



# *I Pity the Poor Immigrant*

A NOVEL

ZACHARY LAZAR

AUTHOR OF *Sway*

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I PITY  
THE POOR  
IMMIGRANT

A NOVEL

ZACHARY LAZAR



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*To Bill Clegg and Pat Strachan*

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“I’m not a kneeling Jew who comes to sing songs in your ears.”

—Meyer Lansky to  
Senator Estes Kefauver, 1950

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# 1

## Checking Out

NEW YORK, 2012

I remember taking my father to lunch at an Italian restaurant on 76th Street a few years ago, after my first book, a memoir of my brief marriage, had come out. It was October, and a waiter circulated among the tables with a plate of white truffles beneath a tiny bell jar so that when he lifted it you could take in the aroma before he shaved the truffles over small plates of risotto in black squid ink. Eighty dollars each, those small plates. I can recollect the pungent taste, the Sangiovese in our glasses. It was a daughter's gesture of affection or self-aggrandizement—these things were always murky between my father and me.

“You remember things,” my father said. “I have the opposite problem. I live in the present too much.”

It's been almost a year now since my father and I last saw each other. I should tell you that this is a recurring pattern in the story I'm about to tell—fathers and their children drifting apart, losing contact. Perhaps losing contact with my father was some unconscious fear or goal on my part when I flew to Israel for the first time in the spring of 2009 to investigate the murder of an Israeli writer named David Bellen. I went to cover Bellen's murder, but after my return I learned that the story led elsewhere. It led to a woman from my father's past named Gila Konig, who was born Tsilya Konig somewhere in Hungary, and who when I saw her briefly gave me her part of this story. Not that what she gave me was sufficient, only tantalizing. Gila Konig, like David Bellen, once lived in Tel Aviv. She is also now dead. My father isn't speaking to me anymore. These are some of the limitations of my sources for this new book.

Before his death, David Bellen said: “We don't choose our obsessions—our obsessions, invariably, choose us. Against our deepest wishes, we become suddenly, inexplicably, committed to a path we had avoided, a line of thought we'd had no interest in.”

I once said in an interview: “What we need is a memoir without a self. A memoir about somebody other than ‘me.’ An understanding that the story of other people connected to ‘me’ might

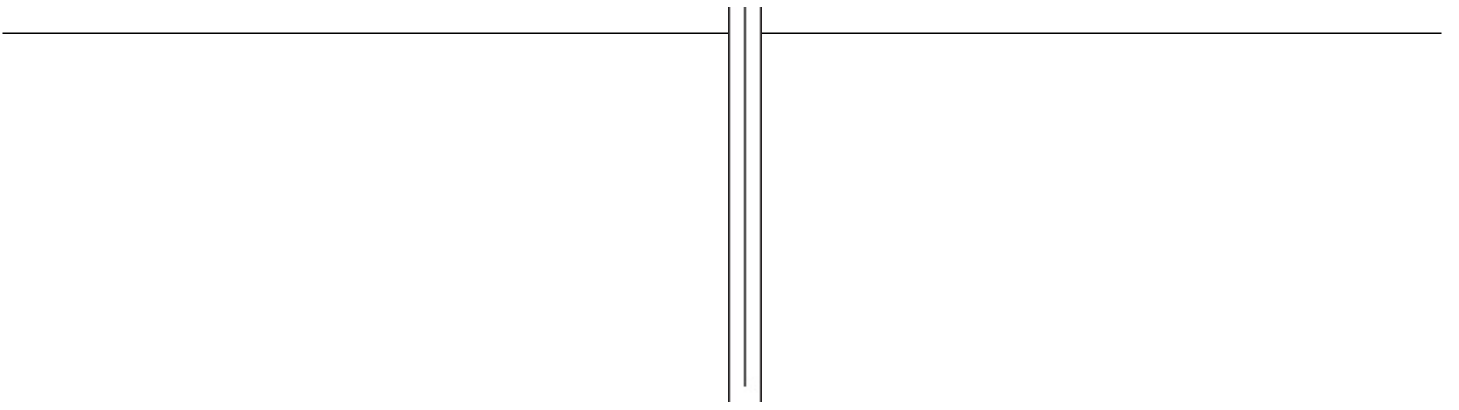
communicate more than the usual 'me,' might show the cultural context of 'me,' might even cast doubt on the viability of 'me.' ”

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I said this in the aftermath of a book scandal, another memoirist caught embellishing his or her “true story,” telling lies. I’m quoting myself here with the same detachment with which I just quote the writer David Bellen, who is one of the figures in what follows, this odd new “memoir” about people mainly other than “me.” I don’t know if any of this will make sense. What I mean is that the people in this story have become my story, or I have become their story. They are my proxies—I am imagining them as I imagine myself, both from a distance and from the inside. In writing this book, I have come to feel like a kind of immigrant in my own life, inhabiting a world of reflections and images of people I can’t fully know, some of whom are dead, and I see now that my life has been shaped by this network, in ways I didn’t always perceive.

A woman, Hannah Groff, goes on a journey. She’s close to forty, divorced, without children, not unhappy but not what anyone would call “settled,” a person in transit, on her way from New York to Tel Aviv to cover a murder. The journey starts with a crime and the crime ramifies, the woman finds she has dishonored people without quite intending to, including her father, who knew Gila Konig, who knew David Bellen, who wrote a book called *Kid Bethlehem* in which the biblical King David is presented in the guise of a twentieth-century gangster.

Gangsters are in this story too. They too are a part of who I’ve become.





## Part One

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# Everywhere Present but Never Seen

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## 2

### Displaced Persons

TEL AVIV, 1972

Gila Konig looked at the photographs in the newspaper and tried to connect them to the man she had been secretly meeting this past year, but the pictures came from a different order of reality. They were separate from what she knew about him—what she thought she knew about him. His essential self was like his body, which you could only take in one aspect at a time—the belly, the slick gray hair, the small dark pupils of his eyes.

The photographs were in black and white—they were almost kitsch, they were so old—and required an effort of imagination to see the violence in them as truly real. In one, a man was slumped over on a floral print sofa in Beverly Hills. One of his eyes had been shot out, his face a clown mask of gore. The blood blended with the darkness of his necktie to cover half his chest in a dark stain. He had been one of her lover's oldest and closest friends, Benjamin Siegel—"Bugsy," the captions always called him. The nickname served to cheapen his murder into something picaresque and quaint.

The next picture was also an antique—fifteen years ago, 1957. In this one, there was little visible blood, just the body of a man flat on his back on a hairdresser's floor. His name was Albert Anastasi. He lay there in a near-cruciform position between two barber's chairs, his legs draped by a sheet and his head, shoulders, and arms by another sheet, or maybe they were towels. The only things exposed were an armpit, a chest covered in hair, a nipple, an outstretched hand.

The photos and the words were sensational—that is, they managed to paradoxically both magnify and diminish their subjects. The Meyer she knew was calm, not friendly, fastidiously clean, strategically cold. There was a reason, she thought, that his body had never turned up in a tabloid newspaper photograph.

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On the ride into Tel Aviv, he noticed that the sidewalks were full of people looking up at the sky. His driver came off Kings of Israel Square—the city hall like an assemblage of cheap building blocks and pigeons in the big asphalt emptiness—and suddenly everything was cast in shadow. Outside the café

waiters stood at the edges of mostly empty tables, arms crossed over their pressed shirts. Right of Frishman, past Dizengoff, Ben Yehuda—juice stands, falafel, laundromats—then farther toward the beach, where the concierges had come out of the hotels, peering and twisting, finding it. Crowds of people silently looking up at the sky, not looking at the car, not looking at him. They turned to each other over their shoulders, then went back to watching what was above, then slowly resumed their courses, heads still raised. There was no way to see from the car what they were looking at.

“What’s happening?” Lansky finally asked the driver.

“I don’t know,” the driver said. “There must be an eclipse. Something like that.”

He spoke fluent English, though with an Israeli accent that at times sounded oddly German.

“I read the paper this morning,” Lansky said. “There was nothing about an eclipse.”

“Clouds maybe.”

“Maybe a patch of clouds. Not an eclipse.”

A crowd of men in suits stood outside the lobby doors, the driveway two lanes thick with black cars. Everyone kept looking at the sky. Lansky waited in the backseat while the driver went in to clear his way. He saw his bag sitting in the sun on the bellman’s cart. The driver returned and he got out of the car, and he and the driver walked past the doorman into the brown lobby. The driver nodded and Lansky got into the elevator by himself and the doors closed.

Gila was sitting in a chair, smoking, still in her uniform, slumped like a child in the beige blouse and black skirt, black nylons. Instead of looking at him, she closed her eyes and exhaled.

“Yosha took my shift,” she said. “I need the money, but it’s okay. What is bad is the way she makes me grovel for it. She knows I’m coming up here, so she makes me grovel.”

He looked over at the bar, the ice bucket, the tongs. “You shouldn’t be begging around like that. You shouldn’t be working here at all.”

“I should be in Ramat Gan, shopping for a new Mercedes. Is that what your wife drives?”

He nodded absently or dismissively and walked toward the window. Beneath them was the Mediterranean, Hayarkon Promenade, the beach with its spatter of orange umbrellas, green umbrellas, swimmers standing in the shallows. Everything was ordinary—the sun had come back out. He went to the bar and made them both a drink.

“I drove into town and all the sudden it was very cloudy,” he said. “Like an eclipse, that was how cloudy it was. Everyone looking up. The whole way down here, I’m worrying how I would get in the hotel without everyone seeing, all the cameras lately, but everyone was just watching the sky. There weren’t any cameras anyway. It was just luck—the clouds, no cameras. My whole life I said that people who believed in luck, they lose, period. Fate, luck, whatever. I guess you can’t really get away from it.”

She was taking off her shoes. He watched, sipping his drink. She knew he was watching. She looked up at him, bent forward, her hair falling in her eyes.

“Where will you go if they make you leave?” she said.

“What makes you think I’ll have to leave?”

“Fate, luck. Those are dangerous words. Maybe you should go back to Poland, that would give them a surprise.”

“You should watch your mouth.”

“Watch my mouth.”

“Whatever comes into your head, you just say it. Maybe that’s why you’re still serving cocktails

a hotel.”

His luggage arrived, five identical changes of clothes. He was tipping the bellman when she put on the bracelet he'd brought her. She looked at it in the mirror, a line bracelet of white gold and small diamonds. Her drink sat untouched on the nightstand. He watched her look at the bracelet and he knew she was already thinking about where to sell it.

Tel Aviv—the sun reflected by water, the coolness between you and it when you looked out the window. The run-down buildings, concrete and stripped paint, the fish lunch in Jaffa, crumbling by the sea.

She had grown up partly in Foehrenwald, a DP camp not far from Munich. Before that, ten months in Bergen-Belsen. When she and her mother came to Israel, her mother changed her name from Tsilya to Gila. It meant “happiness.” He looked at the flatness of her stomach, her breasts, the faint shadow along her rib cage. Sometimes it was beyond him, an effort of patience, but now he relaxed, slow cognizant, closing his eyes. The sound of her name and the sight of her body as he let his eyes come open again.

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Gangster, racketeer, mobster—she could not get the words to adhere to the physical person. Not that she disbelieved the stories, but the stories' language glared, whereas the truth of him resided in understatement. The gray trousers and the pressed shirt, white linen or pale blue linen. The leather shoes and the blue blazer and the *Herald Tribune*. Everything important was invisible, maybe glimpsed for just an instant when he turned to her in a certain way and his eyes accused her of looking too closely.

Albert Anastasia had been shot ten times, one of the shots blowing open his skull. Ben “Bugsy” Siegel sprawled in death as if napping on the sofa, his jacket lapel turned up toward his neck, as if he had sought warmth against the onslaught, blood gushing from his eye. Both of them killers before being killed. Both of them Meyer's partners or vassals or something. She wondered how much of a killer you had to be for others to do your killing for you, to be that separate from the particulars, that was the truth about him.

A proliferation of rumors, he would say, rumors and lies. He had come to Israel seeking a reprieve from all that—the FBI tail, the false indictments, the subpoenas, the attorney's fees. In a lifetime of scrutiny, he had never been convicted of a serious crime. That was why he had come here, because they were supposed to accept even someone like him. As a Jew, even he had the right of return, the birthright of Israeli citizenship.

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They drove the hour from Tel Aviv barely talking, the journalist watching the road, sleeves rolled back on his tanned arms. His name was Uri Dan; he was a military correspondent, a sympathetic ear according to Lansky's lawyer, Yoram Alroy. Dan had long black hair, a Swiss watch, a chalk-stripped shirt half unbuttoned in the heat. An ability to tolerate silence, the first sign of poise.

They parked near the InterContinental Hotel amid the tour buses and stood for a few minutes by the rail with the crowd. Below them, the Mount of Olives was a huge lunar space of white stone, which

sand, dark gray cedar trees, the cemetery descending like a dusty quarry cut in steps. The old gravestone looked like part of the hillside, eternal, sloping down in endless terraces toward the Valley of Jehoshaphat, where the dead would rise. Above it glowed the Old City of Jerusalem—the gold Dome of the Rock, the crenellated wall, the remnants of David’s ancient kingdom, covered over now by the Arab district of Silwan, run-down, cubist, hung with laundry.

Dan squinted down at the cemetery. “It’s unfortunate, the neglect,” he said, raising a flat hand to the panorama. “There’s never enough money to restore it, and once you restore some of it, the boys will come down from East Jerusalem and smash it to bits again.”

“Arabs,” Lansky said.

“Yes, of course, Arabs.”

A photographer said hello in English and took their photograph.

“You don’t mind?” Dan said, turning his head.

Lansky bowed and lit a cigarette. He shook out the lit match, then slid the book back inside the lower pocket of his blazer, pushing it down behind the flap with two fingers. “I’m not crazy about it,” he said. “I’m not really crazy about any of this.”

He had explained himself to Dan back in Tel Aviv, how he hoped Dan might write a more balanced account of who he was and why he was here, something to counter the tabloids. His grandparents were buried in Jerusalem—when life had become impossible in Grodno, his grandparents had come here to Jerusalem, while he and his family had gone to New York. He had not been able to find their graves before. Maybe Dan could help him—maybe that was a way they could begin the conversation.

They started down the steep hill, the scenery blinding. They passed the Church of the Ascension, the Christian tour groups in the Garden of Gethsemane. The olive trees with their scarred trunks looked like enormous hunks of driftwood. *Benjamin Suchowljansky, plot 15, column B, grave 80.* He found his grandfather Benjamin, whom he had last seen sixty years ago, when the languages he spoke were Polish and Yiddish and he was nine years old.

Dogs wandered among the rocks, the broken gates, the weeds. A decrepit rabbi had led them to the grave, where he bent down and cleaned the dirty inscription with his coat sleeve. Lansky pushed his sunglasses back over his head and wiped his eyes. He looked out across the valley without seeing anything but the brightness. He saw his grandfather in a full-length coat, beard, fur-trimmed hat. The dim shul with its broken Torah scrolls decaying on the shelves. The smell of the spice box, the molten smell of men among books, the *yahrtzeit* candle in its glass. In Tel Aviv, you never thought about these things, you lived in 1972. He saw himself at twelve, smashing a plate in someone’s face—whores on Madison Street, *shtarkes* and pimps. New York faces crammed beneath the awning of the wagons and pushcarts and rain.

He took his sunglasses all the way off and held them folded in his hand. He closed his eyes and said the prayer for the dead, remembering the foreign words from three or four lifetimes ago.

“Before we left Poland, there was a big argument,” he said to no one in particular. “I was nine years old, so I remember. My grandfather wanted to be buried here in Israel—he was already an old man. My father wanted all of us to go to America. He thought there would be opportunity there—the old story. Opportunity. In Grodno, one day the rabbi came across a dead girl in the woods, a Polish girl, she’d been raped and killed. So the rabbi ran back for help and they said it must have been his who killed her. He wanted her blood for the Passover—that’s what they said. They cut him up into pieces while he was still alive. They took the four pieces of his body and they nailed them to the city walls of Grodno. It was a brave thing just to take them down and give him a proper burial. We left in 1911, and my parents and my brother and I went to New York and my grandparents came here. My

grandfather wanted to die here, just like I want to die here. Die here as a Jew.”

~~He gave the rabbi some money and asked him to look after the graves, then they walked back up the hill. It was hot and he took off his jacket. Poland, New York—the places of his life had begun to lose their meaning. Their meaning was subsumed by this landscape, religious and shaming. The light was honey colored and the dirt and the trees looked the same way they had looked five thousand years ago. Uri Dan walked through it all like an insouciant guide, watching his feet on the rocks, a native born Israeli, a sabra, not just a Jew.~~

If only he had come here in 1911, instead of going to New York. The barked orders as they boarded the *Kursk*, the ignorant silence, food sloshing by in wooden buckets. Seasick, he would walk the deck and look at the people sitting there like pack animals in their blankets and rags.

They drove through the Lions’ Gate and walked across the Muslim Quarter to the Western Wall. Paper yarmulkes lay in piles on the card tables. Tufts of weeds grew out of the stones in extravagant bushes. He stood in front of the wall with his sunglasses in his shirt pocket, pressing the bridge of his nose, eyes closed. Beside him a boy in a white shawl bowed in rhythm, a prayer book in his hands. Lansky touched his forehead to the stone. You couldn’t take it all in, what it cost in blood.

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United States District Court  
FOR THE  
Southern District of Florida

United States of America

v.

MEYER LANSKY

To The United States Marshal or any other authorized agent or officer

You are hereby commanded to arrest MEYER LANSKY and bring him forthwith before the United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida in the city of Miami to answer to an Indictment charging him with

Criminal Contempt, in that he refused to appear before the United States Grand Jury in the Southern District of Florida on March 10 and 11, 1971, pursuant to lawful subpoena and court order in violation of Title 18, U.S.C. Section 401

Dated at Miami, Florida

on March 24<sup>th</sup> 1971

Bail fixed at \$200,000 SURETY

When he hadn’t returned, they’d revoked his U.S. passport. Extradite him, was the Department of Justice’s message to Israel. LANSKY, ACCORDING TO DE CARLO, HAS A “PIECE” OF VIRTUALLY EVERY CASINO

IN LAS VEGAS DUE TO HIS EARLY ENTRY AS THE "PROTECTION" FOR JEWISH ELEMENT WHO ORGANIZE GAMBLING ELEMENT THERE. HE LISTED FLAMINGO, DESERT INN, STARDUST, SANDS, AND FREMONT AS HOTELS IN WHICH LANSKY HAS INTEREST. The Department of Justice had so much intelligence on him that they no longer knew what was fact and what was myth. Of course it was in his nature that they would never know.

Later, Uri Dan would write that even before he met Lansky he was opposed to those Israeli authorities who wanted to send him back to the U.S. He would write, "On principle I defended his right as a Jew to come and live in the land of his ancestors." He would go further: "Israelis had been molded by blood, violence, and a struggle for survival and power in the sands of the Middle East. Lansky had used his connections to help arm the Haganah during Israel's fight for independence. He and his men had broken up Nazi rallies in Yorkville in the 1930s. "He fascinated me," Dan wrote. "Meyer Lansky has that type of personality."

The allure of power, the allure even of its excesses. Of course it is the excesses that account for the allure. Some negative force everywhere present but never seen. The black-and-white photographs of murdered gangsters. Meyer Lansky walking his shih tzu near the beach on Tel Aviv's Hayarkon Promenade.

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He uncapped the Pernod, listening to Gila translate the article from the Hebrew. It was the usual list summary. He tried to listen, displeased even by the facts once they'd been presented in the funhouse mirror of someone else's language. No serious criminal convictions—was it because he was innocent or because of his shrewd invisibility? He had spent the last forty years not commenting on the things. He looked Gila in the eye when she got to the murders of Ben Siegel and Albert Anastasia. He sipped his drink and waited for her to start reading again and then he turned away and listened, staring at the wall.

"I liked Dan all right," he finally said. "The more I talked to him, the more I did. Very smart. Very close with Ariel Sharon. He's covered Sharon for fifteen years."

"Sabras," she said. Her voice was distant, somewhere between a hiss and a sigh. "Big balls like a ox, at least that's what they think. They spit on people like me. Refugees."

She was still contemplating the story. It had become more interesting than he was. He stood by the window and looked out at the beach, crowded even at sunset. The coolness of the Pernod on his tongue, the herbal sweetness. He fished for his cigarettes in the pocket of his robe.

"I guess they taught you pretty good English at that DP camp," he said.

"English. Dressmaking. Lots of things."

"A real finishing school. Dressmaking."

"We made dresses and the boys made watches. Useful Jews. We loved the Americans, they were very patient with us. Then we come here and there's no work, nothing to eat. Lentils, a few cucumbers."

He exhaled the cigarette and started coughing. Gila folded up the newspaper and laid it on the bed.

"I couldn't save my friend Ben Siegel," he said, still facing the window. "He had that kind of temperament—he liked a fight. He thought he could cheat people, even the goddamn Italians, and they would back down. I never backed down, but I always used my head. It's easy to blow yourself up. It happened to Ben, it happened to a lot of people I worked with in those days. The wheel turned, the wheel lost. Not that they were animals, but they were characters, personalities. I used to take a lot of crap from

being quiet. I was quiet. I wasn't any better than they were, but I was quiet."

He looked at the newspaper on the bed. In English, the title was *Meyer Lansky Breaks His Silence*. Some kind of raffish joke, a stereotype from an old movie. FLAMINGO, DESERT INN, STARDUST, SAND AND FREMONT. Useful Jews. Everything secret, everything always at risk. Now Ben was long dead, but himself was sixty-nine. If they made him leave, he didn't know where he'd go.

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He walked with his two lawyers through the crowd past the concrete planters full of weeds. The Palace of Justice was in a shabby part of modern Jerusalem near some defunct railroad tracks, the sidewalk hemmed in by dented chain-link fence. Amid the fans and the dark wooden beams, he tried to follow the rhetoric. His Israeli lawyer, Alroy, made an argument in Hebrew, then the State of Israel's lawyer, Gavriel Bach, made a counterargument in Hebrew. For once, he was not asked to speak. He sat beside his American lawyer, Rosen, and the two of them read along as an interpreter translated on a yellow pad with a ballpoint pen. The five supreme court justices listened to the contradictions. He was the head of the Mafia and had a fortune of three hundred million dollars. He was a retired hotel operator and had practically no money at all. It was theater—the robed judges, the lawyers rising and sitting back down. If he was the kind of outlaw they alleged he was, then the only legitimate response would be silence. Either he was guilty of everything and it couldn't be proved, or he was guilty of nothing and it couldn't be proved.

The State of Israel in its twenty-four years had taken in hundreds of thousands of Jewish victims in the service of ending forever the saga of Jewish victimhood. He had ended his own victimhood a long time ago, before Israel existed. There were Israelis, many of whom had fought in wars, who believed that the end justified the means. There were others, many of whom had fought in wars, who believed otherwise.

He had attracted a large following now. The cameras would be there waiting for the next recess. Lansky out smoking in the courtyard with its scraggly palm trees, surrounded by young men who had come to see him. He would sit on a bench or on the steps and look at the restaurant sign across the street with its two red Coca-Cola logos, and he could have been in Miami facing trial there.

*Mr. Lansky, what is the Jewish Mafia?*

*Mr. Lansky, have you ever committed a violent crime?*

*Mr. Lansky, are you a religious Jew?*

*Mr. Lansky, who killed Bugsy Siegel?*

He didn't answer—sometimes he made a joke. After five days, the hearings were over. Fate, luck, whatever. Whatever happened was out of his hands.

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Gila wondered sometimes if she wanted him to be worse than he was. As if to be worse was also to be stronger, and somehow by association for her to be stronger.

She had brought her sketches to show a man named Gelb—he mostly did swimwear—and he muttered about which factories could make the stitch, private labels, things she already knew, industrial talk. He had some acquaintance on Seventh Avenue who did knockoffs of big couture lines, maybe he could put her in touch. The offer was not so much mechanical as scornful. Swimwear, when she designed women's clothes. Seventh Avenue, when she was in Tel Aviv.



Her mother napped in the reclining chair, hands like wax, her head covered by a bright orange scarf like some Orthodox housewife. If you had the choice between illness and death, you chose illness. Radiation and chemo, hope and despair. Her mother was younger than Meyer.

She watched him on TV. He looked terrible, weak, except for his eyes, standing in a slouch outside the Palace of Justice, cigarette in hand. Just from looking at him you could tell he had lost the case—he would have to leave Israel now. When he spoke, he reminded people that only a week ago, in Munich terrorists had kidnapped and murdered eleven athletes from Israel's Olympic team. He spoke of it in a strangely poetic way. *Young branches cut down*, were the words he chose. Young branches: by comparison his loss meant very little. He was an old man with a weak chin and a sunken mouth. She tried to see him that way.

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He stared at the Old City of Jerusalem from a window of the King David Hotel. It would be a maze of narrow alleys this late at night—Armenian restaurants, souks, cracked buildings where everyone lived in a different century. From his room he could see the crenellated wall lit up like a theme park, the Tower of David with its parapets and flag. Egypt would come from the west, Syria from the north—everyone knew it was just a matter of time. You waited for the city to explode, but it didn't. It glowed like something in a nightmare.

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They ate in a café up the beach from the Dan Hotel, rows of tables and wicker chairs, oil lamps and glass boxes. Hummus, olives, tabouleh, labneh, baba ghanoush. The moon shone on the water. It was still a shock to have people's eyes on her when she was with him. She tilted her head back to sip the cold beer from the large glass. He was watching her eat, sitting back a little from the table, smoking.

"I remember when you first came into the lobby," she said. "People talked about you already. Who is he, he's someone famous. You would just sit by yourself, drinking coffee, very quiet. Very calm."

"No one special."

"Like you owned the world."

He bowed his head, turning the cigarette slowly in his fingers. "We could go to Caesarea for a couple days. Or maybe just stay here, relax."

"I like Caesarea."

She smiled down at her food, but the quiet way she said it was a way of saying no. They never spoke about her mother or her illness. She wondered how he was able to come and go so easily when he lived with his wife.

The room was blue in the dark and he lay on his back with his fists against his temples, waiting for time to pass. There were times when he couldn't do much of anything and it made him pound the bed in anger and shame. It was their last time together. He let his hand rest on her thigh and she held it there.

"I'm going to make a Pernod," she said. "Would you like one too?"

"Yes, fine."

"Just one ice cube to make it turn milky."

They sipped their drinks and didn't speak. Afterward, he lay with his head on her bare stomach. ~~His hair was clean and he smelled like cologne, and he moved himself up and they stayed that way for a long time.~~ She had to concentrate—he was concentrating too—they went slowly. His body was not unpleasant. It was a yearning body, and she held him closely in her arms.

They slept late the next morning and then they said goodbye.

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She was a cocktail waitress. Businessmen, scotch and gin, some stale pastries in a glass case, no music in the background. One night, after Meyer had left Israel, the journalist Uri Dan came in with a group from the embassies, and he half stood and pointed at each of them with his cigarette, relaying the orders, not seeing her. Of course, he could not have known who she was. Of course, she was nobody. She bent at the knees, serving, back straight, focused on the glasses, the table. The inventedness of Israel as a country seemed completely transparent at such moments, everything too new to be convincing, but she realized that this was a refugee's thinking. The real problem was that she had never gotten used to the newness, had never taken her position in the country seriously enough.

She was smoking at the bar in her uniform one day when Meyer's driver walked into the lobby in his jeans and sunglasses. He had come to check on her and also to give her something—he would explain it to her in the car if she had a few minutes to go for a drive. She remembered him, they had met a few times before.

They left the hotel driveway and started up Frishman Street, past Ben Yehuda, Dizengoff, the sudden open space of Kings of Israel Square—pigeons and litter, discount stores fronted by cafés with white tables. They kept east until it got quieter, a neighborhood of modern apartment buildings, flowering trees, benches in the shade. The lantana grew in hedges, its pink and orange petals dusting the sidewalks like scraps of bright plastic.

"This is where he lived," the driver said. "Here and in Ramat Gan. He lived in a lot of places."

She stared at his turned face.

"He said the rent would be taken care of. I told him I would take you here and give you the keys. You can do whatever you want after that."

She sat there looking at it through the window, the narrow walkway up to the glass door beside the post boxes. It was a gray building like a thousand others in Tel Aviv, built on concrete stilts so cars could be parked beneath it. Inside, there was a tiny elevator with a brass gate that you had to pull back by hand before the door would close. There was barely enough room for the two of them. On the third floor, they exited into a dim hallway with a linoleum floor, mezuzahs on the identical doorframes, a smell of cabbage. It was smaller than her own hallway. It looked like a place to die.

Another war broke out—on Yom Kippur, Egypt and Syria attacked from the west and the north, in Sinai and the Golan Heights. It meant long weeks of sitting in the TV light, warming soup or just tea, bathing her mother, skeletal and bruised. The city would disappear, the country would disappear, bodies amid the shredded cars and buildings. She wanted to leave, to move to New York, but her mother kept living and so for a long time she forgot about her ambitions and her plans.

The war ended. She read that in Miami, Meyer had been acquitted of all charges: contempt, conspiracy, tax evasion. She felt certain now that it was not because he was innocent but because his life had been lived so invisibly. No one knew who he was, neither had she. Every once in a while she

went back to the apartment to see that it was still there, still waiting for her. Three empty rooms with  
~~marks on the bare white walls from where the furniture had stood, where the pictures had hung.~~  
Broken slats in the closet door. The water in the kitchen sink would sputter out brown until it ran  
clear. Such a strange, unwanted gift, as if he were finally telling her something crucial. *The future will  
not be much different from now. Tsilya. Gila. Look at the odds.*

## Only Connect

NEW YORK, 2012

*A memoir without a self. A memoir about someone other than “me.” An understanding that the stories of other people connected to “me” might communicate more than the usual “me,” might show the cultural context of “me,” might even cast doubt on the viability of “me.”*

I remember being in Florida to cover a murder case you may have heard about because it involved the infamous lobbyist Jack Abramoff. The case had been tied up in court since 2005. When it went to trial, Abramoff was not expected to appear, though he had of course been convicted of other crimes for which he’d served forty-three months in federal prison. He’d appeared at his previous trial in a dark trench coat and fedora, like a gangster from decades ago. In news stories, he was sometimes likened to Meyer Lansky.

When Gila first told me her story in the spring of 2010, I knew almost nothing about Meyer Lansky and wasn’t very interested in him or in the lore surrounding him. It was the women in his life, starting with Gila, that made me interested.

From the *New York Times*, June of 1995:

Hannah M. Groff, daughter of Lawrence H. Groff, of New York, NY, is to be married today to John V. Haynes, the son of Dr. and Mrs. Donald Haynes, of East Hampton, NY. The civil ceremony will take place at the Hayneses’ home in East Hampton with a reception to follow.

Ms. Groff, 25, is a recent graduate of the journalism school at Columbia University. Mr. Haynes, 28, is a litigation associate at Byrons and Company, a New York law firm.

I remember when I was young, hearing a song called “The Adulteress,” about a woman, like Gila, who loses herself in secrets. The singer, Chrissie Hynde, seemed like the kind of woman I might be.

someday, the kind of woman I thought I wanted to be someday—the song seemed autobiographical. Later, when I became something like that kind of woman, I had long since forgotten the model for the role I was playing, though by then it might have occurred to me that the song was less a boast than an indictment. The song had come out the year I first met Gila, 1981, though I didn't hear it until much later. I had mostly forgotten Gila by then. I had forgotten how much she'd meant to me when I was young, though some shadow of her must have always been there.

Nathanael West writes: *It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that need are. But it is easy to sigh.*

Frankie Lymon asks, *Why do fools fall in love?*

**home** n. *a place of residence or refuge, as in the Promised Land, Tomorrowland, Never Never Land.*

I'll tell you one more story about the women in Meyer Lansky's life before I tell you about myself. One more story about a woman who loses herself in secrets.



## Immigrants, Part 1

NEW YORK, 1928–29

### I

She touched up her lipstick in the powder room mirror, a girl who'd sewn her own dress from a Butterick pattern, a blue shift she wore with a brooch of fake pearls—Anne Citron, formerly Anna—the name change a hopeful step away from the past, a step toward here, the Park Central Hotel. The beige light settled behind her on a grouping of cane chairs on a pale carpet. Her face in the mirror seemed too long, the curves Semitic. The longer she stood taking in the room's stillness, the more haughty and derisive it became.

She left the nickel Meyer had given her in the attendant's basket and went back into the dining room. At her place on the table was a small velvet box. The whole night so far had felt illicit—American, unfamiliar, not Jewish. Now he was giving her a ring, as in the movies.

She looked at him and his eyes changed and she looked back down, trying to smile, imagining the way it ought to appear. He prodded her to open the box. She didn't know whether to sit or keep standing, so she sat clumsily back in the chair. The ring's small size surprised her—the smallness made it less dreamlike. It was a round crystal set in what she imagined at first was silver. Only gradually did she understand that it wasn't silver and it wasn't a crystal.

He looked at her with his mouth parted, eyes mistrusting. She was worried now in a way that was almost superstitious.

“Is it paste or is it real?” she asked.

“That's a diamond.”

“Meyer.”

“That's a real diamond.”

There was something flummoxed about how he adjusted himself in his chair. “I shouldn't have surprised you like that.”

He had reached across the table and taken back the box. He snapped it closed with a quick movement of his index finger, then secreted it away in the lower pocket of his jacket.

“Does it mean what I think it means?” she asked.

“That's a real diamond. You think about it for a couple days, then you tell me what you think it means.”

On the table between them were stemmed glasses, white dishes, silverware arrayed on the white cloth—whiteness and high spaces full of air. He wished she would sit up straighter, not be so dour and scared. The waiter brought over two cut-glass dishes filled with diced melon and pineapple—fruit cocktails, they were called. It was Prohibition, so there was no wine.

“I heard you drove all the way to Florida,” she said later in the backseat of the dark car. They were in a garage on Cannon Street that he and Ben Siegel owned, among a fleet of other cars that he and Ben

owned.

“I never drove to Florida,” he said.

“Were there storks there?”

“Who told you that?”

“Not storks, pelicans. Flamingos.”

“I never drove to Florida. I never drove anywhere near that far.”

He felt the neckline of her dress against his wrists, her face in his hands, the length and fineness of her hair. She was warm on top of the opened coat. He had worried at first that it would be strange that she was taller than he was, but instead there was a sense of abundance. He kissed her and moved his hands toward her breasts and she pushed them away, over and over, as slow and repetitive as the waves on a lake.

The crowd filed out and they stayed seated, the soft light on the theater’s Moorish columns, her hair on his coat sleeve. The movie’s spell was tenuous and she knew it, and she wanted it to last longer. It had been a college movie: an America of football, a dog rolling on the grass, a blond boy with a row of white teeth scoring the winning touchdown, his cheering friends in V-neck sweaters and ties. The lightest froth, so silly and glowing that the actors spoofed themselves, opening their eyes a little too wide at the camera, screwing up their smiles with a devious slant, but she could see by looking at Meyer in the dark that he didn’t scoff, that he’d been infected by it. Donald Keith, aroused by girls but unable to articulate anything; Clara Bow, “The Hot Potato,” a wild girl with a dark bob and teasing eyes. You watched the callow boy grow into his infatuation and the girl echo each of his changes with her own. *If there’s a moon tonight, do you want to take a walk?* Moonlight indicated by a blue filter over daylight in sepia. The lovers went to a speakeasy with checkered tablecloths, the hall jammed to the rafters with dancing couples, a funny old black woman flipping pancakes on a griddle, stealing a bottle of gin when the cops raided. A college movie—“Prescott College.” The sadness of graduation. How Donald Keith had changed so much in his four undergraduate years, from an awkward boy to a half-confident man. He slapped down some cad who tried to kiss Clara Bow against her wishes, and in that way, as well as in his awkwardness, Donald Keith was like Meyer.

They sat at joined tables—the Lanskys and her family, the Citrons—her brother Jules in a silk tie and beige suit, across from him Meyer’s mother staring absently through thick lenses. Waiters in vests brought blintzes, sour cream, whitefish, borscht. She watched the plates go by without appetite. She knew so many things now. How the garage on Cannon Street was more than just a garage. How Meyer and Ben owned property like it all over the city and in New Jersey and Philadelphia. How they imported whiskey from Scotland on ships they chartered themselves and then distributed it across the United States to wealthy businessmen, even politicians. Her friend Esta, Ben’s girl, had told her this. Esta, the brassy one, her lips clenched in the moment before she burst forth with the secrets, what Ben had told her after their date at the French Bakers or Manny Wolf’s restaurant, the movie, or the pleasure drive in the Gardner coupe or the Dodge Brothers sedan.

She watched her father frown his way through two plates of food, a squat man in a scuffed hat. Meyer bowed his head and didn’t speak, the lunch a duty to be gotten through. When it was over, he reached into his pants pocket and discreetly gave one of the waiters money without asking for a bill, placing his hand on the man’s shoulder as he bent down. Everyone saw, had been waiting for it. Her father endured the moment with a scheming stare at the dish of cream that still remained on the table.



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