

THE PROMISE

Alex Gordon

For my mother

The Mountains of Lebanon

I'm flat on my back staring up at the sky. Tears of pain roll down my cheeks, stopped only by the dirt on my face. There's blood coming from my mouth, and I feel numb, frozen, unable to move. How did this happen? How did I get here? Hell, I could be dying! No, don't go there. Think of something good. Something bright. Then I remember, as always, Compo Beach.

PART I

Compo Beach

Growing up, I thought I found heaven, my summers in Connecticut on Compo Beach. Endless summers, filled with laughter, adventures, and time with my mother. Nothing could hurt me. Of that I was sure.

Our house was on Fairfield Avenue, about half a block down from the ocean, and the beach was my backyard, my playground. I was always exploring and finding new ways to get into trouble. That was never too hard for me. It kinda came naturally. My mother would sometimes ground me and even lock me in my room.

Now I knew I was guilty of many infractions and misdemeanors, but being put on death row, to be locked up in my room, felt too severe. It just didn't seem to fit the crime. So I would crawl out of my window and run down the block toward the beach. Sometimes my escape was successful, but sometimes my mother would catch me. That's when our neighbors would see a familiar sight: a little naked boy running to the beach with his mother yelling and chasing after him. All I wanted to do was jump into the ocean. I could play in it. I could fight with it. It was wild and alive!

Most evenings my mother and I would come to the end of the jetty, sit down, and watch the sunset. We didn't have to say much. She would have her arm around me, or I'd lay my head in her lap. We'd watch the sun disappear behind the waves and welcome in the night. It was one of my favorite things to do.

But this evening, I was by myself. It was dusk, and I made my way to the jetty. I hopped and jumped over each rock until I reached the end. I passed by the fishermen who were casting off for baby blues. I called them snappers. The water was dancing, and all the snappers were fighting for the bait at the

end of the fishermen's reels. It looked as if the fish were jumping straight into their buckets. They didn't even need a rod! It almost felt unfair, but a lot of fun to watch.

I sat on the last rock of the jetty and watched the sun set over the waves. The waves were looking rough, rougher than usual. They crashed onto the jetty and sprayed water all over my naked body. I watched and watched until the sky grew dark. Then I stood up and looked out to the ocean, and the light of the moon showed how vast and never ending the waves seemed to be. The water looks angry tonight, I thought. But that wouldn't stop me. I gathered up my confidence, dove in, and began my journey.

I started swimming out to sea with my strong little arms battling the rough, dark waters. Then I stopped for a minute to find my bearings. There in the distance, about a hundred yards out, the moonlight was shining right on my buoy. I always knew my buoy was out there, I just didn't know where, so I would keep on swimming until I saw it. I never turned back, not once.

The light of the moon reflecting off the waves was like a compass to me. I put my head down and started to swim with more purpose toward my buoy. I grabbed her, wrapped my legs around her, and held her tight. I always made a promise to myself to never let her go. She was my anchor, my mother, and made me feel safe. Nothing could harm me as long as I held her.

During the day, boats would pass by, and the men steering them would look in astonishment at this little boy holding onto the buoy. They'd always ask if I needed assistance, and I'd smile and wave them off. But on this evening, the waves were huge. They crashed down on me as I held tighter onto the buoy. I wasn't afraid though. All I wanted to do was hold onto the buoy and bob, bob, bob. The strong waves lifted me and the buoy high in the air, and then we'd crash underwater. I would surface, catch my breath, and go under the water again. It was like a roller coaster ride! But then the highest wave of all lifted me, caught me in its crest, and rolled me with it,

over and over. I couldn't fight it, I couldn't breathe, I could only let myself be tossed and thrown.

When I emerged again, I was lying on the beach, looking up into the dark sky. I was gasping for air, coughing, and spitting up blood. A gust of wind blew some dirt on my face. I was scared, cold, and alone.

The Mountains of Lebanon

Blood again, more of it this time, and I still can't stop coughing. Funny thing to notice while you might be dying: nobody's coming. I'm not even from here, for fuck's sake. Somewhere between the Zionist and the super Jew and whatever the hell I've turned into, there's gotta be an origin story. Something from childhood, maybe. Some actual anti-Semitism I lived through, not just read about. I go looking for it, and one memory comes up first.

The Bully

I was fifteen years old and walking down the school corridor. Kids were strolling together and laughing. One student was having trouble opening his locker, while others were rushing to get to class. In the middle of the corridor were three big guys, bully types, pushing other students to the side as they approached. They shoved me from behind. "Hey, Jew boy! Hey, Heeb!" one of the bullies yelled at me. "How you doin' bagel-head?" the second bully asked. All three of them laughed, and a few of the students watching the altercation joined in and laughed nervously too. "We heard you're trying out for the football team, Rabbi!" Laughter erupted again. I pondered a bit and decided to use reason. "Well, my name's not Jew boy, my name's not Rabbi, and although very funny, my name is not bagel-head either. If you have a problem with that, maybe we should discuss this more after class in the cafeteria." The bullies were elated! They looked at each other, snickered, and

nodded their heads in agreement. “We’ll see you after school,” one of them said, as he walked by and thumped me with his shoulder.

My head was down in defeat as I repeated what he had just said. “We’ll? Oh crap.” A scrappy friend of mine approached me. “Wow, that was kinda scary!” “You think?” I said with a tinge of sarcasm. “Yeah. But all you have to do is tell him you’re not Jewish and they’ll leave you alone. It worked for me!” I looked at him with disbelief and disgust. “I should be hitting you,” I said, “for being stupid—and a coward.” I pointed my finger into his chest and walked away. He might have been scrappy on the outside, but he was weak on the inside—and I vowed that would never be me.

When class ended, I walked into the cafeteria, where eight boys were waiting for me with the biggest bully out in front smiling. What I had thought would be an unfair match with three guys now looked like a great deal! As always, a bunch of kids were also hanging out, waiting for the fight. In the crowd of students I noticed my scrappy little buddy, who half smiled and then put his head down in shame and fear. I wasn’t getting any help from him today. The only help I had was my chutzpah. I wasn’t sure what that meant exactly, but it was something I always heard my parents say: “Alex might be small and frail, but he sure has chutzpah!”

Showing no fear, I looked over at the boys and smiled. “Looks like I have my work cut out for me, boys. No problem. Let’s just make a nice line so I can take care of you guys one at a time. It’s only fair, y’know.”

I just didn’t care. I didn’t give a shit. I guess that was my chutzpah. They would have to kill me because I would never stop. It didn’t make a difference how many there were or how big they were. My resolve was more powerful. That was my edge and strength, and nothing could beat it. I was Jewish! Being Jewish defined who I was. Without it I’d be nothing. It was a loyal best friend that was always there for me, and I was in debt to my best friend. That was

my secret sauce. Nothing could break me. Ever! They would soon find that out. I then closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and called on my alter ego.

His name was SexyHeeb. He had been a boxer during the Holocaust and a fighter in the death camps. That's how he survived Auschwitz. The SS guards would have the prisoners fight against each other and bet on them. It was a fight to the death. If you didn't die in the ring, the loser would either be shot or immediately taken to the gas chamber. Before every fight, the two Jewish fighters would meet in the middle of the ring, hug each other, and pray, as the drunken guards made their bets and cried out for blood. At first, SexyHeeb refused to fight. But the SS guards told him if he didn't, they would line up ten prisoners and shoot them in the head. They also informed him that if he didn't fight his hardest, the same outcome would occur. He agreed to fight.

Through the ashes of the crematoriums, he rose, forged in fire. He had tattoos all over his body. One on his forearm—where the Nazis had placed numbers on Jews like cattle—read in Hebrew, “NEVER AGAIN.” The tattoo on his chest read MENSCH in Hebrew letters, and a Star of David was over his heart. This was one badass Jew you did not want to mess with! I was just this skinny kid, but I aspired to be like him.

SexyHeeb was my hero. He was my confidant, my inner strength. And anytime I felt challenged, scared, or in trouble, SexyHeeb would appear. He always had my back, which made me feel like a lion—and he was with me now.

I slowly opened my eyes and looked over at the bullies. They looked a little nervous and started to back away. I smiled, with my hands clenched in fists. “Ready, fellas?” I asked, as SexyHeeb started to walk toward them.

I'm strutting down the street with the biggest smile a boy could have. My shirt is ripped and disheveled. I have a huge shiner on my left eye, and some blood is running down from my mouth. I walk into my home where my mom

is in the kitchen stirring a big pot of matzo ball soup. She turns to her boy and lets out a gasp! She inspects my wounds and then looks at me, standing there proudly in all my glory with my black eye, fat lip, and a huge smile. My mother can only shake her head. “Oy gevalt,” she moans. “What now?” Those boys never bothered me again.

The Mountains of Lebanon

I’m lying on the ground delirious, with blood coming out of my mouth. I’m choking on dirt, making it difficult to breathe. As I lie here, looking for answers, I think, No, that wasn’t it. That wasn’t anti-Semitism. It was just boys being boys, fighting and messing around. I was raised in New York City, Manhattan. If that’s not the true melting pot, I don’t know what is!

I cough again as more blood sprays from my mouth. What the hell, I’m fucking dying here! Talk about ass-backward decisions, why did I do this! I had a life back in New York—good friends, good times—I used to date a Knicks City Dancer for Chrissake!

I look up into the sky, and my Knick City dancer is standing above me. She looks down at me in dismay, shakes her pom-poms, and then jumps in the air while yelling, “Go team!” Her image freezes in midair. I shake my head a bit and then remember, I even beat out Michael Jordan for her affections!

The Knicks City Dancer

My friend Jake had an older brother, Tommy, who was known for his wild parties that I’d happily attend. It was at one such party that I met my sweet dancer. She was eighteen and saving her money from dancing to go to college. I told her I was eighteen too, out of school, and seriously searching for what to do next. Well, the “out of school” part was kinda true, since I was out more days than in.

On this particular night, I was home. My parents were out and I was waiting for a pizza I had ordered and planning to meet my girl later on. That's when the phone call came. She was calling to tell me that Michael Jordan had just called her. "What? Who? Bullshit!" I yelled. Why would the idol of my life be calling my girl? "Yeah!" she said. She informed me that he was in town hangin' out with Ahmad Rashad, who was dating the captain of the Knicks City Dancers. They had asked her to join them over at his hotel to have drinks and hang out. "They obviously can't go out in public because they'll be mobbed," she said, in a miserable attempt to convince me how innocent the whole thing was. I dropped my head down, knowing it was many things, but innocent wasn't one of them.

But then the good news came. Jordan said he'd give me a front row ticket to tomorrow's playoff game and a pair of Air Jordans with his signature on it, knowing I was his most ardent fan. Hmm, I said to myself as my mind drifted off.

There I am in the front row of the Knicks playoff game! I'm all decked out in my Michael Jordan gear from head to toe. I even have my Bulls hat on sideways on my head. I am one cool-looking dude! I mean, my feet, or should I say my Air Jordans with his signature on it, are touching the wood! I've arrived, dammit! A couple of Wall Street guys are standing on each side of me and look at me confused. How on earth did a guy like me get the best seat in the house? I finally break the uncomfortable silence and yell out, "Michael Jordan is fucking my girlfriend!" The Wall Street guys laugh and high five each other as I stand between them. I'm staring straightforward with a beaten, defeated, and dumbfounded look on my face.

Shaking my head to erase this bad dream, I yelled into the phone, "Listen! I don't want the tickets or the sneakers. What kinda guy wants a pair of sneakers that has some other guy's name written on them anyway! But if you wanna go, then you should go. Just know that our relationship will change dramatically!"

Confused and upset, she asked me, “How on earth would our relationship change?” Begrudgingly, I said, “Honey child, you’re dating a Jewish guy who is seriously pondering what to do next, and you’re talking about fucking the greatest athlete of our time! Things are gonna change!” I told her I had to hang up, but I let her know if she wanted to go, I understood. Frustrated, I headed to the bathroom to find solace. I slammed down the toilet seat and shut the door.

I’m on the throne staring ahead with a blank stare. Why does this shit always happen to me? I remember when I was courting her. She was dating another fella at the time. It was wintertime and I told her I was going to wait outside her house come rain or snow for one hundred days until she was mine. The next day I recruited one of my friends and bought a Polaroid camera. I then packed a bunch of different shirts into a duffel bag and headed out. We set up a photo shoot in front of McDonald’s on 71st and Broadway, across the street from her apartment. I kept changing shirts as my friend snapped photos of me. The next day I dropped off one of the shots with her doorman and wrote Day 1 on the back. By Day 3, she was mine! But that was then, and now was Michael Jordan. I felt deflated and heartbroken.

Just then the doorbell rang. At least my pizza had arrived. I could drown my tears in pepperoni. “Comingggg,” I slowly yelled. I opened the door with my head down, looking for cash in my pants. Then I looked up at the delivery boy in shock and disbelief. There standing in front of me was my Knicks City dancer—in full gear!

“I would never go,” she said. “I’m with the home team!” She then shook her pom-poms as we embraced in a meaningful hug. And as I held her, I imagined myself jumping from the foul line and dunking the ball over Jordan. “Not in my home court!” I yelled, and let out a thunderous roar!

I never took my sweet dancer to meet my mother, who was fervently praying I’d meet a nice Jewish girl. Despite her prayers, none of my New York

girls had belonged to the tribe. Far from it. And none was farther than the Admiral's daughter.

The Admiral's Daughter

I opened the back door to her apartment and quietly tiptoed down a hall. I'd been drinking beer all night. That's what me and my high school friends did, almost every night of the week. At 4 a.m., I thought it would be a great idea to stop by my girlfriend's house. It also happened to be the house of her father, Admiral Hercules Steele.

The image I had of him was a stoic, proper man in a navy uniform covered with medals. Kind of like what a dictator might wear, even if he's never been to war. But I was sure Admiral Steele earned every single medal. He came from poor means and had led a life of accomplishment, not to mention all he gave to community and through service. With his piercing blue eyes, he had a very aristocratic, Waspy look to him. Admiral Hercules Steele, named after the Roman god known for his superhuman strength, also sat on the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Needless to say, he was a pretty intimidating dude.

I got to my girlfriend's bedroom door, slowly opened it, and crawled into bed with her. We started moving around under the sheets.

Admiral Hercules Steele was also a Rhodes scholar, to add insult to injury—especially for me, a guy who'd been thrown out of 13 schools! I guess you could say I had a well-rounded education, but it kinda paled in comparison. I wasn't sure he liked me, I thought, as his daughter and I moved together more aggressively.

Some time later, I was woken up by noises I heard in the next room. I looked over at the clock on the nightstand and it read 6 a.m. I tapped my girl's shoulder and asked if her parents were going somewhere. She moaned and whispered her father was going to Washington. She then buried her face into the pillow. I nodded, accepted that answer, and put my head back down.

A second later I picked my head up and started to nudge her again, annoying her. "Is your mother joining him?" I asked. "She is," she said. I was concerned that her mother would come into her room to use the bathroom to get ready. She said her mom had never done that before. She then cradled herself in my arms. Satisfied with that response, I put my head down on the pillow, kissed her head, and closed my eyes.

A light went on under the door. It was the hallway light, waking us up. We opened our eyes, looked at each other in bed, and at the same time said "shit!" Nervously, my girl told me to go hide in the bathroom. I tried to make an argument that her mother might use the bathroom and that I should hide under the bed instead. But she was adamant. She said her mother had never done that before and I should go hide in the bathroom. Without any more time to argue, I took my naked ass and quickly tiptoed into the bathroom. I heard the door to her bedroom slowly open as I gracefully stepped into the tub and shut the curtain to hide.

The bathroom was really small— the kind you typically find in turn-of-the-century New York City apartment buildings. The tub, toilet, and sink were literally on top of each other. I was standing naked in a small tub with the shower curtain closed and my hands covering my privates. My eyes were bugging out, wide open in fear, and I quietly whispered, almost praying, "Sweetheart, please stop your mother and tell her you need to use the bathroom ... pleasee."

I heard the door to the bathroom open and close. Someone was in the bathroom with me! We just went to DEFCON 1! I was totally freaking out and panicked. Then the toilet flushed and I began to pray again. "For the love of God, please don't open the shower curtain ... I'm asking you, pleasee, don't open it. Pleaseeee, just leave. Just go in peace. Pleassseeee."

At that moment the shower curtain was flung open! I was standing in the bathtub naked, covering my private parts with my hands. In front of me

stood a demure, middle-aged woman in a pink bathrobe, and she was completely in shock. She backed up, almost stumbling as she rested her back against the wall. “Oh my God!” my girlfriend’s mom whispered.

Let’s back up for a minute. As intimidating as my girl’s father was, that was nothing compared to her mom. She was the head master, mistress, whatever you call it, of one of those all-girl schools on the swanky Upper East Side, where they have classes on how to stay away from guys like me. She was also a disciplinarian, and I knew something about that since I spent more than a little time in detention. Her mom was like a nun to me for Chrissake! But she was a nun who reached out to help.

I was never that good at school. Even when I was there, I kind of wasn’t. I was also a wild and undisciplined lad. Yet my girlfriend’s mom believed in me. She helped me with my homework and, more importantly, she helped me believe in myself.

Standing there naked in front of her, and still covering my privates with my hands, I looked up and whispered back to her, slowly, repeating each word, “Ohhh myyy Goddd is righttttt.” With that she left the bathroom. I followed behind her frantically, seconds later. My girlfriend was sitting up in her bed crying, with tears rolling down her cheeks. I gathered up my clothes in a ball, haphazardly shook her hand, and said goodbye. Stumbling to the back door, I dropped my underwear, picked it up, and made my way down the stairs of the building—naked and holding onto my clothes.

Scared that the Joint Chiefs of Staff might be after me, I kept a low profile for the next few days. And I wrote an apologetic letter to her mom:

Dear Headmaster,

Words can’t express how deeply sorry I am to have startled you like that. I think it’s fair to say I’ll never be forgiven for what happened. Understood.

My only request is that this incident doesn't interfere with the relationship you have with your daughter. It was my fault.

Sincerely,

Alex

I never saw my girl again. And I never hid in another bathtub. Twice was enough—the first time being in Compo Beach.

Compo Beach

The gig was up. Someone must have seen me and told my mother how I swam that night out to the buoy. Two days later she woke me up and announced I was enrolled at beach school. Beach school! That was a worse sentence than being locked in my room! I cherished my freedom, roaming wherever, and creating my own magic worlds on the beach. "No!" I cried out, but to no avail. A small yellow bus pulled up in front of our house twenty minutes later, and with the help of my mother and the bus driver, I was dragged on board. I begrudgingly took a seat next to the other little convicts, and off to beach school we went.

Five minutes later we arrived at the same beach where I used to run free. Those days were gone. All of us kids had to walk in a line holding each other's hands. I felt like I was part of a chain gang, just waiting for one of the guards to look the other way so I could make my escape. But we had a buddy system in place so if any of the kids would drop their hand, the other kids would yell and alert the authorities. All I could do was be patient and wait for my chance.

As we headed into the ocean, we had to count off as each camper entered the water. The prison guards, our counselors, created a human barrier surrounding us that we were confined to play in, and the water only went up

to our waist! While all the other kids were splashing and playing, I just looked out into the ocean longingly, searching in the distance for my buoy.

What finally saved me was summer love. Two of the counselors were so enamored with each other that they finally took their eyes off of us. The time for my escape was here! I took in a deep breath, dove underwater, and swam right between those two lovebirds. I held my breath until I was a good distance away from them, then swam back to shore and started running. I was elated! I had escaped from beach school! But now that I was free, I had no idea what to do next. Thinking it be best to lay low, I headed home, went into the bathroom, and hid behind the shower curtain in the tub. I must have been there for hours. The phone kept ringing, but I didn't dare answer it. Finally, my mother returned home, just as the phone started ringing again. "Yes, who's speaking please? WHAT? WHAT! PLEASE, NO!" my mother yelled. She immediately hung up the phone and ran out of the house toward the beach.

As I found out later, when the campers exited the ocean, they each called out a number. There were sixteen campers who entered the water, and only fifteen came out. They were missing one camper—me! They immediately closed the beach. No one was allowed in the water. The lifeguards were dragging metal rakes from their lifeboats along the bottom of the ocean, fearing I had drowned. The local cops patrolled the area and created roadblocks, thinking I might've been kidnapped.

Two more hours passed. I stayed in my hiding place in the bathtub and sat there frozen, not moving an inch. Then I heard someone opening the front door. "Try not to worry," I heard a man say. "It's best to stay here, and we'll phone you as soon as we find him." The door closed, and I heard my mother crying in despair as she moved aimlessly around the house. I could only imagine what she was going through, and I felt horrible. I also knew I was gonna get a severe beating and probably be locked in my room for the rest of the summer.

She then came into the bathroom, sat down on the toilet, and started crying hysterically. So I poked my little head out from the tub and said, "Yooo hooo." My mother leaped into the air, picked me up, and held me tight. She squeezed me so hard I thought I was going to pass out. She then let go and started beating the shit out of me! I was crying hysterically too and begging her not to send me back to beach school. She lifted me up and hugged me again. We were crying together as she nodded in agreement that I didn't have to go to beach school anymore. She then held me close, stared right in my eyes, and said, "Yours are the sweetest eyes I've ever seen." It was a line from her favorite song, "Your Song," by her favorite singer, Elton John.

The next day I was back on my beach walking along the shore as the waves broke against my legs and ran up the sand. I was just so happy to be free again. As I walked along, I picked up rocks and threw them, skipping them over the water. It wasn't just any rocks I picked up. They had to be a certain size and width and smooth on both sides. It was like a science to me, and my rocks had to be perfect. My longest skips on top of the water were fourteen. I heard of another boy who claimed he once had sixteen skips, but I didn't believe him. I held the record.

As I made my way down the beach, I passed by the beach school. All the kids stopped playing and splashing in the waist-deep water and just stared at me as I strutted by in all my glory. Suckers! I thought to myself, as I smiled broadly and went walking by. They were like little canaries in a cage, and I was a hawk soaring above them.

I continued my journey down the beach until I came across the lifeguard stand. Right next to it was a playground, and hanging from one of the swings was the biggest fish I'd ever seen. It had these huge, scary teeth and looked like a prehistoric animal. I went over to one of the lifeguards and asked what the hell was that. The lifeguard looked at me and said it was a shark. "A shark?" I repeated. "Where did you get it from?" The lifeguard bent down and slowly pointed his hand toward the ocean. "From there," he whispered. "That

was from there?" I nervously asked. He looked at me grinning and slowly nodded his head yes.

This was devastating news for me. The place that I loved so deeply, where I felt free and alive and nothing could hurt me, had monsters lurking in it! I started running as fast as I could to the jetty. I had to get to my buoy. I knew if I could just get to her and bob, everything would be okay. She was my anchor, my safety.

I jumped over every rock, faster than I ever did before, and reached the end of the jetty out of breath. I looked out onto the angry, dark waters nervously. I couldn't see her. I was shaking and frightened and I couldn't dive in. I was scared the sharks would get me. All I wanted to do was hold on to my buoy and bob. But I never swam out to that buoy again. I stood at the end of the jetty by myself as the strong waves hit the rocks and sprayed water all over my little body. I was alone.

The Mountains of Lebanon

I'm gasping for air and shaking with fear. Nineteen, I keep repeating in my head, like it's a password that might get me out of here. It doesn't. My hands won't stop shaking, my lungs are working overtime for nothing, and underneath all the fear there's this stubborn, almost embarrassing need to understand how a kid from Manhattan ends up bleeding out on a hillside in Lebanon. So I stop asking why and just let it come. All of it. From the beginning.

PART II

Israel

I'm a little boy sitting on the floor while my parents sit behind me on the couch holding hands. The three of us are directing our attention to the center of the room where Uri, a tall, husky man in his forties, is standing in front of us telling an animated story. Uri speaks with his body, waving his arms in the air, full of enthusiasm. I look up at him with my mouth wide open, listening intently. As I'm listening I start to pick my nose, and my mother leans forward and slaps my hand.

It was our yearly visit to Israel, which meant our yearly visit with Uri, a friend so close he was family. Uri would always share his war stories with us. He loved talking about the war. He had a deep voice that made everything he said sound very important. He seemed to like me a great deal. He would lean over and pinch my face, taking my whole cheek in his hand. I would then pinch Uri's cheek back. Uri had very thick skin. The kind of skin that if you pinched it, hit it, or even burned it, it didn't seem to bother him at all. He also had this tremendous bush of black hair all over his body. I would look at Uri's hairy chest and then look at my own—a skinny, frail chest with no hair on it. I searched desperately for any signs of manhood on my chest in hopes that someday I would be just like Uri.

Then, one day, when I was twelve, it happened. I was in my bathroom standing on a stool in front of the mirror and looking at my reflection with a magnifying glass focused on my chest. We had just gotten back from Israel, and I was going through my regular routine of looking for some strand of being a man—and lo and behold, there it was! How could I have missed it! I was feeling very proud and smiling broadly. It was at least a good inch long, and it even started to curl at the end. It was obviously a very mature chest hair! I looked down at my chest again with the magnifying glass and then

stared straight ahead in shock and disbelief. For God's sake! Out of all the places on my chest, it had to be coming out of my nipple! There it was, this one-inch-thick black hair coming out of my nipple! I wanted hair on my chest like Uri's. I wanted to be a man!

"The day of your Bar Mitzvah is the day you'll become a man," my father said. It was Passover, and our extended family was sitting with us at the table for our holiday service and dinner. My father had drunk his three ceremonial glasses of wine—or more—and was laughing uproariously while throwing little pieces of matzah at my head. "Hey, hey," he yelled from across the table. "You gonna find the afikoman? You gonna find the afikoman and earn a dollar? Probably the only dollar you'd ever make in your life!" He burst out laughing again. Then he turned serious, pointed the chicken shank at me, and said, "The day of your Bar Mitzvah is the day you'll become a man." That was all fine and good, I thought, but I knew in my heart that the day I got hair on my chest would be the day I've come of age.

So there it was, my manhood, coming out of my nipple. It was a trauma. I pictured myself walking down the street curling between my fingers this hair that was coming out of my nipple. The horror, the horror. But soon more hairs followed, and I recovered. And the more hairs that came, the more I felt like Uri.

Uri would always finish his story of heroism—how he saved the day or the life of a pal, a theme all of his stories would have—and then look at me. I was sitting on the floor looking at him with awe, listening as if it came from the burning bush itself. Uri would then lean over me and ask, "When are you going to fulfill your obligation as a Jew, Alex, and come fight for Israel?" I never knew how to answer him. To be honest, I got scared thinking about being in a war. But then again, I liked feeling obligated. I felt like I had a purpose.

I'm sitting between my parents on the plane. We said goodbye to Uri and are headed back home. My home. New York City. Manhattan. A city I loved and would never leave for anything.

New York City: The Track Race

It was a grey day, the day after a rainfall. The air was filled with mist. My tenth grade track team was competing at Van Cortland Park in the Bronx. The track was muddy with puddles.

A tall black teammate of mine, Tyrone, was sprinting and then leaped in a long jump. He fell awkwardly and held his ankle as he rolled around in excruciating pain. I was sitting on the bleachers by myself when the coach came over. He explained that Tyrone rolled his ankle and I was the only one who could take his place in the quarter-mile race. I immediately shook my head no. Fuck that, I said. The coach explained that they didn't need to win, but if we came in second place in this race, we'd win the whole tournament. I raised my head and saw my other teammates watching me. I reluctantly looked up at my coach and nodded yes.

I was standing in line with other runners, ready to run. The umpire stood to the side with a gun in his hand raised to the sky. The gun went off as the runners popped up and started jockeying for position.

Before I knew it, I was passing the other runners, one by one. Me and another runner were making a turn on the track. On the previous turn, he'd been in front of me, and his cleats kicked up soft dirt into my face. My face had dirt all over it when I found myself neck and neck with this guy. The coach and Tyrone were cheering me on.

Holy shit! I was soon right behind the lead runner. We all came around the final turn. It was a mad dash to the finish line. I barely beat out the third runner and came in second. Our team had won the tournament! Tyrone was on the top of the podium, bowing his head as he received the medal around

his neck. Tyrone and the coach came over to the bench where I was sitting by myself. Tyrone took the medal off his neck and put it around mine. "You deserve this," he said, as the coach looked on smiling.

I walked into my home and was greeted by my mother at the door. "My little runner is home!" she yelled. "How did you do?" she asked, as she kissed me on my forehead. With my head down I sheepishly mumbled that I came in second place. "Awww, you're always number one with me!" I took the medal from around my neck and placed it around hers. She smiled, grabbed my cheeks, and kissed me, making a loud smooching sound. Then she gave me one of her famous hugs and held me tight for a minute. It was one of those hugs only a mother could give. I loved them.

That night was Shabbas dinner. I watched my mother as she said the prayers for the candles, moving her hands slowly in the air over the fire. The medal I won earlier was dangling from her neck. I looked at my mother lovingly and just smiled. She always made me smile when I looked at her. She was so beautiful, so full of life. She was my home. I then put my head down, lifted it up again, and we smiled broadly at each other once more.

New York: The Marathon

It was two years later. I was seventeen, and it was my first time running the New York City Marathon. Thousands of us were running through the streets of the five boroughs, and thousands of people were cheering us as we ran by. It's the one day of the year when New Yorkers come together like one big family. There was a black guy and a Hasidic Jew holding each other and cheering us on. Most of us had our name on our shirt so the crowd yelled our names as we ran by, giving us motivation to keep going. My shirt read "MENSCH" in big black letters.

I slowed down by a volunteer who was holding a wooden plank that had globs of Vaseline on it. Other runners were slowing down too, taking a

glob of Vaseline and applying it to their armpits and nipples to stop chafing. I grabbed a handful, applied it everywhere, and continued to run. A buxom black woman was holding her son's hand and jumping up and down in excitement, cheering the runners as we ran by. I started to run by her as she motioned to high-five me. With globs of Vaseline still on my hand, I ran by the woman and high-fived her. When both palms of our hands met, it sent out this disgusting sound. The woman looked at her hand with this mysterious gook on it in bewilderment. "What the fuck is this shit!" she said. She looked over at me as I ran backwards with my hands in the air. I was smiling broadly as I mouthed I was sorry. The woman put one hand in the air while her other hand held her son's. "Mother fucker!" she yelled. "I'm gonna get you! Get back here, mother fucker!" I turned and kept running.

I finally reached First Avenue on the last leg of the marathon. The streets were packed with people lined up and cheering as we ran by. I was exhausted to a higher degree than I'd ever been, but I was doing it. I was running for my mom and that empowered me. And I was nearing the end.

As I approached the finish line, I was breathing deeply and panting. A still picture of me crossing the line read 3:35. It would've been a great shot if it weren't for this eighty-year-old man finishing right in front of me. I was happy for the guy, but it kinda stole my moment. The officials were waiting for the runners as we came across the finish. They put a medal around my neck and wrapped me in foil to keep me warm. As I walked down Central Park West in the middle of the street, families were reuniting with loved ones who had just finished the run. I jumped onto a crowded bus with the foil still wrapped around me and headed crosstown.

The Hospital

I walked over to an old woman who was sitting in front of the hospital making flowers out of paper. I grabbed a bunch and handed her some money.

"You're going to see your mother?" the old lady asked in a heavy Yiddish accent. I nodded yes. "You're such a good boy," she said. "You're a mensch, bubby." The flower lady smiled broadly showing no teeth. Then she reached up, squeezed my cheek, and watched me with a sad face as I walked into the hospital. "God bless," she said.

I hated hospitals. The white walls always felt like they were closing in on me. And the gowns patients had to wear were the worst. The back of them exposed your ass. You'd go from being on the streets outside, strutting to the tune of "Saturday Night Fever," and in a few minutes you were transformed into a victim.

I walked into my mother's room, sat down next to her bed, and held her hand. SexyHeeb sat down nearby and put his arm around me. My mother was lying in bed with her eyes closed. She was very sick from ovarian cancer. I put the paper flowers I bought from outside in a vase with no water next to her bed. And I put my marathon medal around her neck. "You're always number one with me," I whispered, as I rested my head on her chest. My heart was filled with the soothing Yiddish music coming from the tape recorder by her bedside as I listened to her heartbeat.

I was watching my mother deteriorate and all I could do was hold her hand. Maybe that was enough, I'm not sure. I prayed to God every night to allow me to switch places with her so I could take away her pain. I wanted to fight for her and protect her. I always tried to be a good son. Every night growing up, my mother would come into my bedroom and sing me a Yiddish lullaby to sleep. She would then kiss my forehead and say, "Sweet dreams, sugar plum."

As I lay my head on her chest in the hospital, I thought, no one would sing me a lullaby anymore, kiss my forehead, and say, "Sweet dreams, sugar plum." I felt so alone.

I once was beat up six times in the same day by the same person. She was a big Spanish girl in the neighborhood named Magdalena. After the last beating, she told me we were dating now. I agreed because I didn't want to get beat up anymore. Six times in one day was enough for me. I was relieved when it turned out that all she ever wanted to do was walk around the neighborhood and hold hands.

When I was ten, I had a friend on my block whose father was the manager of Ted Nugent. One night he invited his son and me to a show in Brooklyn where Nugent was performing. The club was packed and filled with smoke. The music was so loud I could barely think. I lost my buddy in the crowd and made my way downstairs to the bathroom in the basement. I took a stall beside this longhaired dude who was taking a leak next to me. He just looked down at this little boy taking a piss next to him. Inquisitive, he asked, "What are you doing here, little man?" I shrugged my shoulders and said, "Not much, just taking a piss." He found my response very amusing and started to laugh. "You're gonna be fucked up," he said. Not understanding what he meant at the time, I just stared back at him and nodded in agreement. Now I understood, I guess.

It wasn't my parents' fault. I was just unreachable, a free spirit with a strong will, and no amount of discipline was going to rein me in. I grew up in the late sixties and 1970's. Everything felt so open then, especially in Manhattan. There was this free flow, and I was in it. I'd wake up each morning just wanting to run and feel the blessing of a brand new day. And when my mother would hear of my latest escapade or open the door and find me there with a policeman, she'd give a helpless shrug and say, "What now?"

School

School was never really my thing. I only wanted to study topics that interested me, and few did. Most of the time, I just wanted to be with my

mother and take care of her when she got sick. I must've been thrown out of the best private schools in the city. It always amazed me how I got accepted into the next one. I wasn't so much of a disciplinary problem, I just never showed up to class. You could usually find me at the hospital with my mom. That's all that mattered. That's just how it was.

I believe every child has a gift and is special—at least that's what I told myself. Sure, I might not have been academically inclined, but my street smarts and social skills were right up there with the best. I was just a kid and dealing with life-and-death issues at home. So I mastered in the art of schmoozing, better known as bullshitting. I was just such a character from a very early age. I taught myself how to fight, and all I knew was to keep fighting. One year, at the Riverdale Country Day School, I was forced to see the school's psychiatrist for a session once a week. I had no idea why I had to go. I didn't know, I guess, that I was a fucked-up kid. I remember running into her office and locking the door behind me. "Don't go outside!" I told her frantically. Alarmed, she asked why and what was outside. "Academia!" I replied. At least I had my humor. Telling jokes and acting lighthearted was how I dealt with what was going on in my life. It was how I insulated and protected myself. It was my defense.

I had this Caribbean math teacher. Trigonometry was the subject matter, and it could've been Chinese for all I cared. I just sat by the window and stared out at the open fields, watching the girls sunbathing and other students throwing Frisbees. "Alex mon!" the teacher yelled at me. "What are you doing over there?" I just looked at her and smiled. "I just don't get it," I told her. "It's a beautiful day and all the girls are outside. Life is happening outside." "You don't want to be here?" she asked. I nodded no. "Okay, you can leave." She didn't have to ask me twice. I packed up my bags and started to go. Another student asked if he could leave too, but he got shot down immediately. I think she just knew she could never reach me.

The only teacher who reached out to me was my art teacher. His name was Satish. He knew I was a wild child and didn't care. As soon as I walked into class, he'd put a brush in my hand and I'd start to paint. I loved it! I always looked forward to art class. One day I told Satish I had a great idea for a school project. I told him I wanted to build a huge vagina on campus and have the students walk through it. Satish was a bit taken aback and asked why. I told him I was obsessed with vaginas and that's all I thought about. I guess I was a typical high school boy full of testosterone—or maybe not. Maybe I was different. I wanted to express my love for vaginas, I told him. I'm obsessed with vaginas, I yelled! I didn't want to become the next Georgia O'Keeffe though. I explained to Satish that my mother was very ill from ovarian cancer. I wanted to make the other students aware of what ovarian cancer was and really understand it. Instead of teaching it in a classroom with a textbook, I wanted the students to actually feel it and experience what a vagina was. What better way then to actually walk through a vagina? I explained to Satish.

My idea was that everyone would wear a head-to-toe raincoat and walk through my huge vagina. Along the way, they'd hear Barry White's "Let's Get It On" playing in the background. They'd also hear a faint thumping sound throughout. In the exhibition, the students would learn the mystery of the vagina and to respect it. How it gave pleasure, but how it could take life too. As they'd keep moving farther and deeper inside the vagina, the thumping sound would get louder and louder. Finally, at the end they'd see a picture of a fetus, a soon-to-be-born baby. That thumping sound was the baby's heartbeat. The exhibition would finish by explaining how vaginas give life.

Satish smiled and nodded with approval of my vision. He then politely suggested why don't I start with an 11 x 14 canvas and go from there. My huge exhibition of a vagina that the student body would walk through never came to fruition. But one of my vagina paintings did hang in the headmaster's office above his desk. I thought that was pretty cool too.

And that's the way it was with me and school—a complicated relationship. I remember attending Columbia Grammar & Preparatory School in the seventh grade. It was the end of the school year, and everyone was going around asking other students to sign their yearbooks. I came across the dean of the middle school and asked her if she wouldn't mind signing my book. She said she'd be happy to. I then looked at what she had written. "You're a good guy, Alex. We're gonna miss you next year." I was a bit perplexed and asked her what that meant. Maybe she was going to miss me over the summer break? I inquired. "No," she said, smiling. "We're not accepting you back next year." What a terrible way to find out—and she seemed to enjoy it. I just called her a fucking bitch and walked away.

So there you had it: two examples of my relationships at school. On the one hand, you had a guy like Satish, where under his tutelage and patience, this wild flower flourished. And on the other hand, you had this nasty, vindictive bitch. I guess I brought out the best in everyone.

It was my junior year and I was almost finished with my illustrious career as a high school student. The only problem was I wasn't enrolled in any school. My mother had taken a turn for the worst, and every day I could, I spent by her bedside. But now it was October, and I needed to find a new school.

When students are labeled as a troubled child or academic fuck-up, they most likely end up at the McBurney School. I obviously fit that description perfectly. I could have been their poster boy. The problem I had, though, was the school year had already started a month ago. But that didn't stop me. I brazenly walked into McBurney and asked to see the headmaster. I told him my situation in detail and asked if I could attend. He politely said he appreciated my plight but unfortunately the school year had already started and he couldn't help me. I pulled out a blank check that I had found in my parents' room and asked if it would be okay if I made the check out to him personally. After a few uncomfortable moments of silence, he said that would

be fine. Ten minutes later I had all my books for that year, and I was sent to class!

Three weeks later the headmaster pulled me out of one of my classes and into the hallway. He informed me that the check I had given him for tuition for the school year had bounced. "I can't believe it!" I said. " You mean the check that I gave you for the school's tuition, that I wrote out to you personally bounced?" After a few seconds he understood the gravity of my statement. We both just stared at each other for a moment, and then I started to grin. " You little shit!" he said. "I'm gonna get back to class," I said. "This isn't over!" he said in a threatening voice. "Actually, it really is," I said, as I opened the class door and took my seat. I could see him angrily staring at me through the glass window of the door. It was quite amusing. I took pleasure in the small victories.

One issue for me was that I only applied myself to classes and topics that I found interesting. There was a class called American Exceptionalism. It was all about hope, the entrepreneurial spirit, and how anything is possible in life if you work hard and apply yourself. I loved this class! I would sit outside the classroom and listen to the teacher every day. My English teacher at the time would always walk by and see me sitting outside. "In trouble again, Alex?" he'd say. After two weeks of seeing me sitting outside the class, he finally stopped and asked me what my problem was, why I kept getting thrown out of class, and why I was such a disciplinary problem. I asked him what he meant. He then said, "Why are you always being thrown out of this class?" I informed him that I wasn't in the class and this was my lunch break. He was totally blown away. In all his years, he said, he never saw a student so interested in a class that he'd take his lunch break and sit outside and listen. As a teacher, he said, he was impressed with me and inspired. That was a first for me. I guess he spoke with the other teacher because the next day he came outside and invited me into the classroom to sit and participate. I loved it.

Pinball

One of my favorite things growing up was playing pinball. It wasn't just a game to me—it was life! The pageantry and lights were intoxicating. I took playing pinball very seriously. I could immediately tell who was a good player and who sucked. The guy who would hit both flippers at the same time was worthless. Just a loser in life. That might sound harsh, but that's how seriously I took playing pinball. It wasn't a question if the ball would go down the drain, but how long. The two-flipper guy couldn't handle one ball at a time let alone five balls simultaneously.

To me, pinball was an art form. You had to incorporate your whole body in the process. It was a dance. You had to know when to use your hips, give it a nudge, and see what you could get away with so you didn't tilt. Each machine had its own temperament, and you had to feel it out—while at the same time holding one ball with a flipper while hitting another ball with the other flipper, accumulating the most points. It was a science.

I grew up on 71st Street between Central Park West and Columbus Avenue. After our weekly Shabbat dinner, when the adults were having dessert, kibbitzing, and talking Israeli politics, I'd sneak into my parents' room and steal a few quarters lying around on their mantle. I didn't need many. Two or three quarters could last me for hours of playing. I'd then sneak out and make my way to O'Neal's Restaurant nearby.

My pinball machine was located in the bar, but for some reason they didn't mind this eight-year-old kid coming in to play. I was a regular! There was always an older African-American woman playing with me. We'd play together for hours. She was my friend. She was very good, but I always beat her. She hated that. One day I came into O'Neal's and the pinball machine was gone. They had to make more space for tables, they said. I was devastated. I never played pinball again, and I never again saw my friend. I guess sometimes you have to put childish things away.

Years later, the Riverdale Country Day School, which I was attending that year, was having a music appreciation day. They had all these local musicians playing in different tents on the soccer field. It was really cool. I loved music. It soothed my soul. My favorite band at the time was the Beatles. I actually heard the shots that killed John Lennon. Well, truth be told, I was listening to the radio in my bedroom and the DJ announced that John Lennon had just been shot. Lennon lived around the corner from me in the Dakota building. I immediately got dressed and ran over. By the time I got there, more than a hundred people had already congregated. Within an hour, there were over a thousand. That truly was the day the music died.

One of our special guests at Riverdale for music appreciation day was Roberta Flack, the famous soul singer. She was in the “Faculty Only” tent, sitting at a round table and having lunch with the headmaster and other faculty members. Satish was there too. I took a long look at Roberta and then snuck my way into the tent and approached the table. I went right up to Roberta and introduced myself. “Hello, Roberta. I’m Alex.” She was a bit startled but turned to me with a very nice smile. “Well hello there, baby, how are you?” Immediately, the headmaster rose from the table and demanded I leave the tent or get Saturday detention. That didn’t seem like much of a threat to me. I already had every Saturday spoken for the next three months in detention. “I just want to ask her one question, and then I’ll leave.” “Absolutely not!” he barked. The rest of the star-struck teachers were also offended by my intrusion and scoffed at me. “That’s okay,” Roberta said in her calm, soulful voice. She then looked over to me and said, “What do you want to ask me, baby?” “I just have one question for you, Roberta.” “Hmm, hmmm, baby, what is it?” she asked. The whole faculty at the table was waiting in bated breath. “You like pinball, girl?” I asked.

I’ve never seen a group of people jump up from a table so quickly. “Okay, Mr. Gordon, head to my office right now! We’re getting your mother on the phone!” the headmaster yelled. Even Satish looked perturbed. Just as two

teachers grabbed my arms and were about to carry me out, Roberta spoke. "Wait a minute. Wait a minute," she said. "He's okay." She then looked at me and said, "Ohhh, I love pinball, baby." "I know you do, girl." I then took a seat next to her. "Do you remember a little boy who used to always play pinball with you at O'Neal's and would always beat you?" I asked. Roberta then lifted her head up into the air to think about it. Slowly, all the teachers began to sit down, anxiously awaiting her reply. A lightbulb went off above Roberta's head. She then turned to me and put her hand on my arm. "Ohhh, I hated that boy," she said. Exuberantly, I looked at her, smiled, and put my other hand over hers. "It's nice to see you again!" "Oh my lord! Is that you, baby?" she said. She then gave me the biggest hug. The headmaster and the rest of the teachers were in shock. Satish burst out laughing. I really loved him. He had my back.

I shared a cup of coffee and a Danish with Roberta, and we talked about pinball. "So what else do you love to do besides playing pinball?" She asked me. "Well, I love painting vaginas, and I love spending time with my mother." "Awww, that's sweet, baby," she said. I looked over and smiled at Satish. "But I also love to sing!" I said. Roberta just stared right at me with her loving eyes. The headmaster and most of the teachers at the table seemed to smile too. Roberta kept looking at me. "Baby, you are just a beautiful open book," she said. Roberta kept looking at me and started swaying back and forth a little, and then she quietly sang,

*"Strumming my pain with his fingers,
Singing my life with his words,
Killing me softly with his song,*

Killing me softly...."

That was a beautiful afternoon. We sang a bunch of songs together. And I never showed up for one Saturday detention.

Work

Even though I was a fuck-up academically, I always had a strong work ethic. I enjoyed working and being entrepreneurial, and I always had a job. Even at a young age I would come up with some kind of get-rich scheme.

When I was about seven years old, my family was on a vacation in Canada. I walked into a convenience store and inspected the candy selection. I was a candy connoisseur. I came across one I'd never heard of before. It was called Pop Rocks. I never experienced anything like it! The candy was literally exploding in my mouth! I asked my mom if I could take a loan of fifty dollars from my future allowance. I spent it all buying Pop Rocks, knowing that the kids back in NYC had never tried or even heard of it. A packet retailed for twenty-five cents. I could easily resale each packet for a dollar. I'd be rich!

When I returned home, I sold out literally by the end of lunchtime. But unfortunately for me, while in transit, all the Pop Rocks had turned stale. When the kids put the candy in their mouths, nothing happened! My inventory was worthless. I had to pay back everyone his or her money. I lost everything—along with my fine reputation. That was my first business failure.

When I was sixteen, my father thought it would be a good idea to get me an intern job on Wall Street with one of his friends. "For the experience," he said. I didn't really have a choice. And since it was winter break, I didn't care. I also didn't want to argue with my father. We were both going through a lot of pain. So I put on the only suit I owned and headed downtown to Wall Street.

My father's friend was this huge, larger-than-life Irish guy named Fitzpatrick McSorley. Clearly not a Jew, I thought upon first meeting him. My little hand got lost in his when he shook it. His breath and clothes reeked of booze. And I soon found out that he was always either drunk or nursing a hangover. Never anything between. He introduced me to his guys on the desk. They all seemed drunk or nursing a hangover too. Never anything between.

In the time I spent there, I never actually saw anyone do any work. They would always talk about breakfast, what they were gonna have for lunch, and of course, where they were going after work for drinks and dinner. Everyone just hung out all day, laughed, and told stories to each other. I was home! I could see having a career on Wall Street! I just never knew when these guys slept. They got to work before 7 a.m. every morning, drank every day, and didn't get home until the wee hours of the night. They were like endurance athletes to me, and I admired them tremendously. They also all had these sinus problems. It was weird. I'd go to the bathrooms at work and every stall was full. All I could hear every day at any hour was sniffing coming out of those stalls.

Some of the guys would call Fitzpatrick "Fitzy" or "Patty Boy." One day I made the mistake of calling him Fitzy too. He immediately turned to me with his terrible alcohol breath and informed me that I hadn't earned the right to call him by his nickname. It was Fitzpatrick to me. It was all about respect for ole Patty Boy! Well, I was only there for a few weeks and didn't want any problems.

Big Fitz's favorite watering hole was P.J. Clarke's. It was an old-school restaurant/bar that he took me to for lunch and happy hour drinks every day. It was always a liquid lunch. Fitzy was obsessed with P.J. Clarke's bathroom. Every day he told me to go in and look at it, forgetting that he had told me the day before to do the exact same thing. "Isn't it beautiful?" he asked upon my return. I never met any guy before who was so enthralled by a shitter. But to his credit, it was pretty cool. The whole aesthetic was this thick white porcelain marble. It was everywhere. There were two huge porcelain places to urinate that went from the floor to the ceiling. I could literally fit my whole body into one of them. The other guys on the desk told me that Fitzy designed his whole bathroom at home identical to P.J. Clarke's. Some rich guys like to buy a boat or build a pool in their backyard, but good ole Fitzy wanted a bathroom at home just like P.J. Clarke's. I understood it though. I appreciated

a good dump. He was having a holiday party that Saturday night, and he invited me to come. Declining the invitation wasn't an option.

Fitzy lived on Staten Island—or The Rock, as it was also known. When I walked in I recognized most of the guys from the desk. Everyone was very festive and in a good mood. I was starving and headed right to the table of food. There was something called the Shamrock Surprise. It was a spicy meat dish that I thought I'd like. I immediately piled a good portion on my plate and chowed it down within minutes. I then helped myself to another full plate and took it down with free abandon. Almost immediately after eating the last bite, I knew something was wrong. To put it politely, the food didn't agree with me. I started breaking out in a sweat and thought I had a fever. Then came the bowel movements, and I was farting uncontrollably. It was seriously disgusting. When you're actually disgusted with yourself, you know you have a problem. Moving extremely slowly so as not to shit all over myself, I politely asked where the bathroom was and made my way through the crowd to seek refuge.

As luck would have it, there was a long line. I tried maneuvering my legs together and made my face go into some weird contortions. I was clenching my ass cheeks and holding my breath, but nothing seemed to help. The shit was coming out. When my turn for the bathroom came up, I slowly shimmied my feet into the room without lifting either leg up to walk. As soon as I shut the door and locked it behind me, I let out a sigh of relief. But in doing that, I also let go of my tight grip of my butt cheeks. Needless to say I crapped all over myself! It came out of me like lava! It was fucking disgusting. I tried to regain my composure and began to inspect my surroundings. The first thing I noticed was how his bathroom really did look like P.J. Clarke's! It was amazing and dare I say quite beautiful. But it was also quite small and dark. With all the heavy white porcelain marble, it didn't give you much room to maneuver. I pulled down my pants and immediately felt something freezing on my butt. I must have caught one of the ends of the huge white porcelain

sink that was behind me. I then inspected my underwear. There was no salvaging it. So I got completely naked and looked for a place to dispose of the smoking gun. I figured if I got rid of it, no crime actually occurred. Unable to find a proper hiding place, I opened the small window above the toilet. It was snowing like crazy that night. A welcome gust of air and some snow came into the room and fumigated it a little. I then leaned up toward the window and with all my might tossed my chocolate-soaked underwear out into the blizzard. I quickly cleaned myself up, left a small crack of the window open for some fresh air, and got the hell out of there. On the train home shortly after, all I could think about was what the fuck was in that Shamrock Surprise!

That following Monday, I ran into ole Patty Boy. He was sitting at his desk and actually in a somber, sober moment. I asked if everything was okay. He kept looking at his blank screens and slowly told me that someone had disrespected his home. I inquired how. He then looked at me with fire coming out of his eyes and veins bulging from his big Irish neck and all but yelled at me that someone had taken a shit in his beautiful white porcelain marbled P.J. Clarke bathroom. I calmly asked him, "Isn't that a good place for someone to take a dump?" He then slowly got up and looked down at me and said, "Not on my fucking sink though!"

Immediately, I knew what he was talking about. When I had bent over to remove my shit-stained underwear, my butt went directly into the corner of the sink, clearly leaving a stain. I'd never seen anyone so upset about a shit in my life. And in my short time knowing him, I've never seen him so distraught—and also sober for that matter. Everyone was a suspect, he said, as his eyes looked over and canvassed every guy at his desk. He was even talking about getting DNA samples. All the guys were living in fear. I was happy it was my last week.

Months later I met him and my father out for dinner. We actually met at P.J. Clarke's of all places. Old Fitzzy was a different man though. He looked

sober. He pulled me aside and told me, "The disrespect continues." I just looked at him as innocently as I possible could. He then told the story of how he was driving home from work one evening and saw something hanging from his tree outside his house. He parked his car and went to inspect what it was. He was infuriated to find a fully soiled pair of underwear hanging from his fucking tree. I knew at once it was my underwear. When I threw it out the window, it must have gotten caught on a branch, and once the snow melted away, it was there in plain sight for all to see. Fitzzy then told me it looked like a small boy's underwear. He stared at me for a second that felt like a year and said he actually thought it might have been me that night. But when he inspected the underwear, he saw someone had put their initials in it. "Who the fuck puts their initials in underwear!" he asked me, and seemed about to cry hysterically. "Who the fuck does that!"

Thank God he was Irish and didn't know that when Jewish kids go to summer camp, their mothers always put their child's initials on their underwear and clothing so it won't get lost. It was a Jewish thing, something my mother continued to do in my teens. I had to be thankful though. My middle initial was J, and my last name was Gordon, but for some reason my mother always put my first initial and my middle initial on my underwear. Once again, my mother had come to the rescue. My guardian angel had saved me again. I wished Big Patty luck in finding this despicable person. We rejoined my father at the table, where I heard Fitzzy say, "I'm gonna find this guy if it's the last thing I ever do."

That summer, I was hired as the personal driver to the Australian Ambassador to the U.N. How the fuck I got that job was a mystery since I didn't even have a driver's license! I thought everything was fine until they asked for a copy of my license. So I asked my friend Jake's older brother Tommy if he wouldn't mind if I borrowed his license. He didn't mind at all. I made a photocopy and sent it in. I got the job.

Driving around the Australian Ambassador to the U.N. was really cool. They gave me a credit card for gas money, and I was able to take the car home with me. I would fill the car with gas and then ask if anyone else needed gas for a cash discount. I had quite the enterprise working. The best was that I had diplomatic plates. That meant I could park anywhere and never get a ticket. I'd double-park in front of my favorite pizza joint and order a few slices. One day, when I came outside, a female cop was writing up a ticket. I just casually got in the car, rolled down the window, and yelled as I was pulling away, "Diplomatic immunity, baby!"

The only problem I ever had was in the office at the U.N. The ambassador would always introduce me to his colleagues as Tommy. I would then say, "Hello. I'm Alex." They must've thought I was on drugs. Eventually realizing that mistake, I started telling them that my middle name was Alex, and I preferred to be called that. Problem solved.

At the same time I had that job, an older buddy and I used to throw parties for high school kids in the city. We'd rent out empty brownstones or clubs that weren't doing well. We were known as the "Carouser Brothers." We supplied all the booze and charged all the kids a cover to get in. I would buy the booze in Jersey because it was cheaper, and then drive it back to the city. On one particular afternoon I was driving the Ambassador to a meeting. He was sitting in the front seat with me. He asked me if I ever used the car for anything other than official business. I turned to him and told him to look at my face. I then assured him that this had never happened and never will. He seemed pleased with my answer. At that very moment, the light turned red. I immediately hit the brakes as hard as I could. All the booze in the back went flying up into the front seat. He just looked at me sternly. "Wanna beer?" I asked. That was the end of that job.

The Counselor

Back in the hospital, I was meeting with a counselor. He was preparing me for the inevitable, I guess. The room was quiet and I had my head down. I wasn't in the mood to speak to anyone about my mother. Especially someone I didn't know. He looked at me and said, "You know your mother's going to die, Alex." I'd never had so much rage inside me. I was ready to explode. I looked up and stared straight at him. He must have felt the weight of my stare and fury as he shifted around nervously in his seat. I slowly got up and said, "I'm not going to talk about my mother's death in here while she's still out there fighting for her life." Both SexyHeeb and I then proceeded to leave.

"I'll see you soon, Alex," the counselor said as I opened that door. I guess he was trying to get the last word in. I slowly turned to him and said, "I can see you outside right now if you want, motherfucker!" SexyHeeb placed his hand on my arm to cool me down. Nobody should mess with someone's mother, I thought, as I shut the door behind me.

I returned to my mother's hospital room. I leaned over her and whispered in her ear that I had to go. I kissed her on her forehead. "I love you with all my heart," I said. "Please be strong."

Sammy's Romanian Steak House

It's like walking into a Bar Mitzvah in the basement of someone's house in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. But it's the best shtick in town! It's where the Jews and the goyim come together and dance the hora, that wild Israeli folk dance with a terrible name. Sammy is the owner of the restaurant. He's a short little guy with a huge personality. He's always wearing a bunch of gold and silver necklaces, including a huge one that hangs over his chest and blinks SAMMY in gold letters. He also wears a bunch of rings on every finger, and he greets his guests at the door by yelling very loudly "Shalommm!" He's a cross between the character Mini-Me and a Jewish Mr. T.

Sammy moves around throughout the evening to different tables and greets his guests. Meanwhile, he is always drunk and spilling his wine wherever he goes. He kisses an old man on the head and then grabs the man's wife's hand and kisses it. "You keep looking more beautiful every day," he says, as he moves on to another table. Sammy grabs some food off a customer's plate and eats it. "Mmm, delicious," he says. "Who owns this place? The food is fantastic!" The other customers look on and laugh. He really was quite the show.

I walked in that night, exchanged hugs with Sammy, and then walked to a table at the back where my father's friends were waiting. A very old woman and a young woman with enormous breasts walked in. They both looked a little lost. They also looked like they were from the Midwest—they were wearing bright colors and had a "Let's Go" guidebook in hand. Obviously tourists. Sammy stopped in the middle of the restaurant, threw his hands in the air, and greeted them. "What have we here?" he yelled. "Mother Teresa and a shiksa with big titsas! We don't discriminate! How can we? We're Jewish! Please, please," he said as he sat them both down at a table and called the waiter over. Sammy then took a stamp out of his coat pocket and pressed it on top of the hand of the shiksa with the big titsas. The stamp read: Sammy-917-Jew-love. "Call me!" Sammy said, as he walked away in all his grandeur, but then turned to her and added, "But not on Shabbas, baby!"

The restaurant was full with a festive circus-like atmosphere. It always had this euphoric exuberance, like parents who just married off their youngest daughter. People are eating, drinking, singing, and dancing. There's an organ player who plays only Jewish and Yiddish songs. His name is Dani Luv. He claims to also be a rabbi, but one who only performs circumcisions. He was a burley, unkempt guy—always unshaven and with these bald patches on his head. He would try in vain to comb his hair from one side to the other to cover his bald spots, but it never worked. Quite the character, he would greet you by saying "Shalom, boychick. My name is love, Dani Luv." He was

one big matzo-bowl soup filled with Jewish themed songs. Listening to Dani Luv was like a Jewish rock 'n' roll concert. Some of his famous songs were "Strangers with My Wife," Billy Joel's "It's Nine O'clock on a Shabbas Night," and from the Beatles, "Hey Jew, Take a Sad Song and Make it Sadder."

On every table, there was an old-fashioned seltzer gun that sprayed bubbly water into a glass with chocolate syrup in it. The rightful name of the drink is an egg cream, and it was very popular. All the waitstaff wear shirts that say HEEB in big letters on the front. Pickles came by the bucket, along with huge bowls of chopped liver. This was the house of cholesterol! There are also beers on every table. But the only beer they sell is He-Brew from the Maltz brewery in Brooklyn.

The most popular drink is a block of ice with a bottle of Absolut vodka frozen into it. That's the drink of choice for my father's friends this evening. I was at their table doing shots of vodka with them. They all had their arms around each other, swaying side to side and singing to the music of Dani Luv. I was looking for my father. "Don't worry," one of his old friends said. "He'll be here. Your family is always late! You know this," he said and laughed.

Sammy approached Sherma at the corner of the bar. She was a big woman wearing a black leather jacket with fake diamond studs on the back that spelled out "MAZEL TUFF." Sammy stumbled over to her drunk, spilling his wine as he approached. He puts his arm around her and realized how big and strong she was. "This is the only Jewish Hells Angel I know," he said, followed by a burp. He squeezed her arm and, realizing her strength, asked her if her parents fed her yeast growing up. Sherma turned to Sammy slowly and gave him an ugly look. Sammy, fearing for his life, backed up and moved away. "Don't worry, Sherma, Manischewitz is half off for you!" Feeling he'd created enough distance and with his confidence restored, he asked her, "Why is tonight different from all other nights? Women drink free! He-Brew for everyone!"

Fast forward and I was helping an older man carry a very drunk Sammy out of his restaurant. He was drooling and under his breath he said, "I should've named this place Bar-Mitzvah." I saw Sherma sitting on her motorcycle outside Sammy's. I called out her name. She turned around, spat out some chewing tobacco, and looked over at us. We plopped Sammy on the back of her bike and politely asked her to take him home. Without hesitation, Sherma jumpstarted her bike and revved it up. Sammy sat in the back, defeated, drooling, and with his head resting on her shoulder. Sherma snickered. "Sure! Why not! My home, that is!" She then let out a howling sound—as if to say I found myself a man—revved the engine again, and raced down the block. Over the sound of the engine we could hear Sammy yelling, "Oy gevalt!" as they disappeared into the night.

I rejoined my father's friends at the table where they were still drinking shots of vodka and singing along with the organ player, Dani Luv, the rabbi who only does circumcisions. I looked toward the entrance and saw my father had arrived. He was standing at the door, wearing a trench coat and a cap. It had just started raining outside and he was wet. He looked very serious and sad. He'd looked that way for some time now, but this felt different. His eyes were red and swollen. He slowly nodded hello to me. Something wasn't right. I slowly got up and crossed the room to meet him. My father's friends watched us, looking on concerned.

That walk across the room felt like forever for me. I was frightened. "Papa. Is everything okay? It's very late. Is Mother okay?" "My poor Alex, my poor Alex," my father said slowly. He took both his hands and cupped my face and moaned. I stared straight into my father's eyes, petrified. My father spoke quietly and put his head down. He couldn't look at me. "Your mother died." I let out an aching sound that came right from my heart and put my head down in disbelief. "I was just with her a few hours ago," I said. "It can't be, it just can't be." I rested my head on his shoulder and didn't feel the dampness from the rain on his jacket. "She's gone boy, she's gone," he said. My father then

whispered in my ear, "Come meet me tomorrow at the deli. We have a lot of things to discuss." I nodded my head okay, as my father and I embraced. We were standing in the middle of the restaurant holding each other. The organ player, Dani Luv, was playing a beautiful Yiddish melody in the background. My father's friends looked at us and started to get up from their table. They slowly walked over to us and circled us, and we all embraced in a big hug. My mother was dead.

My mother is weak and trying to walk down the hospital corridor as she holds on to her IV stand. The white walls are closing in on her. My mother is lying in a hospital bed with tubes in her nose. The paper roses that I bought for her have curled over and died. Two nurses enter my mother's room and start to put a white sheet over her face. Everything is so fucking white. It's suffocating me. Just as they're about to put the sheet over my mother's face, she opens her eyes and with no energy mouths, "Help me, Alex, help me." The nurses put the sheet over her face. I try with all my might to reach her as doctors and the two nurses hold me back. "Stop it! Stop it!" I yell. "She's alive, dammit! She's alive!"

Just as I'm about to reach her, I'm standing over a coffin in a black suit with a shovel in my hand. I'm looking up from the coffin's perspective, watching myself shovel, as the particles of dirt fall on the coffin like black rain. Now I'm in the coffin, and the dirt is falling all over me. I'm burying myself. Shovels of dirt are falling all over me until I can't see anymore and everything is black.

I sit up straight in my bed yelling. I'm breathing heavily and sweating. I look around my room, trying to get my bearings. It was a fucking nightmare. I get up from my soaked bed, head to the bathroom, and turn on the faucet with the cold water running. I splash some water on my face, look in the mirror, and see the utter hollow sadness in my eyes. I then bury my head in the cold water in the sink that's half full.

The Punching Bag

The morning sun was shining light into my room. I sat on the edge of my bed and laced up my shoes. I put my gloves on tight and headed to the bag. I got loose, started dancing, and punched away at the bag. I was focused and determined as my punches started getting stronger. Every time I hit the bag, it unleashed a crack in the air like a whip, and the bag was sent flying.

My mother and I are sitting down at the dining-room table. I'm just a boy enjoying my milk and cookies. I'm telling a story to my mother very enthusiastically, using my hands and body to make my point. She would always say she loved to watch me talk, even when I was a young boy. She's listening very intently, smiling.

I hit the bag again, sending it flying. The crack in the air sounded like a firecracker went off.

I run into my parents' room complaining how sick I am and just can't bear going to school that day. I make the argument that it isn't just that I'm ill but that I'm concerned about the well-being of my fellow students. "I am a very sick little boy," I say to my mother with conviction. It's funny, but when I say things with such a strong belief, I actually believe what I'm saying—even if it isn't true. I call it an honest lie. Thank God my father has already left for work. I would've already been dressed and on the bus. He always says I have diarrhea of the mouth. My father warns me at a very young age to be careful or one day I actually might believe the shit that comes out of my mouth. He obviously doesn't understand the definition of an honest lie.

But I am truly sick that day. I, for one, am convinced of it. My mother seems a bit skeptical but relents and agrees to take my temperature. She goes to the bathroom and reemerges with a thermometer in hand. We were old school so I flip on my belly, butt up in the air, and assume the position. My mother gently places my "Get out of school free" card inside and tells me she'll come back in a few minutes to check my temperature. As I lie belly

down with my butt in the air, I decide not to leave anything to chance. I was fully committed to my honest lie. There was no way in hell I was going to school that day! Then it dawns on me. I figure the deeper the thermometer goes inside of me, the hotter it will get. So I reach around, grab it, and proceed to push it deeper into my butt. With my exuberance and conviction getting the best of me, I must have pushed too hard because the thermometer disappears right into my butt! It was gone!

Panicked and frightened, I yell at the top of my lungs for my mother. "Mom! Come quick! Mom! Pleassee hurry!" Hearing my screams, my mother runs into my room frantically, but probably thinking, how bad can it be? I just left him a few minutes ago. "It's bad, Mom! The thermometer, it got lost in my ass! Do something!" I plead with her. I think it's the first time I ever saw my mother dumbfounded. She starts to inspect the crime scene herself while her little boy is whimpering on his belly, with his butt high in the air. My mother throws her hands up in the air in disbelief. "What should we do!"

At that moment, it dawns on me. I might not have been a gifted child, but the few talents I possessed were powerful ones. "Mom!" I yell in excitement. "I can fart!" "What!" my mother asks in amazement. "Mom, I can fart on command! I do it all the time at school!" It really was a talent. It separated me from the rest of the kids. Who cared if my grades were poor? I wasn't aware of any other student who could fart on command. "Well, might as well try," my mother says. "Unless you want a thermometer up your butt for the rest of your life!"

Determined, I wipe away my tears, hold my breath, push my butt higher in the air, and concentrate. Minutes go by that feel like hours, literally days. My mom just keeps looking at my butt with high hopes. Then it happens. I feel it coming. It isn't a special fart per se. It hisses along, and at the very end, it pirouettes into a cannonball sound. The thermometer pops right out! For the next half hour, my mother and I lie on that bed and laugh our asses

off. It was one of the best moments of my life, and one of my best farts too. I didn't have to go to school that day!

I hit the bag again. CRACK! The bag went flying in the air. As a boy, I always admired Clarence Clemens from the E Street Band and wanted to play the saxophone. I just thought the instrument was so sexy and cool. I remember my mom coming home one day with a surprise gift for me. I opened up the box and inside was a long black instrument. Having no idea what it was, I asked my mother, "What is this?" "It's a saxophone," she professed. "Really? I kinda remember a saxophone being silver or gold and curved at the bottom." "Fine," she confessed. "It's a clarinet. It was a hundred dollars cheaper and you'll learn to love it." She then proceeded to spend over seven thousand dollars for my lessons. Eventually, I bought the saxophone on my own, but it really didn't matter. I was horrid at both. As I said, I wasn't a gifted child. I might have had a few talents, but playing an instrument wasn't one of them.

Crack! I unleashed another punch into the bag and remembered the day I came home from school and walked into the kitchen where my mom was preparing dinner. I picked her up, spinning her 'round and 'round as she smiled and laughed joyfully. "I'll take you to Paris, Rome, and Venice," I said. I wanted to celebrate her. She was such a light.

I dance around the bag and unleash a devastating blow sending it flying backwards.

My mother is lying in the hospital not moving at all. I move her head from one side to the other, trying to wake her up. "Mama, please don't sleep. It's time to get up." I pull the blanket off of her to see what's wrong. I look at her stomach as it starts to open, and blood starts coming out of it. The blood starts coming out slowly at first, but then starts pouring out profusely. Blood is all over the place. I start working in a frenzy to push the blood back inside

her. "Help her! Help her! Please someone help her!" I yell at the top of my lungs. "Please help me! I need help!"

I was staring straight ahead with my hands at my sides. As the bag swayed from one side to the other, you could see me and then SexyHeeb.

Katz's Deli

Katz's Delicatessen is the most iconic Jewish deli. At nighttime the bright neon lights that spell out Katz's Deli are like a beacon in the dark. It reminds me of how when Gotham City was in trouble, Commissioner Gordon would light up the sky calling on Batman to show up. Whenever I saw Katz's neon lights, I couldn't resist and also had to answer the call. I wasn't a crime fighter. I wasn't there to rid the city of scum or save the day. To me, it was more primal. All I thought about was a pastrami sandwich on Jewish rye bread with a heap of spicy mustard on it. It always came with a huge sour pickle. I liked to start with a matzo-ball soup and, just for good housekeeping, a nice hot knish too. The best in the city. My family had been coming here for years together. It was like home to me. There was bologna hanging from the walls. And a huge sign read: "Send a boy in the Israeli Army a salami." The place had a run-down, rustic look to it. To me, it just felt familiar. Although today it felt more somber.

The fellas behind the counter say hello to me as I make my way to the back where my father is sitting. They all know my family. By the way they said hello, I knew they had heard about my mother. I give my father a kiss on his head and join him at the table. A waitress comes over to take our order. She's a classic little old yenta who's been serving me since I was a small boy. She had this huge wig on that probably took her two hours to put on that morning to make it look just right. But to me, she looked like a little old yenta with a really big, ugly wig on. She had a deep Yiddish accent. I loved her.

"Hello, bubala. I heard. I'm so sorry for you and your family, boychick. How about a nice hot pastrami sandwich? It'll make you feel better." "Thank you darlink. That'll be fine." "No problem, baby" she said as she walked away.

My father waited patiently. "We have a lot of things to discuss," he said as he readjusted himself in his chair. "Listen, Avrum," he said, using my Jewish name as he often did. "Your mother and I always want the best for you, you know that." My father stretched his hand across the table and held my hand. "But we also want you to be a mensch. It was very important to her." "I know that," I told my father. "What are you trying to say?" He paused, looking sad, but then continued. "Before your mother died, she wrote a letter, a letter to you, Avrum." He took the letter out of his coat pocket and I literally leapt up from my chair and snatched it out of his hand. It was nourishment to me, and I was starving for anything that had to do with her. I began reading the letter, imagining her soft, beautiful voice as if she were reading it to me.

" My dearest son. I hope you won't have to read this letter for a long time, but I feel tired. Very tired. I'm weak. By the time you are reading this, I will have died. I don't want you to be mad, Alex, because if you know me, I'm more upset about this than anybody! I want you to remember me not when I was sick with all these phcockta tubes in me, but when I was healthy, happy, full of life, and not to mention beautiful! They called me Peppy for a reason! These memories I want you to remember. I want you to be a good Jewish boy. I want you to be a mensch. You don't have to be a religious boy, as long as you're a good person I always say. I have one request for my final resting place. I figure it's my last place I'll be, so it's not that much to ask. Alex, I want to be buried in good company. With people I know, who I understand, who I can talk to." I smile as I'm reading that. "People like Leah, Jacob, Isaac, Rebecca. This is good company for me, Alex. I want to be buried in Israel!"

I'm completely startled by this. I looked up at my father as he motioned to me to keep reading. "Listen, I know you think when the time comes I should be buried near you and near your father, who is a great man. A wonderful

husband and a beautiful father. But I want to be in Israel! Besides, when you think of New York City, who thinks of eternity? I want you, my Alex, to take me and bury me in Israel. You remember you were there when you were a little boy? The family trips we'd take each year together? I think it would be nice for you to go and see it again.

"Okay, listen, I have to go. I love you, my son, more than anything in the world. I'll always be with you. I love you with all my soul. Now goodbye."

I put down the letter in disbelief. I folded it up ever so gently, placed it back in the envelope, and put it in my pocket. I was in shock. My thoughts were interrupted by the waitress. "One hot pastrami sandwich for the baby. Anything for you, young man?" she asked my father. My father shook his head no and she walked away. Still in shock, I placed extra mustard on my sandwich and took a big bite.

"I've made all the arrangements," my father said, as he placed a plane ticket in front of me. "They will pick up the coffin when you get there. You leave tomorrow." Since my father suffered from severe chronic respiratory disease, I knew he couldn't fly with me. I put down the sandwich and wiped the mustard off my face. I had lost my appetite. I was literally in shock.

I was sitting by the window on an El-Al plane, spacing out and lost in my thoughts. I was missing my mom and still couldn't believe she was gone. The old lady sitting next to me, eager for a conversation, asked in a loud voice if I'd ever been to the Holy Land before. Politely, I answered in a quiet, somber voice that I was there when I was young. I was hoping she'd get the hint that I didn't feel like talking, but to no avail. "You're still young, boychick!" she yelled back. I did my best at fading out her voice as she kept talking about her family and how she had a nice girl she wanted to introduce me to.

The sunset was coming through the window. In the middle of the plane, Hasidic men were praying, welcoming the night. I looked out the window and watched the sun fade out.

My mother comes into my room, sits down on my bed, and tucks me in. She sings me a Yiddish lullaby as I fall asleep. She then kisses my forehead, whispers that she loves me, and says, "Sweet dreams, sugar plum," before she turns off the lights.

I closed the window shade on the plane, shut my eyes, and went to sleep.

PART III

Israel

I wake up to the sounds of the plane landing. I slept the whole flight, and the old lady next to me is still talking. I wonder if she was talking to me the whole time—or to herself.

I can't believe that my mother is dead. And I can't believe that I'm in Israel. I collect my bags and head out to find a cab. Outside there's a huge crowd of Israelis, yelling, crying, and screaming. They are waiting for friends and loved ones who went abroad. I notice the old woman I was sitting next to embrace a large group of family members, all in joy and tears. She looks over to me with a big warm smile and waves goodbye. It's actually a nice moment to watch. I kinda feel bad I didn't listen to her earlier.

Heading over to the line of cabs, I get in one. "Shalom! Shalom! Welcome to the most beautiful country in the world!" I'm a bit taken aback by my driver's enthusiasm. "How's my English?" "So far, so good," I reply. I pull a wrinkled paper out of my pocket and try to pronounce the address where I'm going. After a few failed attempts, I hand it to the driver and he reads it out loud. "Rehov Ben Yehuda!" he yells out. "'You know where this is?' I ask. "Of course!" he says. "Israel is very small. There isn't any place I don't know! Do you like Yemenite music?" Before I can answer, he turns the volume up to its loudest and drives off. His hands are in the air as he smiles proudly. "This is Yemenite music!" he confirms, yelling in adulation as the music is blasting. "My name is Shmuel, but my friends call me Smooky!" "Alex," I yell back at the top of my lungs. Smooky nods approvingly and then seems to get lost in the music.

Smooky is a little fella who seems to be sitting on a phone book so he can reach the wheel—and he's still barely able to look out at the road ahead. He has very thick glasses, which doesn't give me much assurance of his ability

to actually drive. The back of his cab looks like a bodega newsstand! He seems to have every trashy Israeli magazine, along with every candy known. This is complemented with a string of holiday lights around the perimeter and a small disco ball spinning in the back. All that's missing are a strobe light and a fog machine and I could be at some cheesy nightclub in South Beach. I find this a great and welcome distraction, but my attention is drawn more to the scenery outside.

As a native New Yorker, I'm always concerned about tourists' first impressions as they drive into the Big Apple. I guess nothing beats the first time you see the Empire State Building and the skyscrapers. To me, it's the most beautiful sight in the world. I always hope that tourists feel that bigger-than-life moment when they first see Manhattan. And now, I'm getting my first real view of nighttime Tel Aviv.

I lower the taxi window, look up at the sky, and I'm mesmerized by how bright and strong the stars look. It's beautiful. Then I watch in wonder as we drive through the Israeli night. All the memories I had as a boy come racing back into my mind, turning this nightclub on wheels into some poor man's version of a time machine. Smooky is the "ghost of the past," a tour guide of what once was and where I came from. I stick my head out the window, close my eyes, and let the wind blow in my face.

Like a dog with an acute sense of smell, I sniff in the air. It's intoxicating and overwhelming and gives me potent waves of information and memories. I've been in this country only a few minutes, and it has already filled my whole body with memories of my mother. The hair on my body is standing at attention as if my mother's ghost is blowing on them. I'm not alone. The smell of the air, even after all these years, reminds me of my mother. She is with me. I start to cry quietly and take a few deep breaths to gather myself. But I'm not afraid. The complete opposite, actually. My heart is bursting and feeding my body with warmth. With my eyes still tearing, I look up, and in the rearview mirror I see Smooky looking at me concerned through his thick

glasses. He looks as if he is sharing my emotion and is about to cry. Then he starts to look frantically around his seat while talking to himself. "What's wrong?" I yell over the Yemenite music. "Is everything all right?" Smooky lowers the music and in a broken voice apologizes profusely for not having tissues. I can't help laughing, but he's clearly upset. "How could I have everything and forget to have tissues?" he begs. He really did have everything! Sensitive to his plight, I assure him that I'm okay. He must've recovered quickly because as soon as I assured him, he spun the dial and that Yemenite music was blasting again.

"How long do you plan on staying?" he asks. "Not too long," I reply. "I have to get back home. To New York City, Manhattan." Smooky turns off the music and spins around, looking at me with his eyes off the road. "Alex! If you're here, you should see my country, no? Ahhhh," he groans. He turns back around annoyed and flips the music back on. He then waits a minute, turns the music back off, and spins around. "Listen, I'll give you my number. You can call if you want Smooky to show you around, okay?" I smile and nod okay. Smooky drops me off, yells not to forget to call, and speeds off, with the Yemenite music blasting all the way down the street. I wave goodbye, gather my things, and ring the bell to a house I remember well.

Uri's House

Uri opens the door and greets me. He's still a big husky man, but now older and with streaks of grey in his hair. "Alex?" Uri hasn't seen me since I was a little boy and isn't quite sure what I'd look like. "Yes," I reply. Uri puts his strong arms around me and gives me a big hug. "Shalom, shalom, my old friend." He holds my shoulders and inspects my face. "What a fine young man you've turned into." I think he can sense I'm not in the mood for small talk. "I'm so sorry to hear of your mother's passing. She was a very special woman." I nod in agreement, thanking him. "I've made all the arrangements. The funeral will be tomorrow." "Thank you. Is there a plane going out

tomorrow night?" I ask. I can tell Uri is taken aback by my urgency to get back home. "Alex, you just got here. Wouldn't you want to take some time and see our country?" I tell him I have to get home. He handles the situation with care and says he'll look into it for me. Then he shows me around his house.

We pass by the couch where my parents and I had front-row seats to hear Uri sharing his valiant war stories with us. Man, I think, that was a long time ago. As we walk by the kitchen, I look through the screen door to the backyard where an Arab boy is working. "Ahh," Uri says, "that's Haleb. He sometimes works for me." Haleb is in his early twenties, has a dark-olive complexion and a pleasant face. But his dark eyes defy his innocent look, showing some bitterness, anger, or some kind of struggle. He stops working for a moment. We both inspect each other, and then he continues to work as Uri and I walk away. I turn around and watch Haleb working again. "He's from a small village in Hebron," Uri says. "He's a very good gardener."

We walk down the hall and Uri opens the door to the room I'll sleep in. He asks if I'm hungry, want to shower, or get some sleep and get ready for tomorrow. I thank him for his kindness and tell him I'm just tired. "I'll leave you now, Alex." He starts to shut the door and then stops. "I'm really so sorry about your mother, Alex. G'nite." Uri shuts the door behind him. I can feel him as he stays outside my door for a moment, then I hear his footsteps as he walks away.

The Jewish Cemetery on the Mount of Olives

Uri tells me that from Biblical times until the present, Jews have been buried on the Mount of Olives. It was the burial place of Jerusalem's most important citizens in the Biblical era, and it's been used as a Jewish cemetery for over three thousand years. It's named for the olive groves that once covered it.

Looking around, I see rows and rows of headstones with the Jewish star engraved on them along with Hebrew writing. In the distance I can see the Old City. I feel a warm breeze, there's a beautiful calm in the air, and I know my mother is happy right now. As much as I miss her, it comforts me to know she's out of pain and is home.

Uri had arranged for a rabbi to be here, along with some friends who will serve as our minyan, the ten people who are needed to recite certain prayers. I'm standing alone, but SexyHeeb is behind me. He is quieter than I've ever seen him, and his hand rests gently on my shoulder. The rabbi is dressed in black and stands next to Uri. He begins reciting the Mourner's Kaddish in Hebrew, as I slowly repeat after him. Then I bend down, find a small rock, and place it near where she'll be buried. The rabbi asks if I'd like to say anything.

How do you express emptiness? How do you describe a void? I knew that I would miss talking and being with my mother. That was for sure. But my life had been so enriched by having her as my mom. As I stand there, about to lay her in her final resting place, what I feel most of all is lucky—lucky for all the time I'd spent with her. It was a true gift. I knew how much I'd miss her, but I also knew I'd been blessed.

The rabbi asks again if I'd like to say something. I don't answer. I'm lost in my memories of my mother, and I first remember Compo Beach.

Most evenings my mother and I would go to the end of the jetty, sit down and watch the sunset. We didn't have to say much. She would have her arm around me or I'd lay my head in her lap. We'd watch the sun disappear behind the waves and welcome in the night. It was one of my favorite things to do.

Now I'm standing alone at the end of the jetty. I'm looking for my buoy, my anchor, to protect me and keep me safe. All I want to do is hold onto her tight and just bob, bob, bob. But I can't see her, my mother's gone, and I'm alone.

I get on my knees and put my hand on the wooden coffin before it's lowered into the ground. There's a hole on both sides of the casket. My mother is wrapped in a white sheet. I put my hand in the coffin and touch her. I whisper to her, and I know she can hear me, "I'm the last one to touch you, and you're the last one to touch me." Then I stand up.

My mother always told me that life was a song. At anytime in one's life, she said, a song is playing. It could be the low notes on the piano when you're sad, or the high notes during the happy, joyful times. When she was sick in the hospital, she told me that when she passes away, her song doesn't end. It's my responsibility to continue to play that song and embrace life in her honor. When I play my mother's song, she is still very much alive in my heart and soul. I knew she wouldn't want me to mourn her death but to celebrate her life.

With these thoughts, my heart explodes with love and happiness for my mother. I know that going forward I will always light a candle and mourn the day of her passing. But more importantly, I will dance and drink on the day of her birth and thank her mother, my grandmother Lilly, for bringing an angel into the world.

I'd cried, I'd been silent, and now it was time for song. Dani Luv from Sammy's Romanian Steak House is sitting behind his big grand organ next to my mother's grave. My mother loved Elton John, and Dani Luv knows exactly what to play.

I turn to the Rabbi and tell him that I don't have anything to say, but I have a song to sing. It was "Your Song." It was her song. I am standing in front of her grave. Dani Luv starts playing the piano intro as I close my eyes. My mother's voice inside of me starts to sing, and I let her song take me away.

*"Anyway the thing is what I really mean,
Yours are the sweetest eyes I've ever seen..."*

Haleb

I'm sitting in the kitchen by myself having coffee. I feel physically and mentally drained. Haleb comes over and speaks in a soft voice. I wasn't sure if this was how he always spoke or if he was just being respectful. "I heard of your mother's death. I'm so sorry for your loss." I motion for him to sit down. "Would you like some Turkish coffee?" I ask. "Please."

As I return to the table with a mug, I can tell that Haleb is surprised that I'm serving him. I sit back down and ask him how he learned English and where he's from. He says he learned in school before the intifada and that he and his family live in a small village just outside of Hebron. I am distracted and not really paying attention to his words, but I'm appreciating the company. "Do you plan on staying long?" Haleb asks. "Yes," I reply, half surprising myself. "A few weeks, I think. I've decided to see the country."

I then hastily get up and excuse myself. I tell Haleb I had a very tough day and need some sleep. He also stands up and nods understandingly. I turn and ask him if he'd like to join me tomorrow at the beach. Again, I sense he's surprised by the question. He politely declines and says he has work to do. I wave goodnight and head to my room to pass out. I'm suddenly feeling so hurt and lost. I need sleep badly. It's my refuge. My mother is gone.

On the Tel Aviv Beach

I wake up feeling lighter. My mother is gone, but she's at peace now and out of pain. I've been mourning her illness and fearing her death for so many years. Now her spirit is free. I feel the heat of the sun from the open window. It's a good day for the beach.

The Tel Aviv Beach sits on the Mediterranean, and all I can see are miles of beach alongside this amazing stretch of bright-blue water. Besides the sound of the waves crashing onto the beach, the only other sound is the tick-tock of balls hitting paddles, the sound of people playing matkot. It's Israel's

national sport played on most beaches. At first the sound is annoying and dominant, but soon, just like the sound of crickets in the countryside, it becomes simply background, familiar and soothing.

I've never seen so many people on a beach. To find a place to sit is precious real estate. As I'm walking toward a rare open space, I notice a girl close by getting up from her towel. She is absolutely gorgeous, and her beauty takes me aback. As she wipes the sand off her body, everything seems to be going in slow motion. We exchange looks. Well, I was staring at her and she happened to look in my direction. I can tell she's an Israeli. She has long, curly black hair, a dark complexion, and a deeply tanned and athletic body. She also has these enticing brown eyes. I feel hypnotized. If I was a soldier caught behind enemy lines and she interrogated me, I'd buckle immediately under any questioning.

The sounds of the rubber balls hitting back and forth start to slow down to a sultry beat. I imagine it's nighttime and a beam of light from the moon is shining on her. We're alone on the beach, with the waves breaking onto the sand in the background. She moves like a belly dancer around me, clicking her mini tambourines in her hand to the same beat and rhythm of the balls being hit in the paddle game. She's intoxicating. I am drunk on her torso movements and her dark, deep stare into my eyes. I am smitten.

My dreamscape is interrupted when one of those balls hit me in the back of the head. I am back again on the beach, standing there dumbfounded. My dream girl is gone, but when I look toward the ocean, I see her running into the water and diving in. I set my blanket down as close as I can next to hers. There's a jetty only a few yards out that runs parallel to the beach. Now I can see her sitting on one of the rocks with her head back, taking in the sun. The jetty was placed there to break up the waves and keep the integrity of the beach. It's low tide now, so I can almost walk out to the rocks, which I do without fear. I climb up on the rocks and sit down next to her.

"Hi," I say. She picks her head up. She seems very shy, but nods hello back. "I saw you in the water and was worried about you. There are a lot of sharks out here y'know." I roll my eyes at my lame attempt at making conversation, but I soldier on. "Oh, I forgot, I'm sorry. Do you speak English?" She looks at me with her sparkling brown eyes. "I understand you," she says and smiles. "You do? All right! I'm Alex." "Dafna," she says. I extend my hand out to shake hers. She smiles again at my being so formal. "Dafna.... That's a beautiful name." "Thank you," she says. "What were you saying about sharks?" "Oh yeah, sharks! They'll eat anything," I say. "You can be the greatest swimmer in the world, but to a shark, you just look like a hurt fish swimming on top of the water." Sarcastically, Dafna says, "So I look like a hurt fish to you?" "What? No! All I'm saying is that when a fish is hurt, it floats to the top. You're vulnerable. The shark sees this and attacks. I usually never swim out this far. I once saw this guy coming out of the water after a shark attack. He was hopping on one leg with his other leg in his hand! It was horrible." Dafna is looking at me like I'm crazy, but I can never forget that shark on Compo Beach. "All I'm saying is be careful. Just watch out. You never know." "I think I should watch out for you and not the sharks," Dafna says. We both laugh.

Dafna tells me she's from a small kibbutz outside of Tel Aviv. She came to the beach for the weekend to relax—and to meet me, I'm thinking. I tell her I'm American, from New York City, Manhattan, here on vacation. Then I look up toward the beach and spot a group of Israeli soldiers walking on the sand. "Look at those guys," I say. "They look ridiculous!" "Who?" Dafna asks as she looks toward the beach. "The soldiers!" I exclaim. "It's a beautiful day, most of the guys here are wearing clip-on speedos, and those guys are walking around in fatigues!" I might have overplayed my hand with the sarcasm, and Dafna wasn't remotely amused. Let's just say the mood changed immediately. In a stern voice, she explains that these soldiers are protecting the country, that they are protecting us.

Sometimes when you have a bad hand, you should just fold and take your losses. I, unfortunately, never learned that lesson and pressed on. Chuckling to myself, I inquire just exactly where the possible threat was coming from. "Here on the beach?" I ask. "Pleassee." Dafna is clearly upset. Any niceties or talk of sharks is definitely behind us. "I'm also in the Army," she informs me. I'm surprised and tell her so. "You just don't seem like the type," I say. "Type? Type!" she yells at me. At this point, even if there were sharks, they were definitely scared off by now. I'm scared too, to be honest, but I seem unable to move. "If you're Jewish and healthy you go!" she says. "Ach, you're such a typical American! We don't have the opportunity to go to college. We must first serve our country for three years to fight! To stay alive! When have you ever had to struggle or fight for something in your life?" she asks with disgust in her voice. I smirk in my usual over-confident way, with not much to back up my self-entitled arrogance. "I'm from New York City, Manhattan," I announce, "and I've got to fight every day!"

Dafna then lectures me on the mindset of young Americans and how our priorities are backward. "All you care about is building your résumé. But have you ever come across a résumé with service on it?" she asks. "I'm not talking about just military service," she says sternly, "but any kind of service. To serve! To serve your country, to serve your neighborhood and the people in your community. It doesn't make a difference how you volunteer or serve, as long as you do something!" She looks deep into my eyes, searching to see if I have even a clue of what she's saying. "At the end of one's service," she says, and starts to stand up, "it's not only what you gave, but more importantly, what did you personally get and learn from your experience. That's what makes you who you are.... That's how you grow and become a better person."

"Listen," I say, in an attempt to calm her down. "I didn't mean to..." Dafna turns around and stares at me. "I'd rather try my luck with the sharks than with you!" With that, she dives into the water and swims back to shore. I just stand there, defeated, and watch my dream girl swim away. By the time I get

back to the beach, Dafna is long gone. All that's left of the vision that was Dafna is a pair of hand-held tambourines in the sand, half buried. I look at them and think I hear the faint, distant sounds of them clicking in her hands, click, click, click, which then turn into the sounds of balls hitting the rubber paddles. "She's one of the great ones," I say to myself, as another ball hits me in the back of my head.

As I stand on the beach looking out at the ocean, I'm thinking of my mother. "Embrace life!" I hear her saying, as she always did. And I swear I can also hear her saying, "Now there's a good Jewish girl!"

Hummus and Cactus

Uri, Haleb, and I are sitting around the kitchen table having a bite to eat. We're eating a traditional meal of Israel. On one plate there's an Israeli salad. It's comprised of cucumbers and tomatoes, seasoned with Israeli olive oil, and sprinkled with kosher sea salt. It all tastes so light that the plate seems to float in the air, and it tastes delicious. The tomatoes and cucumbers come from Uri's garden, compliments to Haleb. He really is a talented gardener, I think. We also have a plate of hummus with tahini in the middle. It, too, is seasoned with kosher sea salt and a drizzle of Israeli olive oil. I like to think of myself as a connoisseur of hummus. I've eaten it my whole life. I have hummus going through my veins! After each bite, I announce that this might be the best hummus I've ever tasted. Then there's the warm pita bread, which all together is like sweet music to my taste buds. I cut my pita in half to make mini sandwiches. The hummus literally melts inside the pita, and with the Israeli salad, it's a beautiful ensemble. It's such a simple dish, but the smell alone is intoxicating. I'm having an orgasm in my nose! I'm in heaven!

I forgot how much Uri enjoys a good drink and his Ouzo. It tastes like Sambuca to me, but I think Uri is happy that I'm relaxed, smiling, and

drinking with him. I'm actually feeling relieved too. As the evening progresses, I definitely start to feel the effects of the Ouzo, and I start to talk.

"I met this beautiful girl on the beach today," I confess. I describe Dafna in detail and share the story of what transpired. I was looking for some sort of compassion or sympathy, but instead, they look at each other for a moment, then simultaneously burst into laughter. Uri leans across the table toward me and says, "Alex, you've met your first Israeli cactus!" I look back at him dumbfounded. "My first Israeli cactus?" He explains, "An Israeli cactus is an Israeli woman. They are strong, smart, absolutely gorgeous, independent—and definitely not afraid to share their opinion!" Uri looks over to Haleb for confirmation and continues, "They are very hard on the outside like a cactus, but once they get to know you, trust you, and let you in, they are the sweetest taste in the world on the inside. As tough as they are on the outside, they are like maple syrup on the inside. But that's only after they trust you, or more importantly, respect you."

I tell them that I was shocked that she was an officer in the Israeli army. "Alex," Uri says, "the women in Israel run the army. Without them, it wouldn't function. They also run the country. Without them, we wouldn't exist." Wow, I think, what powerful words coming from Uri. I sit back in my chair for a moment to consider what he just said. I remember learning about Golda Meir, Israel's fourth prime minister, when I was a young boy in Hebrew School. She created "Operation Wrath Of God," a covert operation directed by the Mossad to assassinate the terrorists involved in the 1972 Munich massacre—in which eleven members of the Israeli Olympic team were killed. She was a badass!

I stand up, raise my glass of Ouzo, and hold it in the air for a moment. "To the Israeli cactuses," I toast with pride and drink my shot. It was getting late and the bottle of Ouzo was finished, so bed seemed like the best option. I stumble to my room and get under the covers. I reach toward the nightstand and turn off the light. The room is pitch-black. "Israeli cactus tree," I say out loud to myself. "You are so beautiful, Dafna. I'll see you in my dreams, my

Israeli cactus.” I close my eyes and can hear my mother saying, “Good night, sugar plum,” as I fall fast asleep.

Haleb’s Garden

I wake up to the sounds of Haleb working in the garden. The aroma of Turkish coffee permeates the house. I walk into the kitchen where a fresh brew awaits. It’s comprised of very fine coffee beans and served in a copper pot. It’s extremely potent and strong. Just the smell alone is a swift kick in your ass to get you going and start your day. For those half n’ half, mochaccino-with-caramel frappuccino types, this isn’t your cup of tea.

I look out to the garden where Haleb is just finishing praying. I know that he’s a Muslim and that he’s now facing Mecca. I watch as he bows, then prostrates himself, recites prayers, and sits down on the ground. He turns and sees me and waves for me to come over. As I walk out into the garden, I feel like I’m walking into another world. Even Haleb looks different. His face is lit up. And the hate and bitterness I had seen in his dark eyes are now gone. His eyes are warm, he’s smiling broadly, and he seems happy and proud to show me what he has created. I can see how he took a blank canvas and filled it with beautiful, bright colors in full bloom. There’s life all around me, and everything feels alive! He should feel proud, I think. It’s a beautiful garden.

The open patio, which lets light into the house and where Uri sometimes eats, reminds me of a sukkah with its palm fronds on the rafters. There are also yellow, blue, and orange butterflies flying everywhere! Haleb tells me how they lay their eggs on the patio, and the eggs turn into larva and then pupa—a kind of cocoon— from which these exquisite flying creatures finally emerge and make Haleb’s garden their home.

Everything here seems connected. And with all the hate and divisiveness surrounding us just outside these walls, this garden feels like an oasis, a beacon of light. It reminds me of the tiny flower I once saw growing out of a

crack on a busy New York City sidewalk. I watched people's feet walking frantically from one direction to another—but no one stepping on the flower.

I think about the butterflies' metamorphosis, and I feel a yearning to go through some kind of transformation myself. I realize that just like a caterpillar, I spun myself into a cocoon—a casing to protect myself from my pain. I want to break out now, but I don't know how or what I will be. I just know I'm in need of a radical change.

I give Haleb a hug, then take in a deep breath as I look around. Haleb is smiling widely. I notice Uri looking at us through the screen door. I leave them feeling inspired, and I'm looking forward to exploring this country, Israel, that in her heart was my mother's home.

The Tel Aviv Main Bus Station

The Tel Aviv central bus station is the largest of its kind in the world. The complex is a maze of a huge shopping mall, filled with shops, restaurants, and yes, a bus terminal too. It's a Sunday morning, and there are soldiers everywhere, heading back to their various army bases. I feel as if I'm walking through a circus, surrounded by clowns, jugglers, and lions that are jumping through a huge circle of fire. It's organized chaos! I'm looking down on the top of an anthill watching all the ants working in unison around me. I can't even ask anyone for directions because they're moving so fast.

I have always felt bad for those tourists walking around Times Square. They stand out like a sore thumb with their bright clothes, fanny packs, and a look of being overwhelmed and completely lost. I would walk by them—dressed in all black, which is standard attire for native New Yorkers—and chuckle to myself. Now I can sympathize with their plight. I am now one of them.

As I'm searching for my bus, I look over at a group of female soldiers in line. OMG, that's Dafna! Did I just say that out loud or to myself? I am beyond

excited to see her again. She has her hair back and is in uniform. I run over to her and yell her name, as if we're two lovers separated by a war who haven't seen each other for years and this is our homecoming! Dafna doesn't share my exuberance. Just looking at her face I can tell she's not happy to see me. Her friends in line seem to sense her discomfort and give me ugly looks. So much for a warm homecoming. I start moving with the line of soldiers as they get onto the bus. "Hey, so you are a soldier," I say to Dafna, in an effort to break the uncomfortable silence. "I didn't mean to offend you yesterday. But with all this chaos around us, I think there's a reason that we've found each other again," I point out. This doesn't seem to work either as she keeps moving along with the line. And her friends' evil looks don't help the situation. "Dafna, can't you wait a minute?" I find myself almost pleading with her as she completely ignores me and gets on the bus. She takes a seat by the window, we look at each other, and the bus pulls away.

I am left in a dark cloud of exhaust. That didn't go the way I hoped it would, but wow, did she look amazing. I walk over to another soldier who was in the same line as Dafna and ask him which base that bus was going to. He is very helpful. I slap him on his back, thanking him. I'm not sure why I'm so excited, almost upbeat. This second chance meeting couldn't have gone any worse. Still, it felt really good to see her.

Tel Aviv Museum

I'm walking through the rooms of the museum not really paying attention to my surroundings. I'm still a little shocked from running into Dafna. What were the odds? I think. I join a tour group that's in the museum. They're all wearing these huge red beanies on their heads—much bigger than yarmulkas. I guess they wear them to identify each other. I'm in the back of the group following them from one room to another. The tour guide stops in a room where the walls are full of pictures showing Jews being tortured, beaten, and killed during a pogrom. "The pogroms took place in the Russian

Empire during 1791-1835,” he says. “Prior to the 19th century, the Russian Empire had very few Jews, until they acquired territories with large Jewish populations. The Jews were forbidden to move to other parts of the empire unless they converted to Russian Orthodox Christianity.”

The tour guide keeps talking, and my thoughts are drifting off—until I hear music playing in the background. I stop walking and freeze. The tour guide explains that the Yiddish lullaby we hear is what mothers used to sing to their children at bedtime so they wouldn’t hear the sounds of horror just outside their door. I slowly walk to the front of the group and study the pictures. I listen to the lullaby and look around at the people on the tour, hoping for some kind of recognition or connection. But when the tour group moves into the next room, I stand by myself staring at the wall, at the horrific photos in front of me. At the same time, the sound of the lullaby sends a warm breeze through my body. I don’t want to leave. I close my eyes and listen to the song. It takes me back to when I was a little boy snuggling under the covers as my mother, a Yiddish teacher, sat on the edge of my bed, singing a Yiddish lullaby to me quietly, putting me to sleep. She finishes the lullaby and kisses my forehead. I smile and close my eyes. Then I feel my eyes tearing as I whisper to myself the beautiful words my mother would say to me before she turned off the lights in my room. “Sweet dreams, sugar plum, sweet dreams.” I open my eyes and stare at the atrocities of the pogroms.

Military Base

Back at the Tel Aviv bus terminal, I’m standing in line with a group of soldiers who are getting on a bus. I take a seat in the back. The entire bus is filled with soldiers, and I’m the only civilian there. Even though most of the soldiers are the same age as I am, I’m surprised at how young they look in their uniforms. They’re just kids, I think, and they all seem so normal. Some of them are playing music and swaying to the beat, while others are engaged in what seems like a very passionate conversation or debate. A few of them

exchange cigarettes with each other. I sit in the back and watch them all as if it's a play taking place exclusively for me. Nothing feels real. I'm in Israel, and my mother is dead.

When I get to the army base I ask the guard at the front if he can help me. Soon, I'm standing at the door of a small office. There are eight desks in the room. The desks are connected to each other in a row with two soldiers facing each other. Dafna is sitting at her desk doing some paperwork. The other female soldiers are the same ones who were in the line for the bus that morning. I wouldn't say it was a room of warmth. I lean against the open door and bravely knock. "Hello, Dafna," I say confidently. She lifts her head and is obviously shocked to see me. The other soldiers also look up and are surprised or, by the looks on their faces, appalled that I'm there. "You didn't give me a chance to finish talking with you," I say, trying to stay brave. Dafna jumps out of her seat, grabs my arm—a very tight grip I might add—and walks us both out of the room into the hallway. She's clearly upset and embarrassed. What's just as clear is that I might have miscalculated this decision. But I was hoping to at least explain myself to her.

"What are you doing here?" she asks in disgust. "Listen, I just wanted to —" Dafna interrupts me, not being able to stomach the sound of my voice. "Ach! You're so typical!" she yells. "This is where I work, where I work!" She is moving the back of her hand in my face, as she eloquently amputates any masculinity that's left in this shivering boy in front of her. "You come and chase me and you think you're impressing someone!" "I just wanted to talk," I murmur, the words struggling to leave my mouth. Dafna laughs at me sarcastically. "Talk? I know what you want, Alex. Go back to America and play your silly games. I have no time for them. You believe in nothing!" she says, as she looks me up and down. "Now please leave. You have no right. No right!" she yells. She walks by me and heads back into her office. "Dafna," I say quietly. She spins around still furious. "What? Just stop it! Go home, Alex, just go home." Dafna walks into her office and closes the door behind her.

I stand alone in that hallway for a few long minutes. I'm not sure if I'll be taken away by the military police. Then again, they're probably so embarrassed for me that they'll let me go out of mercy. Soon, I find myself in the back seat of an empty bus leaving the army base. I feel gutted. The inside of a cactus tree is like maple syrup? Yeah, right.

PART IV

Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center

Why was I never here before? Were my parents scared that I was too young, that I'd lose all faith in humanity? Walking through the museum is a dark and somber experience. The photos are horrific, and the videos of survivors sharing their tales are at once compelling and unbearable to hear. Then I come across a picture of shoes that belonged to the children who perished in the Holocaust. So many little shoes. The sign below says that more than a million and a half young children perished in the Holocaust. Their names and ages are announced on a recording, over and over. I feel sick to my stomach and have waves of nausea. I also have waves of fatigue, so I sit down on the nearest chair and close my eyes.

When I wake up, I notice signs pointing to an interactive theatre. It's called "The Hope." What a strange name to call an exhibit at Yad Vashem. A woman at the door explains that participants go through one at a time and that the people you interact with are all actors. The idea is for you to experience what it felt like as a Jew during the Holocaust. It sounds like a haunted attraction to me, since what I have seen so far is unbelievably upsetting. Still, being who I am, I go in.

The first thing they have me do is change my clothing. I put on some clothes that look and smell like rags. There's a yellow Star of David on the left corner of my shirt, right over my heart. I immediately feel labeled and less human than before. A large door has a sign in English, Hebrew, and German that's blinking "ENTER." I walk through the door.

I find myself on a quaint German street paved with cobblestones. There are Nazi flags flying from every window, and the street is busy with Germans going about their day. Some shops have JUDE written on their windows, along

with huge swastikas. A woman and a young boy walk by me. The boy stops and points. "Mother, look. It's a dirty, filthy Jew that smells like a pig!" The mother spits in front of me, grabs her son, and pulls him away. People walk by me snarling and call me dirty Jude. A bunch of young German boys come up the block and start throwing rocks into the windows of the Jewish-marked stores. There's broken glass everywhere. They look at me and yell, "Get the dirty Jude!"

What the fuck is going on! These guys are acting, right? Either way I feel terrified. The boys, dressed in lederhosen, push me against a wall and start shouting German obscenities. My inner SexyHeeb is about to come out, but no, I think, not now. I try to remain calm. Then a huge man dressed in an SS uniform pushes the boys aside and addresses me. "Papiere!" he demands. I have no idea what he's talking about. He slaps my face. "Papiere! Papiere!" he yells. Papers? What papers would I have? He goes through my pants pocket and pulls out what looks like an old passport. I had no idea it was there. He opens it and looks at me questionably. "Alex Gordon," he says. "Is your name Alex Gordon?"

I'm completely in shock. How the hell did he know my name? "What are you doing here!" he demands and again slaps my face. I'm scared as hell and can't understand what's happening. Then I remember that before I entered the theater they asked me my name and personal information. I feel a second of relief, which dissipates when he slaps me again. "Where are you from!" he demands. "Where do you live!" "Uhm, New York City, Manhattan," I answer as if I'm not quite sure. "New York City? Manhattan?" The SS soldier looks at me with disgust, his fiery blue eyes staring at me as he raises his hand once more.

Where was "The Hope"? I'm thinking. At that moment a Jewish shopkeeper with an apron on pushes his way through the crowd, grabs my hand, and says, "Alex, run home quick, run home. Do you see that door?" I look across the street and nod yes as I see the door with a blinking red sign

that says ENTER. "Run quick and don't stop. Run home through that door." I know he's another actor, but I honestly don't care. I get the hell out of there and run across the street. I can hear the SS soldier and the bullies chasing me and screaming "Halt!" I get to the door and thankfully go through it.

"Alex? Alex, is that you? Where have you been? I didn't see you in class," a beautiful, tall blond girl says in a mocking, scolding way. She's carrying a bunch of books, and she comes up and kisses me. "I was worried about you." I look around to try and get my bearings. It's nighttime. The sky is lit up with bright stars. "I thought you promised we'd go to the bonfire together," she says. "Here, help me with these books, silly. Be a gentleman." She piles a bunch of books into my arms. A large procession of young men and women carrying books come marching by. They are all wearing brown shirts with a red swastika armband around their biceps, and someone at the front holds a Nazi flag high. They seem very jovial as they sing German songs while marching in unison. A small boy looks over and waves to us enthusiastically. "Hello, Alex! Hello, Lilly!" he yells. "Come join us! We're going to the bonfire." Both Lilly and I join the marchers. "Hello, Max," Lilly says, "Where's Oskar?" "Oh, he'll meet us there. "Hello, Alex," Max says. "Yeah, what's up?" I answer.

We march together until we reach a huge bonfire. I look down at one of the books I'm holding and see the author's name: Heinrich Heine, the famous Jewish-German poet. All of a sudden I understand. This is May 10, 1937, the night of the burning of the books, when German students from the most prestigious German universities gathered in Berlin to burn books with "un-German" ideas. Above the roaring bonfire there's a huge banner that reads: "WHERE THEY BURN BOOKS, THEY WILL ULTIMATELY BURN PEOPLE."

Max and Lilly and the rest of the Hitler Youth are ecstatic as they throw books into the fire. I grip my book tightly as if it were a bible. I notice I'm scratching its cover in anger. I really want to kick the shit out of Max—and

Lilly too. Again, I'm lost trying to understand why this exhibit is called "The Hope."

"Why aren't you throwing your books in the fire?" Lilly asks. "What's wrong with you today?" I grip the book tighter and shrug a little. At that moment I spot a door in the distance with a blinking red light that says ENTER. This time I don't run but slowly saunter to the door. Before entering I turn to Lilly and say, "Don't you ever kiss me again, you anti-Semitic bitch!" Lilly looks back confused. As I walk through the door, I can hear her and Max yelling, "Alex, where are you going?" I just put up my middle finger and walk through the door.

"Shhhh, Alex." An old man puts his finger to his lips, signaling for me to keep quiet. He is holding on tightly to his wife and daughter. We're beneath the floor of someone's home. It's a very dark and narrow space. I crawl over to them and huddle close with the family. I have to keep reminding myself that these are actors, but it's difficult not to get emotional. His daughter points her finger above and whispers to me in a sweet, innocent voice, "Nazis. They've come to get us." I can hear someone pacing above us. He must be wearing heavy boots because his pacing is making a loud sound. The sawdust from the wood floor falls on our faces. It's terrifying.

"I know they are here," the man above us says in a heavy German accent. "If you are harboring Jews, then you are also an enemy of Germany," he says, "and your family will be killed!" The little girl grabs my hand sensing I'm afraid and whispers, "Don't be afraid, Alex. I'm here with you."

"Just point to where they are!" the man above yells. There's a moment of silence that feels much longer. Then the hatch door to where we're hiding swings open. "There you are, you dirty Jews!" yells the man looking down. He's wearing black boots and a black leather outfit and has a swastika around his forearm. He instructs his men to pull the family out of the hole we're hiding in. They grab the wife by her hair and lift her out while she's screaming

for her baby. Next was the father. The little girl keeps holding my hand tightly. "Alex," she whispers, "they don't know you're here. Go back to the door where you came from." A huge hand comes down then, grabs the little girl's hair, and starts to lift her up. "Come up here, you little bitch," the man snorts. The little girl screams loudly as we try desperately to keep holding hands. But we lose each other's grip and she is gone.

"Is there anyone else down there?" a voice growls. "I'll go check," another man says. What's wrong with me? I ask myself. When did I become such a coward? Why didn't I try and save the little girl and fight these guys? Where was SexyHeeb? Where was "The Hope"? Then I remember this is all fake, right? Right? I crawl to the door as fast as I can and pass through.

A huge man grabs me and lifts me up into the air. "What were you doing hiding there!" he yells. He's a beast of a man: another SS soldier dressed in black with a leather whip hanging from his belt. He opens a sliding door and throws me inside. I fall into a bunch of people who are all standing. It's so packed that the people I fall into don't fall over. "Get in there where you belong, Jew!" He then slams the sliding door behind me.

Where the hell am I? I'm in a wooden box with dozens of other people both young and old. It feels like a huge coffin. There's a tiny open window with bars on it. The few people who are lucky enough to be placed near it are raising their heads to the open space, gasping for air. The sun is shining through the window. It must be 100 degrees inside this box, and there's a sickening smell of urine, feces, and vomit. Some people have fainted from the heat but are still standing because there's no room to fall. I can hear the German soldiers outside laughing. Then I hear a loud whistle and the wooden coffin I'm trapped in starts shaking and moving. Now I understand. I'm on a train and we're heading to a death camp.

The anguish on the people's faces around me is heartbreaking. I can't tell if some people are actually sleeping or passed out. There is absolutely no

“hope” here. It’s hard to tell how long we travel, but then the train starts to slow down. I can hear soldiers outside and barking dogs. People in our wooden coffin are petrified. “Where are we?” they ask each other. “What will become of us?”

I know exactly where we are: the Auschwitz death camp. The train comes to a stop, and the sliding door opens with the sun shining in so brightly it blinds everyone inside. The train was so crowded that people literally fall off it like fish in a net that had just opened onto a boat. I fall off it, too, and hit the ground face first. I can hear the sounds of dogs barking wildly and sounding as if they’re drawing closer.

“Everyone off!” yells the German soldier. “Mach schnell or you’ll be shot!” he shouts. “Women and children in one line and men on another!” It’s utter chaos. An old man stumbles around aimlessly. One of the German soldiers stands in front of him, pulls out his revolver, and shoots him in the head. His lifeless body collapses to the ground. “Schnell! Schnell!” Mothers are crying hysterically, trying to hold onto their children as they are stripped away, never to see them again. Then, not far from the screaming soldiers, I see another door with a red blinking sign that reads “EXIT.”

Exhausted and weak, I start walking toward the door. The sun is shining so brightly in my face that I have to squint just to see where I’m going. I slowly walk past the front of the line and past a German soldier. “Where the hell do you think you’re going!” he yells, as he raises his leather whip into the air. He tries to hit me but just misses. I use all my energy and stumble to the door with my hand stretched fully out. Please, let me get to the door, I beg God. “Stop him!” the German soldier yells. I hear a gun shot that just misses me and hits the door. My hand reaches the doorknob. I open the door and fall through.

I find myself walking in a single-file line. I look behind me and the line stretches farther than I can see. German soldiers stand on the side making

sure the line keeps moving. It may seem crazy, but I can't help thinking how beautiful the landscape is. There are beds of flowers in bloom and dandelions are everywhere. I can hear bees collecting pollen and nectar to return to the hive and store honey. A cool breeze comes through, and dandelion seeds fill the air. I start to relax and feel cautiously hopeful.

We come upon a long cement building with two huge chimneys on its roof. We are told to halt. A threatening SS soldier stands on top of the roof right at the entrance. He is standing over a thick iron door that is open, and he addresses us through a bullhorn. "You are at Auschwitz," he explains, "and you're here to work. But first, you must get out of your clothes and shower, and then you'll be fed hot soup." He tries to smile at us, but all I see is a sneer. It seems out of place with the beautiful flowers in bloom and the dandelion seeds filling the air. Or maybe they are out of place. My calmness turns to anxiety and my hope is gone. There is something very evil about this place. When I look around again, the greenery is gone. The ground is burnt and black, and the flowers and dandelions are curled over dead. Then a tiny, old woman in front of me turns around. Her face is filthy and dry from dehydration. But she smiles and says she's so relieved to get out of these dirty clothes and take a nice warm shower. A bowl of hot soup sounds lovely too, she says. All I can do is smile back at her.

"Mach schnell!" the SS soldier on top of the building yells. The line starts moving again. One by one, we enter the cement building. The SS soldier on top is standing directly above the entrance with his legs wide open like an arch as we enter beneath him. We all take off our clothes and leave them on the ground. We were told we'd have another set of clothes waiting after we took our shower. We then enter another room, and the heavy iron door closes behind us making a deafening sound. This room is dark, moldy, and cold. There aren't any showerheads in the whole place. "Where is the soap?" a voice asks. We look around and wait in silence. All along the cement walls I see scratch marks. It is harrowing. Someone tugs my hand and I look down.

It's the same little girl from beneath the floor. She takes my hand. "Hello, Alex," she says. I stare at her and smile lovingly. "Where are your parents?" I ask. She shakes her head. "I don't know, Alex." I pick her up and hold her tiny body tight. I don't want to let go. The little girl whispers in my ear the same thing she said to me before, "Don't be afraid, Alex. I'm here with you."

I hear the clanking noise of cans above us falling down. All hope is gone as the room fills with smoke. The fog is so dense I can't see my hand in front of me, and all I can hear are the screams of people crying for their lives and the sounds of fingernails scratching the cement as they desperately try to get out. Then there is silence. Not a sound. Nothing. I hear a loud vacuum sound that sucks the fog from the room, and all I can see are lifeless bodies lying everywhere—some piled on top of each other by the iron door where they had hoped to escape. The little girl in my arms is stretched out limp with her head back and her arms drooped to her sides. She is dead. I break down and cry hysterically as I hold her.

Then a loud bell rings out, and bright industrial lights come on. Everyone around me starts to move and get up. The little girl opens her eyes and looks at me. "Are you okay, Alex?" she asks. Trying to catch my breath, I nod yes. I try hard, but I can't stop crying. I am broken.

Slowly, everyone comes toward me and we embrace in a beautiful hug. Besides with my mother, I'd never been held like this before or felt so much love. Then, out of the loudspeakers that were hidden, "Hatikvah," the national anthem of Israel, starts to play. All the actors sing along quietly:

*"As long as the Jewish spirit is yearning
deep in the heart,
With eyes turned toward the East,
looking toward Zion,
Then our hope—the two-thousand-year-old hope—
will not be lost:
To be a free people in our land,
The land of Zion and Jerusalem."*

*Now I understand the name of this exhibit. Hatikvah, in English, means
"The Hope."*

There's a reception afterward to meet the cast and other participants like myself. The first actor I speak with is the little girl, who couldn't have been more engaging. I pick her up and give her a big hug! She explains that her grandmother died in the Holocaust, and out of respect for the nana she never knew, she volunteers once a month with the theater. I can't believe it when she tells me that all the actors are volunteers. No one gets paid. She says it's an honor to participate.

I then go speak with Lilly and Max, whose real names are Leah and Avner. Leah tells me she's in the army, and this is part of her service. I apologize for calling her an anti-Semitic bitch. "No, Alex," she says. "That is exactly the reaction we wanted." I also tell her I loved her kiss.

Somewhat reluctantly, I next make my way to meet the actor who played the SS soldier who stood over us at the crematorium. He's the same actor who slapped me in the street. "Alex!" he yells, as he motions me over with a big smile on his face. He's a bigger-than-life figure whose name is Uzi. He tells me he's a retired general who served in the paratroopers. I thought if you were retired, you'd buy a boat and go fishing—or open a pub named Uzi's. But not this guy. He explains to me how important it is to educate the next generation so they don't forget. He also emphasizes how important it is to serve. I sarcastically ask if he thought it was necessary to slap me. He looks dead into my eyes and asks me the same question. I nod in agreement and feel honored to have met him.

The last person I talk with is the tiny, old woman who thought that a bowl of hot soup sounded nice. Her name is Ester, and I soon find out that she lost her parents, her two brothers, and her twin sister in the Holocaust. Her entire family wiped out. Yet she is so loving and full of life. Ester says that for her, volunteering is a way to honor her family. She wants to help others

understand what it means when we say “Never Again!” Her work with the theater, she says, is her way to serve.

Serve. They all feel it’s an honor to serve. I remember what Dafna said on the beach. To serve. To really add value and be part of a team. That’s how you grow and become a better person.

I feel a yearning inside that makes me think of Haleb’s caterpillars, pushing against their cocoons, wanting to evolve, but not knowing what that will mean.

The last thing I see when I leave the museum is a large poster with bold letters that say “NEVER AGAIN.”

Israel’s Military Cemetery

I feel emotionally drained from Yad Vashem. Still, I continue on my journey, walking east toward Mount Herzl, Israel’s national cemetery, where Israel’s soldiers are buried. I want to pay respect to all who gave their lives for this country, its hope and its dream.

All I see at first are endless rows of tombstones. Each grave marker tells the Hebrew name of the soldier and the age at which they died. Most of the ages are nineteen, eighteen, seventeen—that’s my age, for God’s sake! I think of my friends back in New York City, planning for college and starting their lives, while here, their Jewish counterparts are dying in the fields of war. Dying for our freedom as Jews!

Looking at the ages of the fallen soldiers, I mourn their lives. They paid the ultimate sacrifice before they really had a chance to live. It feels wrong, not how it should be. I feel that way about my mother too. She died too young, only forty-two. And she was more pissed off about it than anyone.

The sky is getting darker, with storm clouds forming. But I keep on walking. Then I come across a teenage girl who’s hugging one of the

tombstones and crying as if she can't stop. Startled, she looks up at me. She has such a beautiful, innocent face, and her eyes are swollen from her tears. "I'm sorry," I whisper to her. "I'm so sorry." I bow my head and start walking away. The wind is picking up now, and my pace increases as I pass row after row of tombstones.

I'm not a religious Jew. Lord knows my mother tried everything—from yeshiva schools to religious camps during the summer. What she and my father did teach me, though, was gratitude for being Jewish. It's given me pride and purpose and an unbreakable inner strength. Being a Jew makes me stand fucking tall! The SexyHeeb in me will never bend or kneel!

What my parents also gave me was a strong connection to Israel, to its people, and to the Jews who created a nation. And now, seeing the graves of all these soldiers, young men and women who gave their lives—their lives—to defend Israel and our freedom as Jews, my connection grows even stronger. This land is my mother, and I need to protect her.

Between Yad Vashem and the military cemetery, I am truly wiped out. I need to get back to Uri's.

Bus Station - Evening - Jerusalem

I'm sitting on the bench waiting for a bus to go back to Uri's, and I'm watching this little boy chase some bird around. I felt so tired I could crawl up into a ball and go to sleep right here. An Israeli soldier approaches and motions to my bag. "What's in your bag?" he asks in Hebrew. I don't understand him. "Your bag, your bag, what's in it?" he repeats, raising his voice. I'm too tired to argue but feel annoyed that he's bothering me. He goes through my bag methodically and without any emotion walks away. I just shrug my shoulders as I watch him.

A short time later my bus pulls up and I join the long line to get on board. The soldier who inspected my bag is sitting at the front of the bus, motionless,

staring straight ahead. I walk by him and take an aisle seat a few rows back. Then I stare off into the headlights of the cars on the other side of the road until I fall into a deep sleep. Tel Aviv is ninety minutes away....

I'm awakened abruptly by someone smashing my elbow as they run toward the front of the bus. It's a man with a gun. He stops right behind the bus driver and shoots him. All the passengers, some fast asleep, wake up to their worst nightmare: A terrorist is trying to crash the bus! Screams of fear are heard all around me. The driver, who was shot in the shoulder, tries to keep control of the bus and stabilize it before it goes off the road. The Israeli soldier in the front of the bus jumps up and starts wrestling with the terrorist. The terrorist throws the soldier against the door and turns toward the driver to finish the job. I'm hiding behind my seat frozen in fear and not knowing what to do. But then, in an instant, SexyHeeb takes over. I stand up and run toward the front of the bus to help out. Pure adrenaline runs through me. A minute ago I was too weary to move. Now, every inch of my body is vibrating with nervous energy. I have absolutely no idea what I'm going to do once I get to the front, but I feel compelled to do something.

The terrorist sees me charging, raises his gun, and points it directly at me. I stop just before I can reach him and raise my hands in the air. It feels like I'm standing there for hours. BANG! A shot from a gun is fired. I fall to the ground, slowly pick up my head, and look right in front of me. The terrorist is lying there motionless. His eyes are wide open, looking directly at me. The soldier had shot the terrorist and saved my life.

The driver gains control of the bus and slowly pulls over. The frantic passengers seem relieved and calm down. The bus is quiet except for a few people whimpering and whispering to each other. Incredibly, it takes the first responders only minutes to arrive. The paramedics come in and attend to the bus driver, and the body of the terrorist is put in a body bag and carried away. The passengers are then allowed off the bus.

Bright lights from the military jeeps and flashing lights from the police cars make it almost seem like a circus environment. News crews have arrived, and TV cameras are filming the scene and even focus on us. I look over to the soldier who is standing in a circle of military men, briefing his superiors. He stops and looks over at me. I nod to thank him. He smiles, nods back, and then turns away to talk with the other soldiers. That guy just saved my fuckin' life!

Uri's House

Uri is watching the news on TV in disbelief. I come into the room, walk over to the TV, and turn it off. Then I turn to Uri, who is sitting on the couch. "I want to join the Israeli Army!" I say emphatically. "I want to be a soldier." Uri stands up, comes over, and puts his hand on my shoulder. "Calm down," he says. "You've just been through a terrible ordeal." I look at Uri right in his eyes. "I don't want to calm down," I say. "I want to be a soldier. I've changed. I want to be part of it. I need to."

Uri turns and starts to walk out the room. "You're not speaking rationally, Alex. You've only been in the country for a short while." I catch up with him and spin him around. "Don't give me that shit, Uri! Don't you remember? When I was a little boy?" Uri is staring at me confused. "It was you!" I continue. "You would always sit me and my family down and tell us your war stories. Right here," I say, as I motion to the couch. My voice turns from anger to pleading with Uri so he can understand. "You would always finish by turning to me, patting me on my head, and asking, 'So, young Alex, when are you going to fulfill your obligation as a Jew and come fight for Israel?'"

Uri has his head down as I plead with him. "That time is now. I'm ready now," I say. "I've screwed up a lot in my life, and this is my chance to do something good. My mother always wanted me to be a mensch. Now I'm not

about to become a rabbi, but I've got to be part of it. I've got to serve. This is the only way I know how."

Uri picks up his head and is listening intently. "You told me that any Jew in the world can come and serve in the Israeli army," I remind him. "Diaspora! Diaspora Jew! That's what I am. Someone who lives outside of Israel. Don't keep me out, Uri. Help me. I don't have time to waste. I know you can get me through the red tape."

Uri looks down. "What about finishing school?" he asks. "School and I were finished a long time ago," I answer. "You need to tell your father." "I will, but I need you on my side." Uri stares at me and rests both of his hands on my shoulders. "Are you really sure you want this?" he asks. I don't say a word and keep staring back at him. "Okay, Alex, okay. It will be done."

PART V

Recruitment Center

“Alex! Let’s go!” Uri yells. He’s waiting outside to drive me to the recruitment center where I’ll be processed. “Let’s go!” he yells again. “All right! All right!” I’m in my room gathering my things and freaking out a little. I can’t believe what I’m about to do. I’m so nervous that I can’t find my underwear. So I just put on my jeans and head out.

Walking by the screen door, I see Haleb working in the garden. “Haleb! Haleb!” I yell. Haleb doesn’t respond and keeps working. He definitely heard me. I’m puzzled but also super late. I shrug my shoulders, run outside, and get into the car.

Most of the ride there is pretty quiet. When we reach the processing center for new recruits, Uri parks the car and looks over at me. He seems a bit apprehensive. I slap my hand on his thigh and tell him not to worry, I’ll survive. “You’ll have to do more than just survive,” Uri says. “You’re going to be different than the others, Alex. More will be expected.” He then slaps me in the face. “Make us proud, boychik!” I got out of the car and make my way inside the building. Why does everyone in this country slap me in the face?

I get in line and hand my papers to the officer behind the desk. He motions for me to join the other recruits sitting down. I’m then escorted with eight other guys into a small room with hooks around the perimeter. A doctor comes in and reads our names off. He then says something in Hebrew and leaves. I look around with no idea of what’s going on. “What did he say? Do you know what we’re supposed to be doing?” I ask. The other guys just ignore me. They start getting undressed and hang their clothes on the hooks. I assume it’s for a medical exam. Feeling highly motivated and wanting to be first, I rip off my shirt and jeans as fast as I can. The other guys stop and watch me as I strip down with lightning speed.

Feeling proud to be the first one undressed, I stand tall and head to the door, which I open and walk through. The door makes a loud sound like a prison door slamming shut. "Ohhh, shit!" What I thought was a doctor's office turns out to be a regular office instead. Doctors, nurses, secretaries, and soldiers are all walking around. Everyone stops what they're doing and looks up, staring at me. Once again in my life I'm standing buck naked, my hands covering my private parts. The doctor from before steps forward and addresses me. "You don't speak Hebrew?" "No," I reply. "Well, go put on your underwear." I start to leave but then turn to him and say, "I don't have any underwear." "Well, go put on your pants!" Devastated and humiliated, I turn around and walk back through the door. The other guys greet me with smiles and laughs. I'm happy to entertain them. Fuckers.

A group of us are now sitting on a long bench. Everyone's wearing underwear except for yours truly who's wearing his jeans. A huge and scary looking nurse emerges from the curtain wearing gloves. She looks mean and clearly means business. After giving us a scornful look, she calls out a recruit's name to follow her behind the curtain for a physical. A shy, young, skinny boy gets up and slowly walks toward the curtain. The big nurse gives him a shove to move faster.

The line of guys moves quickly now, as one by one they disappear behind the curtain. At some point, each recruit lets out a high-pitched yell and then reappears adjusting their underwear. The next recruit called in is the one just ahead of me. He turns to me, confidently winks, and slowly struts behind the curtain. He's your typical Israeli guy, brash as they come. Through the curtain, I can see the shadows of him and the nurse. After the nurse checks his genitals, he takes her hand and puts it back on his balls. The nurse slaps him across the face. She slaps him so hard that he falls over. He then comes out holding his cheek, and there's a tear rolling down his face. He looks up at me and smiles. "She loved it," he whispers.

"Gordon! Gordon!" the nurse yells. I make my way behind the curtain and stand in front of the nurse, who's sitting in a chair. I unzip my pants and shimmy as they fall to my knees. She looks down and sees that I'm well endowed. She looks up at me and says "Oy gevalt!" She then makes an ugly face, grinds her teeth, and looks down again. I put my head back. "Be gentle," I say. My high-pitched scream could be heard in Jerusalem!

I'm sweeping outside of a barrack. Another recruit, a black soldier, is sitting down, leaning against the barrack and smoking a cigarette. A broom is on the ground by his side. He's a little guy with long dreadlocks and looks like a Rastafarian. He also seems tough, or at least pretends to be. He definitely has an attitude—but here in Israel, that's a prerequisite.

"Hey, enough of that shit, mon. Come over here and have a drag," he says. "You speak English?" I ask. "What does it sound like, Japanese, mon?" I smile, rest my broom against the barrack, and sit down beside him. He offers me a cigarette, but I nod no. He looks at me with some distrust and disappointment. Everyone in this country smokes. I guess to refuse one might be taken as disrespectful. Still, I don't care to share his peace pipe—an offering, I guess.

"Alex," I say, introducing myself. "I'm Avichi," he responds. "How do you speak English?" "I've been here for three years, mon. I learned English at a reggae bar named Soweto in Tel Aviv." He then raises his hands in the air and moves his body to his own personal jukebox that no one else can hear. "Eireeee, mon!" This Avichi character intrigues me. All I can do is just look at him and smile. I've made a friend.

"So where were you before this?" I ask. "Ethiopia, mon, Africa." "And you came to Israel?" Avichi looks at me with a touch of condescension. "There are black Jews too, y'know, mon." He laughs to himself and says, "Israel's been very good, very good to my people. It's terrible what's happening there, mon. I come from the Gondar Region, where the Jews live. We were prohibited to

practice our religion. We are very poor there. We are farmers, but the government comes and takes away our oxen. When the rain comes, we cannot plough our fields and farm. My people starve. Israel made routes in which we can travel, but only the strong have a chance to make it. I left most of my family behind. It hurts my soul."

Avichi takes a long drag from his cigarette and gazes off as he tells me the amazing story of the Ethiopian Jews and how they fled from civil war and famine. Many went to nearby Sudan, and about 12,000 walked from Gondar, suffering hunger, thirst, and attacks by bandits and wild animals. Then came Operation Solomon, a covert Israeli military operation that airlifted much of the Ethiopian Jewish community to Israel. More than thirty-five planes brought more than 14,000 Ethiopian Jews to safety in thirty-six hours. The planes were stripped of their seats to accommodate as many passengers as possible, and most of the immigrants came with just the clothes on their backs. The American Government was involved too. First President Bush had sent a letter to the Ethiopian Government, asking to let the Jewish population leave. It was a very successful operation, and it saved the lives of the Ethiopian Jewish community.

Then Avichi tells me the almost unbelievable story of how he escaped. The Mossad had rented a tiny beach resort built by Italian entrepreneurs in the early '70s, and they used it as their cover for the mission. They took Avichi and thousands of other refugees, all disguised as night scuba divers, in small boats that were met by Israeli Navy Seals, who brought them to a ship headed to Israel.

After sharing his story, Avichi looks at me and motions to hear mine. "I'm from New York City. Manhattan," I begin. Then I laugh to myself for a second. "I still don't know what the hell I'm doing here. I just know I have to do it," I say. "You have any family?" "No. I'm by myself." "Ah," Avichi says. "You're a Chail Boded." "A what?" I ask. "Someone without a family here. A lone soldier." I nod in agreement. "Yes. I'm a lone soldier." "Well," says Avichi,

"we're both here for something. I'm here to find a home. You're here, Alex, to find yourself." I like that. We look at each other and smile.

Later, Avichi and I stand on line outside a tent along with other recruits, all waiting for our names to be called. A soldier walks out, and a commanding, authoritative voice from within fills the air, sending chills through every guy on the line. "Gordon!" I turn to Avichi and motion goodbye as if I'll never see him again. He looks back at me solemnly.

I bend my head so I won't hit it on the tent on the way in. The ground is dirt. As you walk in, the ceiling of the tent rises. There's a long table filled with paperwork. Behind the desk sit four highly decorated men. I stand before them and salute. The officer in the center looks up at me. He has very tired eyes as if he's been up for weeks. "Relax," he says in Hebrew. I continue to salute. He rests his hand on his cheek and stares at me. "Relax, Gordon," he says in English. I put my hand down and face forward. "American?" "Yeah," I reply. "New York City, Manhattan." The officer leans back in his chair. "So Mr. Gordon from America, New York City, Manhattan. What can I do for you?" I look right into his eyes. "I want to be part of it." He nods his head. "Okay. What part do you want to be part of?" he asks. "The Paratroopers." "Sanchaneem! It's a fighting unit. It's a commando unit." "I know," I say. "You know," he says. "You know. Okay. First you must go to a Hebrew learning center for three months." He starts to write something in the folder in front of him. "No," I tell him. He stops writing and looks up at me. "No?" "No," I repeat. "This is a one-time deal. I don't have time for a Hebrew course and little classrooms. I'll learn it as I go." The officer looks up in the air as if he's talking to someone. "He'll learn it as he goes! Listen, Gordon, you don't understand. I own you. We own you. And you will do as you're told. Understand?"

I don't move an inch. I keep my ground and look forward. The officer sits back for a second and looks me over. "What is it, Gordon? The red beret? The uniform? The red boots?" "It's never been about how I look or what I wear,"

I answer. "I've never given a shit about that. I'm from New York City. I wear all black all the time. It's what we do." I then pause. "Please. You have to understand. I've been dreaming about this moment since I was a young boy. And that dream didn't have me sitting in a classroom for three months wasting my time. I'm just not going to do that," I say.

"But it will be very difficult, Gordon. You will only be with Israelis. You don't understand. These men are very tough." "You don't understand," I say. "I'm from New York City. I'm very tough!" "Okay, okay," the officer says, smiling at me and conceding. "I'll be watching you," he says while pointing his finger at me. I nod my head, salute, and start to walk out. "But Gordon..." I turn around to hear him. "First you have to pass the test," he says and smiles. Test? What test!

PHOTOGRAPHS



Me



Me - Paratrooper Ceremony



Me and my commander Mosche - Lebanon



Weekend pass



Paratrooper awards ceremony - Proud moment - Kotel - Jerusalem



Hello

732096-1 מס' 1

שם אלדן גורדון פרטי

משפחה Gordon

השם והמשפחה בלועזית

שם האב סלע האם אלדא

מס' זהות 1172062

תאריך לידה 12/10/65

מצב משפחתי נשוי

מס' נפשות 1

ארץ מוצא ישראל
(ארץ מגורים בשנה האחרונה)

נמל יציאה ישראל

תאריך כניסה לארץ 14/9/87

תאריך קבלת מעמד עולה/עולה בכח 12/11/87

חתימת העולה

מקום ותאריך הוצאת התעודה 22/5/89

שם וחתימת האחראי נ. גורדון



ID



My crew - "A" team! - Lebanese border



Barracks - Lebanon



Barracks Lebanon



Barracks Lebanon



Lebanon



Lebanon



Lebanon



My ride - Lebanon



Guard duty - Lebanon



Lebanon



Paratroopers base



Paratroopers base



Paratroopers base



My brother David and me - Kotel - Jerusalem



My brother David - King David Hotel - Jerusalem



My brother David and me - Kotel - Jerusalem



My brother David - Kotel - Jerusalem



My brother David and me - Weekend pass - Jerusalem



Finishing the Masa Kumta - 90 kilometer all night march in full gear to end my combat training - Earn the red beret - Join the elite brotherhood and officially become an Israeli Paratrooper - Proudest and greatest moment of my life to honor my mother.



Chillin

The Test

To even be considered as a paratrooper, you first have to complete a rigorous, eight-hour physical test. Many soldiers try out, but most either quit or aren't chosen. It's not just about completing the test. You have to be both mentally and physically on top. Then, if you're chosen, you go through a six-month basic training course. That's six months! Again, most soldiers fail or quit. But if you complete your six months, you can choose where you want to serve for the remainder of your time in the army. If you choose to be an officer, that's an additional year and a half of training.

I love the fact that everyone starts in the same place. There's no preferential treatment for the elite, wealthy, or educated. Nobody receives any shortcuts. If you want to excel and lead, you have to earn it. As much as I respect the American army, especially the Marines, I was always surprised by how short their basic training is—only six weeks. And if you're a college graduate and finish your six weeks, you're automatically given the title of an officer—just because you have a college degree! How can anyone ascertain by that if you're a leader of men? It's dangerous. An officer's title shouldn't just come with a college degree. That's the last guy I'd follow.

I'm surrounded by three sergeants all yelling at me in Hebrew at the same time. There's no communicating, reasoning, or dialogue with them whatsoever. They aren't here to sympathize with your plight. Either you do exactly what's expected of you or you're thrown out. Period. No appeal or discussion. I'm looking at one of the sergeants without a clue of what's going on, while the other two are observing me and writing things down on their pads. "Zooz! Zooz! Zooz!" the sergeant keeps yelling in my face. I run over to join a bunch of soldiers who are lifting a stretcher with a soldier on top. Avichi's one of the soldiers holding up the stretcher with me. "Shit, man. I can't understand a word. They keep shouting this one word: 'Zooz! Zooz! Zooz!' If I knew what this word was, I wouldn't have any problems." "To move, mon," Avichi says. "Zooz means to move your bomboclat!"

For the next eight hours we go through grueling physical and mental tests, during which one soldier stands out above the rest. He's fast and strong. He has a dark complexion and long black hair and looks like a wild animal. He doesn't speak to anyone and is extremely focused and motivated—like me. Avichi later tells me that he comes from a kibbutz up North, he's a Sephardic Jew, and his name is Aaron. Both his parents were murdered when he was a young boy. A terrorist came into the kibbutz, broke into their home, and killed them in their sleep. The security at the kibbutz killed the terrorist before he could kill the rest of the family.

Throughout the day, Aaron and I seem to be in the front of every challenge, during which we exchange wary looks. He doesn't seem to like me. I guess he's staring at the small, skinny guy I am and doesn't know he's looking at SexyHeeb. I'll be happy to make the introduction. But he isn't my problem—at least not for now. I need to pick my fights wisely, and right now, all I'm concerned about is completing this test and becoming an Israeli Paratrooper.

The sun and the heat are excruciating. We carry the stretcher with the biggest soldier on top for hours over very rough terrain. Avichi tries quitting a few times, but I don't let him. We then have to drag a hundred-pound sandbag through the mud and under barbed wire that's as long as a football field—all while having the sergeants constantly yelling at us. Maybe it's a good thing I don't speak Hebrew because I can't understand a word of what they're fucking yelling. The distance between the mud and the barbed wire is very narrow. It's impossible not to get your whole back scratched up and cut. I start to help another soldier drag his sandbag through the mud. It isn't just a question of finishing the task; we're also being timed. And if you don't finish in the time frame given for each task, you're no longer in the running.

Once we're done, the sergeant asks how many times we went back and forth under the barbed wire in the mud. I answer four times. The soldier next to me answers six times. He's immediately thrown out for lying, and he leaves

with his head down, crying hysterically. I'm told later that his father is the main officer in the tent. There's no nepotism or free rides here. If you can't handle the mental and physical challenges, then there's no place for you in the Israeli Paratroopers. For him, it was a question of character. He lied. As bad as I feel for him, it also strengthens my resolve. There's no way in fucking hell I'll quit or get thrown out. This is the most important test and day in my life, and I'm not about to fail—or let them win. They want a fighter? I'll give them a fighter! I've been fighting all my life.

I come from a family of fighters, and in the last eight years, we faced three great battles. My father's business—that had done so well for so long—went into bankruptcy. The house we grew up in went into foreclosure. And, worst by far, my mother was fighting ovarian cancer. Everywhere we turned was bad news. The worst news. We had to fight, and as a family we fought. Every day was like being in a prizefight with Mike Tyson with our hands handcuffed behind our backs. Every morning the bell rang and we had to answer the round. To quit was not a fucking option. So we fought. We fought for our family business. We fought for our home. And, most of all, we fought for my mother.

We battled every day and on all fronts. At night we tended to our injured, licked our wounds, and built up our courage and resolve for the next day of fighting. It became a way of life. Giving up or retreating was not in our blood. We fought. But it's hard to go through every day against the ropes. People smell it. Some walk by and smack you in the face. When you ask why, they answer, "Because I knew I could."

I was a young boy, holding my father's hand as we walked down the street. My father's accountant walked up and started to pester my dad about a bill he owed him. This was a man who knew my father for years. I thought it was awful of him to embarrass my father in front of his son. So I gave him a swift kick in the ass and chased him down the street. "What the hell was that?" my father yelled as he caught me and grabbed my hand. "Dad," I said, "he wasn't

with us." My father didn't care. "That's not the way you were raised," he said sternly. We walked back home holding each other's hand in silence.

That same year, my father, mother, and I were at a Yiddish concert, listening to Sidor Belarsky. He was the greatest Yiddish singer of his time and also a family friend. I loved the sound of Yiddish. My parents often spoke it in our house, especially when talking about me. And my dad once told me the story of my mom responding to an ad for a Yiddish schoolteacher. The principal expected to be interviewing an old yenta, since Yiddish was a dead language, and was thrilled to see instead this young, beautiful woman. On this night, years later, my mother was already sick, but she was still so beautiful and radiant. During intermission, she went backstage to say hello to her friend.

Meanwhile, a guy wearing a cheesy silk suit was making his way up the aisle, saying hello to everyone. He stopped and motioned to my father. "How's Elizabeth?" he asked. "How's she doing?" My father, the consummate gentleman, just nodded his head and said "Thank you." "Tell her I say hi," the man said. He kept lingering and asking questions. Finally, I stood up and told him if he didn't beat it I was going to kick his ass. Once again, a grown man was seen running away from a young boy. My father grabbed the back of my pants and shoved me back in my seat. "What the hell was that?" he whispered harshly. I looked at him and said, "Dad, he wasn't with us." My father looked at me closely for a minute and then smiled. "You're right, son. He wasn't with us."

We ended up losing the house we grew up in. We ended up losing the family business. And saddest and hardest by far, we ended up losing my mother. But we were never losers—we were winners. We gave our heart and soul and left nothing in that ring. My mother always taught me to be hungry. Be hungry for life! Be hungry for love! Be hungry for happiness! Be hungry for success! Nobody is going to give you anything, she said. You have to stay hungry, fight, and never give up!

The night of the day my mother died, I went walking in Central Park by myself. I never felt more alone or more anguish. The pain inside me was so profound it came out in a hollow scream. I just stood there and yelled with nothing coming out of my mouth. Then I looked up at the night sky and begged God to take my life and to please let her live. And I believe with all my heart that God heard me. For my mother is alive inside me. The beat of my heart is hers, and I'm living in her honor. There were so many times in my life when I wanted to quit, but my mother would always whisper in my ear to stay hungry, fight, and never give up. I could hear her now. And there was no way I wasn't going to become an Israeli Paratrooper!

Before the test is over, 70 percent of the soldiers drop out. The rest of us continue running, doing sit-ups, pull-ups, and sprints till exhaustion. At one point, they have us do sit-ups in the ocean with our backs to the sea as the waves crash down on us pulling us under. You never know when the wave will hit you or how big it will be. And one wave might hit you with another one right behind it, which keeps you under water for a long, hard time. A lot of guys quit during this challenge. The pure fatigue and continuous unknown of the waves hitting them as they tried to hold their breath was too much. But it doesn't bother me. I keep thinking of my buoy on Compo Beach and how I held on tight. I remember how the waves would lift me and the buoy high in the air and then crash down taking me under the water. It was like a roller coaster, and I loved it. So now, I just close my eyes, do my sit-ups, and try to anticipate the next wave. It's like a game to me, and I want to win.

The sun is setting as we make it back from the beach to the base. Totally spent, we shower and then put on our new uniforms—the uniform of an Israeli Paratrooper. It's one of the proudest days of my life. I smile and silently say to my mother, "They didn't win. We did!" And I can hear her saying back with love, "With me, you're always Number One."

I get on the bus with the rest of the soldiers who made it. As I walk by Avichi, I give him a high five and take a seat. I feel Aaron's eyes on me from two rows back. Clearly, the competition has begun. Now I can focus on him.

We exit the bus to a base I'll call home for the next six months. We immediately go into a barrack to get our heads shaved. I look over and watch as they shave off Aaron's long hair. He shows no emotion and just stares straight ahead as he goes from looking like a wild animal to a bald badass. I then look over and see Avichi without his dreadlocks. "Ya, mon, what a handsome guy!" I yell out in a terrible Jamaican accent. He looks over not amused and very sad.

The base is full of energy. We're running around from one place to another with the officers yelling at us every step of the way. I feel a little lost and overwhelmed. It isn't just the physical exhaustion but also the mental challenges and the fear of the unknown, and everything is an unknown for me. There isn't a minute that I feel comfortable in my surroundings or secure in what lies ahead. Everything is new, and I feel like a tourist walking around Times Square with my mouth open in awe—as I get pickpocketed. Looking around at the other soldiers I can tell they're scared too. But what makes things worse for me is that I don't speak or understand a word of Hebrew—besides the meaning of "zooz," that is. How will I communicate? How can I bear not speaking? Why don't they just castrate me right here. I remember my father telling me as a boy that I had diarrhea of the mouth. I wasn't insulted. He was right. But right now my mouth feels constipated. How could this be? I'm a native New Yorker. I have to speak, discuss, debate, persuade, and most importantly, tell jokes. But now, I'm like a mute. I feel like Boo Boo the chimp in fatigues. I'm the Helen Keller of the Israeli Paratroopers. Still, like all New Yorkers, I use my hands and body to speak and communicate, so at least I have that going for me. My mother always said she loved watching me talk. Besides, I tell myself, I've always looked for love and light, even in darkness and under the worst circumstances. Well, this is right up there as

far as the worst is concerned. And there's no way it can be this bad for the next six months, I tell myself. I was right. It got a lot worse.

Barracks - Nighttime

All the other soldiers are sleeping. I have a sheet over my head, my flashlight is on, and I'm writing in my journal. Weeks have passed, and I can't tell one day from the next. Every day is like Groundhog Day. I also can't remember the last time I got more than three hours of sleep in a row. Still, I've tried keeping up with my writing to have some kind of record to look back on. But I'm always so fucking tired, and I barely have time to shit. When my officer gives me three minutes to shit and I do it in two minutes, feeling proud that I completed a task with time to spare, that's when I know I've been broken.

Back in New York, going to the bathroom was always a process. I enjoyed the time, the peacefulness, and the isolation. My first rule was to get completely comfortable. That meant taking off all my clothes and being completely naked. I didn't care where I was—at home, a friend's house, a restaurant—the clothes always came off. It was a time to read, swipe right, or just reflect. Here, there are no toilet seats. That was a luxury. We're out in a desert in the middle of nowhere, where even at nighttime, it's hot as hell. I walk out into the black night with two empty bullet cartridge cases and squat between them, resting my butt cheeks on each case. The only other choice is being brave enough to use the latrine. It's just a barrack filled with holes and a few sinks, and the smell is so rancid that after a few minutes you'd pass out in disgust.

I don't even have time here to play with myself. Back at home that was one of my favorite hobbies. It was my sleeping pill. I guess living with twenty guys in a barrack or a tent can cramp any guy's style.

I readjust my flashlight and the sheets, stretch my neck a bit, and continue writing in my journal. I still can't believe I'm here. I keep thinking I'm in a bad dream. A nightmare. I feel like a little boy who wakes up and his sheets are soaked. But here I am now eighteen, and these guys are scaring the shit out of me. I'm confused and have a lot of self-doubt. I guess that's what they want, and I've gotta stay strong. I remember Uri saying that I'm going to be different and more will be expected. He was right.

The Gun

One of the first things we were issued when we got to the base was a gun. It was an M16. You can never be without it. You can't even take a shit without it. It always has to be by your side. You have to sleep with it too. I cradle it in my arms and hold it tight. At nighttime, the officers sometimes come in and try and take the guns away from the soldiers. If they succeed, you're woken up and immediately thrown out. You have to treat your gun like an extension of your body—or like a best friend or girlfriend you love dearly. You have to feel that as a person you couldn't function without it. On the firing line, the officer always walks by nodding at me in an approving way. I guess I have a good shot.

Not everyone looks at me in an approving way. To most, I'm a complete enigma. This army is hell, and I volunteered for it. For everyone else, it was mandatory, and most went in reluctantly. Immediately, there's a lot of distrust, and I wasn't liked by a lot of guys. The kitchen sergeant was one of them. He's a big, fat, burly guy with a chip on his soldier, and he seems to take great pleasure in ordering us new recruits around. He comes from a small village in the north. Israel is a very small country, no bigger than Connecticut. But this guy has never even been to Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. New York City to him might as well be Mars, and I was a Martian.

My unit is in the mess hall, sitting at attention and waiting for permission to eat. The kitchen sergeant circles the room, smacking the tables with a stick as he walks by. He hasn't given permission yet for the soldiers to eat. Feeling like the little orphan boy in *Oliver Twist*, I whisper out loud to myself, "Please sir, may I have some more." The soldier next to me shoves me and says, "Shhh." But it's too late. The kitchen sergeant comes over and tells us both to stand. The two of us have to stand for the rest of the meal and then clean all the dishes. By the time I get back to the barracks, all the other soldiers are sleeping. I collapse onto my bed. Within minutes, a soldier comes to wake me up. "Smira," he says. "Smira." I feel dazed and rub my face. "Smira! Smira!" I sit up and walk outside. Smira means guard duty. I start pacing back and forth, dead tired, and asking myself once again what the hell I'm doing here.

At 4 a.m., the officer comes into our barrack and yells, "Five minutes to shit, shower, and be outside. Zooz!" I sit up in my bed in shock. I didn't get any sleep. And the officer was kidding when he said we had five minutes to shower. There's no such thing here as taking a shower. There are times when we don't shower for weeks. We also sleep in our clothes and boots. You never know when the officer is going to come in and you have to be prepared. The punishment, otherwise, is too severe.

It's late at night and we're all standing outside the barracks in a semicircle. The officers walk around checking our guns, making sure they're clean and everything's in order. We have to dismember our guns in the dark and put them back together in seconds in front of the officer. While the officer is checking one soldier's gun, another soldier drops a piece of his weapon on the floor. Everyone stops and looks over. I feel bad for the guy. His name is Do-Dee. He's clumsy and always getting into trouble. Do-Dee is an Orthodox Jew who always wears a yarmulke and has curls of blonde hair by his ears. He's skinny and frail like me. I admire him because he, too, volunteered.

Religious Orthodox Jews are exempt from serving in the military. And not only did he volunteer, but he chose the Paratroopers. I respect that.

As Do-Dee bends down to pick up the piece of the gun he dropped, he proceeds to drop all the rest of the pieces. On the one hand, we're all relieved because we know he's now the focus of the officers and not us. On the other hand, I feel really bad for him. For the rest of that night, Do-Dee has to run around the barracks trying to get around once in twenty seconds. It's one of those exercises that's impossible to accomplish—and that's the point. Its purpose is to humiliate, exhaust, and break you. We stand at attention while Do-Dee runs around us and the barracks. Taking apart and putting our gun back together becomes second nature.

On the obstacle course, Aaron and I are in the front, running side by side. The rest of the soldiers are far behind, while we take turns coming in first and second. The officers always antagonize the loser, which only heightens the resentment and dislike we have for each other. All Aaron sees is this frail kid from New York. He still has no clue he's messing with SexyHeeb. I walk back to the barracks with the rest of the soldiers and, as always, get stopped by the kitchen sergeant. "Alexxx," he says with a snarl. And a half hour later I'm doing push-ups in the mud with him standing over me, while my buddies—and Aaron—look on from the barracks.

It's Friday night, Shabbat. My unit is in the mess hall, sitting at attention. Do-Dee stands in the center of the room, looking like he's about to fall over and pass out. He lights the candles and says the prayers over the bread and wine, ushering in the Sabbath. Even though I'm not a religious guy, it always feels good watching Do-Dee say the prayers. I look around at the other soldiers and can't believe they're all Jewish. They all look so different. That's because they are. There's Avichi and other black Jews from Ethiopia, Ashkenazi Jews from Central Europe, Sephardic Jews from Spain and Portugal, and Mizrahi Jews who come from the neighboring Arab countries. Together, we look like one big Swatch Watch, bursting with different colors.

I love celebrating Shabbat with my new brothers. It feels like an honor and makes me feel special. At the end of the meal, all the soldiers are arm-in-arm, singing and humming Hebrew songs while swaying back and forth. Yes, I think, we're all different, but we share a common bond: We're Jewish, and we're fighting for the same cause—our country, our land, and our people.

On the next day, Shabbat, a day of rest, I actually get a little time for myself. I strap my M16 around my shoulder and head out to the far side of the base. While walking alongside the fence I hear a sound I'm not familiar with. It's a rustling sound. As I move closer, the sound gets louder. Maybe it's an animal caught in the fence? I pick up my pace while moving toward the disturbance. As I approach the part of the fence where the sound is coming from, I see an Arab man in a robe who's carrying a stick and making his way underneath the barbed wire. I shrug my shoulder, making my gun come whipping around my back and into my arms. A clip of bullets is already in. I'm ready. I cock the gun and point it at the intruder. I guess all that repetitive army training paid off because I did this literally in seconds.

"Don't move!" I yell. I can't believe it! An Arab! A terrorist? I'm not even thinking, just running on instinct. I stand over him and point my gun down. Now I'm actually resting the tip of my gun right on his head. He's wise not to move. He freezes still. Here I am, face to face with the enemy. What's this guy up to? Did he come to kill us? What the hell is he doing here?

The Arab is lying in the dirt, trembling, with half his body jutting through the barbed wire fence. He isn't going anywhere. Should I just shoot him? He raises his hand and points behind me. He wants me to turn around. For what? So he can get a chance to hit me with that stick? Or maybe he has a gun? Fuck that! He knew the risk. It's a fence. It's like a sign, loud and clear, to keep out! He's an intruder. But he doesn't look like a killer, and now he's shaking like a leaf.

I half-turn to where he's pointing and see a sheep eating grass. Then I fully turn around with my back toward the Arab. "A sheep! A sheep!" I say in disbelief. I look back at the intruder, who's lying in the dirt, shaking and breathing heavily. This guy isn't a terrorist. He's a shepherd. And one of his sheep had strayed. I almost killed Little Bo Peep!

I help the Arab man to his feet, dust him off, and try to calm him down. For the next half hour, you see this Arab shepherd and Israeli soldier running around, laughing, and trying to catch this sheep. Dani Luv is behind his big organ playing an upbeat Israeli song that sounds like a chorus of clarinet players as we both chase this sheep around. We finally corner it, and the shepherd crawls back under the barbed wire to the other side as I lift the sheep and hand it to him. Then I watch the lost sheep reunite with the rest of the herd. The Arab man and I smile at each other before we walk our separate ways. Jesus, I think to myself, I was going to shoot that guy.

Becoming

I continue to write in my journal most nights, crouching with my flashlight under the sheets. It's the Hebrew, I write. I'm lost. Yeah, I know a few words: zooz, to move; stoke, to shut up. That officer was right. I should've taken that Hebrew course. Now, I not only have to get by, I have to own it. It's just another obstacle I have to overcome.

I readjust the sheets and keep writing. I remember when I first got to Israel and meeting Dafna on the beach. She bends over and flips her hair in slow motion. I can hear her hand tambourines clicking now. I take the sheets off my head and point the flashlight at the door. Dafna is clicking the tambourines with her hands in the air, slowly moving toward me as her hips are circling. The rest of the guys are sleeping in their beds. My flashlight dies for a moment. I smack it with my hand and the light goes back on. I flash it toward the door, but she's gone.

I go back under the sheets and keep writing. Those were all great experiences. I can't wait to get home to New York and tell the boys about Dafna, the huge nurse with her firm grip, and even the day-to-day in this shithole. But something was happening to me. These aren't just experiences I'll share with the guys over beer. This is my reality now. It's who I am and what I'm becoming. The old me was always so scared and alone, hiding under a bravado I almost believed. I was caught in a time capsule: little Alex, holding onto the buoy, holding onto his mother before she got sick, when she was vibrant and healthy. I've been in mourning for a long time. I felt if I didn't do that, I would lose her or disrespect her or, even worse, forget her. But now I feel that the best way to love and honor her is to make her proud. To be the mensch she always wanted me to be. To let go of little Alex and embrace my SexyHeeb.

I put my pen down, close my book, and put them both under the mattress. Then I arrange my gun so that I'm hugging it tight, turn off the flashlight, and go to sleep.

Marching

When I first got to the base, I was asked what role I wanted to have in the unit. I told them I wanted to be the machine gunner, the most prestigious and powerful position of all. At first the officers laughed at me and said the gun was bigger than I was. That might have been true, I said, but I didn't see anyone else volunteering. At least I deserved a shot. The officers smiled and nodded in agreement. I might've been small and thin, but I knew SexyHeeb could carry it without a problem. Then again, sometimes you have to be careful what you wish for.

The officers were right. The machine gun was almost as big as I was! Not only did I have to sleep with it —and it took over most of my bed—I also had to take it with me to the bathroom, which always posed a challenge. But

something that really impressed me was how everyone in our unit had to learn and have knowledge of whatever expertise the other guys had, whether they were a machine gunner, grenade launcher, sharp shooter, or radio man. This was done so in case a soldier was killed, another soldier could immediately move into his position and take over.

My unit is standing in formation outside our barrack. We're wearing our full gear. The officer comes down the line inspecting each soldier individually. I'm wearing the machine gun strapped around my shoulders and the bullets around my waist. That doesn't include the bullets already in the gun and a pouch of bullets hanging off to the side. All told, it was an additional hundred pounds on top of me. How I was going to jump out of a plane and land without breaking my legs was yet to be seen. In what appears to be a moment of kindness, Aaron looks over at me while the officer's inspecting me and gives me the slightest nod of approval. I turn around and look behind me just to make sure he was really looking at me.

This is the first of many marches we'll be going on. As the months progress, so will the distance, until the final march will be one hundred kilometers. That march will finish in Jerusalem, when our basic training will be complete and we'll officially be Israeli Paratroopers.

The officer blows his whistle and we start our first march. Today's journey is straight up a huge, steep mountain to an observatory bunker on top. You can see miles and miles in every direction from the summit. I'm happy that it's nighttime so at least we're not marching in the blistering sun. As we start the ascent, I keep my head down and just follow the man's boots in front of me. This isn't by choice. The machine gun is so heavy I have to march hunched over. My shoulders are in so much pain from the weight that I can't wait for them to become numb so I won't feel anything anymore. That's the best feeling of all. It's like someone gave me a cortisone shot. I'll know what I'm carrying is still heavy and there, but I just won't feel it. I won't feel a thing.

Hard winds are blowing against us as we move up the mountain, and a fog is setting in. I figure we'll have the wind on our backs when we come down. I look up ahead and see other soldiers carrying stretchers with soldiers on top. One of the soldiers on top is Avichi. The other one is Do-Dee. He looks over and half-smiles at me because he sees I am struggling. I painfully smile back and then put my head down again. I'm happy for him that he caught a nice break.

I pull out my canteen and take a well-needed sip of water. In the desert, it's extremely important that you manage the water in your canteen. Once it's out, there's nowhere to refill it. A soldier I don't know comes up to my side and motions for a sip. He's breathing heavily, and his lips are sweating and coated with white foam. He looks like a dog salivating in heat. I reluctantly hand my canteen over to my brother in need. The bastard finishes it all. Fuck! I say to myself. But the numbness has settled in and I'm feeling no pain.

When we reach the top of the mountain, the wind is still blowing hard. I feel like I'm in a turbine. But the fog has dispersed, and from the light of the stars I can see miles and miles around me. Although we're all ready to drop, we're swept away by the beauty. Avichi and Do-Dee are walking around and attending to other soldiers to see if they need any help. They're good guys and good friends. I consider them my brothers. Do-Dee comes over to me as I'm still hunched over. He helps me straighten out my back, which no longer feels numb but is throbbing with pain.

Do-Dee asks if I want to come back to his house next Shabbat if we're allowed to go home for the weekend. He knows I don't have any family in the country, and his family would love to meet me. What would we do? I ask. First, he says, we'll sleep late. Then, when we wake up, we'll pray, eat a home-cooked meal, take a walk, and have meaningful conversations about God and life. Then we'll sleep again.

I imagine myself sitting at a long table filled with ultra-religious Hasidic Jews singing Hebrew songs and banging on the table with passion. I'd be sitting there in my baby Gap black tee staring straight ahead.

Coming back to reality, I politely decline his generous offer. I put my hand on his shoulder, look into his eyes, and say, "My beloved Do-Dee, I'm going to Tel Aviv, gonna eat some hummus, get drunk, and just like any other red-blooded American boy, try and get laid. Some other time." I nod, and we prepare for our descent.

Family Day

Soldiers are scrubbing up and getting ready. Everyone seems ecstatic to see their families. Some of the guys are singing in the showers. All throughout the base, I see soldiers and their families having picnics. There's a Yemenite family having a barbecue. The father is standing over the fire with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. The family is circled around a portable radio that rests on the picnic table, and they're dancing to the beat. The younger daughter dances over to her father. He places some food on her plate and kisses her head, and then she dances back to the table and takes a seat. The soldier in the family waves for me to join, but I decline. As I walk by a few more picnics, other soldiers invite me to join them, but I don't want to intrude. I feel a little out of place. I don't have any family here, but neither did any other soldier when it was just us on the base. We were a family. These guys were my family. But I really miss home today. Most of all, I miss my mom. I can picture her here laughing, sharing her home cooking, her famous brisket, with the whole platoon, kissing each soldier on the head, and telling us to be strong. Followed by her meaningful hug that instills a confidence that you're truly loved, anything is possible, just set forth and let the world know who you are!

I'm heading to the barracks when I look over and see Aaron with his family having a picnic. I know his parents were murdered, but he still has family here visiting him. That's one invitation I won't be getting. We exchange looks, and while we're staring at each other, a girl comes from behind and places a plate of food in front of him. She and I look at each other and both freeze. The two of us are in complete shock and can't move. I can't believe what I'm seeing. It's Dafna! What is she doing here with Aaron? I look away and walk back to the barracks.

The room is dark with rays of sun coming through the window. I sit on my cot with my head down in disbelief. When I lift my head up, Dafna is standing at the door. "Alex?" she says. She enters the barrack and starts walking toward me. "It is you. What are you doing here?" she asks. "I'm asking myself the same question," I answer. Dafna sits down on my cot right next to me. We're both in a state of disbelief. "So you're here to see Aaron?" She nods yes. "Boyfriend?" I ask reluctantly, not wanting to be right. "Boyfriend! No. He's my brother."

Thinking that this day can't get any stranger, I put my head down and start to laugh to myself. When I pick my head up, we just stare at each other for a minute. "I'm really shocked," she says, breaking the silence. "Why are you here?" "I don't know. Maybe it was something you said, something that happened. I just felt it was something I had to do. It was like a calling that kept ringing in my head, and I finally had to answer it."

Dafna is listening to me intently and moves a little closer. I feel her opening up, and I do too. "My mother died of ovarian cancer. She wanted to be buried in Israel. That's what brought me here," I say quietly. "You buried her here?" Dafna asks. "Yes, that was her wish." We look at each other for a moment before I continue. "When I was young, my mother brought me to Israel many times. And now, she brought me back in her death. She did it for a reason. She was a huge Zionist. She loved Israel very much. When she died,

I felt so lost without her. But I feel her here. I feel her in Israel.... It's funny, but I sometimes feel like Israel's my mother."

Dafna is clearly moved, and her eyes are tearing. She reaches out her hand to mine and we hold hands while looking at each other. I caress her hand with my thumb. Dafna slowly moves her fingers on my hand, back and forth. "I can't figure you out, Alexander," she whispers. We take a long walk on the base, holding hands and talking for hours. It's the best day I've had in the longest time.

White Night

Our unit is marching in formation in the night. Avichi is carrying a water tank on his back and falls behind the rest of the soldiers. I drop out of place to help him. He's too weary to handle the weight of the tank. I take it off him and put it on my back. Along with the machine gun, that's a lot of weight I'm carrying. SexyHeeb is definitely with me. But I also feel empowered because we're going home this Shabbas for the weekend, and I'm looking forward to spending time with Dafna. Ever since visiting day a few weeks ago, she's all that I've thought about.

I run back to the front of the line. The numbness from the weight on my back kicks in and I'm feeling no pain. We pick up our pace and slowly start running. It amazes me how my body has changed. Only a few months ago, I wouldn't have been able to make it for one mile, and now we're marching more than fifty. Every day I wake up and go to bed feeling more like SexyHeeb. I don't have to seek him out anymore when I feel weak. He's just there. And the little boy I was is becoming a distant memory, far away in Compo Beach.

By the time we make our way back to the base, all the men in the unit are worn out. When we get to the barracks, we drop our equipment and collapse on our cots. Then the sergeant comes in and yells, "Five minutes to

inspection! Tonight will be a White Night. No sleep tonight if you want to go home tomorrow." He isn't just talking about no sleep and guard duty. White Night consists of constant drills and physical tests while lights around the perimeter light up the whole base.

As the sergeant starts to walk out, I collapse on my cot and say "Oh shit!" The sergeant stops at the door, turns around, and walks toward me. Then he yells at me in Hebrew and walks out. My Hebrew has improved a little, and I really don't need a translator to know the shit just got worse. Avichi and Do-Dee help me put all my gear back on, including the machine gun, all the bullets, and the water tank. I have two minutes to get outside, where I'll be running twenty-second drills around the barracks for the rest of the night.

The sergeant is waiting for me, and each time I make it around the barracks, he looks at his watch and makes me run around again. "Twenty seconds, move!" I think I actually beat twenty seconds a few times, but it doesn't really matter. I know I'm here for the rest of the night. Still, every time I run around the barracks is one step closer to being with Dafna. "One more time around and I can be with her," I keep repeating to myself. That's my motivation, and it's a strong one.

Meanwhile, the rest of the soldiers don't have it much easier. They're running the obstacle course and doing sprints, push-ups, sit-ups, and whatever else they're ordered to do, while officers yell at them every step of the way. At one point, I run around the barracks and almost collide into Aaron. We look at each other for a second but are too crazed for a confrontation. It's a long, long night.

The sun starts to rise as I make my way around the barracks one last time. The sergeant just walks away from me without saying a word. Who cares. I'm getting out of here—even if it's only for a weekend. I'm getting off this base and I'm going to see Dafna. Nothing in my world feels more important than that.

The soldiers line up to get on buses that are ready to leave. Do-Dee sticks his head out of a window of a bus that's pulling away and yells, "Shabbat Shalom, Alex!" Avichi sticks his head out too, pushing Do-Dee to the side. "I'll see you Saturday night at Soweto! Eireeeee Alex!" I smile and barely wave goodbye as I make my way onto a bus and take a seat. I put my head back, and a soldier leans in and whispers to me, "You're a horse." I just nod. As the bus pulls out of the base, I look around and see that all the other soldiers are already sleeping. I close my eyes and pass out.

A Weekend Home

I'm fast asleep in bed when I hear someone banging on the door. I have no idea where I am until I hear Uri's voice. "Alex, do you want to get up?" "What time is it?" I ask. "It's Saturday night, Alex! You've been sleeping for a day and a half!" "Holy shit!" The last thing I remember is getting off the bus and awkwardly carrying my duffel bag down the street. Someone driving by noticed me struggling and pulled over. Israelis are used to seeing bone-weary soldiers returning home on Friday night for the weekend. "Wow," the driver said, after asking where I was from. "You came all the way from New York to serve in the Israeli Army. Then I will serve you and drive you home." That's the last thing I remember.

I get up quickly and start to get dressed. "Relax," Uri says. "We'll go and get a bite to eat and relax." "I can't, I have a date." "A date?" Uri says. I just give him a big smile and head for the door. "A date!" I hear him say again as I shut the door behind me.

Reggae Bar - Soweto's

Who knew there was a happening Reggae bar in the heart of Tel Aviv? I see Avichi at the bar and head over to him. Matisyahu, a famous Hasidic reggae singer, is performing, and the place is packed. Everyone is dancing in

sync, moving in unison. As I lean against the bar I take a sip of my Red Stripe beer, watch the crowd, and ask myself, who are these Jewish Israeli creatures? They live in this tiny country surrounded by enemies who wanna kill them and drown them in the sea. And yet, with all this turmoil and on the verge of war every day, they always make time to laugh and dance. They really know how to live, I'm thinking, and celebrate life. They're a special breed, for sure.

The Israelis' thirst for life is infectious. Avichi and I start dancing. Dafna comes up from behind me. I grab her hands and pull them around me as we start dancing together. Dafna brought a girlfriend with her whom Avichi takes a fancy to. He tries to dance seductively with her, but she's not interested and walks away. Dafna and I laugh as the three of us keep dancing together. After a few more beers and a couple shots of tequila, I ask Dafna if she wants to go somewhere quieter. She nods yes.

Tel Aviv Beach - Nighttime

Dafna and I walk on the beach with the waves crashing at our feet. The moon and stars light up the sky. "So what are your plans, Alexander?" she asks. "My plans? Finish the army and go back to New York City. She's my lady," I say. "I'd never leave her." "Maybe you'd want to stay?" Dafna asks. "No way. I'm a native New Yorker. You can't just simply leave. There are rules, you know," I say sarcastically. I look over at her and smile. "I'm really sorry about the things I said when I first met you. I just didn't know." We both stop and look into each other's eyes. "I know. I'm sorry too," Dafna says. "I guess I didn't really give you a chance." I look around at our surroundings on the beach. "This is where I first met you." "Yes," she says. I look out into the water toward the jetty and then back at Dafna. "Let's start all over again, okay?" She nods yes and smiles. We both take off our clothes and swim out to the jetty. We climb upon the rocks and sit down next to each other. "Hello, Dafna," I say. "Hello, Alexander." I put my hand out like before, and we both

shake jokingly. The stars and moon reflect off the water shining light onto Dafna's naked, wet body. She is so beautiful, I'm thinking, as we lean toward each other. SexyHeeb leans in too. "Uhm, I think I've got this," I tell him. "Right!" he says and fades away as Dafna and I kiss.

Leaving Uri's

It's early Sunday morning and I'm about to head back to the base. Amazing, I think, what two days as a civilian can do for you. I finally got some sleep. I wish I could spend more time with Dafna, but I have to get back. Still, I have her smell all over me, which makes me feel closer to her.

I'm in full uniform and having a cup of coffee, while waiting for Uri who insisted on driving me to meet the bus. I walk into the garden where Haleb is working. I haven't seen him in such a long time. His back is toward me. "Haleb?" He keeps working and ignores me. What's wrong with him? It's late, and I have to go anyway. "Fine. Fuck you," I say and start walking back inside. Haleb stands up and turns toward me. "Fuck you, Alex! Fuck you!" Shocked, I turn around. "What's your problem, Haleb?" "What's your problem?" he yells back. "What's with that uniform?" Okay, now I understand. I slowly walk over to him and quietly say, "You have to understand, I'm Jewish. That means something to me now." Haleb is furious and his dark eyes stare right through me. "All that means is that you and I are now enemies," he says. "Why? Our relationship has nothing to do with the problems between our people. Sure, the reality we both have to face is over these walls. But this garden is a beautiful oasis," I say. "It's a seed of peace that can grow and spread." "No!" Haleb almost shouts. "It's a mirage. It doesn't exist. Not when my people are suffering." "What about my people? So we're enemies, Haleb? I kill you and you kill me. Is that it? You want to kill me, Haleb? Is that what you want?" I twist my shoulder and my gun flies in front of me. I put a clip in it, cock it back, and throw it at Haleb. Then I point to my chest. "Go ahead! Come on. Kill me, Haleb! That's what you want, right? Let's go!"

Haleb has his head down as he's holding my gun. I come face to face with him and speak softly. "Maybe our relationship can't help but be affected by what's going on over these walls, outside this garden. But wouldn't it be better if we were friends, not enemies? Wouldn't that be a beginning?" Haleb is standing still with his head down. He pushes the gun back into my hands and starts to walk away. "I thought we were friends," I say and turn toward him. Haleb stops for a moment but then walks quickly by the kitchen door where Uri is standing, shocked by what he just saw.

PART VI

Army Base

All the soldiers in my unit are lying down in formation. The sergeant moves from one soldier to the next and yells, "Up!" The soldier quickly gets to his feet and pumps a few rounds into a target twenty yards away. The sergeant moves to the next soldier, who does the same. We keep repeating the drill for hours and then move to drills in the trenches. Three soldiers all jump in at the same time. They stop and throw a hand grenade at a fork in the trench. One soldier counts out loud, "Twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three." The hand grenade goes off with a loud explosion. Another soldier yells, "I'll go right! You two go left!" The three soldiers move with precision and open fire. A whistle blows. "Very good! Very good!" yells the sergeant. "Come out of there." A jeep pulls up to him, and he and the driver exchange words. The jeep then pulls away. The sergeant addresses the whole unit. "Listen good!" he yells. "Report back to the base immediately. Get your full gear together and get on the bus at the gates. Do it now!"

Army Bus

There's a convoy of buses waiting for us. The bus I'm on looks like a broken-down school bus. It's filled with soldiers and all our gear. I'm sitting next to Avichi. "Where are we going?" "Don't know. I think we're going into the territories." The officer in the front of the bus stands up and addresses all of us. "We are heading to Hebron. There is an immediate situation. There's been an uprising. Close all the windows of the bus and keep your heads low." We immediately shut the windows and lower our heads.

We're driving through the streets of an Arab village, weaving in and out of the burning tires and garbage that Hamas militants put in front of us. As the bus makes it way through the narrow streets, the Palestinian women stick

their heads out of their windows and let out an eerie, high-pitched scream. They do this to warn the men in the village who are wanted by the army that we're coming and they should run to the mountains. They also want us to know that the streets might be empty but the village is full. Our buses stop on top of a long, narrow hill. There's a big house down below us. It's where we'll be going.

The Valley at Sunrise

As we're walking through the empty streets, I spot a small boy with fiery red hair standing in a doorway. He's completely still and looks frozen in fear. I wink at him, and he starts to shyly smile. Then someone from behind him pulls him inside.

Soldiers from two units converge on the big house, and the third unit covers the perimeter on top of the hill so no one can come or go. Once we know the house is completely surrounded, the officer and five other soldiers, including me, approach the front door and bang on it. A light goes on from inside. The door slowly opens and a Palestinian man who still looks half-asleep appears. He seems confused as he rubs his eyes. The officer asks if he's Abdul Hamesh, to which he nods yes. A woman appears behind him. He motions for her to go back into the house, but she stays where she is. We then ask if he's the brother of Radwan Hamesh. Again the man answers yes. "Do you know where he is now?" "No," he replies. "I haven't seen him in years." The officer then shows the man photos of him and his brother in front of his house. The man confirms it's him in the picture. "The pictures were taken yesterday," the officer yells and demands to know where his brother is. The man refuses to answer. The officer tells him that his brother is a terrorist who murdered innocent Israeli children by running his car over them and that we know he was here yesterday in this house. The officer again demands to know where his brother is. The Palestinian man says he wishes his brother had killed more. That's all the officer needs to hear. He hands him an official document.

He and his family are to be punished for harboring a known terrorist who was wanted by the State of Israel and who murdered innocent Israeli children. The officer tells the man that he has one hour to collect his family and belongings and leave the house. The Palestinian man who was so defiant now looks scared and confused. "You must leave your house! We are blowing up your house! These men behind me will help you bring your belongings outside," the officer says. The woman shrieks and runs into the house. The man turns around and runs after her. "Isabella!" he yells.

For the next hour, we carry their furniture and personal belongings outside the house. The woman is in the bathroom collecting her beauty aids and putting them in a box. She then collapses and cries. I was in their daughter's room picking up her belongings to carry them out. As I lift up a box, a doll that's on top falls off. I put the box down to retrieve the doll. As I kneel down I see a little girl standing at the door to her room. I pick up the doll and slowly motion for the girl to take it. I look at the doll and notice that one of its eyes is missing, as if someone tore it out. The little girl slowly walks across the room and stands in front of me. I gently hand the doll to her. "One of its eyes is missing," I say. I then look at the girl and see that one of her eyes is missing too. The girl rips the doll from my hands. She then inspects it and cuddles it in her arms like a mother might do with her baby. The little girl then looks at me with defiance in her eyes, spits on the floor in front of me, and runs out of the room.

All of the soldiers are standing on top of the hill that overlooks the house. A crack in the air is heard. A huge explosion goes off that instantly blows up the house. The air is filled with smoke and debris. A white dove that was flying over the house falls from the sky in front of the soldiers. It's completely ripped open. The smoke clears, and the house is completely destroyed. A high-pitched sound is heard. It's coming from neighbors in the village. It's the same high-pitched scream we heard when we first entered here.

I separate myself from the rest of the soldiers, feeling like I'm a mile away from them. I look down at the Arab family holding each other in despair. Sounds of laughter and cheering are coming from the soldiers. I immediately turn and confront them. "Stop it!" I yell. "Stop it! This isn't a time to be happy. What we did was wrong! This is just not right!" Some of the soldiers look back at me confused. Aaron comes forward and yells at me, "Then go back to America! Go back if you don't like it!" He waves me off and turns his back to me. "You don't think this is wrong, Aaron? You don't think this is wrong! You don't think this is fucked-up, Aaron!" He turns back to me and defiantly says "No." "But they're civilians!" I argue. "They're not our enemies!" Aaron tries to compose his anger. "Yes they are! They are!" he says. "You have a lot to learn about this area, Alex. Tell it to the families who lost loved ones in Israel. They were just waiting at a bus stop or on a line to buy food, and a bomb goes off killing them! Innocent women and children, Alex! And this man," he points to the father Abdul Hamesh, "lets a known terrorist, his brother, into his house, breaks bread with him, harbors him, and has now exposed himself and his family as enemies of Israel! It's a war, Alex! It just has a different face. It's not easy. It's painful for both. Go back to America if you can't understand this."

Both of us just stare at each other for a moment before Aaron turns away again and walks back to the other soldiers. I walk to the back of the bus, throw my stuff on the seat, and sit down. That's the first thing that guy has ever said to me. And I agree with him. I understand what we did and why we had to do it. I just feel it's nothing to cheer about.

As we swerve around the burning tires and slowly head back to the base, I sit still, lost in my thoughts. This is ugly business. The hate goes back so far. And everyone sees it in black and white. There's got to be some grey, some kind of compromise. When I look out the window, everything looks grey, and I'm thinking how the whole region is in a constant state of purgatory, with no time or space for innocence. I think of the little girl with her doll and wonder

what it's like to grow up here amid the hate and distrust. Do the schools have team sports or varsity letters? Are there high school sweethearts walking together or going to proms?

I remember my first love, Rachel, whom I met in high school. She was a shy, academic girl—a straight-A student. I was this wild, undisciplined guy on the verge, as always, of flunking out. It was truly a story of beauty and the beast. We sat next to each other in English class. There was once a surprise test that the whole class failed—except for Rachel and me, who both got A's. The class ended up having to take the test over because the teacher suspected that someone had cheated.

We dated in ninth grade, and it was a sweet time to be together. But she lost interest in me by the end of that term, just before we took our finals—a double blow. Still, I persisted. I always had trouble letting go. I have abandonment issues, I guess, from the loss of my mother, whom I first lost when she got so sick. And sometimes, persistence pays off. Two years later, Rachel agreed to go to the prom with me.

After the school dance, we got into a limousine packed with some classmates and headed to my friend Joe's parents' house in Litchfield, Connecticut. After a night filled with drinking and playing spin the spung in the Jacuzzi, Rachel and I crept off to a bedroom. When we collapsed on the bed, kissed passionately, and held each other tight, I couldn't have been happier. She felt so amazing in my arms. She then whispered that she was still a virgin and wanted me to be her first, but she pushed me back when I got on top of her. She told me there was one stipulation, which in my life there always was. She told me I needed a condom. Not an outlandish request if you think about it.

Stipulations should never be an issue if you anticipate them and come prepared. But I hadn't. I was just so happy to be spending prom night with her, I never anticipated this moment and what kind of memory it would be—

either one I would cherish forever or one that would haunt me to my last breath. It wouldn't have been a problem if we were in New York City. Hell, I could call the local deli and they'd be there in five minutes. But I was in bum-fuck Litchfield! I searched frantically throughout the house in every potential hiding place I could think of. Desperate and out of ideas, I gently knocked on Joe's parents' door. His dad came out of the bedroom and asked if everything was okay. I told him what was at stake and asked if I could borrow a condom—whatever that means. He reminded me that he was married, didn't use condoms, and that I was a moron. All very accurate, I conceded.

Defeated, I went back to the room where Rachel was curled up in bed, fast asleep. Her body that was warm and welcoming had turned cold. I put a blanket over her and crawled up beside her. The moment and the night were over. And so were Rachel and I....

I have files and files stored in my hard drive of life, filled with memories of love, breakups, sports, travel, school, and most importantly, opportunities and choices. But here in this Palestinian village, what these kids are fed for breakfast, lunch, and dinner is a full plate of despair and hate. Their dreams are taken away even before they have them. These children are the true casualties of war. And there's no prosthetic for an amputated soul.

At that moment, all the windows on my side of the bus suddenly shatter. We bend down in our seats as glass falls over us. The soldier next to me raises his head, and it's covered with blood. Then I look out the window and see two men on top of a roof. They're dressed in hoodies with black scarves covering their faces, and each has a Molotov cocktail in their hands. They both light them and throw them off the roof. I watch the bottles with flames falling toward the bus in slow motion. The bottles shatter on the roof, setting it on fire. The soldiers are looking around, panicked and scared. "We can't stay here!" one of the officers yells. "Count off as you get off the bus and take cover." Each soldier runs off the burning bus, yells out his number, and takes refuge behind a building. The officer wants to make sure no one is on the bus

and everyone is accounted for. The soldiers count off, "One, two, three, four...."

I'm back at beach school at Compo Beach. All of us are in a line, counting off as we leave the ocean. The soldiers' voices turn into children's voices as they continue to count off and depart the bus. "Five, six, seven, eight...." The front door of the bus opens and children dressed in Israeli Army uniforms start coming off the bus and run to the wall of a building to find cover. Each child has a water gun strapped to him. On top of the building, the terrorists throwing Molotov cocktails have transformed into children throwing water balloons off the roof. They're both smiling and laughing. The Israeli children soldiers are also laughing as they run into the middle of the street shooting their water guns everywhere.

Water Fight!

Dani Luv from Sammy's Rumanian Steakhouse is behind his big organ in the middle of the road playing The Beach Boys' song "Wouldn't it be nice." The Israeli and Palestinian children run around him laughing and throwing water balloons at each other.

*"Wouldn't it be nice if we were older?
Then we wouldn't have to wait so long.
And wouldn't it be nice to live together
In the kind of world where we belong"*

Young Palestinian and Israeli children are laughing and running past each other, squirting water from their water guns. One Palestinian boy stops in front of me with a happy, mischievous look on his face and then takes a water balloon he was hiding behind his back and throws it directly in my face. The balloon explodes and water is everywhere. He smiles and runs off. There are stockpiles of water balloons lined up throughout the street. I look up at the blue sky and see water balloons of every color in the air. As they hit the

ground, huge explosions go off. An Israeli child soldier is bouncing a soccer ball on his feet and smiling broadly. A Palestinian boy runs by and then stops in front of him. He throws a water balloon and it hits him right in the face. The water is red and the Israeli boy is covered in it. He has a confused look on his face and starts to cry. The soccer ball rolls down the cobblestone road with blood all over it.

An Israeli boy sprays water from his gun at two Palestinian boys who are against a wall. The wall just above them is then rattled with bullets that just miss their heads. More balloons fall from the sky and huge explosions go off when they make impact. The streets are filled with Israeli and Palestinian boys standing still and crying with their clothes soaked in red. The water running down the cobblestone street turns into an angry red river and disappears down a drain.

An officer yells out for Aaron, Do-Dee, Avichi and me to join him. We are walking in formation through a patch of lemon trees when bullets ring out, hitting the trees around us and kicking up dirt. We all hit the ground and take cover. Our officer takes out his night binoculars so he can see more clearly. He immediately spots three men running. "Three men on the right, fifty yards away!" he screams. The officer is lying next to me and points to the right, guiding me to exactly where they are. I open fire to where he's pointing. The officer sees one of the three men get hit and fall to the ground. "One is down!" he yells. "Yalla! Yalla!" The officer waves his hand in the air motioning for us to move in. We reach the fallen man and surround him, as the officer watches to make sure the other two men are gone. I look down at the man I just shot, and I'm stunned. Those dark, bitter eyes. His young face and olive complexion. "Haleb!" I cry.

The other soldiers look at me, surprised that I know him. "Jesus!" I yell. "Help him!" He's bleeding badly and I reach down to try and close the wound. "Medic! Medic!" I shout. We put Haleb on a stretcher and lower him by the side of the bus. Reinforcement soldiers have arrived, securing the area. Haleb

looks straight up into the sky, closes his eyes, and is still. A medic rushes over and starts performing CPR. But it's too late. Haleb is dead.

"Haleb! Haleb!" I stare down and lean over to hug him. But then I'm shocked again. It's not Haleb! It's another young Arab with those same eyes and complexion. But it could have been Haleb, I'm thinking. My friend.

All the other soldiers are on the bus looking at me dumbfounded. "Alex! Get on the bus!" the officer yells. I ignore him. Then SexyHeeb appears and softly places his hand on my shoulder. "Get on the bus," he says quietly. The soldiers are on the bus with the shattered windows heading back to the base. All of them are sleeping except for me. I'm staring straight ahead with the young Arab's dry blood all over my hands and fatigues.

Physically and mentally drained, all the soldiers are walking back to the barracks in hopes that they can pass out for a few hours. An unfriendly voice calls out my name. "Alex! Alex!" It's the kitchen sergeant. I just ignore him and keep walking. "Alex! Alex!" Finally I turn to him and yell back, "What the fuck do you want from me!" He just smiles and snickers, knowing he got me. For the next three hours I'm on my hands and knees in the latrine, scrubbing the shit from the floor.

Wasted and broken, I'm slowly walking to the barracks when I see a bus about to leave the base. I check to make sure no one else is watching, jump on the bus, and hide in the back. The bus driver gets in soon after, starts the engine, and drives off the base. Holy shit! I'm thinking. I'm free! I get off the bus when the driver stops to get some food. Then I start hitchhiking, heading south.

I soon find myself in the back of a pickup truck traveling through the desert. I look up at the nighttime sky and it's full of the brightest stars I've ever seen. I'm thinking about Haleb and the young soldier I killed. I'm also just relieved to be away from the army and that fucking kitchen sergeant. I haven't felt this calm in a long time. We drive by Masada as we make our way

toward Eilat. As we pass the Dead Sea, I knock on the driver's window to let me off. I thank him and then watch the truck drive off into the night. I hadn't been to the Dead Sea since I was a boy with my family. All I want now is to get into the water, float on top, and release myself. I need to be cleansed.

As I walk toward the sea, I come across a small Bedouin tent with a few camels tied up outside it. There's actually a nice cool breeze here. I lie down under a tree and make the sand underneath me my bed for the night.

The next day I'm floating on top of the Dead Sea with my arms out to my sides. It's an amazing feeling. As soon as I got into the water, the dense salt immediately pushed me up to the top. I relaxed and drifted off as the hot sun hit my face.

After hours in the water, I go sit in a mud pit. I'm naked and covered with mud, and so are all the middle-aged tourists who surround me. The mud was harvested from the sea. It feels good and literally grounding. From a distance, I notice a man approaching me who looks familiar. He gets into the mud pit and sits down next to me. "Hello, Alex," he says. I look over and I'm shocked to see SexyHeeb. "How did you find me? What are you doing here?" He quietly answers, "When someone runs, they always run toward Eilat. You know exactly why I'm here, Alex." "What now?" I ask. "What now is up to you," SexyHeeb says. "You're different, Alex. Very different, actually. You're not from here, and that's why sometimes more is expected from you to prove yourself." "Maybe I made a mistake joining the army," I say. "Well, if that's your answer, I won't waste my time with you anymore. But I think you can make a very good soldier." We both sit still for a minute in silence. "I'm just so confused by what happened," I tell him. "I killed a young man. He looked like Haleb. He could have been Haleb! And Haleb was my friend. Do you understand? My friend!"

"I know what you're feeling, Alex. No one said it be easy. The young man you killed was also a soldier for his cause. I'm sure he believed in what he

was doing and was ready to die for it. Remember, he shot at you first. I don't have the answers for you, Alex. These things you have to work out yourself. But if you do decide to come back, you will be punished for running and will go to jail. After that, it's up to you." SexyHeeb pauses and then says, "And make a real effort to learn Hebrew. Then you won't feel like an outsider anymore."

I sit there for a few minutes and then turn toward SexyHeeb. But he's gone. I look down on the ledge where he had been sitting and there's a book: Hebrew for Dummies. I pick it up and inspect it. For dummies? That's appropriate, I think.

Jail

Let's be clear—jail sucks. There's no positive spin to it. I went from sharing a barrack with the best guys I knew, my brothers, to a huge cell filled with metal bunk beds and the worst of the worst of what the army produces. These soldiers were thieves, misfits, cowards, and fighters, and many were mentally ill. I shouldn't even call them soldiers. They had no honor. But then, neither did I. I shouldn't have gone AWOL and run away. And no excuses or grey areas are welcomed in this country. There are rules that you follow like everyone else. If you break those rules, then you are punished, period. There is no debate or mercy of the court. Since I've been here in jail, I've received a lot of support from the brothers in my unit— and especially from Dafna. They believe in me. But they know, too, that no one is special and above the law. I respect that and feel humbled by it. Now I just have to survive this.

Here's what "this" is like: The jail is dirty and rat-infested. Most of the metal bunk beds don't have mattresses on them. Most of the inmates look troubled and sick. It's difficult to sleep with the cries and screams coming from around the prison. And the guy next to me is playing with himself. He doesn't even have the decency to cover himself with a sheet. It's raining

outside and the water starts falling on top of me from the leaks in the ceiling. As I try to move away from the drops of rain falling on me, I realize I've hit rock bottom. I take out a lighter and begin to read the book SexyHeeb gave me. It's a good time, I think, to start learning Hebrew. Then I put out the lighter and try to get some sleep.

The mess hall is lined with prisoners sitting at long tables and eating lunch. Not only do I have to live with these animals, I have to feed them too. I'm one of three guys pushing a food cart and putting loaves of bread on the tables. Of course one of the wheels on my cart is off, which makes pushing the cart awkward and tedious. As for the guys I'm feeding, let's just say they missed taking that class on etiquette. Each table is yelling at me and grabbing the bread off the cart. Truly, a bunch of animals. One big guy sitting at the head of the class is more obnoxious and outspoken than the rest. He wins the award of biggest prick around. In his broken English, he yells, "Hey, American, fuck you, bitch! Fuck you, America! Fuck you, mother!"

I'm not quite sure, but for some reason, most guys, especially this Neanderthal, think cursing is some kind of universal language. I actually speak it myself. Fluently. But to be referred to all day as a fucking bitch can wear on anyone's nerves. And bringing my mother into it is a whole different ballgame. I awkwardly push my cart over to him, lean in, and whisper in his ear, "You have a problem?" He stares straight ahead and surprisingly whispers back to me: "Fuck you, American. Fuck you." We are obviously having a moment. Yeah, right, I say to myself and start to walk away. "Be careful, I kill a man!" he shouts in his broken English. "That's why I here." SexyHeeb slowly leans toward him and gets very close. His lips are almost touching him as he whispers directly into his ear, "You know why I'm here? I killed my whole fucking platoon! You be careful!" With that, SexyHeeb takes the guy's head and slams it into his plate. His head jerks back, and there's cottage cheese all over his face. He looks around shocked and embarrassed

as the rest of the table starts to laugh at him. I slowly push my broken cart away.

After the animals finish feasting and leave, I'm left to clean up the carnage. The whole mess hall looks like one big road kill. I come across where cottage-cheese-boy was sitting and notice the head of the spoon he was using without the body. As I learn later, they take off the top of the spoon, sharpen the metal body, and make it into a knife. Good job, Alex, making friends everywhere.

As I leave the mess hall, cottage-cheese-boy and two of his assailants lie in wait. That's okay. SexyHeeb and I are ready. One of the guys grabs us from behind and is shocked by how big we are. I throw him off and knock out the teeth of the other guy who comes at me. Cottage-cheese-boy has his makeshift knife shaking in front of him as SexyHeeb moves toward him, kicks him square in the balls, and watches him fall to the ground. He lies there in a fetal position while moaning in pain. I kick the knife away and leave the three of them on the ground, licking their wounds and trying to collect any semblance of dignity they had left. I'm actually glad this happened instead of having them come visit and stab me as I sleep.

Later that evening, we're all back in the mess hall. I awkwardly push my wobbly cart down the aisle and stop by cottage-face-boy. SexyHeeb takes a loaf of bread and slaps it in his face. Humiliated, cottage-boy keeps his head down and stays quiet. Me? I just want out.

As I'm walking back to my humble abode, I hear a familiar voice call out my name. It actually sounds like an angel. It is an angel. "Alexoxoxo!!! Alexoxoxo!!!" Behind the barbed wire and gate stands Dafna, waving at me with both hands, smiling broadly, and exuding life and love. I'm beyond happy to see her and really touched that she came. She has my back and that means everything, and I do mean everything. I was clearly falling in love with her.

The two of us are sitting at a table in the visiting room. I can't stop kissing her neck and rubbing her hand. Her smell is intoxicating, and I just want to devour her. "It's been a long haul," I tell her. "But three more days and I'm out of here." Dafna smiles with such brightness that I feel the light. "Ani ohev otach," I whisper. "I love you too," Dafna says, and then happily exclaims, "Alex! You're learning Hebrew!" We both laugh and then embrace, holding each other tight and feeling like one.

If you've ever been to jail, then you know it's as bad as it gets. I actually miss basic training—and even the kitchen sergeant! Anything is better than this living nightmare. Three days later, though, I'm walking through the barbed wire gate to freedom! Only to return to basic training, but I don't care. I miss my unit—especially my brothers Avichi and Do-Dee. As I'm leaving the prison, someone calls my name. It's cottage-cheese-boy. "Take care, Alex, take care!" he yells. It's amazing. In the normal, civilized world, the pen is the most respected weapon. But here, in the Middle East, in this badass zip code, the sword still prevails. I motion goodbye and get outta there.

Back At Base

I never thought I'd say this, but I'm ecstatic to be back on the base. Still, as I make my way over to the barracks, I'm nervous and concerned what the guys now think of me. I sincerely hope they believe in second chances, and more importantly, still believe in me. I walk into the barracks and drop my duffel bag by the door. All the guys in my unit look up at me and smile as I let out a sigh of incredible relief. The sergeant then walks in and yells, "Five minutes to the firing range!" As the guys in my unit file out, they each hit me in the left side of my chest near my heart. Do-Dee walks by and gives me a big hug. Avichi walks by and winks. "Eiree, good to see you, mon." Aaron slows down but keeps walking by me. I drop my bag on my cot and take a deep breath. I feel completely humbled. I guess I'm an emotional guy. But I'm

feeling so thankful. All I want is to regain their trust, and I'm grateful for the chance to do that. I won't let them down again. And that includes Aaron.

Firing Range

Soldiers stand in a straight line with a target about 20 yards in front of each one of them. I actually enjoy this part of training. Some how or other, I developed a good shot. Not sure how it happened, but it did. Each soldier shoots three bullets into the target and then runs up to the target to await inspection. Do-Dee is standing next to me. "Shit," he whispers. One of his shots was way off. "He's gonna make me stay on the base for Shabbas, I know it," Do-Dee says. "I need to go home and see my mother," he adds, as his voice breaks a little in despair. "Relax," I tell him. I pull his arm and quickly switch places with him. One of the younger officers sees the switch and smiles as they move down the line. Aaron also sees it and looks on surprisingly. The officer approaches my old target with Do-Dee now standing in front of it. "Excellent! Very good, Do-Dee!" I don't think I ever saw Do-Dee so happy. He'll be going home for Shabbas!

A fly is buzzing around my head. It lands on my arm and I slowly move my other hand above it, smash down, and kill it. The fly falls to the ground. I lean over and pick it up. I then rip the fly in half and place one half of it in the bullet hole that Do-Dee shot outside the target area. The officers converge on my target and begin to inspect it. The head officer looks at me and shakes his head in disappointment. "You're not back twenty minutes and you're already messing up!" he yells. "What do you mean?" I ask in a timid voice. The officer angrily points to the target and yells, "You have two bullets that are close to the target and one that is way off! You weren't concentrating! What were you thinking about? The good times you had in jail? Maybe you want to spend more time there?" Calmly, I respond, "I was just going for the fly, sir." "The what?" he yells. "The fly," I repeat. The officers walk up closer to the target and inspect the hole. In shock and amazement, they simultaneously turn to

me as I stare straight ahead at attention. The younger officer who saw the switch earlier isn't able to hold his composure and starts laughing. Aaron and the rest of the soldiers also start laughing. The officer smiles too. "Very good, Alex, very good," he says. He then turns to Do-Dee and says, "Shabbat on base," but follows that with a wink.

A Gift from Home

I walk back into the barracks and see a package on my cot. It's from my father. I stand still and just look at it for a few minutes, wanting to savor every minute of this joy. I couldn't care less what's inside. It's a lifeline from the outside world that lets me know there's life out there, outside this army base in the middle of the desert. This package is a beautiful slice of life. Fuck, this package is the whole Goddamn pie! I sit on my cot and caress it for a few minutes. Then, with childish abandon, I rip it open with the paper flying everywhere. Even though I have zero reference point, I feel like a little boy on Christmas morning opening up a present that was placed there by Santa himself.

I pick up my father's letter that's on top of the paper inside the box. I read it as if he is speaking to me, and I can hear his voice. "My son. I miss you very much. Katz's deli and Sammy's aren't the same without you. Enclosed is a postcard from Katz's." I pick up the picture postcard and smile. It's a photo of their oversized sandwiches with pickles and fries on the side. "I've also sent you some bare essentials that I know you can't live without. I'm very proud of you son. More importantly, your mother would be very proud of you too. All right, I gotta go. Be good my boy and keep low. Be a MENSCH! Love ya, hug ya, miss ya, kiss ya!" That's how he always finished a conversation with someone he cared about.

I smile, put down the letter, and inspect the package to see what kind of bare essentials he was talking about. The first thing I pull out is a huge

salami! Just like the one I always saw hanging in the window of Katz's Deli. I remember the sign underneath it that said, "Send an Israeli soldier a salami." Now that sign has real meaning for me. A bunch of guys in my platoon surround me like a pack of hungry wolves. One guy has already pulled out his army knife and asks with excitement, "What do you have there?" I knew it wouldn't last long.

Next, I pull out a Baby Ruth candy bar—my favorite of all time! I was a junk-food junky back at home. I loved all candy, but Baby Ruth was my number one. I quickly put it in my pants pocket before the rest of the guys can see it. I have no problems sharing the salami, but this chocolate-covered Baby Ruth was mine! As I pull out the rest of the paper, at the bottom of the box sits the ultimate prize. I could even smell it. An official New York Yankees hat! I immediately pick it up, squeeze the tip together a few times to break it in, and ceremoniously place it on top of my head. I have a huge shit-eating grin on my face. I couldn't have been happier. Wearing a yarmulke for religious guys is supposed to emphasize that you're only so big and tall, but above you there's the Lord your God. It's a lesson in humility. I appreciate that. But for me, the only things above me are the Yankee organization, the Bronx bombers, and all the guys in pin stripes! Memories of watching my favorite team and the greatest ensemble of players ever to be in one bullpen come rushing through my veins to my brain. Catcher was the captain, Thurman Munson. On 1st base, Chris Chambliss; 2nd base, Willie Randolph; short stop, Bucky Dent; 3rd base, Greg Nettles; pitcher, Goose Gossage. Left field was Louuuuu Piniella. Center field was Mickey Rivers. And last but certainly not least was Mr. October himself, my idol, Reggie Jackson! He actually came out with a Reggie candy bar, but I'm a loyal guy and stayed with the big bambino, the house that Ruth built, my Baby Ruth. What a great care package. Thanks, Dad! It blows air into my sails to keep me going. I feel sincerely grateful.

In the Gymnasium

More than 200 men are sitting in a huge circle watching two soldiers in the middle kick the shit out of each other. There's no headgear, no gloves. Hell, there isn't even a ref officiating. Just two guys in a street fight being cheered on by a pack of 200 bloodthirsty wolves. There's something barbaric and almost beautiful in its nature. I, for one, enjoy watching it, and I'm eager to fight too. The boxing instructor finally walks into the circle and breaks them apart. "Okay. Okay. Good job." He playfully slaps both of them in the face, then pushes them both to go sit down. They seem dazed and confused as they stumble back to their seats. The boxing instructor looks like a wild animal. He's huge and has hair all over his body, reminding me of Uri. He walks around the circle with a swagger as he inspects us and picks out the next two warriors. I love his attitude. He stops in front of Aaron and motions for him to get up. Aaron stands up immediately and makes his way to the center of the circle. Then SexyHeeb stands up and goes to join Aaron in the center. "What have we here?" says the boxing instructor. "Very good! I'm going to enjoy this!" The rest of the soldiers yell with cheers and animal sounds in anticipation of a great matchup. Aaron and I face each other and reluctantly shake hands. "Fight!" yells the instructor.

I start it off by giving Aaron a good smack in the mouth. Then we embrace and begin to pummel each other with our fists. We break apart for a few seconds. Coming from New York and with a street attitude, I start dancing around Aaron and taunting him. I quickly move in and unleash some devastating blows to his head. The soldiers are now standing and cheering us on. Aaron, frustrated, yells from the top of his lungs, charges at me, and picks me up in his arms as we both collapse on top of some of the cheering soldiers. "Okay! Okay! Very good!" yells the boxing instructor. "That will be all with you two!" He takes both our hands, directs us to the center of the room, and motions for us to shake hands. SexyHeeb and Aaron stand face to face, both our faces swelled up and bleeding. Aaron's left eye is completely shut. We

look like warriors who begrudgingly shake hands. "It seems like the two of you like each other a lot. Okay, I understand. You can sit down," the instructor says as he pushes Aaron back to the circle, "You stay here," he says to me.

The instructor then points to Do-Dee and tells him to get up. We face each other and shake hands. "Fight!" yells the instructor. I start moving around, exerting about 20 percent of my energy. Even though Do-Dee and I are about the same size, I wasn't about to introduce him to SexyHeeb. He's my friend. "Stop it! Stop it!" yells the boxing instructor. He walks over to me and smacks me in the mouth. "What's your problem?" he asks. "It's unfair," I answer. Sarcastically, he asks why. "It's just not fair. I'm much bigger than him." The instructor then inspects both of us, not seeing a difference at all. "You're much bigger than him? You're both the same size! I don't care! I told you to fight! He's your enemy and I want you to kick the shit out of him. You are disobedient, which you'll pay for later. But right now, fight!" "I won't," I say. Quietly and in a gentle manner, the instructor turns to Do-Dee and motions for him to sit down. He then turns to me. "I'm a lot bigger than you, am I not? I have no problem kicking your ass!" With that, the instructor moves in and starts hitting me. His punches are powerful and extremely painful, but this isn't the time for SexyHeeb to appear. I have to pick my battles, and this one was lost before it began. I close my eyes, swinging wildly, and get one good shot in. The instructor just smiles and then proceeds to beat the living hell out of me. I fall into the other soldiers, who plead with me to stay down. But I have a defiant personality that will never give up. It just isn't in my DNA. He's gonna have to kill me, I'm thinking, as I move into the middle of the circle and motion for him to engage. He looks at me in disbelief, but then delivers two upper cuts that send me to the ground. I slowly and awkwardly try to stand up. Never give up. Never relent. That's how you deal with bullies. I'm finally standing again, slowly wobbling back and forth. I'm too weak now to lift my hands, and they hang by my side. Both my eyes are so swollen I can

barely see in front of me. Still, I stand in the middle of the circle and motion for the instructor to engage again.

The other soldiers are all standing, but no one is cheering. Instead, there's a deadly silence in the gym. Aaron looks on concerned. He actually makes a move to step in, but another soldier grabs his shoulder from behind, quietly nods no, and whispers not to interfere. The boxing instructor then pulls back and addresses the platoon. "Class dismissed!" He looks over at me, a bloody mess, and says, "Good job, Alex." I collect myself, pick up my Yankees hat that dropped to the ground during the fight, fit it carefully on top of my head, and then stumble my way back to the barracks. Avichi and Do-Dee run up to both sides of me and help me get my bearings. I guess there was a lesson to be learned here, but for the life of me I can't figure it out. Maybe he was a Met fan. But I didn't want to fight my good friend Do-Dee, so I took the beating. It was definitely a good one.

Latrines

On the way back to the barracks, I'm stopped by the kitchen sergeant, and I painfully get down and start doing push-ups, until a voice is heard confronting the sergeant. It's Aaron. "Why must you keep bothering him? What has he done that's so bad?" Aaron asks. The kitchen sergeant looks over at Aaron, surprised that he's defending me. Avichi, Do-Dee and I also look over in shock. "Get out of my sight, Aaron, and mind your own business!" the kitchen sergeant yells. "No," Aaron says. "I don't understand why you have to keep doing this. What lesson is learned here? You're just picking on him because he's different and not from here. You're obviously intimidated by him in some way." Wow. Was this really coming from Aaron, my antagonist? "Different" was an understatement though. I've heard that my whole life. The kitchen sergeant looks over at both of us, annoyed and frustrated. "Fine, the two of you can do it together!"

Two hours later, both Aaron and I are on our knees in the latrine, scrubbing the crap off the floor. It's 90 degrees outside, and the humidity is easily over 100 degrees in this shit box. Just to give you the complete visual, there were stalls in this bathroom but no toilet seats. You just bent over a hole and hoped you aimed straight. Most guys didn't. If you wanted to urinate, there was a narrow, long tub that you shared with everyone else. The drain was usually clogged, which created a tub of piss. Yes, this was our home in the desert. I keep reminding myself that I was the moron who actually volunteered for this abuse.

"This is awful," Aaron says. I get up off my knees and lean against the wall. We're both sweating profusely, and our uniforms are drenched. Not to mention the dry blood on our faces and uniforms from the fighting earlier on. Aaron's left eye is still swollen and shut. We're quite the sight. I reach into my pocket and pull out my Baby Ruth bar. As I tear open the wrapper, I inspect the floor. To our credit, the place is actually now clean, I'm thinking, as I'm about to take a rewarding bite. At that moment, the kitchen sergeant walks in, and Aaron and I stand at attention. This is the kind of guy who if he thinks the latrine isn't spotlessly clean, he'll make us stay on the base for Shabbat. The worst two words any Israeli soldier can hear are "Shabbat sit." This means you're not going home that weekend, and the next weekend break could be months away.

I hate this prick. I have the Baby Ruth in my hand by my side, and when he starts inspecting the stalls, I quickly toss it toward one of the toilet drains on the floor. But with my luck, the bar misses falling down the drain and rests on the edge. The kitchen sergeant seems pleased with the job we did until he comes across the drain with my Baby Ruth. "What the fuck is this! Does someone want to tell me what the hell this is!" He looks at both of us standing at attention and looking like we've both been through a war. We certainly smell like it. We stare straight ahead in silence. Finally, I look at him and talk. "I don't know. Let's find out though, shall we?"

I walk over to the Baby Ruth bar resting on the edge of the drain and kneel down to see it up close. I look at the kitchen sergeant and then back at the Baby Ruth. "It looks like shit, sir. Not quite sure though." I then shrug my shoulders, lean down, and pick it up. I start to rub it, almost caressing it, trying to figure out what it is. "It looks like shit, sir, and it feels like shit, sir." I then bring the Baby Ruth bar to my nose, close my eyes, and inhale deeply. Then I open my eyes and look straight into the kitchen sergeant's eyes. "It looks like shit, sir, it feels like shit, sir, and it smells like shit, sir." Aaron is in the background, shaking and giggling behind the sergeant. He looks like some kind of creature from the lagoon with his left eye shut, bloodstained face and clothes, and sweating profusely. The kitchen sergeant is staring at me in shock and disbelief. "What, what, what are you doing there, Alex?" I look over at both of them, shrug my shoulders again, and take a big bite out of my Baby Ruth! While I'm chewing, I address the sergeant. "Mmmm, ya, it's shit, sir." When the candy melts a little bit, I start licking my fingers and then pick my tooth for a second. "Corn." I walk over to the kitchen Sergeant. "Ah, is it okay we if we go now, sir?" He can't even speak and nervously nods yes.

Aaron and I walk out of the latrine, laughing hysterically as we head back to the barracks to take a much-needed shower. We have our arms around each other as we walk, laughing and feeling very proud of ourselves. 'I don't think he'll be bothering you again,' Aaron says. I nod and smile. We walk into the barracks laughing together like two high school girls. All the rest of the guys sit up in their cots, looking at us surprised and in shock that we're buddies. "What?" we both say.

Jump!

The plane is filled with soldiers who sit in two lines facing each other. The green light goes off in the back of the cabin. The soldiers stand up, and the back door of the plane opens. I can feel the outside wind hitting my face. An officer is standing in front of the door with his hand in the air. He throws his

hand down and yells, “Ready? Go! Go! Go!” One by one, the soldiers inch closer and closer to the open door and start disappearing through it. Avichi is in the back of the line with me. “I’m going to die, mon!” he says with more than a little distress. “This is very uncool. It’s not good for my head!” “Relax,” I tell him. “It’s just like how we’ve trained—just a lot higher up.” I’m not sure Avichi takes much comfort in that. I actually don’t either. The idea of jumping out of a perfectly functional plane is for the birds. It makes no sense.

Looking back, it was actually very peaceful, almost therapeutic. That is, once you jumped. Before that, you face a battle within. It’s a test of confronting your fears, and the buildup in your mind before you jump can be almost unbearable. Then there’s landing, another challenge—especially when you have 100 pounds of equipment on you. I had the M60 machine gun too, along with all the bullets. It was a lot of additional weight. That’s why we trained for weeks on how to land and how to roll once we’ve landed. I heard about a French Lone Soldier who landed on both his feet and didn’t roll. He shattered both his legs and was sent home packing. That wasn’t happening to me. I’d been rolling in my sleep. It’s funny, but I was more afraid during practice when we jumped off a five-story apparatus. That was all too real for me. I could actually see the ground. Here in the plane, 10,000 feet in the air, when I look down at the ground, it seems make believe, not real.

I get to the green light, wait for the officer to give me thumbs up, and jump out. While in the air, my mind relaxes, and all I can hear are the thoughts in my head. I feel like one of those butterflies in Haleb’s garden, drifting, drifting down. I think of my mom and how proud of me she’d be. I’m at peace, my mind at ease for the first time in a long time. I’m present in the moment, and it’s beautiful. I search for some epiphany to share, some words of wisdom to contemplate later. But my only reality is the earth and the ground, and it’s fast approaching. All I keep thinking is roll, baby, roll.

Safe on land, Avichi and I gather our parachutes and put our arms around each other as we walk to meet family and friends who are waiting. We are

ecstatic! When I see Dafna, I give her a kiss hello and put my arms around her, and the three of us start walking together. “Roll, baby, roll!” Avichi and I both yell. “That was great!” I tell them. “It was just incredible! I can’t wait to get back to New York and tell my friends about this.” I feel Dafna drop her arm that had been firmly around my waist. I don’t think about it at the time as Avichi and I are then greeted by the rest of our platoon. We all embrace each other and dance. It’s been a long journey. We’re becoming paratroopers!

Masa Kumta

At the end of our gruesome eight-month training, we have to complete our final challenge. Before we will be fully-fledged soldiers of the Paratrooper’s Brigade, we need to finish our “Masa Kumta,” which translates to “Beret March.” This is an all-night, 120km march in full gear, through any kind of weather. And at the end of it, we’ll become paratroopers and receive our red berets. It signifies the end of our training and full admission to the active elite forces of the Paratrooper’s Brigade!

We begin our journey in the evening and continue throughout the entire night. After several hours of heavy marching, fatigue starts setting in. I’m in full gear and carrying the machine gun. Even for SexyHeeb, the additional weight causes many challenges as we move at an aggressive pace. Hunched over with all the weight, I’m just waiting for my back and shoulders to become numb so I won’t feel any more pain. I sense that this might have physical ramifications later on in my life, but I don’t care. I just want to finish. There’s a red beret waiting for me, and that’s all that matters. It’s the dream I’ve had since I was a little boy, and I am undeterred by the pain. My mother is with me. My heartbeat is hers. And there’s no fucking way I’m not going to make it!

After many long hours of marching and as the sun starts to rise, we reach our final destination, Jerusalem! Just outside of the Holy City, I slow down to

urinate. I have so much gear on me that I'm struggling to find my zipper. An officer comes by and yells at me to keep moving. "To stop is to die!" he shouts. "All your muscles could cramp up and you're done." But I really have to piss. Fuck it. I have no choice but to urinate in my pants and keep moving. "Ahhhh, it fucking burns!" I can feel the burn all down my legs, but I can't stop. Even for me, I'm disgusted with myself, but there was no way I was gonna fail, cramp up, and not be able to finish. I'm so close.

I'm also a firm believer that everything bad happens in the last minutes of play. That's when you feel like you have the game won, get complacent, and then fumble the ball. Or you had a few drinks, drive safe for miles, and the cops pull you over just two blocks from your house. Not today. It won't happen to me. I take that burn running down my legs and turn it into a positive. I turn the pain into a badge of courage. That pain is just weakness leaving my body. I also have flat feet and can feel the huge blisters on my feet filling with blood and pus. My feet are numb so I'm not in pain, but I can feel the liquid moving inside the huge blisters, swishing and rubbing with each step I take. Now I can see the finish line. We're marching in a jog through the streets of the old city, making our way to the Western Wall, the Kotel. The game clock is dwindling down and victory is ours. There is nothing in this world that can stop me from becoming an Israeli Paratrooper.

People on the streets are cheering, and cars beep their horns to encourage us to keep going. We converge on the Wailing Wall from all entrances. We're like a storm of ants moving in unison. Some of the soldiers reach the wall and collapse. Others fall to their knees, exhausted, full of emotion and crying uncontrollably. A few of the religious soldiers reach the wall and start praying. They lift up a Torah and begin singing and dancing around it. Israelis always find a reason to celebrate life and to dance. And it's tough not to feel religious in this moment. The mental and physical hardships we endured, combined with the powerful and beautiful significance of being

in front of the Kotel, make for an experience that is overwhelming and humbling.

I did it. I fulfilled a lifelong dream and a promise to my mother. I don't say it often, but I'm proud of myself. I carefully remove all my gear and place it on the ground. I can still feel the liquid in my blisters moving around as I slowly walk over to the Wailing Wall and rest my tired head against it. Then I close my eyes, kiss one of the pillars, and share a quiet moment with my mother.

Our platoon makes a semicircle as we wait to receive our red berets and officially establish ourselves in the greatest fighting unit in the world, Israeli Paratroopers. I'm remembering movies I saw growing up that showed the pageantry of military ceremonies of other armies. They always reminded me of an elaborate wedding. But here in Israel there isn't much emphasis placed on those kinds of theatrics. Our officers make their way through our semicircle and stop at each paratrooper. They present us with our red beret, slap us on the shoulder, look us in the eye, and say "Kol hakavod." In English that means, "All the honor, well done, good job." They then move on to the next soldier. I couldn't have asked for more. Life is a collaboration. It's all about being part of a team and adding value. And right now I feel like I'm part of the greatest team in the world.

On the Kibbutz

The platoon is given a week off to rest. Our unit will then spend three months in Lebanon, followed by three months in the territories. It's the start of our two-year conscription. Needing sleep and time to heal, I go to the kibbutz where Dafna lives. Once there, I see Aaron standing tall on his tractor and working in the fields. He looks proud and happy, and I enjoy watching him. Most of all, I enjoy spending the whole week with Dafna, a week that feels like heaven. She's very kind to me and nurses my wounds. I love waking

up with her naked in my arms. When I'm with her, nothing else in the world matters. I could stay in bed with her all day—all week. We practically did.

But something always holds me back from feeling completely at home and settled. My old insecurities and fears of abandonment would manifest at nighttime and haunt me in my sleep. I hear the reality police banging on the door to wake me. "Who's that? Who's there?" I yell from my bed. "It's the reality police, Alex. You know why we're here." I begrudgingly get up and open the door. I know I have to go with them. I don't even fight it. Still, I turn back to the bed and look at Dafna sound asleep. Her body is wrapped around a pillow that she thinks is me. I watch her sleeping peacefully. All I want to do is give her one last kiss on her forehead and say goodbye, but I know I'm not allowed. I turn back to the reality police, nod, and leave with them. The hands of that broken watch, where time stood still, start moving again. And I have to start moving again too.

I'm in a 1965 four-door white Cadillac convertible, cruising down the highway of life. The top is down and the wind is blowing my hair. SexyHeeb is riding shotgun. All I can see is that open road ahead of me, and I romanticize about the journey. This is the true meaning of life for me: I'm insulated and protected as long as I keep moving. The idea of getting off at some random exit on the highway and living with someone forever just doesn't resonate for me. SexyHeeb wouldn't be found there. Just the frail, vulnerable little Alex, looking for strands of manhood on his bare chest. Life had already left me hurt and abandoned. I wasn't about to let that happen again. So I need to keep moving. That's the one thing the reality police and I both know and agree on. Just keep moving.

I wake up with Dafna in my arms. The watch wasn't broken. It told time perfectly. I'm the one that's broken. I kiss Dafna on her head and move gently not to wake her. Then I grab my journal, walk into the other room, sit down, and start to write:

Why am I here? How did I end up as an Israeli Paratrooper? One answer is Zionism. My mother and father were ardent Zionists, and I guess I am now too. But it's not enough to say that. If you believe in Zionism, you have to somehow give to the cause that is Israel. My way of giving was joining the Israeli army, to honor my mother and to defend Israel, my spiritual mother. But the level I think is the highest commitment is to make Aliyah, to move to Israel and settle here to live. And I'm not ready to do that. I have friends and family and a life I love back in NYC. It's where I grew up and all that I've known. I'm a true native New Yorker. I want to finish my service and then head back home. I feel I have to.

The last night on the kibbutz with Dafna is difficult. I tell her that after my service I'll be going back to America. Back to New York. Dafna gets out of bed, puts on her robe, and heads toward the door. "How can you walk away from all this, from me!" she yells. She leaves the room but then comes back in. "How can you leave your mother, Alex?" "That's not fair!" I yell back. "Alex, I know you've been deeply hurt by the loss of your mother," Dafna says. "But you don't trust what you love the most. You question it always. You're controlled by your insecurities, Alex. I understand that you don't want to be hurt like that ever again, so you build walls so no one can reach you. Well, I love you with all my heart. I've seen the man that you've become. Your mother would want you to be happy, and find love, and give love. You're capable of so much love, Alex. If you end up old and alone, what honor is there in that?"

Dafna is crying now, but she keeps on talking. "You always say your mother lives inside you, that she is your heartbeat, and I believe that now and feel as if I know her. You say you want to honor her. I think what you did volunteering for the Paratroopers was noble, and you had all the best intentions to protect her and make her proud. But if you truly want to live in her honor, she'd want you to be happy! To find love, respect it, and hold it tight. Let yourself be vulnerable and exposed, Alex. I have. That's the true meaning of living and being alive."

Dafna turns to go but then turns around again and says, “I know how hard it is to lose a parent when you’re young, Alex. I know. But if you can cherish the time you had with her and stop punishing yourself and be happy, that would be the greatest honor you could give her. Stop running, Alex.”

With that, Dafna looks at me, shakes her head in pity, and leaves. I don’t sleep at all that night. I look everywhere on the kibbutz, but I can’t find Dafna. At 6 a.m., there’s an army jeep waiting to take Aaron and me back to the border of Lebanon to regroup with the rest of our unit. I jump in and put my head down. Aaron puts his arm around me as the jeep drives off.

Underground in Lebanon

It’s been a long three months in Lebanon. We haven’t been able to take one weekend off, and we’re constantly on high alert. Our home is an underground bunker. You walk down four flights of stairs to a long corridor that’s filled with ratty, old bunk beds that keep collapsing. I haven’t showered or changed my clothes in months. They don’t have the facilities for it. Besides, you can’t risk not being ready in case you’re called to respond at a moment’s notice. You have to sleep with your boots on so you can jump up immediately and sprint up the stairs.

Each night I lie on the top bunk bed and stare at the ceiling, trying to get some sleep. If I’m lucky, I get about three hours at a time. That’s when I remind myself that I actually signed up for this shit. I’m the moron who volunteered for this.

My morale—our morale—is low. It seems like a tireless exercise, not to mention dangerous. Every morning we open up the roads that higher-ranking officers will be using to get to different bases and outposts. We start that drill at 5 a.m. Then we walk for miles along this narrow, winding dirt road to make sure that no terrorist group like Hezbollah has placed IEDs (“improvised explosive devices”) along the road. They would plant the IEDs at night, and

we'd sweep the roads every morning to clear them out. There's a scout who walks in front of us who's trained specifically in locating the IEDs, and there's a tank in front of us too. I feel particularly upset by this assignment because we never had any training in what to look for. And when I tell any of the officers my concerns, their response is always, "Don't worry, Alex. You'll know when you come across an IED." That isn't very comforting.

On this day, I pack up all my equipment and jump into a jeep with a dozen other soldiers. We drive deeper into Lebanon, reaching the border of our 10-mile buffer zone. Each soldier is dropped 100 yards from the next. There's a ditch and a sleeping bag. We're here to relieve the soldiers who've been there for the past three days.

The soldier I'm relieving jumps into the jeep and says, "Have fun," as I jump out to replace him. I'm handed a three-day ration of food, a shovel, and that's it. The food is canned food from the U.S. and has a date on it from a decade back. It reminds me of cat food. I'm not even sure it is food, but after a while, you get used to the taste. I even began to crave it.

So here I am in this ditch. I set up my gun and ammo facing the landscape in front of me. Then I place the sleeping bag over me because at nighttime, Lebanon can get fucking cold. My orders are very straightforward. If anything moves in front of me, shoot it and kill it. This is a no-go zone, and anyone in this area has bad intentions and shouldn't be here. I get ready to face some long days and nights. You only go out of the ditch to go to the bathroom. To do that, I take two of the metal boxes that hold my bullets, rest one butt cheek on each one, and do my business. I'm used to it by now. That's the only time you should be out of the ditch so as not to expose yourself to a possible sniper.

What kills me most is being alone. I love being around other people. Their energy feeds my soul. As a native New Yorker, I'm addicted to the everyday hustle and bustle. It's like a drug. I remember one day going across the George Washington Bridge to New Jersey and suddenly feeling like I had a

nosebleed. I had to turn back home to get my fill. Worse yet, I once spent a weekend during the summer in the city, and it haunted me. Every weekend there's a mass exodus to Long Island beaches or the Jersey shore. Being left alone in the city without its energy was an out-of-body experience. And now, here in this ditch in Lebanon all day and night feels like a death sentence to a guy like me.

I know I have to keep myself entertained and occupy my mind. So I start talking to myself. When I tire of my conversation, I begin to sing. And then I think of Dafna—all the time. I get this peaceful, loving feeling every time I think of her, how it felt to be in bed with her, touch her soft skin, and have her smell all over me for days. I look up at the night sky, see all the stars, and wish she was here with me in this ditch. That's like the last thing she would want to do, but I just miss her so much. Our last fight was so terrible. Now I've been in Lebanon for months with no way to contact her. There's no place to receive letters or make a phone call. I'm not even sure she'd want to talk to me.

But as bad as things are—like living in a ditch for days and eating canned food from the '60s—I know I can handle it. I don't need much. I remember telling my mom on my birthday that I didn't need anything special or expensive. If she had to give me something, just wrap a pair of underwear or socks. Making me a card would be nice too. Show a little effort, right? Besides that, I was good. So my current surroundings don't bother me too much. It's my reality now, and I'll make the best of it. I've trained my mind to always have fun in any scenario and think love and positive thoughts. Still, I miss Dafna immensely. I'm alone and it sucks. I ask Aaron if he's heard anything from his sister, but he solemnly nods no. "I think she's just protecting herself," he says. "She knows your plans. Sorry, man."

The General of the SLA

One of my next duties in Lebanon is being the bodyguard for the General of the Southern Lebanese Army, the SLA. It's a Lebanese militia, mostly composed of Christians, that operates in Southern Lebanon and is supported by Israel. The SLA became Israel's primary ally during the South Lebanon conflict in the fight against Hezbollah.

It's not a bad detail. We guard his home at nighttime, and the worst part is how cold it gets. A few of the guys from my unit often start a fire in a metal garbage can, and we huddle around it. The best part is the general's wife, who's always sweet to me. Every night she comes outside and asks, "Where's the American? Where's the American?" She then comes over and gives me a slice of cake—homemade and delicious. It's amazing how much the smallest gesture means to me now. Especially if it's something to eat or, more importantly, something sweet. Anything is better than the canned meat that's always on our menu, and cake, well, takes the cake! The other guys in my unit hate me for it, but I always share with my brothers. After the general's wife goes back inside, we all circle this one slice of cake and devour it together.

One cold evening, we're huddled around our makeshift fireplace, rubbing our hands over it to keep warm, and anticipating our slice of homemade cake. But no cake comes, and we're later informed that the general's wife and daughter were in Paris that weekend. This particular night seems to be the coldest and last the longest.

After hours of standing guard in the cold, we're startled to hear a gunshot from inside the house. We look at each other puzzled and then run into the house, going room to room to find out where the gunshot came from. The house is dark as night, but when we reach the general's bedroom, we can see a light from under the door. I try to turn the door handle, but it's locked from inside. I call out to the general, but no one answers. I then take a few steps backward and run at the door, throwing my shoulder into it as the door crashes open.

The general is sitting up in bed naked and holding his left shoulder where he's just been shot. Standing over the bed is a naked young girl with a pistol in her hand that she's pointing right at him. Her hands are shaking uncontrollably. She looks over at us nervously and then back at the general. Her hands stop shaking as she starts to take aim and finish the job. We immediately cover her with bullets. She goes flying into the wall and then falls to the floor. I stand over her and fire more shots to make sure she's not a threat. I can't believe how much blood there is, some of it sprayed all over the wall. Then I look down at the girl we just killed and realize I know her. She 's the general's daughter's best friend. She couldn't have been more than 15 years old.

The General is still holding his shoulder and now sobbing uncontrollably. "You're supposed to protect me!" he yells. I storm over and backslap him in his face, knocking him over. He lies there in a fetal position on his bloodied sheets, looking up at me nervously and whimpering. "Who said it was okay to fuck your daughter's best friend!" I yell at him. "She was just a kid!"

I later learned that she was a Palestinian girl from the Dbayeh refugee camp in Lebanon. She had been recruited by Hezbollah to become best friends with the general's daughter at school, seduce the general, and ultimately kill him. That was the last time I saw the general or his family. I was removed from this detail.

Do-Dee and I

Do-Dee and I are in a jeep patrolling the Israel-Lebanon border. The jeep is equipped with two machine guns on both sides, stocked and loaded. Two other soldiers who aren't in our unit are patrolling with us. I hate being on patrol with soldiers I don't know or haven't trained with. That's how mistakes can happen.

All along the border there's a fence with a sophisticated electrical system attached to it. It's routed and connected to a huge board on a base that observes any kind of disturbances. Each area of the fence has a number associated with it. As one soldier is observing the board, red lights start flashing and light up the board like a Christmas tree. The red lights signify a breach. The soldier grabs the radio and yells, "Code red, code red! Numbers 58-63! Proceed with caution. I repeat code red!" His call is sent out to every base and patrol along the border, and it's amazing how fast the response time is for the soldiers to converge on the area in question. Most of the time, it's a false alarm—just an animal getting stuck in the fence or some kind of debris blowing into the wire. But every breach is taken very seriously. And what seems odd tonight is that the breach in question isn't coming from just one specific zone but a number of them.

We happen to be right near where the breach was detected, which means we're to take the lead and be the first ones on the scene. Do-Dee picks up the transmission. "We hear you and are moving in."

Along with being nighttime, a fog has rolled in, making it even more difficult to see. We start inspecting our guns to make sure everything is in order. As we approach the area of the fence in question, we spot three terrorists breaking in. They've already breached the fence, they're in Israeli territory, and they start running off in different directions. Do-Dee immediately grabs the radio and yells, "This is not a drill! There are terrorists! Three terrorists have breached the fence and are in Israel territory!" I can only imagine the reaction of the soldiers who hear that transmission. People are on the move!

Do-Dee and I swing the machine guns mounted on the jeep in the direction of the terrorists and start firing. One terrorist who just came out of the fence is shot dead and thrown back into the barbed wire fence. Another terrorist starts running from the fence across a dirt path. I jump off the jeep and start firing at him. The bullets from my gun are chasing him down until my gun

gets jammed. At this point, Do-Dee and the other two soldiers jump off the jeep and create a perimeter to close the terrorists in. Do-Dee and another soldier see the terrorist running toward some trees for coverage. He stops and turns around to fire at us. Both Do-Dee and the other soldier shoot him dead.

While this happens, I'm still trying to fix my gun that jammed. "There's still one more out here!" I yell. The fog is really coming in now, making it difficult to see more than five feet in front of us. I can hear the sirens and see the lights of other jeeps coming toward us from every direction. That's a relief, but there's still one more terrorist not accounted for. Just then, the third terrorist emerges from behind a rock. The fog clears and he's standing just ten feet in front of me, pointing his gun at my chest. Out of nowhere, Do-Dee jumps between us and opens fire at him. At the same time, the terrorist also opens fire, and Do-Dee falls to the ground. I finally unjam my gun and spray this fucker with bullets, killing him instantly. There are bodies everywhere. I run over to Do-Dee and lean down to care for him. He saved my life. Do-Dee is dead.

A Warm Breeze

I'm in the back of a bus filled with Israeli soldiers. I have my journal out and I'm writing while most of the other soldiers are asleep. The bus pulls over near the entrance of Dafna's kibbutz. As I make my way to the front of the bus, a few of the soldiers wake up and tap my back as I get off. It's nighttime. The bus pulls away as I stand in the dark under a small light at the bus stop. It's quiet. I use all the strength I have left to throw my duffel bag over my soldier and make my way up the dark road to the kibbutz. I have no idea how Dafna will greet me. We haven't seen each other in months. But I had nowhere else to go. And I'm sure that by now she's heard the news.

I open the screen door to Dafna's house and place my bag down. I haven't slept in days, I look like shit, and it's hard to know what's holding me up as I walk into her room. "Hello, Dafna." She gets up from her bed and runs over to me. I literally fall into her arms and whisper, "Do-Dee is dead." I feel her nod yes as she holds me tight. "I love you, Dafna. I love you and I need you." I grab her head with both my hands, push her hair back, and look straight into her beautiful brown eyes. My own eyes are barely open. She can see and feel my pain. "I love you, Dafna. I won't leave. I won't ever leave you." Dafna whispers back, "I love you so much, Alex. You are my world." Then we both start to cry for Do-Dee.

I've been sleeping on and off for two days. Dafna is almost always with me, holding me close. Once, when I woke up and she was gone, I opened my journal and read the last entry I had written on the bus.

*A Warm Breeze
I was in my room alone
When SexyHeeb came running in.
Come quick! It's your mother,
Come quick, she's here.
Please, SexyHeeb, not today.
Back off, go away.
Alone again with my thoughts,
Or should I say pain,
Till SexyHeeb came running in,
And said it once again.
She wants to see you!
Your mother, she's here.
She can't stay long, so please come near.
Reluctantly, I got up, and walked out my door.
There seemed to be a party
Just down the hall.
Why wasn't I invited?
Why wasn't I told?
As I walked into the living room
The music so loud I can't hear,*

*A familiar voice called me,
And I drew near.
Who are you? I asked,
Who are you? Once more.
I'm your mother.
You're my mother?
It can't be.
How did you get here?
They let me come see—
SexyHeeb then screamed
From ten feet away,
She has to go, she cannot stay!
I turned to my mother,
How long can you stay?
There are so many things
I want to say.
I need to be held,
I miss you so,
No, SexyHeeb screamed,
This can't be! She must go!
I turned in anger,
And pleaded with his soul.
Please, SexyHeeb, please.
I know, I know....
I turned back to my mother
Her arms opened wide.
I came a bit closer,
Then fell deep, deep inside.
My body turned warm,
My mind was at ease.
The cold in my body
Must have been just a breeze,
For a warm front swept in now
From my head to my knees.
I love you, she said,
In a whisper to my ear.
I will never leave you,
I'll always be near.*

*I turned to SexyHeeb,
You see, she can stay.
But when I turned back,
She had gone away.
I woke in a deep sweat
Not knowing where I was.
Tears came to my eyes,
And fear, all alone.
I was trembling and freezing
From head to toe,
Turning tears into ice,
My heart covered in snow.
I got up from my bed, and searched
The house for clues. My father was awake.
Did you see her, I asked him. Did you?
See who?
Mom! Mom is here!
Where? Where? he asked.
You must bring me to her!
She was in my dream.
But she still has to be here,
So real it seemed.
Ohh, said my father,
As his head dropped low,
It was only a dream.
But it felt so real—
I hugged her!
She hugged me!
I know, he said,
But your mother is dead.
He said it again,
Looking into my pain,
She's gone, my son,
Your mother is dead.
We stood there for a while,
As my father held me tight.
But I know in my heart,
My mother came to me that night.*

I closed my journal and looked down at Dafna, who was sleeping soundly. Then I lay down beside her, closed my eyes, and held her tight.

PART VII

The Mountains of Lebanon

My unit is on patrol just outside of an Arab town. I'm on top of a hill by myself. It's the early part of the afternoon, peaceful and incredibly hot. I reach for my canteen and take a long sip of water. Just then, there's a loud crack in the air—a gun shot in the distance. The tranquil setting of the day changes in an instant. The bullet races through the air like a shark in water heading for its prey. The water seems petrified as it splits in all directions, clearing a pathway for the shark to come through. I smell blood and death, but all I can do is stand here frozen, treading water just to stay afloat. It feels like everything around me is still, waiting for the inevitable collision. And then it happens: The bullet finds its home and strikes me in the left side of my chest.

The power of the impact sends me flying in the air. I spin around in slow motion, like a prizefighter who just received a devastating blow. My body makes a loud crashing sound as I hit the canvas. The referee stands over me and starts counting to ten. And from far away, I can hear the soldiers in my unit screaming, "Cover! Cover! Sniper on the roof! Zooz! Zooz! Kadima!" Then I hear multiple shots of the soldiers firing at the sniper.

It's been minutes, I think, or maybe more. I'm looking up into the clear blue sky and I'm in a total daze. I always thought if I were shot I'd be in so much pain, but I feel nothing. I move my head back and forth a little as I keep looking up into this vast blue sky. It's beautiful, I'm thinking. And aside from the sounds of gunfire in the distance, it's peaceful again and eerily quiet.

Dafna and Aaron appear, standing over me and looking down. "You promised me you wouldn't leave!" Dafna yells. "Do you hear me, Alex? You promised!" Aaron puts his arm around his sister and holds her as she starts

crying hysterically. "He was going to stay!" she cries. "I want him back! Please. Pleaseee ... You promised," she begs. Then they both fade out.

All I see now is this beautiful blue sky as Israeli and Palestinian children come toward me. They're standing together, Jew next to Arab, holding hands. They all smile as they look down at me. A small Arab boy with fiery red hair has a brand new, shiny soccer ball. He kicks it, and all the children run after it. I can hear their laughter as they run away. I stare again at the vast blue sky as blood starts coming from my mouth.

There's the sound of a motorcycle in the distance. It pulls up and stops in front of me. Sherma is driving, while Sammy on the back holds onto her tight. Sherma is wearing a white wedding dress. She starts revving the engine and spits some tobacco on the ground. "You heard we got married? We owe it all to you." She points her finger toward me. "We gotta ride." Sammy looks over at me as he holds Sherma tight. "I love this woman!" She revs the engine a few more times and then drives off. I hear the engine for a while, but then everything goes silent.

A tall figure walks toward me. It's Haleb! He stands over me, looks down, and we stare at each other for a long time. "You are my friend," he says solemnly, but then disappears, leaving me alone again. I start spitting up blood and dirt.

There's the sky. There's the silence. Then Uri stands before me and I'm a little boy again, listening to his stories. Uri would always finish his story of heroism, how he saved the day, and then look at me, a small boy of eight whose mouth was wide open, listening to every word he said as if it came from the burning bush itself. Uri stands hovering over me. "So young Alex, when are you going to fulfill your obligation as a Jew and come here to fight?" I put my head down and Uri starts laughing, leans down, and kisses my head. I pick my head up, half-smiling. I never knew how to answer him. To be

honest, I got scared thinking about being in a war. But then again, I liked feeling obligated. I felt I had a purpose.

There's a breeze. A warm breeze. I'm lying on the ground motionless. My body grows colder and colder, and then I can't feel it at all. Blood keeps coming from my mouth and tears are rolling down my cheeks. I think I hear footsteps approaching, and I wonder if my brothers will save me. But it all feels like a dream. I close my eyes to sleep.

Compo Beach

SexyHeeb is naked on the jetty and slowly walks to the end. He has a massive, beautiful butterfly tattoo on his back. He stands and looks out at the dark ocean and angry waves. He's not afraid. The waves crash on the rocks and spray water all over his naked body. He lifts his arms in the air, and it looks as if the butterfly on his back is about to take flight as he dives into the ocean. SexyHeeb battles the angry waves and starts swimming toward the buoy.

I'm lying on the ground looking up into the sky. My mother hovers above me. She lovingly smiles at me, opens her arms to hug me, and motions for me to come with her. I try with all my might to lean forward and reach her. I stretch my hands out toward the vast blue sky and then collapse back into the ocean, just as SexyHeeb reaches the buoy.

A strong wind comes and blows more dirt on my face. There's the sound of soldiers running as their boots hit the ground. The sound grows louder as they get closer. Now they stand around me with their guns hanging low.

The water is calm as SexyHeeb wraps his arms and legs around the buoy and holds it tight. He doesn't want to let go. He just wants to bob, bob, bob. All I ever wanted to do was hold her tight and just bob.

SexyHeeb looks at his mother and they both smile. As he loosens his tight grip, he says, "I'm the last one to touch you and you were the last one to touch me." He slowly lets go of the buoy, puts his head back, and rests it on the water as if it's a soft pillow.

With his arms stretched out to his sides, SexyHeeb looks up at the bright moon and stars above him. He starts hearing the lullaby his mother would sing to him before he went to bed. He smiles as he drifts away into the night. Over the waves he hears his mother's voice one last time. "Sweet dreams, sugar plum, sweet dreams."

EPILOGUE

New York City - Manhattan

When I returned to the States, I enrolled in a writing course at Columbia University. Using all my notes, journals, and memories, I began to write “The Promise.” Then I got a job, got busy, and put it away. Many years later, I was fired from a job on Wall Street. With a lot of time on my hands, I took out “The Promise” and began to work on it again. It was handwritten in a notebook binder. More papers were everywhere. I had hundreds of pages of stories about my mother, my youth, and my experiences as an Israeli Paratrooper—basically, my whole life and everything I cherished.

One night, while writing notes on the handwritten pages at my neighborhood Starbucks, I got a call from a buddy. He invited me out for drinks and dinner. I put the binder and all my papers in my black knapsack and headed downtown. Hours later, drunk and stumbling, I decided to call it a night and hailed a cab. I jumped into the front seat and started a conversation with the driver. I asked him about his family. We shared stories and developed a bond. I told him I was a mama’s boy and missed my mother dearly. He said he understood, that he too had a strong love for his mother. Then he asked what was in my bulging knapsack. I said I was writing a book about my mother and my time as an Israeli Paratrooper. That’s when the mood in the cab changed—dramatically. He told me his name was Muhammad and that he was a Palestinian.

The next twenty blocks were filled with us yelling our partisan bullet points at each other and cursing at the top of our lungs. The expletives coming out of our mouths were dark and shameful. When we reached my brownstone, I jumped out of the cab. We each told the other to go fuck yourself, and I slammed the door behind me. But as I watched him speed

down the block, I suddenly panicked. I had left my knapsack in his cab—my stories and all my notes, the only copy!

I started running down the street in desperation, yelling for him to stop. All of my characters pressed their faces against the back window of the cab as we tried to reach each other. SexyHeeb, Dafna, Do-Dee, Avichi, Aaron, Uri, Haleb, Sammy, Sherma, the kitchen sergeant, Smooky, and Dani Luv were all in the cab yelling for me. I could see the scared look on Dafna's face. I screamed her name while running down the street. "Dafna!!"

The cab reached the end of the block and turned the corner. It was about 2:30 in the morning and it started raining, of course. I was beside myself, wasted, and overwhelmed with emotion. I called my girlfriend at the time who told me to relax and go upstairs into my apartment. I refused, knowing the cabby had no idea which apartment I lived in. Loaded and soaked, I lay down on my stoop in the rain, and for lack of a better idea, I prayed.

After an hour went by, I was close to giving up and going inside, but I just couldn't. In that cab was my mother. That story was my life. I imagined all my characters frightened and pleading with the cabby to drive back to me. At that moment, a yellow cab came down my block and pulled up in front of me ... It was my cabby! The back door swung open and all my characters, my family, jumped out and hugged me.

Overwhelmed with emotion, thankfulness, and joy, I started crying and shaking. Muhammad was standing outside his cab. As I moved toward him, he told me he hated me. I told him I hated him too. And then we both embraced in the greatest hug of my life. I didn't want to let go. I just kept thanking him from the bottom of my heart. Then I asked him why, after all the nasty things we said to each other, he came back. He told me that after turning the corner he got a customer who was going down to the East Village—far from my apartment on the Upper Westside. He then noticed my black knapsack in his front seat, and his first instinct was to lower his window and

throw the knapsack out. But after he dropped off his new passenger, he turned on his "Off Duty" light and made his way back to me.

He said he came back because I asked him questions about his family and because he shared the same love for his mother that I have for mine. We disagreed on everything, but agreed that the love of a mother is everything. Overwhelmed, I promised him that my story would be heard ... and that our story would be heard too.