

“Well, just to make sure that my son gets home safe and sound, I want you to speak to a friend.”

“A friend?” the President asked.

Good old, Dad. I mean, I've got to hand it to him. He didn't get to the top of his field by being a push-over. Later, when I met Wayne in Israel, he told me how Dad did it. He simply handed the phone to the beautiful model, Miss Susie Lane, the President's clandestine mistress.

“Hello, Bill,” she cooed.

Immediately, the President stopped pedaling his exercise bike. Seeing the look of fear on his face, the two bodyguards standing at the door of the gym immediately stiffened.

The President's tough Texas drawl turned into a tremulous whisper. “Hello,” he breathed.

“Ralph just showed me some photographs that you are going to love,” the model said with a voice filled with excitement.

“Photographs?” the President asked.

“You remember when we met on Ralph's yacht? Well, he took pictures with that infrared camera you gave him. You remember – when we went swimming at night?”

The President blushed. He glanced over at his aide. Droplets of sweat rolled down his forehead as if he were still working out. In his mind's eye, he could imagine how the pictures would look on

the front page of the papers. That night on the yacht, he had had a few drinks. If the press got ahold of the fact that the President of the United States had cheated on his wife, the upcoming election was lost.

"If we can't be together, isn't it great that we have snapshots we can always secretly cherish?" the model ingenuously asked.

"The dirty Jew," the President seethed.

"I know you don't mean that, Bill," my father said, listening in on another phone in his office. "You gave me the camera. I was just trying it out."

"What do you want?" the President asked.

"I don't like it that the State Department is making my son look like a psychopath. I want you to make him look like a hero, understand?"

"I understand," the President answered.

"Thank you, Mr. President," my father said.

"Bye, Bill," Susie giggled, blowing a kiss into the phone.

Two hours later, the President of the United States held a special television address to the Union. With the Capitol Building outside the window in the background, and flanked by an American flag, he faced the American people with a determined, earnest expression.

"My fellow Americans," he began. "I can still remember today how I used to stand at attention as a young boy in grade school, put my hand on my heart, and face our dear flag, Old Betsy."

Like a polished actor, he placed his hand smack over his heart and turned toward the red, white, and blue flag. In a living room in Beverly Hills, like in living rooms, pool halls, and bars all over the country, my Dad and Susie Lane sat glued to the television.

"I feel like crying already," my father sarcastically said.

"Oh hush," Susie told him. "He speaks beautifully."

It was true. Bill Boston was a great orator. Not since FDR's famous Fireside Chats had a President received such high ratings. It was his homey, Texas boy speeches that had put him in office.

Now, he was banking on that talent to save his name, his marriage, and his job.

“I remember the great pride in my heart as I intoned the words of our country's National Anthem. ‘I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation under G-d, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.’”

The President shifted his gaze away from the flag and back to the camera.

“I grew up with that wonderful belief in G-d, in liberty, and in justice for all. All of our school children do. It's what makes America such a great country.”

The President paused, as if overwhelmed with emotion.

“The American youth, Sam Singer, grew up with that belief too – the belief in G-d, the belief in freedom, the belief that every man could worship his Maker in the way he saw fit, without coercion, prejudice, or restraint. Religious freedom is the cornerstone of our nation. It is the first flag of our country, held aloft by the Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock. The freedoms of religion and speech are the pillars of our great democracy. We taught the young American, Sam Singer, these sacred values. Certainly, it would be wrong for us, for whatever political reasons, to desert Sam Singer now. He is not some zealous terrorist as reporters would have us believe. He is a true, G-d fearing American. He is you. He is me. In longing to pray on the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, he was holding aloft the flag of religious freedom for all of us. And so, my fellow Americans, I'll be damned if I'll let this great country of ours abandon him now!”

The President's eyes glistened with tears. Tears filled the eyes of Americans all over the country. My father wept too. I think for the first time in his life, he understood me. Thanks to the President's speech, he finally understood why I had hid myself in my closet. Sure, he knew that the President was laying on the patriotism to save his own skin, but what the President was saying was true. As



a boy, I truly believed in what my grade school teacher had taught me. And for that, people had labeled me crazy.

The President's speech wasn't over. The camera moved in for a close-up.

“In response to the escalating violence in Israel, I have given a Presidential order, as Commander-in-Chief of all American armed forces, that the United States Military be put on full alert. At this moment, aircraft carriers and battleships are on their way to the Mediterranean Sea. Air Force bombers and jets are being relocated from bases in Europe to Israel. The leaders of the Arab countries who have threatened Israel with war have been warned that any attack on the State of Israel will be considered a direct attack on the United States. As we have stated time and again, the question of Jerusalem is to be determined through negotiation and not through intimidation and violence. In this light, in a gesture of peace, I have decided to lead a contingent of Americans of all faiths and persuasions to Jerusalem to pray on the Temple Mount. The Secretary of State will be joining me, along with members of the Cabinet, Senators, Congressmen, and religious leaders of all denominations. As King David said in his Psalms, ‘Pray for the peace of Jerusalem.’”

Wayne told me that my father stood up and applauded. Susie cheered alongside him, her face shining with pride.

The reporters who were waiting to ask questions at the end of the President's speech were less enthusiastic. Like vultures, they pounced on the President the moment the microphones were pointed their way.

“Without meaning to sound cynical,” the NBC reporter asked, “isn't this dramatic visit to Jerusalem just a way to attract fundamentalist voters to your election campaign?”

“Believe it or not, there are some issues that are even more important than election results,” the President answered without losing his cool. “Freedom of religion and free speech are two of them.”

“What if the Arab nations respond with an oil embargo?” the ABC newsman asked. “If the average American gets hit in his wallet, that could lose you a lot of votes.”

“Then the people of America will have to wear warmer clothing in the winter and travel a little less in their cars. Sometimes a little old\_fashion sacrifice is the price we have to pay for being the defenders of freedom.”

“Even if it means losing the upcoming election?” the newsman shot back.

“Even if it means losing the election,” the President answered, looking straight into the camera without batting an eyelash.

“Speaking about warmer clothing, how much has your friendship with Ralph Singer influenced your decision?” the woman from the Chicago Tribune asked.

“None whatsoever,” Bill Boston replied. “I'd feel the same way if it were any American boy.”

“Will you ask for Sam Singer's extradition?” the L.A. Times liason to the White House queried.

“Not only will I ask for his extradition, I will fly him back with me on Air Force One.”

“What about America's Middle East role as the ‘Neutral Broker?’” the Boston Globe asked. “Aren't you worried that your siding with Israel and your visit to the Temple Mount will trigger an all-out war?”

“On the contrary. I'm convinced that this gesture of international brotherhood will lead to a just and lasting peace.”

“Gevalt,” said Israel's Prime Minister when he was informed of the President's plan.

The Yiddish expression was the only word that the former kibbutznik could think of. It would have been difficult enough if only the President were coming to pray on Har HaBayit, but he was coming with the Jewish Secretary of State, the Jewish Secretary of Housing, the Jewish White House spokesman, and a few Jewish Senators and Congressmen. Not to mention the Reform

and Conservative rabbis that he was planning to invite.

“They've almost got a minyan,” the Prime Minister mumbled out loud.

And so it was. The very next day, America's most powerful aircraft carriers sailed into the Mediterranean, striking distance from Cairo, Beirut, Ammon, Bagdad, Tehran, and Damascus. Scores of American bombers landed at Israeli Air Force bases in the Negev. Confronted with the President's action, the Arabs backed down. Arafat called off the riots. Throughout Israel, order was quickly restored. Rumors appeared in the press claiming that the President had made a secret economic deal with the Palestinians, buying them off, but the details were never disclosed.

Ten thousand Israeli policemen and soldiers lined the streets of Jerusalem the day Bill Boston arrived in what was being hailed as the “President's Prayer For Peace.” It was the greatest media event of the 20th Century. Journalists from all over the world fought one another at airports to secure a ticket to Israel. Polls in America showed that a whopping seventy-four percent of Americans supported the President's historic peace mission. For a whole day, television programs were pre\_empted in order to pick-up the live satellite broadcasts from Jerusalem. For two days running, the President's election rival disappeared from the screen. No doubt about it – the “President's Prayer For Peace” gave fuel to a tired campaign. It virtually assured him another four years in the White House.

Even the Pope and the Dali Lama decided to show up for the Temple Mount prayer. Clergy from every major American faith joined in the President's party. There were Catholics, Christians, Protestants, Lutherans, Baptists, Seventh Day Adventists, Christian Scientists, Evangelists, Mormons, Quakers, Presbyterians, a Whole-Earth Minister, and Conservative, Reform, and Progressive Jews. Only the Arabs and the ultra-Orthodox Jews refused to take part. All over the world, Moslems observed a day of fasting and mourning. As far as the ultra-Orthodox Jews were concerned, their

rabbis refused to pray alongside Reform and Conservative “pretenders.” The Agudath Yisrael party declared that without a kosher mechitzah, the presence of the Jewish congresswoman, Miriam Stein from Brooklyn, made the prayer service treif. And a leading Sephardi rabbi adamantly opposed the President's special guest of honor, the Jewish singer, Barbra Streisand, who came along on Air Force One to sing the “Song of Shalom.”

The Temple Mount Brigade was also in arms against the event. When Ariel Tzur suggested that “The Shrine of the Dome should be blown up rather than allow this three-ring circus to be staged,” he was arrested by the Israeli Police and locked up in jail until the President had safely returned to America.

As for yours truly, the guy who had caused all the hullaboo, I was released from the mental hospital the day after the President's press conference. I left the building with Rabbi Dov Bear HaCohen and was under a court order not to leave the rabbi's modest Jerusalem apartment without special police permission. A few days later, along with Yosi Ben Zion, Ariel Tzur, and Benny Friedman, I met my father at Ben Gurion Airport. Dad hugged me in a tearful embrace, as if we had been reunited after a separation of years.

“I'm proud of you, son,” my father exclaimed.

“I'm proud of you, Dad,” I answered. “You're doing a tremendous thing for Am Yisrael. You're making it possible for Jews to pray on the Temple Mount.”

Already on the drive to Jerusalem, Ariel Tzur showed my father the architectural drawings of the synagogue that my father had agreed to finance on the Temple Mount. Approved by several halachic authorities, the synagogue was to be situated on the extreme south side of the Mount, not far from the spot where I had attempted to climb over the wall. Entrance to the synagogue would be from the ancient stone staircase in the archeological garden, right by the Hulda Gate. On the northern side of the synagogue, a bullet-proof glass wall would allow worshippers to gaze at the Temple Mount during prayers. Since the building's only entrance

and exit would be outside the wall, Jews would be able to pray on the Mount without venturing into the hallowed areas strictly forbidden by Jewish law. On the President's urging, the Israeli Prime Minister had given his consent to the project. Knesset ratification was expected. Jews would be granted set times of prayer on the Mount, when the Moslems weren't praying, just as prayer arrangements had been made in the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hevron. The Arabs weren't at all pleased with the turn of events, but as long as Bill Boston was in office, there was nothing they could do.

It was a day I will never forget. Flanked by the President of the United States, the Israeli Prime Minister, the Pope, and the Dali Lama, I walked proudly up the pathway to the Temple Mount. Embarrassed by the fanfare and the scores of photographers lining the way, I kept my head lowered. This time, before venturing onto the mountain, I had taken a ritual bath in accordance with Jewish law. I walked barefoot, just like I had at the President's fundraising party at the start of my trip. But this time, my father didn't get angry. Wearing a big white kippah on my head, I led the contingent of ministers, pastors, preachers, and priests through the Mugrabi Gate, from which I had been rudely ejected just a short time before. The President made a short speech, and the congregation recited the words of the Psalm, "Pray for the peace of Jerusalem; May they prosper who love thee." Babara Streisand raised her angelic voice and pierced the hearts of viewers all over the world with her stirring rendition of the "Song of Shalom." As the final note echoed in the heavens, thousands of balloons were released heavenward into the air.

For my Dad, it was the proudest day of his life. Only two of the people present were prouder. One was the Israeli Prime Minister, who stood smiling cheek-to-cheek, like a bar-mitzvah boy, as he was photographed with the President, the Pope, and the Dali Lama. The other was Susie Lane, the model, who stood alongside my Dad in the crowd of special guests, smiling all the time at the President.

When the ceremony was over, the President of the United States walked over and hugged me. Photographers from all over the world snapped pictures.

“You are flying back with me to America on Air Force One,” he told me with a grin.

I shook my head. “I'm staying in Israel,” I answered.

“But I've arranged a hero's welcome for you back home.”

“I'm sorry, Mr. President,” I told him. “Israel's my home.”

I reached into my pocket and pulled out my United States passport. With a happy smile, I put it in the President's hand. I no longer needed it. I had discovered Jerusalem. I had found G-d at last.

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