



Tough Jews

F a t h e r s , S o n s ,
a n d

G a n g s t e r D r e a m s

rich cohen

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TOUGH JEWS

RICH COHEN

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FOR MY MOTHER AND FATHER

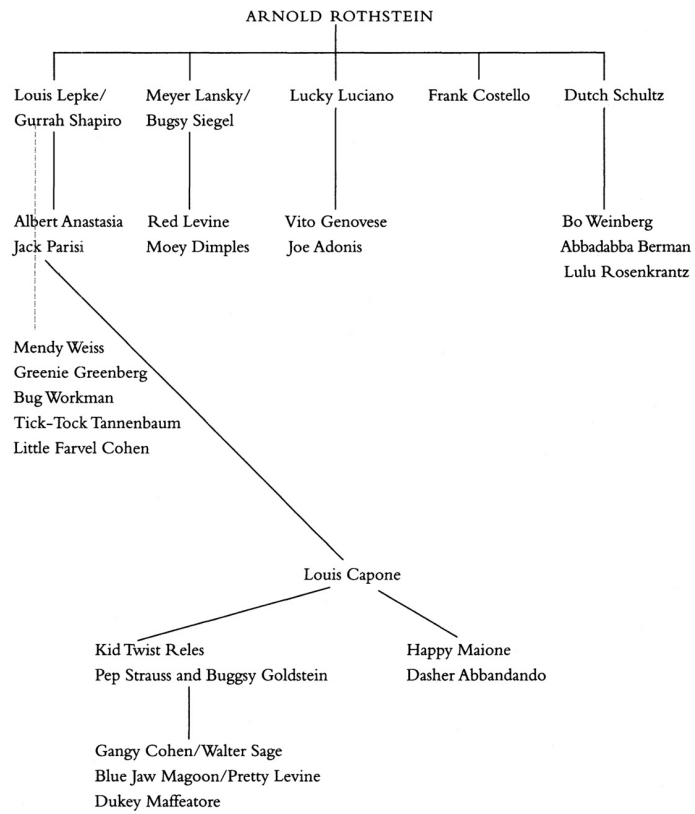
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Arnold's Boys



The criminal progeny that grew out of Arnold Rothstein's underworld empire.

Nate 'n' Al's

THEY ARRIVE IN German and Italian sports cars. They double-park and discard the ticket. They come through the door of Nate 'n' Al's, a delicatessen in Beverly Hills, they come in from the glare of Rodeo Drive expecting friendly faces. They are not disappointed. They float in on Italian-made shoes. They jam the aisles, fill the air, talk pseudo-Yiddish. They ask for the pickles, the ketchup, the herring, and they never say please. It's always gimme, gimme, gimme.

"C'mon, you heard Asher," says Herbie, folding his arms. "Give 'em the herring." Asher gets the herring, lays it on his bagel, and never says thank you. It's okay. It's understood. There are lots of things Asher never says.

They sit each morning at the same booth in back of the restaurant. They look over crowded tables and booths, over mingling bigwigs and hustling waiters, over the cigar case, where toothpicks and mints can be had for free. They blink in the half-light known to all true delis, where every morning is the same morning. They sit among Jews who have moved from the East—Baltimore, Chicago, Brooklyn—and are now looking for something that got lost on the way west. They arrive at the hour agreed on the day before. "Nine A.M. tomorrow," Sid had said, tapping his watch. "Last to come, pays. Agreed?" Heads nod. Agreed.

Today, Sid is the last to come. Sid will pay. Sid is a man of his word. He follows the rules. "Especially when they're my rules," he says, sliding into the booth. "A man who breaks his own rules is no man at all."

Sid is a few inches under six feet tall and broad shouldered and burly, but size is not the first thing about him you notice. The first thing you notice are his eyes, which are full of mischief. "Good eyes see the present and the past right at the same time," he says.

Sid has good eyes. Over the last several decades he has moved west with the country, from New York to Los Angeles. He has passed time at real estate conventions in the Midwest, drink in hand, corn and rye ripening all around. He has been to seminars, talked PTA, the future of the Rust Belt, computers, the explosion of the Southwest, the Internet. Still, in all these years, in all the houses with all the women, he never took his eyes off Bensonhurst, the neighborhood in Brooklyn where he came of age fifty years ago. Wherever he goes he surrounds himself with people who remind him in some vague way of those kids who formed his world in Brooklyn, where every son was an immigrant's son, every dream the pipe dream of an immigrant's son. In Los Angeles, where so many of his boyhood friends have also landed, he runs with the old crowd. "Hello, fellas," he says, reaching for a menu. "Happy to see everyone looking so happy."

Sid is a millionaire. He was in real estate. He sold his company. He says being from Brooklyn is a full-time job. When Sid talks, it's in a high singsong that is pleasantly at odds with his frame. "I see I'm the last through the door," he says, motioning for a waitress. "Guess I have to pay. Well, okay. Don't be shy, boys. Eat up. I'm loaded."

They grunt in acknowledgment. They're lost in their food: Asher and his egg-white omelet, runny

and covered in ketchup; Herbie and his bagel, light toast, light schmere; Larry picking at Asher's egg-white omelet, runny and covered in ketchup. "I want a bagel and a whitefish," Sid tells the waitress. As he hands her the menu, he says, "Tell the counterman to gouge out the eyes. I don't want breakfast looking at me."

"Hey, Asher, you trying to hide your eggs from me?" asks Larry, looking at Asher's plate. "What's with all the ketchup?"

"Shut up," says Asher. "No one invited you."

A breed of such men thrive in Los Angeles, brokers, lawyers, entertainers, entertaining lawyers, promoters, moguls, former furriers, distributors, importers, exporters, self-promoters, men of leisure. They fled Brooklyn thirty-five, forty years ago and have shed as many outward signs of their heritage as would be shed, yet still retain something of the old world, a final, fleeting glimpse of what their fathers must have been. Their faces are concentrated, their talk full of warnings, premonitions of things to come, of time repeating itself, of good men stripped of all worldly goods and left to fight again with nothing but instinct. Every time he enters a room, Asher notes where each man stands, who poses the biggest threat, and who, if necessary, he'll take out first. "This is the stuff I'm thinking about all the time," he says, wiping his hands. "For me, it's just like a crossword puzzle."

On those mornings when the gang is in high form, when the stories come fast as tracks on a CD, they pull Nate 'n' Al's off into a swamp of time, where old Brooklyn comes face-to-face with modern Los Angeles. On such occasions, the group is an attraction to those who fill the outlying booths, the regular clientele of Nate 'n' Al's, who watch the gang as if they're watching mimes on stage, reading meaning in each gesture, seeing in them everything from how wealth is wasted on the uncouth to the last of a vanishing breed, whose very dialect, a thick Brooklynese, exists nowhere but in such storytelling backward-looking circles. "They're trying to teach my grandkid Spanish in school," says Asher, yielding his plate to Larry. "What the hell? If he needs to learn anything, it's Yiddish. The language of my people is dying."

And when the men on stage look back across the restaurant, take in the eyes taking them in, what do they see? Many things. People who ruin every sandwich with mayonnaise, who buy high and sell low, who do what they're told, who say things like "It's nice to be important, but it's more important to be nice," who fall for every cheap carnie who comes through the door, and who know nothing of Brooklyn, of days when the old world existed alongside the new, when each roof looked like the scene of a police chase. "I go wherever I want to go and act like me," says Sid, looking around the room. "Everyone else's home is home to me."

Around each other, these men have a kind of ease that makes you want to confide things. The ease of old friends. Late nights. Stories by now more fiction than fact. Stories set on the stoops and corners of Bensonhurst, Flatbush, Brownsville, in a time when Jewish gangsters, that lost romantic breed, still roamed the streets, when Italians had no monopoly on hooliganism, when a Jewish boy could still fashion his future as murderous and daring and wide open, a future shot full of holes. Alleys. Blue smoke rooms. Basements. The ominous echo of footsteps. Leather shoulder holsters.

In his youth, Sid could leave his family's apartment house on Seventy-fourth Street, walk among the row houses to Kings Highway, where he could follow the immortal Sholem Bernstein, who ran "errands" for the Jewish Syndicate, clear out to the waterfront, where the world seemed to open up. If he tried hard, Sid could almost walk like Sholem, duck his shoulder like Sholem, drag his foot. Or like any of the other members of Murder Incorporated, a Jewish gang involved in racketeering, bootlegging, and shylocking. But all this happened so long ago, back when a Jew in jail didn't have to mean white-collar crime.

“Did I tell you guys who I met?” asks Larry, looking up from Asher’s plate. “Mike Tyson. I interviewed him in the ring after that farce of a fight with that bum McNeely. We talked a little about the fight, then spent an hour on the old gangsters.” Tyson is from Brownsville, the home of Murder Incorporated. And no matter how many middle-class families flee for the suburbs, for the shrubs and hedges of Long Island, heroes never really leave. “When Tyson talks about Lepke,” says Larry, “he chokes up like a schoolgirl.”

Larry is the television personality Larry King. As Larry Zeiger he grew up in Brownsville and Bensonhurst, tagging after people like Sid and Asher, dreaming of long nights on the radio. “I give Larry a hard time,” says Sid, glancing at his friend. “Needle him. An hour goes by and still he can’t believe what’s happening, that someone’s mocking Larry King. Larry Zeiger, maybe, but Larry King?”

Larry, held together by blow-dried hair and suspenders, is hunched over the table, checking his reflection in Asher’s plate. Like the others in the booth, his trip to Nate ’n’ Al’s was an extended ramble over years and landscapes. In 1962 he was seated with a microphone in the window of Pumpernicks, restaurant in Miami, interviewing any fool who happened through the door. One morning he ate alongside Meyer Lansky, an old man hosting an old friend, triggerman Jimmy Blue Eyes. “Lansky kept saying, ‘Jimmy, why do you stay in New York?’ ” Larry recalls. “ ‘Do you know the temperature in Brooklyn today? Two. Why do you want to live like that? Move down here. Miami’s the promised land.’ ”

A few years later, Larry picked a bad horse and was himself just about chased from Miami, splashed across the newspapers, and locked in some cracker jail. “I used to be there, but now, thank God, I’m here,” says Larry, rapping the table.

Larry is in Los Angeles to cover the trial of O. J. Simpson. He flew in this morning, dropped his bag at the Beverly Wilshire, and walked right over. “Hey, Larry, what’s the deal with that Simpson case?” asks Asher, picking up a fork. “What does the jury know? How sequestered is sequestered?”

“They had a conjugal visit last night, so they know everything you know,” says Larry.

“Conjugal visit? How often do they have those?” asks Asher.

“Once a week.”

“That’s enough,” says Asher. “I’d have time left over.”

Asher is the dashing dark-eyed member of the group. When he smiles, his eyes disappear. His hair is gray, his glasses tinted. He sells real estate from an office around the corner. “When did you get in, Herbie?” he says, looking across the table.

Herbie has dozed off. This means nothing. Herbie dozes off all the time. He is relaxed. He once dozed off while having his teeth drilled. “Hey, Sid, shake Herbie.”

“What?” asks Herbie, opening an eye.

“When did you get in?” Asher repeats. “Don’t tell me you’ve been out here hiding from your pals. That’d break my heart.”

“No, Asher,” says Herbie, closing the eye. “I got in late last night.”

Herbie is my father. My whole life, Herbie has been happy to see me. When he sees me, he acts in a way entirely unlike the way he acts before he sees me, something I know from overhearing him and from the way he is described by friends. When he does not see me, his language is filled with obscenity with cocksuckers and motherfuckers and fuckin’ pricks. One thing that frequents his stories—before he sees me—are dead men. “That motherfuckin’ cocksucker and those fuckin’ pricks he calls a crew of dead men.” After he sees me, the talk is about the future, the way one should act, God, the mysteries of life, the neighbors, what Hank Greenberg would hit in this park, funny road signs, Jewish sports legends.

Before he sees me, his talk revolves around Louis Lepke and Gurrah Shapiro. After he sees me, it’s

Sandy Koufax and Sid Luckman. Of course, the same thing that drives his conversation (without me) to Louis Lepke drives his conversation (with me) to Sandy Koufax. It's all about Jews acting in ways other than Jews are supposed to act, Jews leaving the world of their heads to thrive in a physical world, a world of sense, of smell, of grit, of strength, of courage, of pain. "The day Koufax refused to pitch in the World Series on Yom Kippur was a great day for our people," says Herbie.

In the house where I grew up, we had no fewer than three books on the exploits of Jewish sports legends. My father used to point out the entry in *The Baseball Encyclopedia* that encapsulates the entire experience of the Jews in America: "Mo Solomon. 'The Rabbi of Swat.' At Bats 8. Hits 3. Born New York, N.Y., 1900. Died Miami, Florida, 1966." In my house we did not have a single book on Jewish gangsters. And though I enjoy the conversations I have with my father (home runs, no-hitters), I sometimes wish I could talk to him before he sees me, a conversation about Lepke and Shapiro, a conversation riddled with obscenity, a bloodbath of a conversation where every other sentence hides a dead man.

My father has a highly expressive face, where every emotion registers like a shade of light. The lines in his face run north to south, like furrows in a mountain. He talks in a slow, drawn-out manner that pulls people in and holds them longer than they intended to stay. Friends call looking for me and spend hours on the phone with him, at last agreeing he is right, they are on the wrong career track, heading nowhere fast.

My father grew up with Sid and Asher and Larry in Bensonhurst. They formed a gang called the Warriors but never really had the opportunity or inclination to emulate Murder Incorporated in any way other than language and dress. And nicknames. They gave themselves the sorts of loopy nicknames gangsters are supposed to have: the Mouth Piece, Who-Ha, Inky, Bucko, Lefty, Gutter Rat, Moppo. My father named himself Handsomo, a name that to me sounds ridiculous. Still, some of the old gang insist my father really was good-looking. "Your old man deserved to be called Handsomo," Larry told me. "He had dark black hair and green eyes, a rare combination in our neighborhood." Larry has written at least two books that chronicle Herbie's childhood exploits. My father moves through such texts the way the youthful hero, the hero destined to fall, moves through all coming-of-age novels: "There was a stage in my life when I wanted to be Herbie," wrote Larry. "Herbie was a provocateur. He was a schemer and a troublemaker, but he was in it for the sport, and he got just as much satisfaction getting into trouble as getting out. . . ."

After serving in the army and graduating from NYU law school, my father was hired by Allstate Insurance Company, where he announced his daily arrival saying, "Company Jew passing through." Several transfers later (New Jersey, Long Island, Illinois) he quit Allstate and set out on his own. He would consult, lecture, negotiate. "Just who will you consult?" his father asked at the time.

"General Motors," said Herbie.

"How long has this General Motors been in business?"

"For decades, Dad," said Herbie.

"And have they done okay without you so far?"

So my father found himself starting over in the wilds of Illinois, where the "s" is silent. And as I grew up, I found that I was becoming in some ways very different from him. I came to see myself as a midwestern character, as open and friendly as the plains, while he only wrapped himself more tightly in Brooklyn. By age fifty he had developed a great man theory of history, whereby all men of significance are from Brooklyn. "You like that guy?" he would ask, looking at the TV. "Well, that's another one from Brooklyn."

About ten years after he quit Allstate, my father wrote a book that went on to become a best-seller

The book was called *You Can Negotiate Anything*, a title for which I was punished in high school. “You can’t negotiate everything in this class, Mr. Cohen.”

Oh, yeah? Fuck you.

To me, that title, *You Can Negotiate Anything*, sums up the ethos of his old block, an ethos that means as much to Sid and Asher and Larry as it does to my father. It’s about being savvy, about never letting anyone know if you’re real or fake, crazy or sane, righteous or fallen, good or bad. It’s about risks. On family trips, my father would steer the station wagon as he read the paper (stretched wide across the wheel) and ate a hamburger (left hand). “Any damn fool can drive a car,” he would say, turning a page. “Reading the paper, eating a meal, *and* driving a car, now that’s something!”

During the Korean War, my father, like Elvis—who, incidentally, was not from Brooklyn—was stationed in West Germany. He was stationed in Bad Kissingen on the East German border a decade after the Second World War. One day, looking over some grainy photos of him in fatigues, I asked if this scared him, being surrounded by men who may have been Nazis so soon before. “Scared?” he repeated, as if I were a fool. “Hey, baby. I had a thirty-eight on my hip. That means when I talk, you listen. Army of occupation, baby. I wasn’t the one who had anything to be scared about. The Kraut, the Jerry, the Hun, that’s who was shaking.”

And this is a lesson many Jews of my father’s generation took from the war. Shooting is bad. Shooting is to be deplored. But if shooting should break out, make sure you’re on the right side of the gun. *Army of occupation, baby!* Which is one reason my father’s friends cling to the romantic image of the Jewish gangster. In their formative years, those following the Holocaust, as they were faced with the image of dead, degraded Jews being bulldozed into mass graves, here was another image, closer to home—Jews with guns, tough, fearless Jews. Don’t let the yarmulke fool ya. These Jews will kill you before you get around to killing them. Bugsy Siegel, Abe Reles, Louis Lepke, antiheroes whose very swagger seemed to provide another option. If Jewish gangsters still thrived today, if they hadn’t gone legit, if Jews of my generation didn’t regard them as figments, creatures to be classed with Big Foot and the Loch Ness monster, I think the Jewish community might be better off. After all, everyone needs someone who gives them the illusion of strength. How else to explain the sacred position in which American Jews hold the Israeli army? *Army of occupation, baby!*

The Jewish gangster stories told each morning by my father and his friends are really the remnants of old neighborhood stories, legends that have been passed from clubrooms and street corners to boardrooms and delis and on to suburban towns, like the one where I grew up. Over the years, in tellings that have worn them smooth, these stories have certainly been worked up and embellished, fitted less to the need of the subject than the teller. The story I am left with is therefore not so much one of facts as the noise those facts make passing through time. It is a story of shifting perspective, the way a group of Brooklyn thugs, each with his own rise and fall, fills a need in the lives of my father and his friends, and also in my life. So what follows is less a straight history than the story of a Brooklyn gangster as seen through the eyes of my father and his friends, and then that story (my father looking at gangster) seen through my eyes, like laying colored glass over colored glass.

And though this story sprawls across decades and time zones, from the stoops and candy stores of Brooklyn to the driveways of suburban Chicago, where fathers let their sons win at basketball, it is really just the story of three generations: the gangster generation, that handful of early century Jews who tried to bust into the palace with a crowbar; my father’s generation, diligent sons who carried us over the threshold with hard work; my generation, cool-thinking suburbanites who wonder what it was like back on the outside. For people like me, who grew up hearing only of the good Jews, fund-raisers and activists, the gangsters offer a glimpse of a less stable time, like the Ice Age, when a greater variety of

species thrived on earth.

~~The Jewish gangster has been forgotten because no one wants to remember him, because my grandmother won't talk about him, because he is something to be ashamed of. Well, to me remembering Jewish gangsters is a good way to deal with being born after 1945, with being someone who has always had the Holocaust at his back, the distant tom-tom: *six million, six million, six million*. The gangsters, with their own wisecracking machine-gun beat, push that other noise clear from my head. And they drowned out other things, too, like the stereotype that fits the entire Jewish community into the middle class, comfortable easy-chair Jews with nothing but morality for dessert. Where I grew up, it was understood: Even the most reckless Jew winds up in medical school. Well, the gangsters helped me clear this trap, showing me that since the worst is possible, so is everything else. If a Jew can die in the electric chair, anything can happen.~~

After living in Chicago for twenty-seven years, my parents repatriated east, settling in Washington D.C. Every now and then, however, when my father is in Los Angeles on business, he spends his mornings at Nate 'n' Al's. Once there, he picks up the narrative of the Jewish gangsters like something he left off only a moment before. "One day, I'm coming home from school and this guy comes running onto Eighty-fifth Street," says Herbie, coming out of his doze. "A car lurches after him and two guys come out. They're wearing hats. They throw the guy against a wall. They get him by the neck, punch him in the stomach. He doubles over and they kick him in the head. The guy slumps against the wall. As the thugs walk back to the car, they see me and one says, 'What the fuck are you lookin' at?' That was the first time I saw real violence—cruel, unprovoked violence. This wasn't two guys fighting. This was something else. "

In a real way, people like my father, Sid, Asher, and Larry are the offspring of those old gangsters. They grew up on the same blocks, were part of the same world, were being pulled toward the same future. They were children on streets where Lepke and Reles were parents, grandparents. In some way, Sid, Asher, Herbie, and Larry are the dream the gangsters had of the future. Jews who are indistinguishable from Americans. Jews who are Americans. Jews who go to temple with all the nonchalance of a President Clinton going to church. Jews washed clean of Odessa, the shtetl, the camps, the tenements, millionaire Jews who drive German cars, who make legit deals before breakfast that pay off just after lunch.

And still, these Jews, are they happy? Can they ever be happy? Is any real Jew ever happy? Happy, is that a word you would use to describe Moses? Jesus? Freud? Einstein? Groucho? Hell, no, they're not happy. They crave the physical power of gangsters. They've seen *The Godfather* dozens of times. They talk tough in the produce line. Mess with them, you'll get hit with something heavy—maybe. No. They're not happy. They long for the past, for a time when all the old assumptions about Jews were like the German mark after the Great War—worthless.

Each day, after the eggs but before the coffee, after the box scores but before the futures conversation turns back to those old criminals. And in the gang's deliberate way of speaking, you hear again the voices of killers under the bridge, the Gowanus Canal at dawn, sharpies and sharks, washlined streets and early morning walk-ups where young hoods make their last nocturnal rounds as sucker brothers are just rousing for another chicken-shit payday at work.

Abe and Buggsy

ABRAHAM RELES AND Martin Goldstein were just coming home. The light was already on the eastern horizon, so it had to be something like four-thirty, five A.M. They were coming back from East New York, a nighttime world of young Italians in sheeny suits and old Italians in ribbed T-shirts, foreign accents, and fire escapes. They drove down Van Sicklen Avenue to Livonia, left the car at a garage, and made their way on foot. Walking through downtown Brownsville in 1931, the height of the Depression, they would have seen an occasional ice wagon and only those men who worked the first shift at the mills and packing houses. In the early morning, such men must have seemed like apparitions, the ghosts of lives Abraham and Martin would have led had they followed the rules and done as they were told.

Reles was known on the block as “Kid Twist,” a name he gave himself, partly in tribute to an East Side gangster of an ancient era, partly in acknowledgment of his style, which was to get his enemies around the neck and twist the life out of him. To friends he was simply “the Kid,” a short man with long arms and huge hands and fingers a cop once described as “spatulate.” Reles had just turned twenty-five but looked half that age, with the soft, unlined features of a prize pupil or, worse still, a mama’s boy. He looked young the way the most vicious criminals look young—like something in his development had been arrested or thwarted or turned into something else. Goldstein, who was known to everyone as Buggsy, must have found it comforting to have a friend like Abe.

As Reles and Goldstein walked along the steel-shuttered, early morning street, their words must have been end-of-the-day weary. They probably talked about the last few months, the bad things that had happened, the bad things that were to happen still, and how they would make up their losses.

In those days, the power in Brownsville was the Shapiro brothers. The oldest brother, Meyer, was born in the neighborhood, a fat kid who had grown into a fat man. Everything about him was fat: fat eyes, fat nose, fat ears, fat mouth. His kid brothers (Irving, William) were like cheap knockoffs of the original; not quite as fat, not quite as dangerous, not quite as smart, they mostly helped Meyer with his loan-sharking, bullying, pimping. The brothers ran fifteen bordellos in the slum. They were like the nineteenth-century Jewish bosses of Odessa, Russia, terrorizing shopkeepers and merchants who, like them, were confined to the Pale.

The big money, their future, was in slot and vending machines. Any store or restaurant owner who wanted to buy or rent a slot machine in Brooklyn in the early thirties had to go to the Shapiros, who, in addition to taking a percentage of the earnings, got five dollars for each machine. And if the Shapiros don’t get paid? If you get your jukebox or cigarette machine or pinball machine somewhere else? Well, then something unfortunate might happen—your store might burn down or get robbed or who knows what else? These things happen.

If you were a young neighborhood tough wanting to steal, intimidate, raise hell, then you too went to the Shapiros. In Brownsville the brothers were the only way into crime, the only ramp onto that particular expressway.

Abraham Reles and Martin Goldstein—neither made it past the seventh grade—went to work for

the Shapiros in the late twenties. By the time the boys were fifteen, Meyer had them stink-bombing restaurants, beating up strikers, collecting loans. And does Meyer show any appreciation? Does he give the boys a sign of thanks? Promote them? Pay them? Of course not. Mostly he just taunts and teases Abe who really was funny looking. The Kid was near the end of his patience the night the cops caught him at Meyer's dirty work. And do the Shapiros come through with a lawyer or bail? No. Not even a visit. This is probably all the Kid thought of as the cops handed him to the lawyers who handed him to the judge who handed him to the guards who put him on a bus that ran north to the Elmira Reformatory. Reles got two years upstate. He must have sworn that if ever he made it back to Brownsville, he'd pay back the Shapiros.

On April 1, 1930, the New York Department of Corrections played a prank on Brooklyn—they let Abe Reles out of prison. While the Kid was away, Buggsy bought a pool hall, a run-down joint beneath the Sutter Avenue elevated. Reles spent much of his time at the pool hall, hustling whoever happened through the door. One night in comes this handsome kid looking for a game. The kid takes almost a hundred dollars off Reles. After that, Reles and the kid were friends.

It did not take Abe long to figure out just who this kid was—George Defeo, kid brother of William Defeo, who was tight with Meyer Lansky and Ben Siegel. Even out in Brownsville, the edge of the map, the names “Lansky” and “Siegel” were magic: they conjured up the whole story, the rise of two Jewish kids from the Lower East Side slums to the heights of the underworld. “So your brother's William Defeo,” Reles must have said. “Not a bad brother to have.”

A few weeks later, in the middle of a casual afternoon pool game, Reles said something like “Hey George, your brother's gang, they do some work with slot machines, right?”

“Sure,” said Defeo. “What about it?”

“Tell him, if he can supply us with machines, we can put them in Brownsville and East New York.”

“You can't do that,” said Goldstein. “That's still the Shapiros' territory.”

“To hell with the Shapiros,” Reles said. “If we're backed by Lansky and Siegel, what can they do about it?”

Defeo said he would look into it.

A few weeks later Reles and Goldstein were in business with Defeo. They had a supply of slot machines, which they leased to bars and restaurants. Though they kept a percentage of each machine's earnings, there was no five-dollar per-machine charge. What's more, since Lansky and Siegel saw this as a way into Brownsville, virgin territory, they gave the Reles gang the machines on credit. When the Shapiros threatened bar and restaurant owners, the Kid laughed it off. “Don't worry,” he told customers. “We've got real power behind us.”

Reles soon moved in on other Shapiro strongholds: bookmaking, shylocking. Less than six months out of prison, the Kid had gotten Meyer Shapiro's attention. After deals and threats failed to deter Reles, Shapiro took the next step: around Brownsville, people who knew, knew that Abe Reles, Martin Goldstein, and George Defeo did not have long to live.

Jews of my father's generation and mind-set have a favorite gangster the way Catholics have a patron saint: a mythic figure who has left them a life lived, a style, a way of doing things. There was a kid on my father's block who would not fight on the Sabbath, who would rather let himself be whipped by a man half his size than fight on Friday night, because that's how Red Levine did it. For my dad, who tried and rejected several gangsters as either too brutal or not brutal enough, the greatest of all the hoodlums was Abe Reles. “I once saw the Kid come out of hiding to buy a newspaper,” my father told me.

“The paper cost a nickel, but he gave the lady a fifty. That’s how you get to be a hero. Lay green on everyone you meet. ~~When you overtip, you’re not throwing money away. You’re investing in your legend.~~”

The Reles legend was handed down from my father to me. I have learned each detail, each step, each misstep, each act of bravery. I have also learned to generalize, to see beyond the details to the poetry inherent in the timeline of every man’s life.

Reles grew up on Pitkin Avenue and Watkins Street in Brownsville. He grew up in the years just before the First World War, before America plunged headlong into the twentieth century. At night the streets were full of faces, dark scowls and sly smiles, babies crying. There were people on the street all night in Brownsville, and they were all trying to get out, move on, get going, keep on, get settled, get rich, get home.

Like most adults in the neighborhood, Abe’s father, Sol Reles, came from Europe, Galicia, a desolate part of eastern Austria. Fleeing pogroms, Sol left his village. By the time he reached Ellis Island in the first year of this century, he had nothing. A few years later he met a woman who had also come from Austria, and she too had nothing. They were married and had nothing together. In 1905 they had a child and for the first time did not have nothing. They had a son, and someday that son would have everything. But even as Abraham made his way in the underworld, Sol continued to struggle. “My Abie was always a good boy,” Mrs. Reles told a reporter when the Kid was arrested for the forty-third time. “If he is such a big man, would his papa have to sell neckties and suspenders from a pushcart?”

Abraham Reles was raised a Jew. He was told of Abraham and Isaac; he was told of the binding of Isaac and must have pictured the blade Abraham held to Isaac’s throat. He was told of the Flood, the plagues, the Exodus, the Commandments. But the life around him, the hum of the streets, must have been infinitely more vivid than those old stories. The time of Abe’s youth was an in-between time for Jews in America. Like many others, Kid Twist was born in the course of a long voyage, knowing neither from where he came nor to where he was going; he was expected to finish a journey his parents began the day they fled the villages and shtetls of Eastern Europe, a trip that would eventually lead to Nate ’n’ Al’s in Beverly Hills.

As they became adults, men like Abraham Reles set out to conquer the new world. They took the dream of America and turned it into their own personal dream. They made fortunes. They rode in fancy cars. They walked in the street without fear. In the end, however, it was they who would be conquered, hunted and hounded and sent to jail. Some of them, the most murderous, the most daring would die in the electric chair. Later, all that was left were bits of stories and colorful names, amusing anecdotes used to adorn the conversation of men like my father. Later still, their great-grandchildren would intermarry and lose their way. Their traditions and their past would evaporate like water on a hot plate. But this was far in the future, and by then there was no longer an old world to dream of returning to.

As a boy in Brownsville, Abe surely heard stories of the old country. Of the flat horizon and the high white sky. Of horses and mules and chickens. And about land and how it’s the only thing worth a damn. And about America, a beautiful nation of beautiful people. The way the kids of immigrants heard about America, you would think it was not down the stairs and out the door but still across the ocean, a distant place where everything is promised and, for hard work, everything is given. From the day he left his parents’ house, Abe had to know his father was right, that America promises everything, but he also had to know his father was wrong—America gives nothing. Those things that are promised, they cannot

be worked for but must be taken, conned away with good looks, obsequiousness, mimicry; or traded for ~~with bits of your soul or the morals of the stories your parents told; or tricked away with lies; or wrested~~ away with brute force. In Brooklyn, home was the old country, the land of the shul and shtetl, but the street, that was where the deals went down, where Rockefeller struck oil, where all roads led to Tammany Hall, where Jimmy Walker was king. In Brooklyn, the street was the new world.

Back then the borough was in a state of flux. Every day more immigrants poured into the narrow streets. Things broke down. Strife was the order of the season. Strikes and threats of strikes. In the middle of a crowded market, a young man would be attacked, beaten, and left bleeding. It was all over in a minute, the assailants disappearing down alleyways. And each day, all over the borough, brothers and sisters woke to another day of school, a useless exercise conducted in alien tongues. The wildes among them ran off, passing the hours however they could—hustling bums, playing cards, picking fights, unloading crates, pitching coins.

On blocks just like the one where Abraham grew up there was already a generation of accomplished Jewish gangsters. Veterans. They ran all kinds of penny-ante scams, and they too had dreams. They would be stronger than their fathers, stronger than the cops. They would be their own nation, with their own laws, loyalties, and justice. The most notorious of these kids were named Buchalter (Louis Lepke), Flegenheimer (Dutch Schultz), and, of course, Lansky and Siegel. Some of them were rumored to have done killings. Reles tried to emulate these older men. They showed what was possible. So even in the early days, before Meyer Shapiro was even a cloud on the horizon, the Kid was on the lookout for other kids, Jewish kids mostly, who took the lessons of their parents seriously, but not too seriously. Mostly he was looking for kids who weren't afraid—of the Italians, the Irish, the cops, the consequences. From the beginning, Reles knew that where you end up is the thing, not how you get there. How you get there that's just something to be debated by the suckers who never make it out.

Over time, Reles emerged as a leader. Though he was just over five feet tall, something in him demanded respect. The smallest provocation, something only he knew the meaning of, could throw him into a rage. One day in the early twenties, he felt a group of older kids were giving him the high hat and so jumped a curb with his motorbike and rode them into a wall. This side of him, this wild, cowboy side, was usually hidden by an easy, laid-back, just-off-the-boat demeanor. He spoke in a slow, guttural lisp. He had a funny way of walking; going down the street, he looked like a man trying to kick off his shoes. Whenever booked for a crime, he listed his occupation as soda jerk.

When Reles was growing up, Brownsville was a hothouse of criminal talent. Just across the way, on Alabama and Dumont Avenues, Harry Strauss was coming of age. The Kid knew Strauss from school. He was one of those kids you admired but stayed away from, who ate alone in a corner of the playground. They called him Big Harry—he really was very big. Or Pep—he could be the kind of friendly that demanded a cute diminutive. Or Pittsburgh Phil—it sounded tougher and more interesting than Big Harry or Pep. As he grew into a man, Pep was often enlisted by the desperate to even the odds. He was big, strong, reckless. He had a sense of fair play, of right and wrong, of justice. Still, he was a head case. Violence was something he liked too much. Violence is something you can't fear, but you can't love it, either. One vice is as bad as the other. Excess is the beginning of the end of any ambitious youngster. Big Harry was good to have in reserve, like mustard gas, but he wasn't the first person you went to.

The first person the Kid went to was Martin Goldstein, who lived a few doors from the Releses. Marty was timid, but the Kid saw something in him. If his timidity was challenged, he could be thrown into a psychotic fit. That's why he was called Buggsy—because he was a little buggsy, a little crazy, a quality that's always recognized in some gangsters and is always called Buggsy.

Everyone familiar with the Brooklyn boys was convinced Edward G. Robinson based his film persona on Buggsy Goldstein, who had the same side-talking, duck-walking, tough-guy attitude as the movie star. And this, too: Buggsy had a real sense of style, a wise-guy sharpness. If you were in the underworld in the thirties and your first name was Buggsy but your last name wasn't Siegel, you'd better have a sense of style. A cop once asked Goldstein what name he went by.

"Buggsy," he said.

"Known by any other name?"

"Not that I know of," said Buggsy. Of course, this was a kind of joke. He was known by lots of other names: jerk, Jew, asshole, schmuck.

Over the years, Buggsy and the Kid pushed each other into crime the way friends always push each other from one dare to the next. He was there at the beginning, and Abe would make sure he was there at the end.

When they were twelve, Reles and Goldstein stopped going to school. What could it teach them? They instead took part-time jobs, Abe working for an engraver, Marty for a plumber. And they robbed: stores, cars, apartments. They were arrested. They were released. Their stock rose. On the block their friendship was admired as a partnership.

There were other guys around, too. Hundreds of them. You would see them on the corner, say hello, good-bye, that's it. Some were named for old gangsters, or for daring acts, or for no intelligible reason at all. Others were named for their physical deformities: Fatty, Big Head, Little Ears. Some would be your best friend for a day, a week, a month, then again fall into the background. Others you tried to help, like Joey Silver, a neighborhood kid who was always tagging after Reles and Goldstein. When Abe spoke about the future, the things he would do, Joey hung on every word. Joey was a cheering section, and the Kid liked having him around.

Just before he was sent up to Elmira, Reles got Joey a job with the Shapiro brothers. Three years later, when Abe started his own gang, Joey stayed with the Shapiros. But that was okay. It was expected. A job is a job. Besides, Joey was only running nickel-and-dime errands for the Shapiros. And if things ever got really bad, the Kid knew he could always turn to his old protégé for help. And things were bad now. A death sentence had been passed. So Abe asked Joey for a favor. "Tell me when Meyer and the other Shapiros go out together," he said. This way, the Kid would know when the hit was coming; he would also know when the Shapiro headquarters was unguarded, when he could stage his own guerrilla raids.

One night, as Reles, Goldstein, and George Defeo were hanging around the pool hall, the phone rang. Maybe Buggsy took it in the back room. As Defeo racked the balls, the Kid could hear Marty talking in low tones. He heard Marty say thank you, hang up. "That was Joey Silver," said Buggsy, reaching for his coat. "The Shapiros just went out."

Abe, Buggsy, and George parked a distance from the Shapiros' clubhouse. They walked to the Shapiros' parking lot. Beyond the trucks and sedans, the clubhouse, a squat building, sat in the dark, not a light anywhere. A car went by in the distance. Abe crept alongside one of the sedans. After taking a knife from his pocket, he drove the blade into a tire, releasing a sharp hiss of air, like the disapproving sigh of a parent, the Kid's mother, say, wearing a housedress, holding a brisket, shaking her head. "Why, Abie? Why?"

Across the lot, as Defeo watched the street, Buggsy tossed a rock at a truck. In the windshield shattering into a thousand tiny images, Buggsy might have seen the men spilling from the clubhouse behind him. He must have heard the gunshots and seen the sparks dancing off the pavement where the bullets hit. Buggsy made it to the corner, his face bloody, the tip of his nose shot off. Defeo was shaken

but untouched. Reles was the last to get away. He had been shot in the back, a bullet he would carry until the day he died.

As he ran, the Kid must have been thinking, Shit. Joey. Joey Silver. Cocksucker. Kike. Fucking bastard. Set us up. Chose the wrong gang. Better hope we don't live.

In the distance, Abe could hear an engine turning over, followed by the crunch of tires on broken glass as the Shapiros drove off. Meyer Shapiro went around Brownsville that night, looking for the Kid's girl. At last, spotting her, he called her to the car. He flashed a gun. "Get in," he said. The men in back slid over. Meyer drove to a deserted street. He dragged the girl from the car, beat her, raped her, beat her again. He left her in a field.

It was a bad night for the Kid—his own personal Night of Broken Glass. Still, the Shapiros had made a mistake. They had hurt Reles in every way possible, and still he was alive. The Kid spent the next several weeks, first in the hospital, then at Buggsy's, fighting to recover. When he again stepped into the street, he was thin, pale. If he was not a killer before, the Shapiros had made him into one. He went to see his old friend, Big Harry Strauss.

Harry lived in a brick house fronted by a narrow wood porch. "Come in," he said to Abe.

Abe told the story, his problems with the Shapiros, how he wanted to pay them back. "We'll run Brownsville and you can be a part of it," he said.

Though Pep normally stayed out of this kind of thing, what Meyer Shapiro had done to the girl—what had she ever done to him?—offended his sensibility. "Sure, I'll help," said Pep. "Just tell me what we do."

Reles and Buggsy then drove to East New York, where the sky opened and the air filled with garlic. After parking on Pacific Street, just off Eastern Parkway, they went into a *pasticceria*, a tiny shop where men drank cups of thick black coffee and studied race results in Italian-language papers. From behind the counter came a man, forty-five, maybe fifty, gray-haired, heavysset, a blue shirt with bone white buttons. He took the Kid's hand.

Louis Capone broke his nose years before, so now, when he looked at you, his nose seemed to be looking elsewhere. He had watery blue eyes. Very sympathetic. And the way he stood—back on his heels, stomach out—he looked like some old advice-giving chef. Capone's shop, over the years, had become a hangout for local thugs. They first came when they were kids. Louis fed them and they came back. Now, when Capone needed a favor, he called one of his tamed thugs. If he saw an especially promising kid, he would pass word to one of the more established gangsters in his circle—Alber Anastasia, Louis Lepke.

After feeding Reles and Goldstein—food is always of some comfort—Capone sent them to Sally Bar and Grill. "Frank Abbando and Happy Maione are down there," he said. "They're good kids. They have no love for the Shapiros. See them."

Of course, the Kid knew all about Maione and Abbando—they ran the Ocean Hill Hooligans, the toughest gang in East New York. Yet even here, on their own streets, they were second to the Shapiros. The Kid had actually met Abbando once before, up at Elmira, where Frank was doing time for robbery. The Kid used to watch Frank play baseball in the prison yard—shortstop. People said Frank was a very good ball player, that with a little dedication, he could probably make the Yankees or Giants. Some even said he got his nickname—the Dasher—on the base paths at Elmira. Others said he got the name early one morning in Brooklyn, when he was trying to shoot an enemy. When Frank's gun jammed, he was chased by his victim. Having lost him, Frank ran around the block, caught the man from behind, and shot him in back of the head. Hence: the Dasher. These men were different than the Brownsville Boys. They were the real thing. Gangsters. Killers. But what choice did the Kid have?

Sally's was a jukeboxy little bar on Euclid Avenue. Coming through the door, the Kid spotted the Dasher in back. He had small eyes, a high forehead, dark hair with a part as sharp as the spine of a book. He was thick necked. When he raised his head, a roll of skin gathered above his collar in back. Even in mug shots, his head is held high. And always that same smug, go-fuck-yourself smile. His biggest smile was saved for the worst times. When things got especially bad, when the cops came around asking questions, he would appear on the street with a suitcase, shake hands, look in windows, then gone, one week, two weeks, a month; then, when the heat was off, he would reappear—"The Dasher is back!" That night he would again be at Sally's, buying drinks, blowing money. "Hey, Frank," someone would say. "Where've you been?"

"On adventures," he might say, raising a glass.

"Hey, Frank," someone else would say. "Where'd ya get all the cash?"

"More adventures," he might add, looking at Happy.

Frank was always looking at Happy, seeing when he should and should not talk. Happy could give such instruction with his eyes alone. He was a little guy—five feet four—but charismatic as hell. He wore a size five shoe, the size of Chinese feet *after* binding. He was well dressed, wearing custom-made suits on even the most trivial errands. His black hair was slicked back—a dramatic backdrop for his dark, melancholy face. He was arrested thirty-one times before he was thirty-one. He knew everyone in the neighborhood and helped everyone he did not have to hurt. He loved to be out among them spending, talking, boasting, laughing. People came to him with stories. He was the best audience in Ocean Hill.

Happy listened carefully as the Kid told him about the Shapiros, what they had done to his girl, how they shot him and Buggsy, and also about his plans: shylocking, slot machines. "If we teamed up, we can run the Shapiros out for good," he said. Several drinks later, Buggsy and the Kid stumbled off, with a promise from Happy and the Dasher to meet the following night at a diner in Brownsville.

As Kid Twist and Buggsy made their way home in the early morning, they must have been satisfied with their progress; from the edge of defeat they had rallied, cobbling together a kind of army. As they turned to say good night, it's hard not to imagine Buggsy grabbing Abe's sleeve and saying, "Hey, Kid, nine P.M. at the diner tomorrow. Last one through the door pays. Agreed?"

One of the diners frequented by the Reles gang was on Livonia just off Pitkin. The restaurant occupied the ground floor of a four-story brick building. There was a long lunch counter, fronted by stools. The counter was polished to a shine. Behind the counter was a grill, which the cook scraped clean with a spatula. Beyond the counter were booths and tables. It always looked as though a rush had just ended in the diner, or else as if something were about to happen. The place was never more than half-full. For years it was owned by a family of Irish immigrants. Then, around 1927, this family, deciding to move on, put the place up for sale. My mother's grandfather pulled together some cash and bought the restaurant. Why he did this, I don't know. Owning a diner doesn't seem like the most obvious way to the American dream. Still, it did a decent business and still occupies a mythic place in our story, recalling a more jaunty, experimental period in family history. At one time the place must have had a name, but everyone, even my great-grandfather, just called it "the diner."

Soon after my mother's grandparents bought the place, they discovered it was a hangout for Jewish gangsters. In the future, these gangsters would come to be known as Murder Incorporated, and the diner would become a sort of shrine to their bravado. The gangsters had a regular booth in back. Often there were many people in this group, and another table had to be added. Louis Lepke himself once sat in the

corner of the booth, his back to the wall.

~~When he was old enough, my mother's uncle Abraham went to work in the diner. One night, before closing, Pittsburgh Phil came up behind my great-uncle, who was stacking dishes. "A big husky kid like you?" said Strauss. "Why you wasting your time doing ladies' work? You could make a nice penny running errands for me and the boys."~~

My uncle did not answer and instead went on stacking dishes. This upset my grandmother, who thought this might be taken by Strauss as a sign of disrespect. "That man would kill you as soon as look at you," she told me recently. "I was positive Abraham was going to wind up dead."

She was right. Several years later Abraham was killed in combat in the Second World War, the same result in a larger cause. The men in Murder Incorporated, they too were willing to die for a cause. They were just selfish enough to know what their cause was—themselves. They were not fool-suckers enough to die for something as vague and abstract as freedom or liberty. Of course, after V-E Day, when the particulars of Hitler's war became clear, these feelings would change.

Around this time, my mother's mother married Benjamin Eisenstadt, my grandfather. Though he had passed the bar exam, work did not come easily for lawyers, especially Jewish lawyers, during the Depression. After trying just about everything else, Ben took a job as a counterman at the diner. If you go to the house in Flatbush where my grandmother still lives, you will see on the wall a newspaper clipping from that time: the photo, Ben in apron with coffeepot, is accompanied by text that reads, "If you want a cup of joe *and* a legal brief, come see Benjamin Eisenstadt." After several years in the diner, my grandfather, tired of countertop sugar dispensers and how they crusted over (he found this unsanitary) invented the sugar packet, which finally freed him from the service industry. Much later he came up with Sweet'n Low, but that was far in the future, when my grandfather had already become a very different kind of man.

My mother's recollections of the diner are vague, but my grandmother still dreams about the place. When I told her of my interest in writing about the restaurant and also about the gangsters and the table in back, her face clouded over. "They'll kill you," she said. "These men, they're not like you. They'll kill a boy like you."

When I pointed out that these men—Reles, Strauss, Goldstein, Maione, Abbandando—were long dead, she shook her head and said, "They'll kill you." That's when I realized that to my grandmother, and to a lot of other people, too, the Jewish gangsters who came to power in the twenties and thirties were less like men than weather systems, wild and unpredictable and unstoppable by a small thing like death. "I beg you not to ask any questions about these men," she went on. "They hear everything and will enjoy killing you."

One night in 1931, at nine P.M. all the men whom Abe had called were seated at a booth in back of the diner, all but George Defeo and the Dasher. There was Pittsburgh Phil, who would soon be known as the most efficient killer in Brooklyn; Happy Maione, who sneered long before Elvis; Bugsy Goldstein whose mother called him Mot'l; Walter Sage, who said he stole to support his study of the Talmud; and Gangy Cohen, a huge tank of a man who talked fast and clear, as though his words were connected by hyphens. Now, when I think of these men and their nicknames, each carefully chosen and solemnly given, I imagine them as colorful, gun-toting action figures.

"Would-somebody-please-tell-me-please-where-is-this-fellow-they-call-the-Dasher?" asked Gangy Cohen. "Where-the-hell-is-this-fellow?"

A window near the table was open, and through the window came the sound of the street: cars, kid

on stoops, mothers calling sons home. "Look, I've been thinking about this and decided we need to kill everyone associated with the Shapiros," said the Kid. "If we don't kill them all, they kill us. And listen: Meyer and Joey Silver. Those are special. I want to be there for those."

Pep, who was seated next to the Kid, nodded. Strauss was tall and well built, with wide-set eyes, dark hair, high cheekbones, a long nose, thin lips, and small teeth. When the waitress came over, he ordered first. He always ordered first, and always sturgeon, the most expensive item on the menu. "Gimme a plate of sturgeon," he would say proudly. Though Strauss was not yet rich, sturgeon was something he had to have, something his parents could never afford. The meat of the sturgeon was white and soft and came apart on his fork. For Strauss, one bite of sturgeon took the place of all his father's morality. The other men ordered coffee, hamburgers, brisket sandwiches, doughnuts.

"Hey, fellas," said the Dasher, coming through the door. "Did you get the news?" When the men looked up, Dasher could probably tell they had not heard and must have felt the thrill of delivering bad news. "I heard it coming over," he said, stripping off his coat. "George Defeo caught it."

And that was all. Abe and Marty had spent much of the last few months with George, but in the end it must have been like hearing about a stranger. All they got was the one cold fact: George is dead. But they did not see him fall. They did not see him backed against a wall on Atlantic Avenue. They did not see the pattern the exit wounds made on the bricks. The cops would be all over this one, so they would not even attend the funeral. "We'll have to look for someone to take his place," said the Kid.

A long time later, Reles and Goldstein probably went to see the tombstone at Mount Zion Cemetery. George Defeo. Born 1910; Died 1930. And that was it. Nowhere in there was there any hint of the real George, how well he played pool, how he wore his hat.

The men sat in the back booth until closing. They talked in hushed tones. Sometimes there was long silence, somebody mumbling, followed by an explosion of laughter. At such moments the back of the diner seemed to fill with teeth. Those moments made my great-grandmother nervous, but the men in the back tipped well, and they made the idea of the diner ever being robbed a kind of joke.

At the end of the meal, the Kid went over assignments, sending men like soldiers across the neighborhood. He was preparing for war; he wanted to fight the Shapiros in the street, so everyone could see the corpses. George Defeo was the first casualty of that war, but the real fighting would not come until the summer, and it would be the first test of Kid Twist and his gang.

The Moderns

WHEN ABE RELES and his gang went to war with the Shapiros, it was a rite of passage—for the Italians, it was making your bones; for the Jews, it was a kind of underworld bar mitzvah, like becoming a man. And it was yet another installment in the long history of gang warfare in New York City, which stretches clear back to the eighteenth century, when a bad night out meant drinking knockout drops, getting blackjacked and rolled, then waking, hours later, on a broken-down ship bound for China, the captain saying, “Work or swim.”

Each kid who makes his way in the city’s underworld, whatever his background, inherits this tradition as even the lowliest bush league baseball player inherits the mantle of Gehrig and Ruth. It’s why Reles named himself after Kid Twist Zweibach, a gangster who was killed one night in 1908 by Louis the Lump in Coney Island; why, in the 1920s, Arthur Flegenheimer, a Jewish kid from the Bronx, called himself Dutch Schultz after a German gangster from a century before.

For living gangsters, the stories of dead gangsters, their exploits and failures, the way they died, is the only history that really amounts to much. It’s a story that most ambitious gangsters are trying to make themselves a part of, a story that begins over two hundred years ago in the Five Points and the Bowery, the toughest, most storied slums in New York, and follows the great gangs that dwelled there: the Bowery Boys, who fought just north of Grand Street, on Bunker Hill; the Dead Rabbits, who were sometimes joined by Hell-Cat Maggie, a ferocious female gangster who filed her teeth to points; the True Blue Americans, who wore stovepipe hats and ankle-length frock coats; the Daybreak Boys, who worked the docks, killing vagrants and nightwatchmen, pillaging ships and warehouses; the Plug Uglies, who wore oversize plug hats, which, before fighting, they filled with wool and leather, fashioning an early version of the sports helmet; the Buckoos; the Hookers; the Swamp Angels; the American Guards; the Slaughter Housers; the Short Tails; the Shirt Tails; the Patsy Conroys; the Border Gang; the O’Connel Guards; the Atlantic Guards; the Forty Thieves; the Roach Guards.

And later: the White Hands, a Brooklyn gang that stole across the Brooklyn Bridge each night, terrorizing downtown neighborhoods; the Whyos; the Hudson Dusters; the Gophers; the Potashes; the Chichesters; and the Stable Gang, who hung out in a barn on Washington Street in Greenwich Village, just a few blocks from where I now live.

Going back through police files, or the pages of old books, you can find pictures of many of the early century gangsters. They have names like Red Rocks Farrell, Slops Connolly, Big Josh Hines, and Gooey Corcoran. Their faces are dark and tight, their features pressed like fingers in a fist. They probably did not have what we would today call a balanced diet. They were surprisingly small: a hundred years ago the average New York gangster was not more than five feet three or heavier than 135 pounds.

If you go back further, to the time of President Ulysses S. Grant and the Tweed ring, the pictures give way to police drawings. Looking at these hastily made sketches—a line here, a shadow there—it’s hard to believe in the actual, day-to-day life of such men. They look like characters in a fairy tale.

And going back before that, to the decades preceding the Civil War, you are left with only a few

legends—the creation myths of New York’s underworld, stories as mysterious and full of portent as those in Genesis. The characters in such stories stand forever behind reputation-minded criminals like Reles and Goldstein, a backdrop against which their most daring crimes are cast.

In his 1927 book, *The Gangs of New York*, which is really the Old Testament of the New York underworld, Herbert Asbury wrote about one of these early gangsters:

The greatest of the Bowery Boys, the most imposing figure in all the history of the New York gangs, was a leader who flourished in the 40s, and captained the gangsters in the most important of their punitive and marauding expeditions into the Five Points. His identity remains unknown, and there is excellent reason to believe that he may be a myth, but vast tales of his prowess and of his valor in the fights against the Dead Rabbits and the Plug Uglies have come down through the years, gaining incident and momentum as they came. Under the simple sobriquet of Mose he has become a legendary figure of truly heroic proportions, at once the Samson, the Achilles and the Paul Bunyon of the Bowery. And beside him, in the lore of the street, marches the diminutive figure of his faithful friend and counselor, by the name Syksey, who is said to have coined the phrase, “hold the butt,” an impressive plea for the remains of a dead cigar.

When Jews began arriving in New York in numbers in the middle of last century, they at once found themselves among the gangs. On the Lower East Side, in rickety tenements, on narrow streets, in brick alleys and crowded warrens, they came face-to-face with Irish thugs. Late at night, when the only light came from the moon or a flickering gas lamp, the streets would fill with toughs who moved among the newcomers. Some preyed on immigrants, Italians and Jews, who could often be tricked out of what little they had; those who could not be tricked could be bullied; those who could not be bullied or tricked could be killed. In those days, before the spread of handguns, an old immigrant would often be found in some dark alley, his skull smashed, his pockets turned out, a timesaving message to scavengers. Nothing more here.

To some Jews still trying to find their way through the streets, this was just a continuation of the past—more of the same harassment they had known in Europe. There was a real anti-Semitism in the air, a hatred often dressed as civic pride. Frank Moss, who worked with the preacher William Pankhurst, claimed he was trying to clean up the city when he wrote of his visit to the Jewish slums:

Ignorance, prejudice, stubborn refusal to yield to American ideas, religious habits and requirements, clannishness and hatred and distrust of Christians; these combine to hinder any device for raising the condition of the poor of the great Jewish district . . . there is no part of the world in which human parasites can be found in more overpowering numbers. . . . The criminal instincts that are so often found naturally in the Russian and Polish Jews come to the surface in such ways as to warrant the opinion that these people are the worst element in the entire makeup of New York City.

The strongest of the immigrants took such words as a challenge. Jews were bullied in America, but in America Jews could fight back. They were not confined, in a legal sense anyway, to any particular place or profession—they were free to be criminals. And they had an advantage that Irish gangsters, many of whom were born in the United States, did not quite understand: the Jews had little to lose. Nearly two million of them left Eastern Europe in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, washing up here like driftwood, with nothing but a few names, a few riddles. How the hell do we get out of the Lower East Side?

And the pogroms of Europe had taught them something. Some it taught how to die; others it taught how not to die. When he was an old man, Meyer Lansky, who came to the Lower East Side in 1911, talked to Uri Dan, an Israeli reporter, about the pogroms that swept through his hometown of Grodno, Poland. Lansky talked about those who threw up their hands, who saw the situation as hopeless, punishment from God; but he talked about others, too, a new generation determined to fight back.

“One man—I don’t remember his name, but I wish I did—held a meeting in my grandfather’s house,” said Lansky. “ ‘Jews,’ he shouted. ‘Why do you just stand around like stupid sheep and let them

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