

SACRED FARE

I guess the last thing even close to a paying job that I had—besides three times smuggling oxycontin pills on overnight flights to Amsterdam, thousands of them surgical-taped all over my body—was driving a taxi cab on Miami Beach. Sometimes on busy weekends, if I didn't park and nap a few hours in the back seat, I could pull in a hundred dollars, maybe one-fifty. Most of it coming from airport runs, or party kids on South Beach, club-hopping by taxi up or down Collins Avenue, Ocean Drive or Washington. Occasionally some half-drunk guy in a tight black t-shirt and sporting a fancy watch might even pass me a fifty or a hundred and then just hop out of the cab after his sexy little girl-treat, either forgetting his change or pretending to be some high roller. In guys like that I always recognized parts of my ancient self. *Can't bullshit a bullshitter*, I've always said. I should have branded that line when I had the chance.

Mostly the job sucked, particularly battling the Miami traffic, beach traffic, and the cars, more times than not, had shit air-conditioning and drivers' seats that wrenched your lower back into throbbing pulp. For most of the ten- to twelve-hour shift, my ass and back and thighs would sweat and stick to the worn vinyl of the seat. Paying for gas was no grand prize, and three quarters of the time on call behind the wheel I remained aware that I was still the son of a man who ran a small fleet of New York City taxi medallions. That I was of a people who owned the fucking cars, not drove them for meter clicks and people's extra nickels.

One night I remember best from my cab-driving times eight or nine years back was this ridiculously hot and humid September night, even by Miami standards. As usual, I was stuck to the seat, and *motherfucking* the traffic, smoking one cigarette after another down to the filter,

when the dispatcher broke in on the radio for a pick-up at the orthodox synagogue a couple of blocks off Alton Road. I mean the black-hats-and-long-black-overcoat-even-on-hottest-Miami-day-ever orthodox. Guys with side curls and bird nest beards, whose body stink I'd be able to smell all the way through the partition. I could never figure out how they walked around south Florida dressed for January in Minnesota.

“Roger that,” I chirped into the radio. Putrid tip, I figured. If any tip at all.

Five minutes later I pulled up in front of the synagogue and two guys, dressed and looking basically as I first imagined, climbed into the cab. The older one, with a mostly gray beard, spoke the address in a firm voice with a New York Yiddish accent. Even with my eyes closed I would have recognized him as a Jew. Best I could tell, there was nothing about my face or graying-blond hair or faded Hawaiian shirt that easily identified me as one. With these kinds of super-Jews, and their wrath-of-God attitude of superiority, I preferred it that way. I didn't need them to point out that I was a sinner.

I set the meter, said “You got it, guys,” and swung a u-turn northbound toward their destination. That's when I realized my photo and name—*Larry Weinrip*—were posted on my ID badge below the meter. Immediately I began fiddling with the A/C vent and the FM radio, hoping to keep my face, but particularly my name, concealed.

We were heading up Pine Tree Drive, a divided four-lane lined with mansions, one more obscene and opulent than the next, when the younger one leaned into the partition slider, which I'd forgotten to close after my last fare paid. I could see him hovering there in the rearview mirror, and for an instant our eyes met. Even after I looked away, I could still feel his gaze burning on my back as I drove. My face and name on the badge lighting-up like a theater

marquee each time the cab rode under a streetlamp or caught the glare of headlights from a car behind us.

“What’s up, guy?” I said. I felt like quick-slamming the slider shut, but I was too polite, too reliant on the job and its meager stream of cash, to risk any significant customer complaints.

“You need something, buddy?”

“Weinrip’s your last name?” He pronounced the *W* like a *V*.

Jesus, I thought. *Here it comes*.

I hesitated as I slowed the cab to a stop at a four-way. “Yes.” I was hoping the conversation would end there.

“You Jewish, Weinrip?” He sounded borderline ecstatic as he asked.

At first I didn’t know how to answer, or if I even should. I certainly wouldn’t measure as a Jew in a line-up beside these two guys. And was it really any of their goddamned business, this pair of fucking twelfth-century *kockers* in sweaty overcoats?

“Yes,” I said and accelerated through the stop sign after a BMW and a Jaguar navigated the intersection first and disappeared on their fancy-ass way.

“Larry Weinrip,” he said, his voice melodious with approval.

I glanced again in the rearview and could still see his thin bearded face, the oversized black yarmulke that stretched like a crown from his hairline and covered the entire top of his head. He might have been bald or shaved on top, like I’d seen with lots of these guys, but it was hard to tell in the half-darkness. One thing I’ve always been proud of was the full-sprout of dirty-blonde hair that covered my own crown.

“Larry Weinrip, that’s me.” I made sure to pronounce my *W* the regular way.

Just then the other guy, with the nearly all-gray beard, chimed in. “You have a Jewish—a Hebrew name, Weinrip?”

“I already told you I’m Jewish.”

“Not a family name, a given name. The name how they called you at your bar mitzvah.”

I was driving now at a near-crawl, in the left lane, while a three-car parade—a Mercedes, an Audi, and a Range Rover—all zoomed past us on the right. Their red taillights glowing like demon eyes.

“I remember my bar mitzvah!” I said, trying now to impress them, to somehow measure up. I was wearing shorts and could feel the back of my thighs sticking tighter to the vinyl seat.

“And so you have a Jewish name,” the older guy said.

“Yes, it’s Lazar.”

“Lazar,” the younger one said. Now that he’d gotten my attention, he reclined back onto his side of the back seat. “Do you know what this name means?”

Without hesitation, I said: “The one that God has helped.” Soon as I spoke the words I thought of the places I’d been, the place I was right now and where I was headed. If any signs remained that I’d ever been helped by God— even but a single time. More than anything, I wanted to light a cigarette, but the dispatch didn’t allow us to smoke with fares in the car. Forget losing this shitty job, smoking with these two in the cab would have brought even more plague down onto my bones.

“So you have studied, Lazar,” the older man said.

“I’ve just always known what the name means. Since I was young.”

“I mean studied the *Torah*, Lazar.”

“Not really. A little bit, as a kid in Hebrew school.”

By now we’d passed 31st Street and were less than ten minutes from their drop-off a little beyond forty-seventh, something I was looking forward to, but also hoping wouldn’t arrive too soon. I didn’t know why. Usually I wanted my fares gone and have some time alone until the dispatcher called, to nap or smoke or stop for a Diet Coke, or until I decided to cruise the South Beach avenues for pick-ups. With these guys, I suddenly felt attached, connected somehow. Like we were but three green leaves growing on God’s massive Jew tree.

“Probably forty, forty-five years ago,” I said.

The younger one with the wide yarmulke peeked back through the partition. I could see a slice of his face in the rearview, but I could feel his earnest eyes probing, as if my lot behind the wheel of this Miami Beach cab were of gravest concern. “Did you ever do *tefillin*, Lazar?”

“Never.”

“Never, Lazar?”

“Not even once.”

“*Tefillin* is a very good thing,” the older one said. “For the heart of a man, and for his mind. To create balance.”

“Would you like to do *tefillin* with us, Lazar?” the younger one asked.

At first I thought he was joking, but I knew *tefillin* wasn’t a topic men like these would ever joke about. Then I imagined myself with those little leather-wrapped square boxes around my arm and attached to my forehead, bobbing forward and back as I prayed beyond my upheld hands. I couldn’t believe I would even consider *davening* with these guys.

Then again, I needed any help I could get.

“Right here in the cab?” I asked. By now my legs were soaked with sweat.

“Pull to the side. We’re in no rush.”

Up ahead I could see the spread of traffic lights at 41st Street, a Chevron gas station to the left, a lit-up Walgreen’s sign marking the entrance to their parking lot to the right. Palm trees swayed in the breeze, blowing off the ocean a few blocks east. For a second I focused on the tallest one and thought about Jerusalem, even though I’d never been to Israel. Since I was a Jew, even a failed one, I knew I could travel there any time I wanted and they’d welcome me.

The Holy Land, filled with guys like the two sitting in the back of my cab, and maybe even guys like me.

“All right,” I said.

“Drive into the Walgreen’s here,” the older one said. “And park somewhere away from other cars.”

“Keep the meter running,” said the younger guy. “It’s ok with us.”

I couldn’t believe I was obeying, but I parked in a far corner of the lot, against a hedge of tall ficus trees, and kept the meter ticking and the engine running. We all got out of the car and gathered by the driver’s side door where the hedges met at a right angle. Both men left their overcoats in the back of the cab and were now only wearing white dress shirts and black vests, their sleeves rolled past their forearms. Except for their yarmulkes and the prayer shawl fringes streaming out from the gap between their shirts and trousers, they could have passed for bearded banquet waiters. Best I could tell there wasn’t a single dot of sweat soaking though either of their white shirts.

As I stood there in my shorts and sandals, happy to feel some air on my sweaty thighs, I realized I needed to piss. I'd sucked down two Diet Cokes in the past three hours, and I reeked of sweat and nicotine.

"Give me your arm, Lazar," the older guy said. Without my even moving he gently grabbed my left arm and pressed a Hebrew-lettered wooden box to the inside of my biceps. Next he started wrapping the leather strap around my elbow, down my forearm, then in a weave around my left hand and fingers. He prayed as he assembled the arm *tefillin*, then quickly attached a similar black box, with a shorter leather strap, to the top of my forehead, pressed into my thick tuft of hair.

As the older man continued to chant his ancient prayer, the younger one told me to pray. To thank the one God for delivering me and redeeming me. Pleasant thoughts I repeated to myself, in simple English, as I bobbed like a skinny palm tree in a hurricane wind, needing like hell to piss, and smelling the stench of my own skin. After a short time with my eyes closed, I managed to forget these things—and a lot other things, too.

"The breeze feels cool," I said.

"*HaShem*," a voice replied. I wasn't sure whose.

All these years later, as I lie here on this sand, and remember that night, I will forever swear, down to my bones, that each *tefillin* just materialized in the older man's hands. One at a time, they just—*became*. Maybe it was disbelief or even holy terror that was blinding me, but I can't ever recall either of those guys opening a satchel or sacred trove. Those little boxes just appeared, ready for my skin and skull. Meant solely for me as I swayed in the breeze and prayed for even one better day.

Soon as we finished, each *tefillin* stripped away, the three of us climbed back inside the cab without speaking. I gently closed my door. Compared to the heat of the night, the car now seemed refreshingly cool, those vinyl seats a little less sticky. I could even wait a few more minutes to relieve my bladder, find a free john right after I delivered my kind shepherds to their destination. I still had a good four hours to drive that night.

“Goodbye, Lazar,” they said when we reached their place, and paid their fare with a pair of twenties. They told me to keep the change.