WRITING AND RE-WRITING THE MIDDLE EAST

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A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews

2012

Writing and Re-writing the Middle East

A thesis submitted to the University of St. Andrews in application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

June 20, 2011

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ABSTRACT

This thesis is comprised of a critical component and a creative component. The creative component consists of a portfolio of creative writing drawn from a fictionalized memoir, and the critical component consists of three interconnected chapters analyzing the creative component.

The creative component, titled *The Accidental Peacemaker*, has been written alongside my recently published (and related) book, *How to Make Peace in the Middle East in Six Months or Less Without Leaving Your Apartment*. It is a satirical, first-person fictionalized memoir about how the Middle East conflict manifests in North America, told from the point of view of a North American Jewish narrator.

The critical component contextualizes the creative component by situating it within the disparate genres of creative writing that inform it, and by exploring its descent from them. Together, the three critical chapters argue that the creative component stands at the intersection of life writing, North American Jewish Writing, and humourous political writing. The first critical chapter, on life writing, examines the overlaps between fiction and memoir, and argues, in part, that from a creative writer's point of view, a sharp distinction is challenging to pinpoint. The second critical chapter, on North American Jewish writing, explores some efforts that have been made to determine what characteristics identify "Jewish writing," and which identifying marks are germane to this particular piece of creative work. The third critical chapter, on humourous political writing, argues that humour and politics are particularly intertwined in North American writing and media today, and that by using humour and first-person life writing, an author can probe into sensitive political terrain without as much risk of needlessly offending as they might have if they used other approaches.

DECLARATIONS

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I, Gregory Levey, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 78 000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

I was admitted as a research student in September 2007 and as a candidate for the degree of Ph.D. in September 2007; the higher study for which this is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2007 and 2011.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my supervisors, Meaghan Delahunt and Professor Robert Crawford, for their guidance and patience. I couldn't have asked for better advisors on this project. I would also like to express my gratitude to Sandra McDevitt and everyone else at the School of English at the University of St. Andrews, and to my colleagues at Ryerson University for all their understanding and support during this extended and somewhat unorthodox process. Finally, I would like to offer my profound thanks to my parents and my wife, who have helped me at each and every stage of this endeavour.

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INTRODUCTION

This doctoral dissertation is composed of two parts, a critical component and a creative component, presented in that order.

The creative component, titled *The Accidental Peacemaker*, was developed alongside and is closely linked to my second book, which was published by Simon & Schuster/Free Press in New York in September, 2010. The book was called *How to Make Peace in the Middle East in Six Months or Less Without Leaving Your Apartment*. It was received positively, and was featured or mentioned by a wide variety of print and broadcast media in North America and elsewhere. In essence, the book is a satirical memoir of my supposed attempt to personally solve the Middle East conflict. It is a book of humour that uses politics as its raw material.

The creative component is a fictionalized version of the same project. It is in many respects similar to the published book, but I have also used this opportunity to experiment with taking my writing some degrees further than reporting, and have changed and distorted characters, chronologies, and themes. The creative component parallels a selection of chapters from the book. This includes the introductory chapters, the final chapters, and several sections in the middle, and in its gaps, the rest of this fictionalized version would be told. For the purposes of readability, I have included very short explanatory sections between chapters to explain how a complete construction of such a work would flow.

In broad strokes, the creative component is in the tradition of several types of writing, and if it stands alone, it stands at their intersection. Firstly, of course, it is a first person narrative based on fact, so it is a work of life writing. As an author, though, I am at least as influenced by years of reading and studying novels as I am influenced by working as a journalist and reading non-fiction. Unsurprisingly, then, in

many respects my work uses the techniques of fiction. Dialogue, multi-leveled thematic structures, pacing, and character arcs are employed novelistically. Secondly, the creative component no doubt falls into a category one could term "North American Jewish writing," and not simply because I myself happen to be Jewish. Some of the authors who have influenced me most have been Jewish, and it is easy to discern their influence—and the influence of Jewish culture, history, and sensibilities—in my work. Finally, my creative component is not only a work of humour and a work of politics, but is also within the stream of books that have mixed these two ostensibly different worlds. In sum, it is at the nexus of life writing, North American Jewish writing, and humourous political writing.

In the critical component of my dissertation, what I have sought to do is to interrogate and situate my creative work in context. Accordingly, the critical section is divided into three chapters, each with its own focus: life writing, North American Jewish writing, and humourous political writing. In each chapter, I discuss relevant authors who have had particular influences on me, or on this particular piece of writing. Where appropriate, I also provide broader references—including historical, political, cultural, and psychological. In a way, each chapter is a hybrid between a selective literature review and an interdisciplinary essay contextualizing the creative component. They are also interconnected.

It should be noted from the outset that while I try to uncover the foundations and ancestry of my own work, I can't pretend to include in-depth research into each of the fields and genres touched on in these chapters. Life writing, Jewish writing, and humour each provide source material for entire libraries of scholarship. Although I have sought to familiarize myself with as much as possible, my research has mostly focused on those works that are germane to the discussion. The critical component

should be considered an interdisciplinary study that employs the work of various fields in conversation with each other in order to suggest a possible approach to writing about serious subject matter without needlessly alienating readers.

The first chapter, on life writing, makes use of an essay by Zadie Smith as a launching pad, and leans somewhat on the work of critic Thomas Larson in his *The Memoir and the Memoirist*, as well as that of other scholars, to provide a structure and foundation.[1] It explores the relationship between fiction and memoir, and how the line between them blurs in many circumstances, not just in form and technique, but also in their relationship to "reality." Certain novelists, for example, might just as easily call their books "memoirs" or even "autobiographies," so close are they in detail and chronology to the actual events on which the work is based. Meanwhile, certain memoirists use so much creative license that their work has clearly crossed over into what a casual observer would call fiction—and while in some cases they are criticized for this, in others, crossing this divide is accepted by critics and readers alike. The chapter considers the work of authors like Philip Roth, David Sedaris, Dave Eggers, and others. It investigates how writers make use of memory, and deal with its precariousness, and in doing so, gives a broader context to the work in the creative component.

The second chapter, on North American Jewish writing, explores what exactly it might mean for a piece of writing to have Jewish characteristics in order to understand how the creative component fits into this rubric. The chapter considers some of the cornerstones of the canon, such as authors like Roth, Saul Bellow, and Mordecai Richler, as well as contemporary writers like Rachel Shukert and Jonathan Safron Foer. Through this, the chapter provides a background for how I see Jewish

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[1] Larson, Thomas. *The Memoir and the Memoirist* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007).

writing and a way to approach the Jewishness of my own work. It uses the lenses of language, Jewish identity, and Jewish humour to attempt the admittedly difficult, if not impossible, task of pinpointing cultural identities. Further, as part of the larger project, it also explores the complicated relationship between North American Jewish writers and Israel, and provides context for how the creative component engages with that relationship.

Finally, in the third chapter, on political humour in writing and other media, I spend some time considering humour's intersection with politics—which, especially in North America, is particularly popular at the moment—and the link between *that* intersection and life writing. It is here that I try to synthesize all three chapters, in order to locate where my creative component lies. In addition, it is at the end of this third chapter that I point towards the future, and suggest that the intersection at which I've staked my ground in my creative component might make for fertile ground for other writers. That is, other serious subjects, within and beyond Middle East politics, could also perhaps be explored using humourous life writing.

Before proceeding any further, some personal explanations and caveats are in order, in the interest of full disclosure, and so that a reader can both understand which angles I approach this subject matter from and grasp the full context of this project.

RELEVANT BIOGRAPHICAL DATA

Firstly, let me provide some relevant biographical data in order to be fully transparent and further contextualize this project. I'm Canadian, but when I was twenty-five-years-old and studying law in New York City, I was offered and accepted a job as a speechwriter for the Israeli Mission to the United Nations. I am Jewish, but

not Israeli, and although I didn't know a great deal about the Middle East before starting this position, I was forced to learn quickly—albeit, inevitably, from an Israeli point of view. Approximately a year and a half later, I was offered a job as the English speechwriter and "Senior Foreign Communications Coordinator" in the Prime Minister's Office of Israel. The prime minister at that time was Ariel Sharon. I worked in that capacity for slightly less than a year, during which time Ariel Sharon suffered a debilitating stroke and Ehud Olmert became prime minister. It is important to note when reading the creative component that my politics are decidedly to the left of the administration I served, and that my role was strictly a writing and communications one, not a policy-making position.

Shortly after leaving Israel, I began working as a journalist, mostly writing about the Middle East, an experience that informs the parts of this dissertation where journalism is discussed. I also wrote a satirical memoir about my experience in the Israeli Government, which was published by Simon & Schuster in 2008 and called *Shut Up, I'm Talking: And Other Diplomacy Lessons I Learned in the Israeli Government*. The book is nonfiction, and, with the exception of some minor detail and description changes to protect privacy, as true to life as possible, given the limitations of memory and the constraints of turning life into prose—constraints I examine closely in Chapter One of this dissertation.

To promote *Shut Up, I'm Talking*, I engaged with both the mainstream and Jewish media, and with Jewish organizations in North America, and participated in the Jewish Book Network, an institution that connects authors of books of interest to Jewish readers with North American Jewish audiences. I discuss this organization in the context of "North American Jewish Writing" in Chapter Three.

More recently, as noted above, I wrote another book, called *How To Make Peace in the Middle East in Six Months or Less Without Leaving Your Apartment*, which was also published by Simon & Schuster. This book was a comedic examination of how the Middle East conflict manifests in North America, depicted through a staged memoir. Although the book is a nonfiction account of real occurrences, the occurrences were contrived for the purposes of writing the book, and so fit within a sub-genre of memoir I discuss in Chapter One. In addition, the book was more removed from underlying occurrences than my first book, because I made more use of composite characters, altered identifying details, and other quasi-fictionalizing tools, some of which I also address in Chapter One.

THE ACCIDENTAL PEACEMAKER AND THE CRITICAL COMPONENT:

As mentioned above, the creative component of this dissertation was written alongside this book, and derived from it. That is, in constructing the creative component, I used the book and the underlying subject matter as the basis of the project, but went further in terms of fictionalization—changing characters' identifying markers and plot details further, and creating dialogue, and thus moving deeper into the realm of fiction. The primary reason for this is that my eventual goal as a writer is to be a novelist, and I used this project, especially the element of fictionalization, both as a literary experiment and as a stepping-stone towards that eventual aim. Because the creative component differs substantially from the published book—in a multitude of differences throughout the text, some of which may seem superficial, but which have a large, cumulative effect—I have distinguished the creative component from the book by the use of a different title, *The Accidental Peacemaker*.

As explained above, a central purpose of the critical chapters is to contextualize the creative work that follows them. Having said that, I have kept direct references to my own work to a minimum, and have tried to point to it only when necessary. Instead of referencing it too much in the other chapters, I will use the remainder of this introductory chapter to refer specifically to sections of the creative component (and, to a lesser degree, my other writing), so that it is clear to a reader of the critical component how exactly the issues discussed therein do in fact contextualize *The Accidental Peacemaker*. I will do this in three short sections, each one corresponding to a chapter of the critical component.

CHAPTER ONE AND *THE ACCIDENTAL PEACEMAKER*

In Chapter One, one of the key reference points used is an essay by author Zadie Smith, in which she states that "an essay is an act of imagination, even if it is a piece of memoir….it still takes quite as much art as fiction. Good nonfiction is as designed and artificial as any fairy story." [2]

I take this assertion as a guiding principle in *The Accidental Peacemaker*, as well as elsewhere in my writing. Even when I am ostensibly writing nonfiction, it is still an "act of imagination," precisely because it needs artifice to function. As discussed, *The Accidental Peacemaker*, the piece of life writing in the creative component, is a fictionalized version of *How to Make Peace in the Middle East in Six Months or Less Without Leaving Your Apartment*, which is a comedic work focusing on my supposed attempt to make peace in the Middle East. The book's tongue-in-cheek premise is that I would do this by speaking to various players in the Middle East debate in order to broker an agreement. Needless to say, I didn't actually expect

[2] Zadie Smith, "An Essay is an act of imagination. It still takes quite as much art as fiction," *The Guardian*, November 21st, 2009.

to make Middle East peace. I expected to entertain, and perhaps educate to some degree. To put it crassly, I also expected to gather the material needed to write and publish a book.

The creative work presented here, however, is removed several times from anything that might be considered to have actually happened. Firstly, the published book of life writing—nominally nonfiction—is in no way a thorough and completely objective account of real life events akin to history or even theoretically objective journalism. In fact, even in the Author's Note, I tell my readers that I have tinkered with the chronology of events, changed identifying characteristics of real people, created composite characters, and must readily admit that it is all very much subject to the limitations of memory.[3] That is to say that in addition to those details, facts, and patterns that I *know* I manufactured—the composite characters, for example—I am well aware that many, or perhaps most, of the details that feel true to me as a writer must necessarily be false, observed or remembered wrong, or just misunderstood by me, for reasons I will discuss in Chapter One.

I have fictionalized the creative component even further, changing more details, and in the end, it cannot honestly be construed as too far removed from fiction. Surely, however, somewhere buried under all these layers of concealment, fictionalization, and imagination, there exist some kernels of real life. Surely, given that I can myself recognize—or think that I can recognize—the moments in my own life that fed these words of quasi-fiction, I cannot be expected to fully accept the idea that all we have here is words on a page. As soon as ink touches paper, it seems that fiction and truth cannot help but mingle, jostling with each other for supremacy, with neither ever emerging with a clear victory.

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[3] Gregory Levey, *How to Make Peace in the Middle East in Six Months or Less Without Leaving Your Apartment* (New York: Free Press, 2010) xiv.

Somewhat later in the chapter, in the context of distinguishing between autobiography (or memoir) and autobiographical fiction, I use Roy Pascal's assertion that while autobiography "has its points of reference outside the work, in real life, in the nonfictional reality of the author," an autobiographical novelist needs to construct internal "logic and coherence" and to

> …give a special pattern to his whole story, organize it round a dominant motif, so that with the particular identity of occurrences there emerges another, more general identity.[4]

In the chapter, I use this in the examination of the work of other authors, but it is also apparent how it might bear on *The Accidental Peacemaker*.

Needless to say, the Middle East conflict is a fully developed mesh of dynamics and symbols that has its "points of reference" well outside my creative work. If I were to have relied on it entirely and simply reported on real life interactions with it, though, my writing could easily have fallen into a trap where it was simply a record of my own specific situation and personality. Instead, I chose to fictionalize the memoir—not quite cross into autobiographical novel terrain, perhaps, but approach it—and thereby generalize it enough so that a reader could be carried along in the narrative, identifying with the narrator, as they might be more likely to do in a novel than a full-fledged memoir. Further, in the specific case of the creative component, where I have taken an inherently serious and tragic situation and tried to paint it in comedic terms—a process I discuss more in Chapter Three—if I had relied on the "points of reference" of the real world, humour would have been hard to come by. It was necessary to fictionalize in order to create a system of reference points with its own "logic and coherence" where the Middle East conflict could produce comedy.

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[4] Roy Pascal, "The Autobiographical Novel and The Autobiography," *Essays in Criticism*, IX 2, (1959), 148.

Towards the end of the first chapter, I use studies presented by the psychologist Daniel Gilbert demonstrating that the description of past events has a negatively correlated effect with the accuracy of memory, and I apply this to the work of life writing. I don't make much mention of my own work specifically, but as a personal aside, if I consider this carefully as a writer, I have to admit that it may be true in my case. I have had a handful of experiences where someone I have written about, either in a journalistic article or in my first book has disputed my version of an event at which we were both present.[5] I have my memory of it, and they have theirs, and although they differ, those moments in the past are gone, and it is impossible to know definitively what happened. Of course, this assumes there actually is a definitive *past*, as distinct from a "now," an idea that is far from certain according to modern physics. As Dan Falk explains in his *In Search of Time: Journeys Along a Curious Dimension*, "It is difficult for us to abandon to idea of a universal 'now.' We imagine that we can utter the phrase 'everything in the universe that is happening right now' and have it refer to a meaningful set of events. But Einstein shows us that such a statement has, in fact, no clear meaning."[6]

Even more disturbing than these incidents when my memory differs from someone else's, though, is when I have very little memory of an event that varies in any real way from what I have written about it. As discussed early in Chapter One, when fashioning the messiness of life into a recognizable narrative, one is forced to manipulate memory to one degree or another: to compress time, to alter chronology, to reconstruct dialogue, or just to fill in the missing gaps through logic and inference. The end result of this for me quite often is that much of the raw material from which I

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[5] Gregory Levey, *Shut Up, I'm Talking: And Other Diplomacy Lessons I Learned in the Israeli Government* (New York: Free Press, 2008).
[6] Dan Falk, *In Search of Time: Journeys Along a Curious Dimension* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2008), 166.

shape the written version of the event is simply lost into the ether, and my own memory of it follows what I wrote, more than the reverse. As time passes from the original events, the written version begins to be all that I have left of what was once a real life experience. The text is all there is. Of course, when *consciously* fictionalizing on top of all this, the disconnection from actual events is compounded further—as is the case in the creative component of this thesis.

CHAPTER TWO AND *THE ACCIDENTAL PEACEMAKER*

In Chapter Two, I begin my discussion of what exactly might constitute "Jewish writing" by considering the character of "Jewish language," and I identify a conversational quality to "Jewish language" in writing that may originally stem from the Jewish ghettos of Eastern Europe and the tenement neighborhoods in the United States where the American Jewish community first made its home in the New World.

My writing style derives in large part from similar sources. I do not believe that it originated directly from the Yiddish ghettos, from which I'm probably too far removed, of course, but indirectly from them, via the generations that came in-between. The way I've chosen to write is conversational prose. It's less stylized and ornate than the kinds of writing that might come from, say, an undivided focus on traditional English literature, and more from time spent consuming American Jewish writing. Even the titles of my two books should attest to that: *Shut Up, I'm Talking*, and *How to Make Peace in the Middle East in Six Months or Less Without Leaving Your Apartment*.

Later in the chapter, in the context of exploring Jewish identity and American Jewish writers, I discuss Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock*. In the book, one of the characters has created a plan to try to save the Jews of Israel by leading them out of

Israel and into the Diaspora, in a reversal of Theodore Herzl's original Zionist vision.[7] It's a peculiar idea, but it's presented with well-structured logic.

While I was writing *The Accidental Peacemaker*, the political arguments and counterarguments in *Operation Shylock* barely crossed my mind, but upon reflection at its completion, I realized that Roth's book must have influenced my piece of writing. It was one of the first novels I read about the Middle East conflict, and one of the books that explored the relationship between Diaspora Jews and Israel in a way I found particularly compelling—and there's no question that the ideas and structures it planted in my mind lay behind the creative component of this dissertation. The alternate Roth's odd, but well-articulated plan is very much like the plans offered by some of the characters in *The Accidental Peacemaker*, and his quixotic but well-intentioned quest is not too dissimilar from that of the narrator, who is seeking to personally make Middle East peace. Both characters are tired of the endless Middle East conflict, and the dangers it poses if it continues, and both see no option but to take it into their own hands, no matter how categorically unlikely is their success.

I also discuss Mordecai Richler's travelogue, *This year in Jerusalem*, where Richler paints a weary, ambivalent portrait of his relationship with Israel, eventually concluding:

> I was raised to proffer apologies because my ostensibly boring country was so short of history, but now, after five weeks in a land choked by the clinging vines of its past, a victim of its contrary mythologies, I considered the watery soup of my Canadian provenance a blessing. After traveling through the Rockies, Rupert Brooke had complained that he missed "the voices of the dead." Me, I was grateful at last for their absence. [8]

The Accidental Peacemaker and my two published books are essentially expressions of this same feeling. In *The Accidental Peacemaker*, my narrator-

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[7] Philip Roth. *Operation Shylock: A Confession*. (New York: Vintage, 1994), 158.
[8] Mordecai Richler, *This Year in Jerusalem* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1994), 238.

protagonist is ostensibly exploring the divergent views on the Middle East conflict, from hawks to doves, and across political and ethnic lines. He finds a few moderate, grounded voices, but for the most part, what he encounters is a slew of highly-charged people with strident opinions and emotion-driven political thinking. These voices come from the Middle East—both Israelis and Palestinians—but they also come from the proxy counterparts in the U.S., who fight out the endless battle on North American soil. Over time, through *The Accidental Peacemaker*, the narrator-protagonist is increasingly drained by the bickering, and I wanted readers to feel him becoming more and more disconnected and almost uninterested in the conflict. At its resolution, he essentially (if sadly) gives up on solving the dispute, and almost gives up on the hope of seeing anyone else solve it either. It's not articulated directly, but faced with the fiery figures of Middle East diplomacy and war, he—like Richler's narrator in the passage above—considers "the watery soup of [his] Canadian provenance a blessing." Further, at the end, as he drifts away from the warring voices, he is, as Richler puts it, "grateful at last for their absence."

I move from Richler to Saul Bellow, who had a much more positive view of Israel, and in the context of discussing his writing on the topic, I draw a distinction between the typical attitudes towards Israel of Jews from Bellow's generation of North American Jews and from younger generations.

In large part, this distinction lies at the heart of my creative work. Characters from Bellow's generation, or close to it, do not feel the same freedom to differentiate themselves from Israel as a matter of identity and policy as do their grandchildren and great grandchildren. I attempt to depict this in a number of ways in *The Accidental Peacemaker*. Primary among them are two pairings of characters, each meant to represent one side of this typical duality. There is an older man who heads a watchdog

organization focused on anti-Semitism, and I pair him with a much younger man, who draws irreverent cartoons that satirize the unrelenting focus of the older generation on Israel and the threat of anti-Semitism. As a correlated pairing, I put my protagonist in a number of dialogues with his uncle to show their different attitudes towards the Jewish state. The goal is to explore the important role that conceptions of Israel can have in Jewish identity.

Chapter Two ends with a discussion of the role of humour in North American Jewish writing, and touches on its origins and arguably distinct nature. This should provide some solid context for *The Accidental Peacemaker*, where what I have endeavoured to do is bring Diaspora Jewish sensibilities to bear on the Middle East situation.

CHAPTER THREE AND *THE ACCIDENTAL PEACEMAKER*

Chapter Three continues the discussion of humour begun in Chapter Two, but engages with it beyond purely Jewish writing. It begins with a few examples of how various disciplines have approached humour, before settling on the work of Henri Bergson as a guiding framework. The chapter's main focus is humorous political writing, and in addition to contextualizing this by providing an overview of the way that politics and humour have become increasingly enmeshed in North America in recent years, it proceeds to argue that humour can be used to write about serious subject matter in order to make it palatable to a broad array of readers, which is part of what I have sought to do in the creative component.

I have also endeavoured to marry the strains of writing discussed in the first two chapters—life writing and North American Jewish writing—and apply them to *political humour*. It is this intersection where I believe that I have staked out some

territory. That is not to say that it is wholly uninhabited, of course, but the creative component here does take more direct aim at politics itself than do most other examples of the recent spate of books of life writing based on staged events discussed in Chapter One.

Chapter Three discusses how this presents some rich opportunities for finding humour in scenarios that would normally only be seen as serious, because of the comedic possibilities of putting oneself in a situation in order to write about it. For example, at one point in the creative component, my narrator explores Second Life, a popular online "world," where participants create avatars and build entire lives for them in a virtual universe that even includes the Middle East conflict. During this exploration, he describes a visit to a café in the "Jewish district" of Second Life, where he encounters the absurdity of fears about virtual anti-Semitism and talks to players who are paranoid about how the Middle East conflict affects Second Life. [9]

What makes this Second Life Middle East scene work comedically was described well by Bergson:

> The first point to which attention should be called is that the comic does not exist outside the pale of what is strictly HUMAN. A landscape may be beautiful, charming and sublime, or insignificant and ugly; it will never be laughable. You may laugh at an animal, but only because you have detected in it some human attitude or expression. You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of, in this case, is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it—the human caprice whose mould it has assumed. It is strange that so important a fact, and such a simple one too, has not attracted to a greater degree the attention of philosophers. Several have defined man as "an animal which laughs." They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to.[10]

We can laugh at the people in Second Life fretting about the Middle East conflict's manifestations in their alternate world in part because we see ourselves in

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[9] See page 184.

[10] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic* (Rockville, Maryland: Arc Manor, 2008), 10.

them. We see humanity in their strange preoccupation with what is essentially an absurd fabrication without any real world consequences. If we are honest with ourselves, we know that the same sort of dynamic plays out in many other areas of life, and probably in our own lives. In the passage about Second Life, we are seeing humanity in digital images on a computer screen, but if there weren't real people behind those images, the scene would not be funny.

To be sure, because the underlying subject matter is gravely serious and there is no escaping this completely, seeking out humour in political spheres through staging situations in order to write about them can be dangerous. There is always the possibility, for example, that the real experience will not provide the ingredients for humour, no matter how hard one pushes it to, and worse, there is the possibility that what the author thinks will be received as funny will only be seen as distasteful or insensitive by the average reader. It is the levels of dilution and proper weighting between humour and criticism that buffers delicate sensitivities while still using politics as fodder for comedy, and it is that balance, and how it is maintained, on which the success or failure of the kind of writing that follows these critical chapters turns.

CRITICAL COMPONENT

CONTEXTUALIZING *THE ACCIDENTAL PEACEMAKER: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY RESPONSE TO THE PROBLEM OF WRITING THE MIDDLE EAST*

CHAPTER ONE:

TAKE CARE OF ALL YOUR MEMORIES: ON LIFE WRITING

"Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward."
--Kierkegaard[11]

In this first chapter, I have several aims. Firstly, I will situate the creative component of this dissertation within the context of the collection of genres known as "life writing," or, more specifically, "fictionalized memoir." As a stepping stone to that classification, I will argue that, although there is sometimes a sharp distinction drawn between fiction and memoir, and although literary critics have managed to establish relatively convincing boundaries between the two, for the reflective practicing creative writer, the line is often hard to discern. To make this point and to help readers pinpoint the location of the creative component, *The Accidental Peacemaker*, within the taxonomy of life writing, I will discuss the work of several authors, both novelists and memoirists, who have influenced it. Finally, I will suggest that it can be understood, in part, to be somewhat aligned with a stream of books written in recent years that have been formally termed "nonfiction," "memoir," or "creative nonfiction," but that rely on events *staged* specifically in order to produce a book, and that often rely on the conventions of fiction.

DEFINITIONS AND BOUNDARIES

To begin with, some definitions and definitional boundaries are in order. The term "life writing" is a relatively loose structure, and has several different definitions. Thomas Larson, in his *The Memoir and the Memoirist: Reading & Writing Personal*

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[11] As quoted in Arland Ussher, *Journey Through Dread: A Study of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre* (New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1968), 32.

Narrative defines it as "biography, autobiography, memoir, and confession."[12] Meanwhile, in their book *Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our Times*, Erika Hasebe-Ludt, Cynthia M Chambers, and Carl Leggo list a wider range of life writing genres: "conventional biography, autobiography, memoir, life stories, personal essays, diaries, journals, and epistles or letters."[13] Presumably, Larson wouldn't have too much trouble with this wider formulation, since it is essentially just an expansion of his own list, but the latter authors also go further with their understanding of what falls under the category "life writing." Relying on Kadar et al.'s *Tracing the Autobiographical*, which assumed "an identity between…unlikely documents and the more familiar literary genres," they assert that life writing also includes sub-genres such as "the semi-autobiographical novel, the fictionalized memoir, journal as poetry, letter as theory, blogging as web-based diary, confession as reality TV, trauma narratives, and life story and auto/biography as documentary."[14] For them, life writing sometimes "blends fictional and non-fictional elements to blur boundaries."[15]

That is, Hasebe-Ludt and her co-authors are quite content blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction within the realm of life writing. By contrast, while Larson by no means argues that life writing can only be based on verifiable facts and objective reporting—a significant amount of his book focuses on the way that memoirists need to contend with the inclusion of murky details and half-

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[12] Thomas Larson, *The Memoir and the Memoirist*. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007), 11.
[13] Erika Hasebe-Ludt, et al. *Life Writing and Literary Métissage as an Ethos for Our Times*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 17.
[14] Marlene Kadar, et al. *Tracing the Autobiographical*. (Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2005), 2; Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 17.
[15] Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 17.

remembered events—he does seem to want to parcel off life writing from fiction as much as possible.[16] He writes:

> …memoir writers are not fashioning fictionalized autobiographies or autobiographical novels…Most memoirists do *not* falsify their pasts so as to build a better story…The nature of memory, as any brain doctor will confirm, is to mix imagination and fact. But that is not the same as saying that as memoirists we can riddle our tales with fictional composites and Hollywood endings.[17]

Larson, of course, is hardly alone in resisting attempts to conflate fiction and life writing. For example, in her seminal work, *The Distinction of Fiction*, Dorrit Cohn uses a systematic approach to not only argue that differences in narrative technique show us how to distinguish fiction from nonfiction, but also purposely uses borderline examples to make her case.[18] She sees this project as imperative, because she sees "the identification of narrative and fiction…[as]…nothing less than the contemporary critique of the entire intellectual foundation of traditional historical practice—of the entire practice that is based on belief in the factuality of past events."

Cohn uses the term "nonreferential narrative" for fiction, defining each constituent term carefully so as to parcel it off from non-narrative writing such as philosophical or critical discourse and from referential writing such as history. It is the latter distinction that requires more effort, and Cohn argues that "(1) its references to the world outside the text are not bound to accuracy; and (2) it does not refer *exclusively* to the real world outside the text."[19] To buttress this division, Cohn uses an analysis of how consciousness manifests differently in narratives in the two realms

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[16] Larson's book is mostly concerned with "memoir," but since that is the *general type* of life writing that the creative component of this dissertation fits within, even with Larson's own definitions, what he has to say about "memoir" is germane to our discussion here.
[17] Larson, 25.
[18] Dorrit Cohn, *The Distinction of Fiction* (Baltimore, Maryland: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 8.
[19] Ibid., 15.

of fiction and nonfiction, and employs a system of linguistic and grammatical signposts to show the distinctions.

Nonetheless, anyone who has tried to compose life writing, as Larson himself has, recognizes that the experience very often leaves the writer unsure about whether these theoretical distinctions are quite so confidently recognized in practice. Larson acknowledges that writers of this kind of work "may rename people and places; they usually re-create dialogue since there's no word-for-word record; and they may dramatize an event that differs from the recollections of others who were there."[20] For anyone whose frame of reference is journalism, which is at least supposedly driven by veracity and objectivity, it's difficult to reconcile this with the idea that there is a sharp divide between life writing and fiction; one wonders if it is just a matter of degree. Larson reconciles this uncertainty as follows:

> …in the memoir, the truth and figuring out the truth abide. The best way to deal with the tension between fact and memory, as one uncovers the tension in the course of one's writing, is to admit to the tension—not to cover it up.[21]

In a sense, then, memoir, or broadly speaking, life writing, is more a process than a fully defined genre. Because of some of the limitations that will be discussed shortly, a practitioner of life writing must accept that it has cloudy elements of fiction that are often not "true" in any verifiable, objective sense. For Larson, though, the endeavour for truth, even with the realization that it is impossible, rather than an all-out escape into fiction-by-another-name is what defines life writing. For him, life writing may not be entirely reliable factually, but it is not outright fiction.

With these definitional difficulties acknowledged, for the purposes of this chapter and this dissertation, I will use as a working definition of life writing the following simple one from Patti Miller's *The Memoir Book*: "[Life writing is] non-

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[20] Larson, 25.
[21] Ibid.

fiction writing on subjects of personal experience and observation."[22] As a starting point, and until we further unpack the tensions in this outwardly straight-forward statement, this will serve as an adequate reference point, and aligns with the definitions employed by the writers discussed above.

Within life writing, meanwhile, there are various sub-genres, including the ones cited by Larson, like biography, epistles, and memoir, which he neatly distinguishes from its "uncle" autobiography.[23] For him, memoir

> …cannot be *the* record of *the* past as autobiography tries to be. Memoir is *a* record, a chamber-sized scoring of one part of the past. Despite its rightness, it's a version of, perhaps a variation on, what happened.[24]

Along with its overt subjectivity, memoir also has contained concerns and does not try to provide everything that happened in a life, as autobiography might, especially one of a significant of famous figure. As Patti Miller writes,

> Memoir is an aspect of a life shaped by any number of parameters, including time, place, topic or theme. One can write a memoir of childhood, or of a year in Turkmenistan, or of a relationship with a parent. While autobiography 'moves in a dutiful line from birth to fame, omitting nothing significant, memoir assumes the life and ignores most of it.'[25]

In addition to autobiography and memoir and other intuitive genres of life writing, though, there are also the murkier ones mentioned by Hasebe-Ludt et al, such as "fictionalized memoir," which the creative component of this dissertation fits within. Hasebe-Ludt et. al. use the term "fictionalized memoir" in their breakdown of the various streams of life writing, but they are not alone. For example, in ""Under Kilimanjaro—Truthiness at Late Light—Or Would Oprah Kick Hemingway Out of Her Book Club," H.R. Stoneback analyzes how Ernest Hemingway's "fictionalized memoirs" might be seen if they were published today, Stoneback takes issue with "the

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[22] Patti Miller, *The Memoir Book* (New South Wales: Allen & Unwin, 2008), 3.
[23] Larson, 17.
[24] Ibid., 19.
[25] Miller, 3. Here, she is quoting William Zinsser in William Zinsser, ed. *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir* (Boston, Houghton Mifflin: 1987).

debased solipsistic form of memoir that occupies center-stage in the current debates over the betrayal of truth," and argues that Hemingway's fictionalized memoirs, such as "Under Kilimanjaro," are successful despite their straying from the facts of real events because Hemingway was "first and last, a storyteller, and a storyteller's job is to perfect the verisimilitude of the lies that tell the truth."[26]

For our purposes, I will take "fictionalized memoir" to refer to a piece of writing that is grounded in real life experiences enough that on balance, it could be defined as memoir, but has then been covered in a veil of fiction and distorted enough so as to be disconnected from the facts that spawned it.

Writers may fictionalize for a number of reasons. For Hasbebe-Ludt et al., writing "that blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction has done much to elucidate the *agon* of difference within the contact zone,"[27] but writers may of course make this decision for more prosaic reasons as well. For example, in the most basic fictionalization, where just names and identifying characteristics are changed, the choice may be grounded in a desire to protect the privacy of those who are written about. In a more elaborate fictionalization where, say, composite characters or even composite events are created, there is usually more at play. Perhaps the author needs to make these changes so that the story can be told in a more three-dimensional, readable manner or perhaps the author wants to experiment with or use novelistic techniques to such an extent that they lean heavily into all aspects of fictionalization, while—as Thomas Larson urges—trying to keep the core aspects of the truth intact. As noted in the Introduction, in my creative work here I have gone well beyond basic fictionalization to what is at times quite developed fictionalization.

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[26] H.R. Stoneback, "Under Kilimanjaro—Truthiness at Late Light—Or Would Oprah Kick Hemingway Out of Her Book Club," *The Hemingway Review*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (Spring, 2006), 123-127.
[27] Hasebe-Ludt, et al., 27.

The problem from a definitional point of view, of course, is that at some point this fictionalization can cross a line, such that the balance between the factual and the creative is so heavily on the creative side of that equation that the project extends well into the sphere of fiction. Managing and navigating that overlap is what the remainder of this chapter is about—from a creative writer's point of view.

In 2009, Zadie Smith published an article in *The Guardian* reflecting on her fellow novelists and the state of their art form. In it, her conclusion is that the perennial reports of the death of the novel are overblown, and that novels still offer creative possibility for writers, despite concerns that the form has exhausted itself. Nevertheless, Smith herself admits to feeling "novel nausea," and to seeing the temptations in other genres of writing, such as the essay. "Tired of the rusty workings of one's own imagination," she writes, "it's easy to tire of the wearisome vibrancy of other people's, and from there it's a short skip and a jump to giving up on the novel entirely."

This is not to say that Smith thinks that nonfiction is somehow preferable because it provides a "literal truth." It is not literal truth that she finds appealing in an essay, but rather a different kind of creativity, a different kind of artifice than offered by a novel. "The literal truth is something you expect, or hope for, in a news article," she continues, "but an essay is an act of imagination, even if it is a piece of memoir….it still takes quite as much art as fiction. Good nonfiction is as designed and artificial as any fairy story."[28]

As we will see, reflecting on both works of fiction and works of nonfiction shows this observation to be true, and also shows the two types of writing to actually

[28] Zadie Smith, "An Essay is an act of imagination. It still takes quite as much art as fiction," *The Guardian*, November 21st, 2009.

be conjoined. In considering the difficulty that reflective creative writers must inevitably face in parsing out what aspects of their work is life writing and what is pure fiction, and where the balance and dividing lines lie, however, the choice of texts to consider for context is almost limitless. Accordingly, for the remainder of this chapter, the books I'll use as reference points are mostly based on the authors that have had particular influence on me, and that have informed my work in the accompanying piece of life writing. I'll discuss the novelist Philip Roth, who has managed to confuse his critics about how to decode what part of his fiction is actually fictitious. I'll consider the writing of memoirist and biographical essayist David Sedaris, whose books and work in *The New Yorker* are quite consistently classified as nonfiction, but may actually occupy a similar place on the fiction-nonfiction spectrum as Roth's heavily biographical fiction. In addition, I'll supplement this with a look at a relatively new school of young authors that are playing with the supposed distinction even further by writing books about life experiences that they engineered for the *purpose* of writing books about them.

Daniel Gilbert, a psychologist who will be discussed more later, has written that when "we want to remember our experience, our brains quickly reweave the tapestry by fabricating—not by actually retrieving—the bulk of the information that we experience as a memory."[29] Through a consideration of these various authors, I'll explore what the implications of this might mean for life writing.

WRITING AND TRUTH

Early in Philip Roth's novel *Operation Shylock*, the narrator—a fictionalized version of Roth himself, also named "Philip Roth" —has a fleeting worry that one or

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[29] Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness* (New York: Vintage, 2007) 87.

more of the characters in his books have "broken free of print," and may be wreaking havoc in the real world.[30]

The context is more than a bit confusing, not only for the narrator, but also for readers. Character Roth is contacted by a cousin living in Israel, who tells him that Israeli radio is reporting that Roth is in Jerusalem attending the trial of an accused Nazi war criminal. His cousin rightly assumes that this is not the case, and when Roth investigates, he finds that there is an impostor visiting Israel, who is going by the name "Philip Roth" and looks a great deal like the "real" Philip Roth. This muddled mystery propels character Roth on a strange adventure to the Middle East, and is the inciting incident of the novel.

Immediately, from its first few sentences, though, the book seems to prod readers with the question of whether it is a novel at all. Not only are there characters in it, like Roth's wife and some of his acquaintances, who share names and identifying characteristics with people in the real world, but some of the events in the book actually occurred. For example, as Elaine Safer reminds us in a useful parsing of the book in her essay "*Operation Shylock*: The Double, the Comic, and the Quest for Identity," both the Philip Roth in *Operation Shylock* and the real world Philip Roth traveled to Israel to interview the novelist Aharon Appelfeld, and at the time of the book's publication, both have recently undergone breakdowns due to the drug Halcion.[31]

Safer also quotes from an essay that Roth penned for *The New York Times Book Review*, in which he wrote: "In January 1989 I was caught up in a Middle East crisis all my own, a personal upheaval that had the unmistakable signposts of the

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[30] Philip Roth, *Operation Shylock: A Confession* (New York: Vintage, 1994) 34.
[31] Elaine Safer, "*Operation Shylock*: The Double, the Comic, and the Quest for Identity," in Ben Siegel and Jay L. Halio, eds., *Playful and Serious: Philip Roth as a Comic Writer*, (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2010) 152-180.

impossible…A man of my age, bearing an uncanny resemblance to me and calling himself Philip Roth, turned up in Jerusalem shortly before I did."[32]

Is the sequence of events in *Operation Shylock* based on real occurrences, or are the facts recounted in his *Times* essay, *prima facie* a work of nonfiction, actually as fabricated as the plot of the novel?

More to the point, where does the distinction really lie between Roth's real life and the life of the character "Philip Roth" in the book? They seem to simply be different shades of the same man. And the fact that even within the novel there is another version of Roth—the impostor in Israel—highlights the fact that the author is making this very point: that writing memoir and writing fiction often only differ in almost imperceptible, and sometimes illusory, degrees.

The subtitle of *Operation Shylock* is "A Confession," hinting that there is truth in its words, and because his adventure in Israel ends up getting him entwined with the Israeli intelligence services, the character/narrator Roth claims to have deleted certain sections of the text in order to protect state security. But as Safer points out, in Roth's "Note to the Reader" at the book's conclusion, he writes, "This book is a work of fiction…This confession is false."[33] Safer's take on this enigmatic line is that the "reader does not know if the term "confession" refers to the subtitle *Operation Shylock: A Confession* or to the 'Note to the Reader' at the book's close."[34]

Even the trial that character Roth's double is in Israel to see, and which plays a fairly prominent role in the book, is itself full of Russian Dolls of reality and fiction. As in real life, a man named John Demjanjuk was on trial in Israel, with prosecutors alleging that he was the Nazi war criminal Ivan the Terrible. And as in real life, a

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[32] Philip Roth, "A Bit of Jewish Mischief." *New York Times Book Review* 7 March 1993: 1.
[33] Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 399.
[34] Safer, 154.

particular Holocaust survivor's testimony about the identity of the accused does not always match up with accounts they gave decades earlier. This might be because of outright inaccuracy, failures of memory, or because for this survivor, this possible Ivan the Terrible *represents* the historical Ivan the Terrible, and all the other Ivan the Terribles there ever were and ever will be. As Safer puts it, the survivor's divergent accounts "show how people create narrative structures for the events surrounding them."[35]

Looking back on the trial now, and looking back on Roth's fictionalized account of it, new complexities appear. Demjanjuk was found guilty in that trial, but his conviction was later overturned by a higher court in Israel, after which he was freed and sent back to the United States where his citizenship (which had been revoked) was restored.

Later, Demjanjuk was put back on trial, this time in Germany, after being deported there from the United States, and being accused of being a *different* war criminal. During the time of this second episode, one almost expected Roth or one of his impostors or doubles to show up at the trial—to have the world of this "novel" intervene in the world that we inhabit, and for one of its characters to give our world expression. Roth's book continues to resonate: truth piles on fiction piles on truth again.

Safer points out, with regards to this interaction between truth and fiction, that Roth's narrator in *Operation Shylock* at one point actually says that it's "impossible to report anything faithfully other than one's own temperature."[36] But in the end, that's one of the purposes of the book: to toy with the wall that separates novels from

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[35] Safer, 162
[36] Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 215.

memoir, to tease us with where the book lies on the life writing spectrum, and to bring home the point that it *is* a spectrum and not a divide.

In fact, according to Safer, when the book was released, a frustrated bookstore representative resorted to calling Roth's publisher, Simon & Schuster, for guidance because he wanted to know if he should catalogue the book as fiction or nonfiction.[37]

Roth was probably delighted when he heard that story about the bookstore, because one of the strongest currents in his writing, both "fiction" and "nonfiction," seems to be a desire to play with the idea of truth in writing, and to confuse any reader who tries to categorize him too neatly. In essence, perhaps, it is to assert that no such classifications are possible—and his sleight of hand goes far beyond *Operation Shylock* and appears more subtly in much of his other work as well, as will be discussed shortly.

It's important to note, though, that in an author's writing, this sort of ambiguity may serve more important functions than merely being coy and clever. My own work, for example, which I've classified as "fictionalized memoir," does not lie too far on the spectrum from "autobiographical novels" like *Operation Shylock*, and it is worth reflecting on the grey area between the two classifications both to consider why an author might choose to move in one direction or another, and to consider the possibilities and obligations that this grey area offers.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL AND THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

In Ben Yagoda's book-length study, *Memoir: A History*, he defines both a memoir and an autobiography to be "a book understood by its author, its publisher,

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[37] Safer, 170

and its readers to be a factual account of the author's life," which is a definition not too different from the definition of memoir suggested above, and which of course comes with the same inevitable pitfalls and tensions that I've alluded to and will discuss more.[38] Despite the uncertainties that cling to it, though, it provides a good stepping stone to a sort of reciprocal definition for an autobiographical novel, which we can term a book "understood by its authors, its publisher, and its readers" to be *fiction*, albeit fiction based at least in part on the author's life.

In "The Autobiographical Novel and The Autobiography," Roy Pascal begins his analysis with this statement: "If one starts with the idea that the terms 'fictional' and 'true' will serve to distinguish these two forms of writing, one is doomed to disappointment."[39] In the article, Pascal argues that there are several reasons why an author might turn to the autobiographical novel rather than a nonfiction form, like autobiography or memoir. Incidentally, he deems the autobiographical novel form more suitable for a young author and autobiography more appropriate for an older one, but he also makes several substantive points about motivations for choosing to write autobiographical fiction.

Firstly, of course, there are easily observable structural advantages:

> There are certain obvious advantages of the novel-form over the straight autobiographical narrative that I want only to mention. It is an advantage to be able to tell of circumstances that occur outside the range of the author's direct experience. Some autobiographies do this, especially when telling us of the author's parentage, but most must necessarily narrow their scope to that of the author-hero's direct experience. The novelist, on the other hand, can evoke events out of his personal range, the inexpressed thoughts of others, he can reconstruct conversations which memory could not possibly retain. The novel's hero, if described in the third person, can be described from all sides.[40]

Besides these sorts of reasons, though, Pascal suggests several other more

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[38] Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009) 1.
[39] Roy Pascal, "The Autobiographical Novel and The Autobiography," *Essays in Criticism*, IX 2, (1959), 134.
[40] Ibid., 136.

complex ones, which are quite fitting with both Philip Roth's work and the creative component here. They also align with Nathalie Cooke's guiding principle in "Reading Reflections: The Autobiographical Illusion in *Cat's Eye*," where she states that her "argument is that autobiography is not so much a generic category as it is a literary strategy."[41] This "strategy," in the context of Pascal, involves elements that go beyond the more obvious benefits of the autobiographical novel form just mentioned. As he puts it, it involves "the differences of purpose rather than differences of expedience or technique."[42]

As Pascal explains, whereas the autobiography "has its points of reference outside the work, in real life, in the nonfictional reality of the author," the autobiographical novelist must create and maintain internal "logic and coherence" and must

> …give a special pattern to his whole story, organize it round a dominant motif, so that with the particular identity of occurrences there emerges another, more general identity.[43]

It should be noted that while Pascal uses the term "autobiography," for our larger purposes in this dissertation, "autobiography" here should be taken to be equivalent to "memoir." Pascal's 1959 article predates the rise of the contemporary conception of "memoir" as a genre widely acknowledged as distinct from autobiography, and he does not even consider the category. In fact, as Ben Yagoda points out in his *Memoir: A History*, in his 1960 book, *Design and Truth in Autobiography*, Roy Pascal drew a distinction between autobiography and memoir that rests on a definition of memoir diametrically different to the contemporary one:

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41 Nathalie Cooke, "Reading Reflections: The Autobiographical Illusion in *Cat's Eye*," in Marlene Kadar, *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 162.
42 Pascal, 136.
43 Ibid., 148.

"In the autobiography proper, attention is focused on the self, in the memoir or reminiscence on others." The sort of books he is referring to there are, to use the example Yagoda employs, works like A.E. Hotchner's *Papa Hemingway: A Personal Memoir*, "in which Hotchner is a supporting player and Hemingway the star." Today, of course, the *self* is first and foremost in books generally labeled memoir.[44]

Pascal's concept of a "more general identity," above, is particularly germane to our discussion. As explained, *The Accidental Peacemaker* should be classified as "fictionalized memoir," which is of course distinct from "autobiographical fiction," but if one can imagine a spectrum of narrative writing that runs from completely stylized fiction with no connection to reality on one end to wholly objective journalism on the other, these two categories must be very close to each other, if not adjacent. What Pascal is positing can clearly be applied to the choices Philip Roth makes in *Operation Shylock*, where he takes what could have been an almost tediously self-involved meditation on his personal life and his personal relationship with Israel and Zionism and, through the use of the techniques and rhythms of fiction, turns it into an engaging narrative and gives it a more "general identity."

In some ways, this question of fictionalization comes down to the question of how narrowly an author wants to focus what could be called the "truth lens." That is, if one focuses tightly on the particular details of a specific event or character, one might actually get an imprecise image of a *pattern of events* or larger array of representative people, whereas if one generalizes somewhat, a composite truth might be more readily discerned. It is instructive to think of this in terms of "sample size" and the dangers in statistics of choosing too small a sample with which to derive overall findings. As Pascal writes,

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[44] Ben Yagoda, *Memoir: A History* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2009) 1.

> What the autobiographical novelist seeks is something general, representative, within his own experiences, the deeper logic within his character, which life itself may in certain respects distort....[45]

Pascal also gives a particularly striking example of this logic. According to him, in Henry James' autobiography, James "actually slightly changed the wording in a letter of his brother William's," and when William's son questioned him about the strange decision, "Henry would only say that he had to make his brother write as Henry himself 'felt him like'—'I daresay I did instinctively regard it at the last as all *my* truth, to do what I would with.'"[46]

Philip Roth's *Operation Shylock* is an autobiographical novel of the type with which Roy Pascal is concerned, and we will shortly examine *The Facts*, Roth's "autobiography," which is situated even more closely to the creative component of this dissertation on the fiction-nonfiction spectrum. Before that, though, one more quotation from Pascal will neatly sum up his counterintuitive but compelling logic about how too much specificity can actually rob a text of useful truth. He writes:

> A recent autobiographer, very naively, promises us that he will tell the truth, but not the whole truth; of the autobiographical novelist, one might say that he aims at telling us the whole truth, and not the truth.[47]

That, arguably, is not just a driving force for the author of an autobiographical novel, but also for the author of a fictionalized memoir.

ROTH'S *THE FACTS*: MEMOIR OR AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL?

The title of Philip Roth's 1988 autobiography, *The Facts*, winks mischievously at the reader.[48] Its subtitle, however, also hints at subterfuge: "A Novelist's Autobiography." We know Roth is a novelist, so why must it be titled as

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[45] Pascal, 147.
[46] Ibid., 148.
[47] Ibid., 142.
[48] Philip Roth, *The Facts* (New York: Vintage, 1997).

such? Is it to notify us that perhaps a "novelist's autobiography" is of a different genre than a standard autobiography? Further, given that so much of Roth's fiction is so openly and obviously autobiographical, what are we to make of the fact that he wrote an autobiography as well? How does it fit into the rest of his canon? All these questions arise just from the title, and things are only murkier in the text itself.

The book begins with an epigraph of a tantalizing quote by Nathan Zuckerman, Roth's literary alter-ego in many of his books: "And as he spoke I was thinking, *the kind of stories that people turn life into, the kind of lives that people turn stories into*." Zuckerman is, of course, Roth's lifelong double, and so it is only appropriate that in an autobiography, he allude to him. In fact, the foreword of the book is written in the form of a letter to Zuckerman and signed by Roth. It begins:

> In the past, the facts have always been notebook jottings, my way of springing into fiction. For me, as for most novelists, every genuine imaginative event begins down there, with the facts, with the specific, and not with the philosophical, the ideological, or the abstract, Yet, to my surprise, I now appear to have gone about writing a book absolutely backward, taking what I have already imagined and, as it were, desiccating it, so as to restore my experience to the original prefictionalized factuality.[49]

This, in a sense, is Roth's declared mission statement in *The Facts*, to "restore [his] experience to the original factuality," something that, as will be discussed shortly, may be a goal just as fantastical as anything in his novels. In his letter to Zuckerman, he reminds the character of the second chance he gave him in his novel *The Counterlife*, and writes, "If while writing I couldn't see exactly what I was up to, I do now: this manuscript embodies *my* counterlife, the antidote and answer to all those fictions that culminated in the fiction of you. If in one way *The Counterlife* can

[49] Ibid., 3.

be read as fiction about structure, then this is the bare bones, the structure of a life without the fiction."[50]

He also tells his double that he was "worn out with coaxing into existence a being whose experience was comparable to [his] own and yet registered a more powerful valence, a life more highly charged and energized, more entertaining than [his] own…which happens to have been largely spent, quite unentertainingly, alone in a room with a typewriter."[51]

In *The Facts*, Roth chronicles his development as a man and as a writer. In addition to describing his influences and experiences, and how they shaped him as he became a novelist, he occasionally delves into discussing how he took his life experiences and used them as the fodder for his books. One rarely finds this kind of honest accounting, and especially for students of life writing, it's highly useful in understanding to what extent Roth borrows from life in creating his "fiction."

For example, at one point Roth describes a particular low point in his student days, when he and his girlfriend were nearly kicked out of university for what was seen as unseemly conduct, and after his description, writes, "It was the mid-1960s before I got round to exploiting this painful, ludicrous episode for a scene in my novel *When She Was Good*."[52]

Later, when Roth is recounting how a bitter argument between him and a girlfriend provided the material for a scene in one of his novels, he readily admits to hardly fictionalizing the episode at all.

"Probably nothing else in my work more precisely duplicates the autobiographical facts," Roth writes. "Those scenes represent one of the few

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[50] Ibid., 6. In *The Counterlife,* Roth uses Zuckerman to explore the different potential paths that one life can take.
[51] Ibid., 6.
[52] Ibid., 74.

occasions when I haven't spontaneously set out to improve on actuality in the interest of being more interesting. I couldn't have been more interesting—I couldn't have been *as* interesting."[53]

If that is case, in what sense are those scenes fiction at all? Other than how they are framed, what is the difference between them and life writing, or even specifically memoir?

At other points in *The Facts*, Roth performs a more confusing rhetorical maneuver. He uses examples and characters from his novels to explain and contextualize anecdotes from his own past. To be clear, he is not stating that he drew those parts of his fiction from his own life, but doing something almost like the reverse. He is seeking understanding of his own life through the prism of his fiction—a wholly counterintuitive way to approach life writing, but certainly an interesting one.

For instance, this is Roth describing a literature seminar he took part in as an undergraduate:

> Like young Nathan Zuckerman, in *The Ghost Writer*, contemplating the living room of the New England farmhouse of the writer E.I. Lindoff, I would sit there on those darkening afternoons and – while Pete, Dick , and I competed to outdo each other with "insights" – say to myself, "This is how I will live." In just such a house I would meet with my classes after I got my Ph.D., became a teacher, and settled into a life of reading books and writing about them. Tenure as an English professor had come to seem a more realistic prospect than a career as a novelist. I would be poor and I would be pure, a cross between a literary priest and a member of the intellectual resistance in Eisenhower's prospering pig heaven.[54]

Here, Roth is writing across a multitude of dimensions. We have the author Roth telling us about his own past—though he has earlier cast doubt on the veracity of his biography—but we also have him comparing his past self to the younger versions of one of his literary alter egos. On top of all that, though, he is describing how his

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[53] Ibid., 107.
[54] Ibid., 68.

young self would imagine that self's future, and in doing so, gives us a view of an alternate life that Philip Roth the man could have ended up living. This is life writing and fiction crisscrossing and overlapping across a cluster of different layers.

Although purportedly an "autobiography," and one called *The Facts* no less, the book not only plays endless tricks with its own credibility, but also jabs constantly at the chicken-and-egg interaction between life and writing. At one point, when describing a dishonest lover, Roth writes, "…who can distinguish what is so from what isn't so when confronted with a master of fabrication? The wanton scenes she improvised! The sheer hyperbole of what she imagined! The self-certainty unleashed by her own deceit! The conviction behind those caricatures!"[55]

Coming from a novelist—someone who is, in a sense, paid to lie—this is high praise indeed. And Roth brings this sharply home through ending the chapter by making this point clear. "Without doubt she was my worst enemy ever," he writes, "but, alas, she was also nothing less than the greatest creative-writing teacher of them all, specialist par excellence in the aesthetics of extremist fiction."[56]

At the end of the book, everything is thrown on its head once more. Even if a reader had thought that through the haze of obfuscation, *The Facts* had at least provided some sort of relatively reliable picture of Roth's real life, the section at its end disabuses them of that notion. In an example of quintessentially Rothian mischief, the book concludes with a letter from Nathan Zuckerman—Roth's literary alter-ego—to his creator, in which Zuckerman critiques the book itself, spinning things around once more. The section begins:

> Dear Roth,
> I've read the manuscript twice. Here is the candor you ask for: Don't publish—you are far better off writing about me than "accurately" reporting

[55] Ibid., 111.
[56] Ibid., 112.

> your own life. Could it be that you've turned yourself into a subject not only because you're tired of me but because you believe I am no longer someone through whom you can detach yourself from your biography at the same time that you exploit its crises, themes, tensions, and surprises? [57]

Suddenly, with this shot across the bow of his own book, Roth—as Zuckerman—mangles the reader's understanding of all that has come before. Zuckerman has us immediately questioning the author's motives in writing the book at all, and because of this uncertainty, we doubt how much stock we can put in the account of his life that Roth has offered up.

In this letter, a lengthy screed that concludes the book, "Zuckerman" takes sharp aim at the credibility of what Roth has written, and strikes blows at it. "What you choose to tell in fiction is different from what you're permitted to tell when nothing's being fictionalized," he writes, "and in this book you are not permitted to tell what it is you tell best: kind, discreet, careful—changing people's names because you're worried about hurting their feelings—no, this isn't you at your most interesting."[58]

What "Zuckerman" is concerned about here isn't that Roth is unable to reveal damaging gossip or identifying personal information—or, rather, it isn't *only* that. Zuckerman is concerned here, and throughout his lengthy rebuttal to Roth's book, about the limitations that autobiography places on a writer like Roth. These are not the limitations one might expect about the limitations of having to stick to the truth and not being able to use his novelistic gift for making narrative interesting and engaging. Nor is it the popular idea, discussed, for example, by Kent C. Ryden, in his *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place*, that

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[57] Ibid., 161.
[58] Ibid., 162.

fiction reaches "larger truths," even if it misses some of the detailed veracity of nonfiction.[59]

Rather, one of Zuckerman's main complaints is far more grounded and far more troubling. Roth's alter-ego believes that because a memoirist or autobiographer—or biographer, for that matter—has to carve a story out of the raw material of life, the choices he or she makes about inclusion are crucial and controlling. When a novelist tells a story, there really is nothing *outside* of the text. There is nothing to omit, except what was there. On the other hand, the choices that a memoirist makes about what to include, even leaving aside how he or she presents them, are absolutely determinative. As Zuckerman articulates it, "Even if it's no more than one percent that you've edited out, that's the one percent that counts—the one percent that's saved for your imagination and that changes everything. But this isn't unusual, really. With autobiography there's always another text, a countertext, if you will, to the one presented. It's probably the most manipulative of all literary forms."[60]

In his letter to Roth, Zuckerman repeatedly criticizes the frailties of autobiography (or, for our purposes, memoir) as a form, focusing on the choices of what to include as its weak point. It is as if, through him, Roth is signaling that he is not only well aware of the artifice in his "novelist's autobiography," but also keenly attuned to where that artifice lies—in the choices of inclusion and exclusion he has made. Here is Zuckerman exploring its wider implications for writers and readers:

> What one chooses to reveal in fiction is governed by a motive fundamentally aesthetic; we judge the author of a novel by how well he or she tells the story. But we judge morally the author of an autobiography, whose governing motive is primarily ethical as against aesthetic. How close is the narration to the truth? Is the author hiding his or her motives, presenting his or her actions and thoughts to lay bare the essential nature of conditions or trying to hide something, telling in order *not* to

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[59] Kent C. Ryden, *Mapping the Invisible Landscape: Folklore, Writing, and the Sense of Place* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), 49.
[60] Roth, *The Facts.*, 172.

> tell? In a way we always tell in order also not to tell, but the personal historian is expected to resist to the utmost the ordinary impulse to falsify, distort, and deny.[61]

Paradoxically, Zuckerman seems to at once consider memoir the "most manipulative of all literary forms" and to hold memoirists up to some higher standard of truth. No matter what his theoretical position, however, he paints Roth as untrustworthy.

MEMOIR'S VERACITY UNDER A MICROSCOPE

It is difficult to know exactly where the real-life Philip Roth stands on the question of memoir, but Zuckerman's insistence on a high bar for verifiable fact in memoir seems somewhat anachronistic. Although his opinion aligns with the intuitive view of the subject, in recent years, the issue of truth in autobiographical writing has come under much examination, and it is far from settled.

Memoirs on serious subjects like drug abuse and the Holocaust have been investigated and found to be grossly embellished or even outright fabricated.[62] In some cases, these books have been dismissed by audiences and even disowned by publishers—that is, they have been evaluated according to Roth/Zuckerman's "primarily ethical" basis—but in other cases, this has not been the end result at all. Controversial writer James Frey, for example, has been able to wrestle an extremely successful writing career out of his initial scandalous entry into the publishing world via memoir, carving out a career as high-profile novelist. One way to understand this is that their skills in the "aesthetic," as opposed to the "primarily ethical" were appreciated enough to propel them onwards.

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[61] Ibid., 164

[62] On drug abuse, see James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004); on the Holocaust, see Misha Defonseca, *Misha: A Memoir of the Holocaust Years*. (Boston: Mt. Ivy Press, 1997).

In addition to situations where a book's lack of veracity became a major mark against it, however, there have been many recent memoir-like books that are not grounded in hard fact, yet have been wholly accepted. For example, Dave Eggers' successful memoir, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* or the works of David Sedaris, to which we'll turn shortly.[63] These books, and many more, have in recent years shown that perhaps for a certain kind of memoir, the reading public has an appetite for story and character as much as it does for authenticity.

But what we have in Zuckerman's argument about the distinction between fiction and memoir is, in essence, an argument that fiction may often actually be truer than memoir. This not because of a clichéd "greater truth," but because of the much more solid fact that a writer is often not be able to be as accurate in memoir because of the limitations of ethics and conscience, and the need to make choices of inclusion.

This may not be intuitive, especially to people who have not actually tried to chronicle life and may assume it is just a matter of describing remembered details, with little concern for structure, characterization, or narrative arcs. As I'll discuss more later, the process of writing memoir is far more fraught with complexity—with necessary fictions—than a non-writer might imagine.

Memoirist David Sedaris has recently found his way into this discussion from the opposite direction to Philip Roth. Sedaris' work consists mainly of collections of autobiographical essays, in which he pokes fun at himself and his family. For the most part, at least with his most well-known work, these stories are understood to be nonfiction.

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[63] Dave Eggers, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

In March of 2007, however, *The New Republic* published an article called "This American Lie", which alleged that much of what David Sedaris wrote was essentially fabricated.[64] This article followed a raft of authenticity scandals in American journalism. Jayson Blair, a reporter for the *New York Times* was forced to resign after allegations of plagiarism and outright lies in his work. Patricia Smith of *The Boston Globe* and Janet Cooke of *The Washington Post* had similar fates.[65] In fact, *The New Republic* had its own scandal in 1998, when a young writer named Stephen Glass embarrassed the magazine and damaged its reputation.

Glass had written stories that gained him increasing levels of fame for the quality of his reporting and writing, but most of it turned out to be entirely made-up. He had even gone so far as to create a phony website and voice mail box so that there would seem to be some reality behind his claims. When *Forbes* Magazine uncovered the deception, though, his artifice crumbled.[66]

But even with its problematic past, the *New Republic* did not shy away from tearing into David Sedaris. The article raised some interesting questions about the dividing line between memoir and fiction, about using novelistic techniques in nonfiction, and about whether the fact that one writes as a humourist makes a difference.

In the article, Alex Heard, the writer for *The New Republic*, systematically fact checks Sedaris' nonfiction life writing, and is critical of the degree of authenticity he finds. For example, in Sedaris' book *Me Talk Pretty One Day*, a twelve-year-old Sedaris' father forces him to take guitar lessons, sending him to a teacher who the

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[64] Alex Heard, "This American Lie; A midget guitar teacher, a Macy's elf, and the truth about David Sedaris." *The New Republic* Online, 19 March, 2007.
[65] Jack Shafer, "The Jayson Blair Project."*Slate*, 8 May, 2003.
[66] Adam L. Penenberg, "Lies, Damn Lies, and Fiction." *Forbes* Online 11 May, 1998.

narrator Sedaris describes as a "perfectly formed midget." What follows is a description of the young Sedaris' relationship with "Mr. Mancini," who dresses strangely, is mocked by children in the mall, and greets Sedaris' burgeoning homosexual identity with outright—but darkly amusing—homophobia. But when Heard set out to investigate the truth behind the story, he found that although there likely was a real person behind "Mancini," Sedaris' description of him may have been grossly unfair to the real-life individual, even if richly rewarding to readers.

Heard suggests that Sedaris "made up Mancini's style, quirks, and speeches, and he invented the moment when Mancini thought young David was making a pass at him," and another former student of the guitar teacher tells Heard that his "recollections of the character represented as Mr. Mancini are not the same as David Sedaris's," and that he "was a very serious-minded guitar teacher."

Heard reports that when he interviewed Sedaris and brought this up with him, Sedaris readily admitted that, for comedic effect, he had "exaggerated" the comedic mannerisms of his teacher and fabricated some of the incidents involving him. Sedaris, however, didn't see any problem with these embellishments. As Heard himself notes, Sedaris does not consider himself a journalist, and so does not feel a need to stick to journalistic guidelines regarding fact. For Sedaris, being funny is a goal in-itself, and although he maintains that his work is rooted in reality—and it is: he really did take guitar lessons from a dwarf teacher—he sees no problem with enhancing it for added humour.[67]

Heard notes that the "midget character" appears again in Sedaris's book *Barrel Fever*, only this time in a story clearly labeled fiction, and that critics and audiences did not find him nearly as funny or successful this time. In fact, the element

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[67] Heard, 3.

of what is and is not funny adds an extra dimension to the discussion. In the minds of many, it seems that humourists, or other kinds of writers employing humour, should be allowed extra leeway in stretching the truth while still describing what they do as nonfiction. If a primary purpose of a work is to amuse, the conventional wisdom seems to be that a writer can stretch the facts somewhat more in order to accommodate his purpose. As a columnist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* wrote after the Heard essay was published, "A humorist has lots of latitude because funny things don't usually write funny."[68]

In his essay about Sedaris, Heard mentions another well-regarded Sedaris work, "Dix Hill," in which Sedaris recounts being a child volunteer at a mental hospital and the odd and amusing stories that came of the experience.[69]

In it, Sedaris describes getting the volunteer position and almost immediately having to help an orderly transport a disturbed, elderly lady. He writes:

> "I'll take her up top and you get the feet," [Clarence] said. "Come on, granny, you're going for a ride." When the sheet was lifted, I was shocked to discover that this woman was naked. I had never before seen a naked woman and hesitated just long enough for her to lurch forward and sink her remaining three teeth into my forearm.[70]

Heard didn't believe that this had actually happened as Sedaris described it, although he did believe that the memoirist had in fact volunteered at the hospital, and so he interviewed a nurse who had worked at the hospital, who said to him, "He's lying through his teeth!"

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[68] Jon Carroll, "Column: Jon Carroll." *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 5 April, 2007.
[69] David Sedaris, *Naked* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998) 73.
[70] Ibid., 76.

He then asked Sedaris himself in an interview, and Sedaris "admitted that he had pumped up the Dix episode to tell a funnier yarn and that the juicy details with Clarence didn't take place."[71] In Heard's view, this was problematic.

"[W]riters reap tangible rewards when they present their humor as nonfiction," he writes, "Things that seems stupid as fiction somehow seem hilarious if they're perceived to be real. You see this at work with Sedaris's dueling midgets. Chatam, the fictional one, is contrived and lame. But Mancini, the 'real' character, struck readers as comical and deeply moving."

It's not just the literary sleight-of-hand that concerns Heard, however; it's also the more substantive, real-world implications.

"The editors and radio producers who packaged Sedaris's earlier work certainly understood the difference [between fiction and nonfiction]," he writes. "They knew that, in our time, nonfiction is bankable in ways that fiction is not. What bugs me is that they milked the term for all its value, while laughing off any of the ethical requirements it entails."[72]

Setting aside the issues of ethics and commercial viability, one wonders what the difference in veracity is between a typical Sedaris work and a typical Roth one. Each borrows from their own lives, and from the lives of those around them, and uses this as material to create engaging narrative, replete with themes, recognizable story arcs, and the other aspects of what is generally considered the domain of the novel.

Sedaris, nominally writing nonfiction, arranges story and writes very much like a novelist at times, and he freely admits to creating dialogue in order to make his work funnier and more readable. Meanwhile, in books like *Operation Shylock* (or, say, *The Plot Against America*), Roth plays the role of quasi-historian, reporting and

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[71] Heard, 1.
[72] Ibid., 7.

teaching in a way that, although seen through the lens of fiction, is firmly rooted in real historical events.[73] If there is a spectrum between theoretical absolute nonfiction and theoretical absolute fiction, it is not easy to determine where these two writers stand in relation to one another.

After the *New Republic* article, one might have expected further criticism of Sedaris. Instead, the vast majority of respondents to the article came to his defense. To give just one example, in *The Washington Post*, Peter Carlson described the article as "truly ridiculous," writing

> Sedaris writes comic essays, usually about himself and frequently about his childhood. Heard says he enjoys the essays but suspects they may not be completely true. So he starts fact-checking them and finds that—brace yourself now—Sedaris exaggerates for comic effect! For instance: Although Sedaris did work in a mental hospital, as he wrote in one essay, he was not really bitten by a demented old woman…I suggest that Heard continue this long-overdue investigation of American humorists. Did Mark Twain fudge facts about how far that frog jumped? Did the bed re*all*y fall on James Thurber's father? Was Bill Cosby's childhood pal Albert really fat or just pleasantly plump? And those kids in Lake Wobegon—are they really all above average?
>
> Get busy, Mr. Heard. Your life's work awaits.[74]

Heard, however, also had his allies. For example, prominent media critic Jack Shafer argued that humourists need not be given more leeway. He wrote:

> Sedaris and company want to erect a penumbra that shields humorists from criticism when they blend fiction into their nonfiction but still insist on calling it nonfiction. The logic behind this is difficult to follow. If writing fiction is the license Sedaris and other nonfiction humorists need to get at "larger truths," why limit this exemption to humorists? Let reporters covering city hall, war, and business embellish and exaggerate so they can capture "larger truths," too. I'm sure that Stephen Glass, Jayson Blair, Christopher Newton, and *Slate*'s "monkeyfishing guy" would back this idea, especially if applied retroactively.[75]

Shafer sees no reason to give humourists any more license than anyone else. Moreover, in his article, he calls such an idea "bogus," and argues that he finds "stories that are absolutely true—like the time one of [his] neighbors, dressed up to

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[73] Philip Roth, *The Plot Against America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004.
[74] Peter Carlson, "Believe It or Not: We're A Little Less Nasty Now." *The Washington Post*, 20 March 2007.
[75] Shafer, 1.

party on Saturday night, fell into a 55-gallon drum filled with human excrement and urine—the funniest."

He also takes issue with Sedaris' use of the word "exaggerate" when referring to the fragments of memoir in question, as he thinks it gives the author license to be disingenuous about the ratio of truth to embellishment.

"Sedaris has long insisted that his nonfiction stories are both true and exaggerated," Shafer writes, "which when you think about it is impossible. But you've got to give him credit for choosing the word "exaggerated"—it gives a writer all the indemnification he needs against charges that he's fabricated. Made-up dialogue? It's an exaggeration. A made-up scene? It's just an embellishment. An altered setting? Hyperbole!"[76]

Shafer is a media critic, charged with holding journalists up to high standards in their reporting, and from this perspective, the charges he makes are reasonable. In his argument, however—that is, in his defense of Alex Heard— he is committing a fairly obvious example of the "slippery slope" fallacy. Sedaris is, quite simply, not a journalist. Thus when Shafer derisively asks why we don't extend the privileges we grant to humourists to "reporters covering city hall, war, and business," he is making the classic "slippery slope" error. Contrary to what proponents of this sort of argument seem to hold, it is actually possible to draw a line somewhere and not to fall forever down the slippery slope. We do it all the time, in essentially every intellectual field of endeavour. To cite just one example, for many legal thinkers, large parts of our system of law rest on the act of drawing distinctions and resisting the "slippery slope" fallacy. For example, in his article "The Slippery Slope Argument," Wibren van der Burg writes, "With respect to proposed acts of legislation, the logical slippery

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[76] Ibid..

slopes are not valid arguments. Legislation often dictates arbitrary limits. There is no essential distinction between 30 mph and 31. Yet legal logic does not lead us toward accepting 31 mph as the speed limit." He also adds that those who worry the judiciary's interpretation of legislation, rather than the legislature itself, is where the slippery slope is decisive are off the mark, because "this is not a slippery slope argument but simply an argument against vagueness of statues, which we usually should try to avoid anyhow, as a matter of good legislation."[77] Clearly, the dangers of the "slippery slope" are not always fatal to an argument.

Soon after this debate about Sedaris and the implications of his writing surfaced, another *New Yorker* contributor, Daniel Radosh, compared the scandal around *The New Republic*'s Sedaris article to an incident from some years before.[78] In the earlier episode, a first-time *New Yorker* writer named Rodney Rothman had been blacklisted by the magazine after writing a comedic article called "My Fake Job," which was discovered to be heavily exaggerated.[79] As Radosh argued, there was what appeared to be an unfair distinction drawn between Rothman and Sedaris. "Sedaris is still a New Yorker regular," he noted, "while Rothman will never write for that magazine—or perhaps any other—again."

"Is there one standard for famous, bestselling authors and another for first-timers?" Radosh asked. "I just want to know if Rodney Rothman is owed an apology."

He then, however, added:

> One other thing to consider is that Sedaris's fame actually does justify giving him more leeway, not because famous people inherently deserve to get away with more, but because readers already identify the brand "Sedaris" with a certain style of

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[77] Wibren van der Burg, "The Slippery Slope Argument," Ethics, Vol. 102, No. 1 (Oct., 1991), 48.
[78] Daniel Radosh, "Fame has its privileges." *Radosh Net*, 11 April 2007.
[79] Rodney Rothman, "My Fake Job," *The New Yorker*, 27 November 2000, 120.

> writing, so they bring the appropriate filter to anything with his byline. An unknown writer, however, is considered part of the "New Yorker" brand, which implies something more rigorous.[80]

Rodney Rothman, in fact, wrote a short response to Radosh:

> To me, the genre of "humorous nonfiction" or "nonfiction storytelling" mimics the way we tell each other good stories orally—when we tell stories orally we may mess around with the timeline or tighten up what people really said, not to mention ignore any surrounding detail that doesn't help the main spine of the story. There's an accepted amount of "fudging" we accept in oral storytelling before we consider the story BS. It's never been codified but we know it when we hear it. The same standards should apply to written storytelling. If you're a nonfiction storyteller who keeps his stories within this accepted range, you deserve to feel guiltlessly proud of your work.[81]

The question that arises from this opinion, clearly, is how do we sketch the lines of this "accepted range"? How do we recognize this "range," and how do we know, as writers and readers, when we are straying from it?

The answers to these queries doubtlessly lie in exactly how and where we draw the contours that separate fiction and life writing. So perhaps, in a way, Jack Shafer was right in his "slippery slope" argument. If there is no way that we can reliably make the necessary distinctions, then it follows that we have no reliable range from which to carefully avoid straying.

STUNT MEMOIRS

Rodney Rothman himself wrote a popular book, *Early Bird*, which fits neatly into a genre of life writing that has become quite fashionable in recent years. It's difficult to categorize or label this sub-genre precisely, but the books in it are recognizable in certain characteristics and have been called immersion memoirs or stunt memoirs. Usually light-hearted, they are written as first-person nonfiction memoirs, using all the style, plot, and character devices of novels. They're self-

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[80] Radosh.
[81] Radosh.

conscious, not just in terms of their narrators' obvious knowledge that they are narrating a book, but often in their characters' knowledge that they are participating in events precisely because they will later appear in a book. To a degree, it has some roots in New Journalism, because as in New Journalism, "the emphasis is on subjectivity and 'getting inside' the story or event,"[82] Nevertheless, this is not really a type of journalism, but rather a type of creative life writing because their emphasis is more on the narrator themselves than on an external phenomenon.

Arguably, it's even a type of fiction, in the sense that the actual events are being *created* for the purposes of the book, just as a novelist creates events and characters. The major difference, of course, is that the events are being created or consciously staged in the real world—so that they can be written about later. It can be thought of as composing in a different medium: life itself.

In Rodney Rothman's own book, *Early Bird*, for example, Rothman decided, in his late twenties, to take early retirement. He did this in the stereotypical manner of a Jewish New Yorker. That is, he moved down to Florida and into a "retirement community," where he lived with elderly people and tried to fit in. He played golf with the men in the very early morning, sat by the pool gossiping with the women in the afternoon, and went to sleep extremely early after playing Bingo.

In a sense this was participatory journalism, or an anthropological investigation. But labeling it as such misses the fact that this wasn't so much reporting on events or subjects, but actually creating a narrative in real life and writing about it after the fact. After all, Rothman's main concern in his book is his own story, not the lives of those around him or the landscape he ventures into. The book he will write about his own adventure is his guiding light.

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[82] Marshall W. Fishwick, "The New Journalism, 2: A Style Befitting Our Times and Tastes," *Journal of Communication*, Vol. 25 No. 3 (Summer 1975), 190.

In the early parts of the book, he is not fully transparent about this motivation, despite the fact that a reader can see it quite plainly. Later on in the narrative, however, he is more forthright with what largely drives him as a character and an author. In a chapter actually called "For My Book," he declares that he is doing certain things simply for the sake of his book, using it as a crutch and an impetus in his real life.[83] "No matter what happens," he writes, "it is For My Book. I recommend to everyone that they have a book that they can say they're doing things for. It really gives you a renewed sense of bravery."[84]

Early Bird is just one of many examples of this genre of life writing in recent years. For instance, A.J. Jacobs wrote *The Know-It-All* (in which he documented his attempt to read the entire encyclopedia), and *The Year of Living Biblically* (in which he documented a year he spent living exactly as the Bible dictates), as well as a string of similar short pieces, including one in which he "outsourced his life" by hiring workers abroad to deal with his daily activities, like talking to his parents or arguing with his wife.[85] Danny Wallace has also written a series of such books, including *Yes Man* (in which he spent a period of time saying "yes" to any offer that anybody gave him) and *Friends Like These* (in which he travelled the world seeking out his

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[83] Rodney Rothman, *Early Bird* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005), 190.
[84] Rothman, 191.
[85] A.J. Jacobs, *The Know-It-All* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004); A.J. Jacobs, *The Year of Living Biblically* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007); A.J. Jacobs, "My Outsourced Life," in *The Guinea Pig Diaries* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2009) 21.

childhood friends).[86] Clearly, these people did these things, as Rodney Rothman writes, "For My Book."[87]

Another way to approach these works might be to consider them in terms of performance art or "live art," where an artist—or, in our case, author—might use their own body or actions to produce a composition. In *The Analysis of Performance Art: A Guide to its Theory and Practice*, Anthony Howell writes, "This notion of some presence outside the curtain can be considered as the Large Other…Our mediating role as performer/witness enables the Large Other to experience the performance through our eyes—that is through the eyes of witnesses who have entered into some complicity of the event—as in classical tragedy."[88] This analysis could readily be mapped atop these stunt memoirs, which provide a sort of intentional performance through which readers can be witnesses.

If these "stunt memoirs" are a sort of performative fiction, however, are they less or more fictional than the work of someone like Philip Roth, who takes organic events—incidents that happened on their own, and were not contrived for the purposes of writing about them—and then lightly fictionalizes them? In a sense, these books of life writing are more like pure fiction than some of the material in Roth's

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[86] Danny Wallace, Yes Man (New York: Simon Spotlight, 2005); Danny Wallace, Friends Like These: My Worldwide Quest to Find My Best Childhood Friends, Knock on Their Doors, and Ask Them to Come Out and Play (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008).

[87] In the work that forms the creative component of this thesis, at least to the extent that it is rooted in the real world, I believe that in addition to being a "fictionalized memoir," my writing fits into this genre of life writing. The narrator of my piece of life writing, who is also the main character, does not truly believe he is going to "make peace in the Middle East." Both in the premise of the work, and in its execution, he is engaging in various activities, interactions, and conversations purely, in Rothman's words, "For My Book."

[88] Anthony Howell, *The Analysis of Performance Art: A Guide to its Theory and Practice* (Amsterdam: Harwood, 1999).

novels. Granted, the events "actually happened" to at least some extent, but they were still fabricated for the purposes of the books for which they serve as a basis. But novels like many of Roth's—and many other novelists', of course—are so firmly based in life events that were not contrived or manipulated they could reasonably be claimed to be far more honest and true to life.

WRITING AND THE ACCURACY OF OBSERVATION

To be sure, on some level, most readers, and perhaps most writers, intuitively divide writing into "fact" and "fiction." This may very well be a natural human inclination. It can only be natural for us to desire to know if a story is fantasy or reality. Perhaps this is even a remnant of some evolutionary instinct hardwired into us.

Writers like Roth, however,—to say nothing of more overtly postmodernist authors like, say, Kurt Vonnegut—seem to take great joy in frustrating this innate human impulse. As Roth once put it, "By the time the imagination is finished with a fact, believe me, it bears no resemblance to a fact."[89] Meanwhile, writers of life writing like Sedaris end up frustrating the desire for fact as well, regardless of their intentions.

Scholars in the humanities are accustomed to living with contradiction and ambiguity, but the twentieth century brought these qualities even to the "hardest" of hard science.[90] If mathematical precision can no longer be expected even in physics, however, readers looking for it in writing can only be disappointed. Quantum physics

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[89] Philip Roth, acceptance speech for National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction, January 28, 1988.

[90] Even as their prominence expanded and accelerated in the humanities as well, with the rise of poststructuralist literary theory and all that has followed in its wake.

has torn apart the idea of sharp, meaningful—knowable—distinctions implicit in Newtonian and even Einsteinian physics. It has shown us, for example, that light behaves as both a wave *and* a particle. Its behaviour is dependent on whether it is being quantitatively observed—an uncertainty that can be proven using mathematics. In his *The Dancing Wu Li Masters: An Overview of the New Physics*, Gary Zukav provides a lucid explanation of this phenomenon, including this core finding: "…when the observed system as represented by the wave function interacts with the observing system (when we make a measurement), it abruptly leaps to a new state."[91]

That concept may be able to teach us something fundamental about life writing: observation itself affects what is being observed.

Modern psychology offers some similar conclusions to modern physics, conclusions that may also have a direct link to life writing. In his book *Stumbling on Happiness*, Harvard University psychologist Daniel Gilbert offers dozens of examples, most of them rooted in quantifiable experimental results, which suggest not only that human memory is far more fallible than one might assume, but also that in many respects it is largely a construct influenced by subsequent events, present feelings and thoughts, and the act of describing the past.[92] The experimental results Gilbert reports are often deeply counterintuitive, but just as often convincing and telling about the way that we remember—and, for our purposes, the way that it follows we must write about those memories.

One of his central conclusions is that when we "remember" past events, it may seem to us like we are "retrieving" what happened from our mental archives, when what we are actually doing is "reweaving" them from the fragmentary data currently

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[91] Gary Zukav, *The Dancing Wu Li Masters* (New York: Bantam, 1980), 81.
[92] Daniel Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness.* (New York: Vintage, 2007)

available to us.[93] For example, he cites one study in which volunteers were shown "a series of slides depicting a red car as it cruises toward a yield sign," and then half of them were asked questions about it and half were not. Later, they were all asked to identify the original picture they had seen. The results were informative:

> …if the volunteers had stored their experience in memory, then they should have pointed to the picture of the car approaching the yield sign, and indeed, more than 90 percent of the volunteers in the no-question group did just that. But 80 percent of the volunteers in the question group pointed to the picture of the car approaching a stop sign. Clearly, the question changed the volunteers' memories of their earlier experience, which is precisely what one would expect if their brains were *reweaving* their experiences—and precisely what one would *not* expect if their brains were *retrieving* their experiences.[94]

For a writer, especially of life writing, whether it takes the form of memoir or fictionalized memoir or any of the other sub-genres, this should be quite disconcerting. For surely, as one writes, one of the processes occurring in one's conscious mind—and within one's subconscious mechanisms—is that one asks oneself a series of questions. *What happened next? What did she do then?* Whether one articulates this to oneself or just performs these questioning sessions just below the surface of one's writing mind doesn't matter. The questioning itself will affect how one makes the decisions one does.

Granted, writers generally won't ask themselves misleading or confusing questions like the one in Gilbert's experiment, but even the questioning involved in trying to distill life from memory into characters, narrative, and dialogue has a similar effect. One's *reweaving* of those experiences will itself affect the remembrance of things past, even if one doesn't realize that this is happening—in a similar fashion to how, modern physics tell us, our observation of light affects how light behaves.

As Gilbert writes, "when we want to remember our experience, our brains quickly reweave the tapestry by fabricating—not by actually retrieving—the bulk of

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[93] Gilbert, 88.
[94] Ibid.

the information that we experience as a memory. This fabrication happens so quickly and effortlessly that we have the illusion (as a good magician's audience always does) that the entire thing was in our heads the entire time."[95]

Most problematic for writers of life writing, our descriptions themselves may actually change the way we remember things, as counterintuitive as that may seem. In another study cited by Gilbert, volunteers were shown a piece of coloured fabric. Some were asked to describe it, while others were asked to just study it. Later, they were all asked to identify the particular fabric they had been given, and the researchers found that

> …describing the color impaired rather than improved performance on the identification task. Only 33 percent of the describers were able to accurately identify the original color. Apparently, the describers' verbal descriptions of their experiences "overwrote" their memories of the experiences themselves, and they ended up remembering not what they had experienced but what they had *said* about what they experienced. And what they had said was not clear and precise enough to help them recognize it when they saw it again thirty seconds later.[96]

It is striking that the "describers" were less able to identify the colour than were the "nondescribers," and in direct opposition to much of what students of writing and working journalists learn. Writers and journalists are often trained to take notes about recent experiences—that is, to describe them—in order to properly write about them later. (Additionally, of course, that later writing adds a new layer of description too.) This study, however, seems to suggest that all that description actually weakens the memory of events, and the ability to recount them.

What writers write is most certainly rooted in the real world and in real experience—in who they are as people—but in the very act of writing it down, they eliminate or at least affect the way that they actually remember it. When Philip Roth writes in his slippery foreword to *The Facts* that he is seeking to take what he has

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[95] Gilbert, 87.
[96] Gilbert, 44.

written and "as it were, desiccat[e] it, so as to restore [his] experience to the original prefictionalized factuality," some of these truths about human psychology that Gilbert reports might push back at him.

To be fair to Roth, though, in his foreword to *The Facts*, he does admit as much:

> Obviously the facts are never just coming at you but are incorporated by an imagination that is formed by your previous experience. Memories of the past are not memories of facts but memories of your imaginings of the facts. There is something naïve about a novelist like myself talking about presenting himself "undisguised" and depicting "a life without the fiction." I also invite over-simplification of a kind I don't at all like by announcing that searching out the facts may have been a kind of therapy for me. You search your past with certain questions on your mind – indeed, you search out your past to discover which events have led you to asking those specific questions. It isn't that you subordinate your ideas to the force of the facts in autobiography but that you construct a sequence of stories to bind up the facts with a persuasive *hypothesis* that unravels your history's meaning."[97]

In the end, trying to sharply pinpoint what is fiction and what is nonfiction in an extended section of writing, let alone in an entire book, is difficult. Even in journalism and history, there is always some degree of artifice. When writing "nonfiction," one cannot note down every detail as if one is a camera with a God's Eye View. One has to reconstruct to some extent, and when writing life writing, this tendency is even greater. When writing fiction, it may be poetic and artistically liberating to imagine that one is creating from nothing, but it defies the injunctions of both logic and common sense. Those details, those characters, those observations about life can only be rooted *in life*. Both supposed forms—fiction and nonfiction—must really be a combination of truth and fantasy.

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[97] *The Facts*, 8

CHAPTER TWO:

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK:
ON NORTH AMERICAN JEWISH WRITING

"I'm not really a Jew. Just Jew-ish. Not the whole hog, you know."
-- Jonathan Miller[98]

In Chapter One, I sought to locate *The Accidental Peacemaker* in the field of life writing, but of course, any piece of writing can be seen from multiple angles, and has multiple ancestries. In this chapter, I will locate it within the arena of North American Jewish Writing.

To this end, I will consider what it might mean for a piece of writing to have Jewish characteristics. Against the backdrop of the cornerstones of the canon, including authors like Philip Roth, Saul Bellow, and Mordecai Richler, and in the context of contemporary writers like Rachel Shukert and Jonathan Safron Foer, I will use the following lenses: Jewish language, Jewish identity (along with the more specific lens of Jewish identity and Israel), and Jewish humour. Each of these are, of course, the basis for endless scholarship, and so I will lean on them only to the extent that they provide illumination to this project.

JEWISH LANGUAGE

I will begin with language. Since all of the writers considered here are native English speakers, who grew up speaking American English, it might seem odd to think that there is anything particularly Jewish about their use of language. In fact, someone claiming that there is might be accused of being anti-Semitic.

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[98] *The Complete Beyond the Fringe*, EMI, 1996.

Although it's impossible to articulate with total precision, however, there is something particular to the way that the Jewish experience manifests in language.[99] In C.K. Thomas' "Jewish Dialect and New York Dialect," which was published in 1932 but focuses on speakers who did not "speak any language but English"—that is to say that they are not recent immigrants—Thomas finds quantitatively that the spoken skills of his Jewish students are markedly different than his gentile students from the same geographic area. In his study, this manifests mostly in what he terms "errors," and so this may be correlated to socioeconomic status and educational background, but since all the subjects are undergraduates at Cornell, this cannot be the full explanation. In fact, Thomas writes, "Their social and scholastic levels are about the same as those of other New Yorkers, but their speech is distinctly inferior, and this inferiority raised the question whether there might be a clearly defined dialect which was characteristic of New York Jews." In reference to one particular pronunciation error, the "dentalizing of the alveolar consonants," he alludes to the possibility that the "cause of this error…[is]…a survival from Yiddish, German, or Slavic linguistic habit or otherwise," but does not fully address this question.

Indeed, perhaps the echoes of Yiddish-speaking forebears manifests in American Jewish language, along with the effect of urban upbringings, or in the case of Philip Roth's generation of writers, the effect of having parents who were not well educated and of learning the colloquial English of American Jewish neighborhoods more than the language of the prep schools and Ivy League universities.[100] This latter element was certainly characteristic of that older generation of North American

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[99] C.K. Thomas, "Jewish Dialect and New York Dialect," *American Speech* Vol. 7, No. 5 (Jun. 1932), 323.

[100] Irving Howe, *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (Simon & Schuster: New York City, 1976), 597.

Jewish writers. For example, Mordecai Richler's father was in the scrap business, and both he and Philip Roth grew up in lower or lower-middle class neighborhoods.[101] They grew up speaking English, but as historian Irving Howe has explained, this does not mean that the linguistic origins of their forebears had no effect on them. As Howe writes,

> The imaginative sustenance that Yiddish culture and the immigrant experience could give to American Jewish writers rarely depended on their awareness or acknowledgement of its presence. Often, it took the form of hidden links of attitude and value. At the least, it could provide a social milieu seen as representing moral rigidity, ingrown provincialism, and immigrant bias, from all of which young literary protagonists would then take off in search of freedom and autonomy.[102]

Further,

> …even a lapsed tradition, even fragments of the past that have been brushed aside, even cultural associations that float in the atmosphere waiting to be sheltered, all have a way of infiltrating the work of the American Jewish writers. The internal bilingualism of Hebrew and Yiddish is replaced by a precarious substitute, a half-internal and half-external bilingualism of Englished Yiddish and Yiddished English, from which there sometimes arises a new and astonishing American prose style.[103]

The "fragments of the past" often serves as a point of embarrassment for Roth's characters, and for Roth the apprentice novelist in the early parts of *The Facts*, but at a certain point in his development, he clearly came to embrace the linguistic difference derived from them and the possibilities it offers.

In *The Facts*, discussing a move to New York and a group of new Jewish friends he made there, he writes:

> Far from causing us to feel at the periphery of American society, the origins that had so strongly marked our style of self-expression seemed to have placed us at the heart of the city's abrasive, hypercritical, potentially explosive cultural atmosphere as it was evolving out of the angry response to the Vietnam War.[104]

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[101] Charles Foran, *Mordecai: The Life & Times* (Knopf Canada: Toronto, 2010), 9.
[102] Irving Howe, *World of our Fathers: The Journey of the East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made* (Simon & Schuster: New York City, 1976), 597.
[103] Ibid., 588.
[104] Roth, *The Facts*, 136

To be sure, much of the world might want to label being "abrasive, hypercritical, potentially explosive" as the attributes of America in general, but from the perspective of within the United States, they are markedly the traits of New York, or as Cornelia Cody terms it in her exposition of perceptions of New York in the context of American folklore, "the double-sided nature of New Yorker aggressiveness."[105] What that means, in many ways, is that these are, broadly speaking, traits also associated with American Jews, who are so significant culturally in New York that they have influenced the city's culture, as has been widely noted. For instance, in Bethamie Horowitz's "Jewishness in New York: Exception or the Rule," she explores the notion that "New York Jews and Jewishness are exceptional in America" not only in their numbers, but also in their "prominence."[106]

In the Roth quotation above, he is using the words "abrasive" and "hypercritical" to refer to New York City's atmosphere in general, but while terms such as these are certainly not terms unfamiliar to gentile critics of American Jews, Roth's point above is that they are also traits embraced by some American Jews.

In Rosina Lippi-Green's *English With an Accent: Language Ideology and Discrimination in the United States*, the author concentrates less on narrative and conversational style than on dialect, but her observations are nevertheless applicable to this discussion. Lippi-Green forcefully rejects what she describes as "the mythical beast called Standard US English," writing that "given

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[105] Cornelia Cody, "'Only in New York': The New York City Personal Experience Narrative." *Journal of Folklore Research* 42.2 (May-August, 2005),, 233.
[106] Bethamie Horowitz, "Jewishness in New York: Exception or the Rule," in Steven M. Cohen and Gabriel Horenczyk, eds., *National Variations in Jewish Identity : Implications for Jewish Education* (State University of New York Press: Albany 1999). 223-240. For further discussion of the identity relationship between New York City and its Jewish population, also see Deborah Dash Moore, *At Home In America: Second Generation New York Jews* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1981), and Eli Lederhendler, *New York Jews and the Decline of Urban Ethnicity* (Syracuse University Press: Syracuse, 2001).

incontrovertible facts about the way language works, a spoken standardized language can only be understood as an abstraction."[107] Nevertheless, she concedes that it is a powerful abstraction, and implies that it serves to protect the interests of the establishment upper class in its embrace of the language of those of high socioeconomic status.[108] This certainly helps to explain the young Roth's discomfort with his parents' language and his own and, incidentally, might also serve to cause some to question the absolutist wording of studies like C.K. Thomas', cited earlier.

In the case of Roth's group of friends, mentioned above, a group of people who are emblematic of a swath of New York society, their "origins"—their parents' and grandparents' lives in Eastern Europe, their own lives in the lower middle class Jewish ghettos of Brooklyn, the Lower East Side, and New Jersey, their otherness that unified them—had influenced their method of communicating. They had, in turn, embraced it in its full character: loud, full of humour, warm, and both critical and self-critical.[109] For Roth the novelist, all this was fuel for his writing—both in subject matter and in method of delivery—and also a way to rebel against the ghost of Henry James, by whom he sometimes almost seems haunted. In this context, the following is a page wherein Roth describes those Jewish friends in New York and their effects:

> There was this audience of sympathetic Jewish friends who responded with euphoric recognition to my dinner-table narratives; there was my intense psychoanalysis, which, undertaken to stitch back together the confidence shredded to bits in my marriage, itself became a model for reckless narrative disclosure of a kind I hadn't learned from Henry James.[110]

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[107] Rosina Lippi-Green, *English With an Accent: Language, Ideology and Discrimination in the United States* (New York: Routledge, 1997), 53.
[108] Ibid., 56.
[109] Howe, 256.
[110] Roth, *The Facts*, 137.

In this passage, in addition to pointing directly as his Jewish friends, he is also pointing at the language style that emerges from psychoanalysis, a practice that is decidedly linked to Jewishness, as noted, among many others, by Kevin MacDonald, who writes that "it is impossible to understand psychoanalysis as a 'science,' or more properly as a political movement, without taking into account the role of Judaism."[111]

Roth is also pointing at the difference in language in this context and in the context of more traditional novelistic storytelling. In contrast to Henry James' more staid novelistic language, Roth would use "reckless narrative disclosure." This phrase is reminiscent of descriptions of the language of the lively, raucous Yiddishized English of early Jewish neighbourhoods in the United States, for example as memorably criticized by Katherine Anne Porter as "a curious kind of argot, more or less originating in New York, a deadly mixture of academic, guttersnipe, gangster, fake-Yiddish, and dull old worn out dirty words—and appalling bankruptcy in language, as if [these writers] hate English and are trying to destroy it."[112]

None of this is to say that what might be described as a Jewish use of language is simply a conversational, informal use of language, or as the "appalling" dialect that Porter saw in it. It can also be seen in a playful hybridization of language that may stem from the cosmopolitan mélange of history and language that makes up American Jewry, from the way that Jews have often had to be comfortable living with multiple languages or between them. For example, the number of Yiddish words and constructions that have found their way into American English is startling, when one considers what a tiny proportion of the American population is Jewish. American Jews constitute approximately two percent of the American population, but Yiddish

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111 Kevin MacDonald, *The Culture of Critique: An Evolutionary Analysis of Jewish Involvement in Twentieth Century Intellectual and Political Movements* (Praeger: Westport, 1998), 109.
112 As qtd. In Howe, 588.

has had a disproportionate effect on American English, as Lillian Mermin Feinsilver showed in her "Yiddish Idioms in American English," where she provided a long list of Yiddishisms in American English, showed that common phrases such as "I need it like a hole in the head" originate in Yiddish, and demonstrated that the influence goes beyond "direct translations, sometimes involving oddities of syntax" to "a number of bilingual expressions."[113]

Yiddish has always been able to contort itself to both add to and be added to by the languages with which it came in contact. Paraphrasing the scholar Benjamin Harshav, in a 2008 essay on Yiddish, Harold Bloom writes, "Yiddish invariably was a language open to new expressions, since it tended to be used by speakers who knew, more or less, other languages as well. Phrases always were liberally borrowed from those others, whether German or Slavic or American English. Ironically, the movement of Yiddish into Slavic lands and later to America emancipated Yiddish from its German component."

To this, Bloom adds, "But then, irony is endemic in the very nature of Yiddish, a fusion always conscious of its otherness, whether in regard to German, Russian, or American English. Any native speaker of Yiddish (I am one) can sense that the language's curious wealth belies its apparent paucity of vocabulary, when compared to English."

Bloom then quotes directly from Harshav:

> Yiddish speakers speak not so much with individual referring words as with such clusters of relations, ready-made idioms, quotations and situational responses. Since each word may belong to several heterogeneous or contradictory knots, ironies are always at hand. It is precisely the small vocabulary of the language that makes the words more repetitive and more dependent on their habitual contexts, hence weightier in their impact (like the words in the limited vocabulary of the

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113 Lillian Mermin Feinsilver, "'Yiddish Idioms in American English." *American Speech,* 37.3 (October, 1962), 204; For the number of Jews in the American population, see the U.S. Census Bureau's 2011 Statistical Abstract (www.census.gov).

> Bible). It is not the range of denotations that the language covers but the emotive and semantic directions of the hearer's empathy. In this mode of discourse, the overt clash, ironic or clever, between words of different stock languages in one sentence is a major source of meaning, impact, and delight.[114]

Clearly, Yiddish is a remarkably flexible language. The question, however, is how this affects Jewish writers in English. For those of the older generation, it's a reasonable assumption that growing up with the language, such linguistic facility would seep even into one's use of English, but what about younger writers? Is it possible that its influence lingers on, even if its use has withered away?

Jonathan Safron Foer is probably one of the most celebrated of the younger generation of Jewish writers, and his book *Everything is Illuminated* in a sense turns on his playfulness with language. The book's language play is not based on Yiddish, though, but on the interplay between Ukrainian and English. The narrator and his Ukrainian guide banter back and forth, and much of the humour and spirit of the book comes from the Ukrainian guide's inventive use of English.

Francine Prose wrote of it:

> Not since Anthony Burgess's novel "A Clockwork Orange" has the English language been simultaneously mauled and energized with such brilliance and such brio. But if Burgess's hero was enraged, disaffected English youth bottom-feeding off the detritus of Soviet culture, Foer's narrator is an actual Russian (or more accurately, a Ukrainian) who could hardly be more affable, more engaged or more enchanted by everything American, from Michael Jackson and "the greatest of all documentary movies, "The Making of Thriller," to the career of the porn star John Holmes to the "many good schools for accounting," one of which Alex dreams of attending. Alex speaks English like someone who has taught himself by painstakingly translating a really abysmal novel with the help of a badly outdated dictionary. In his idiosyncratic and persuasively consistent lingo, to sleep is to "manufacture Z's," to have sex is "be carnal," good is "premium," nearby is "proximal," difficult is "rigid," and a certain downtown Manhattan neighborhood is, logically, "Greenwich Shtetl."[115]

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[114] Harold Bloom, "The Glories of Yiddish," *The New York Review of Books*, 6 November 2008.

[115] Francine Prose, "Back in the Totally Awesome U.S.S.R," *New York Times Book Review*, April 14, 2002.

This is precisely what Yiddish has always done. Finding character and flexibility in its ability to evolve and develop, absorbing bits of language as it goes. In short, even if Foer is not exactly using Yiddish, his use of language has a decidedly Jewish feel to it.

Language is, of course, deeply connected to conceptions of identity, to which we will now turn our attention.

JEWISH IDENTITY

The concept of Jewish identity and Jewishness, and the questions around them, have never been, and will never be, completely settled. Defining "Jewish identity" concretely is an extremely precarious task, but for our purposes here, I will simply suggest that having "Jewish identity" involves sharing some personal connection to the people, culture, or religion (and not necessarily more than one of these) of the Jews.

In terms of literature, one could conceivably argue that since some writers are Jewish, and some are not, those that are Jewish write Jewish books, and those that are not do not. Even leaving aside the fact that within the Jewish world, there is plenty of argument about exactly who and who is not technically a Jew, the problem is that a close look will quickly suggest that it's not just a matter of the ethnic identity of the author. It's also, perhaps even more so, a matter of the concerns and focuses of the work in question. As Stephen Wade states, it is the work of "writers who take as their themes and preoccupations questions of Jewish life and identity within the social and ideological fabric of American society." [116]

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[116] Stephen Wade, *Jewish American Literature Since 1945: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), 2. For a broad view of Jewish

It is worth noting that in addition to more intuitive identifying signs of a work being "North American Jewish writing," such as whether the work is about overtly Jewish subject matter, two notable markers that might be used to determine whether a piece of modern North American writing is "North American Jewish writing" are the extent to which the piece itself seems to consider *itself* "North American Jewish writing," and whether the author is using the piece to grapple with perplexing issue of Jewish identity.

In recent years, a relevant institutional framework has begun to emerge regarding the Jewish reading public in the United States. American Jews reportedly purchase a grossly disproportionate share of hardcover books published, and in a rapidly shrinking book-buying market, publishers have taken note of this and have set out to capitalize on it by producing a perhaps disproportionate share of books that they believe to be of Jewish interest.[117] Even besides the apparent high number of books that American Jews buy, publishers' reasoning is that the demographic of Jewish book-buyers is a definable demographic, to use marketing terminology.[118] In other words, they can be readily targeted for marketing purposes through Jewish community organizations, Jewish publications, and the rest of the infrastructure that the American Jewish community has erected. From the point of view of the publicity department at a publisher, this is a huge advantage over harder to pinpoint groups.[119]

The Jewish community welcomes the interest, and the books that are geared specifically or in part to it. So, to help connect Jewish readers and writers and

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American literature, see Jules Chametzky et al. eds., *Jewish American Literature: A Norton Anthology* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

[117] Please see Andrew Silow-Carroll, "The more things change," *New Jersey Jewish News*, 9 June 2009, and Jewish Book Council, "A Golden Era for Jewish Books," *Jbooks.com*, accessed on 23 March 2011.

[118] Rachel Donadio, "Star Search," *New York Times Book Review*, June 24, 2007.

[119] Donadio.

publishers producing books for them, a new structure within the already developed Jewish communal infrastructure has emerged since 1999.[120] Labeled The Jewish Book Network, it holds an annual audition, where writers have two minutes to describe their book and its appeal to Jewish readers to an audience of organizers of Jewish Book Fairs from around North America.[121] Afterwards, the authors have a short session of mingling with the book fair organizers, and a few weeks later, they are sent a list of which cities are interested in hosting them. This arrangement helps writers and publishers, who no longer have the means to organize expensive book tours or publicity junkets, and helps the various Jewish Book Fairs provide authors for their attendees. It's a powerful force in a struggling industry.

For our purposes here, what is interesting to consider is the question of which authors and which books the Jewish Book Network deems relevant. That is, which books it thinks are Jewish books. The answer, quite simply, is that the organization—one of the most important Jewish literary institutions operating today—doesn't concern itself with whether an author of a book is Jewish. This makes some intuitive sense. If an author just happens to be named Epstein or Levey, but is writing about issues that have nothing to do with Jewish themes, Jewish characters, or Judaism, is it a Jewish book? On the other hand, if a non-Jewish author writes a novel set in Israel, or a narrative history of the Jews of Brooklyn—the type of project that has been put forward on more than one occasion—is it not a Jewish book?

Judging by the authors and books that the Jewish Book Network considers and brings to the dozens of communities it represents, what matters most is, understandably, that the books in question will be of particular interest to a Jewish

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[120] www.jewishbookcouncil.org, accessed on 23 March 2011.
[121] Donadio.

audience. Whether the author herself or himself is Jewish is almost immaterial. What is important, it seems, is that the subject matter is somehow itself Jewish.

To be sure, it's hard to say exactly what this means. Obviously, there are bright line cases where books are clearly of special interest to Jewish audiences, but there is also a wide, grey margin, where it is much less stark. It's hard to define in part because understanding what is Jewish literature would first rest on some kind of an agreement about what constitutes Jewish identity, which is notoriously difficult to arrive at. In fact, what might be the defining aspect of much Jewish literature—as opposed to just literature written by Jewish people—is that it wrestles with the very question of Jewish identity.

To return again to Philip Roth, one of his biggest concerns has always been Jewish identity. In almost all of his books, there is a good amount of text devoted to exploring what it means for his characters to be both Jewish and American. Roth even seems to believe that it was only when he began to engage with issues of Jewish identity that he began to come into his own as a writer, and emerge from his juvenilia. He writes:

> To prove in my earliest undergraduate stories that I was a nice Jewish boy would have been bad enough; this was worse – proving that I was a nice boy, period. The Jew was nowhere to be seen; there were no Jews in the stories, no Newark, and not a sign of comedy—the last thing I wanted to do was to hand anybody a laugh in literature. I wanted to show that life was sad and poignant, even while I was experiencing it as heady and exhilarating; I wanted to demonstrate that I was "compassionate," a totally harmless person.[122]

In *The Facts*, for example, Roth devotes page after page to exploring the dynamic that exists between his generation's increasing level of comfort with the American experience and his parents' generation's experience with it. For example, when a young Roth and his parents are visiting a university that he is considering

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[122] Roth, *The Facts*, 60

attending, he is deeply impressed and excited by how different it is to the Jewish neighborhood where he is from, but senses that his mother is uncomfortable:

> In fact, she was never wholly at ease except among Jews and for that reason cherished our part of Newark. She kept a kosher kitchen, lit Sabbath candles, and happily fulfilled all the Passover dietary regulations, though less out of religious proclivity than because of deep ties to her childhood household and to her mother, whose ideas of what made for a properly run Jewish home she wished to satisfy and uphold; being a Jew among Jews was, simply, one of her deepest pleasures. In a predominantly gentile environment, however, she lost her social suppleness and something too of her confidence, and her instinctive respectability came to seem more of a shield with which to safeguard herself than the natural expression of her decency.[123]

Later, Roth describes his own thinking on the university:

> To be sure, everything about the rural landscape and the small-town setting suggested an unmistakably gentile version of unpretentious civility, but by 1951 none of us thought it pretentious or unseemly that the momentum of our family's Americanization should have carried us, in half a century, from my Yiddish-speaking grandparents' hard existence in Newark's poorest ghetto neighborhood to this pretty place whose harmonious nativeness was proclaimed in every view.[124]

What is strikingly different from the writing of today's emerging Jewish writers, who are at least two generations younger than Roth, is that Roth's insistence here—and elsewhere in his writing—on showing and exploring his own Americanness as distinct from his forebears' experiences reads, comparatively, like he is protesting too much. To put in another way, those Jews in later generations in the United States would be less inclined to harp on and on about how American they were. They would be more comfortable in their American skin, and less eager to show their Americanness.

In fact, in the newest generation of young Jewish writers, it is more common to see writers stressing the things that separate them from generic North America than clinging to it. For example, one need only look at the slew of Jewish-themed magazines and internet publications aimed at today's young, urban "hip" Jew: *Heeb*,

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[123] Ibid., 44.
[124] Ibid., 46.

Jewcy.com, Jewlicious, Tablet, and many others. Especially in New York, these have fostered a cottage industry of writers and journalists who play on their Jewishness rather than avoid it, part of a larger renaissance and reconfiguration of Jewish culture by young people whose aim is to stress how they are different from the mainstream, not how they fit in. This has been widely noted. For example, in their "The Continuity of Discontinuity: How Young Jews Are Connecting, Creating, and Organizing Their Own Jewish Lives," Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman write, "there has been a veritable outbreak of new organizations, projects, programs—both de-institutional, and occasionally within the confines of more traditional settings—participating in this 'invention and re-invention.' In the fall of 2003, this trend was featured on the front cover of Time Out New York and branded as a movement to 'make Judaism cool.'"[125]

A good reference point on the issue is Rachel Shukert. Shukert, born in the early 1980's, and author of the two memoirs *Have You No Shame?* and *Everything is Going to Be Great*, is not as central to the North American Jewish canon as older writers like Roth, Bellow or Richler, but for our purposes in this chapter, she does provide some interesting points for discussion.[126]

Roth is from New Jersey. Bellow was from Chicago. Richler was from

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[125] Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, "The Continuity of Discontinuity: How Young Jews Are Connecting, Creating, and Organizing Their Own Jewish Lives." Berman Jewish Policy Archive, 21/64. 2007. Also see Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman, "Cultural Events and Jewish Identities: Young Adult Jews in New York." Berman Jewish Policy Archive, February 2005, and Marcus, Alredge, "Heebsters: Community and Identity (Re) construction of Urban Jewish Hipsters" in Co-opting Culture: Questions of Culture and Power in Sociology and Cultural Studies, by B. Garrick Harden and Robert Carley (New York: Lexington Books, 2009), 225-250.

[126] Rachel Shukert, *Have You No Shame?* (New York: Villard, 2008); Rachel Shukert, *Everything is Going to Be Great* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010).

Montreal. Jonathan Safron Foer, who is from Shukert's generation, is from Washington, DC. All of these are either hotbeds or near hotbeds not just of writing and culture—but specifically of *Jewish* writing and culture. Rachel Shukert, meanwhile, is from Omaha, Nebraska. There are only about 6000 Jews in Omaha, and they have not produced a great deal of Jewish literature.[127] Despite emerging from this background, however, Shukert's Jewish identity as evidenced through her writing is as sharp as any other writer's—and certainly more than the average writer from New York.

This is arguably the product of a common factor in Jewish identity. It stands to reason that the less Jewish a Jewish person's environment, or perhaps the more Jews feel in the minority in their environment, the more local Jews will typically feel their Jewishness—or, rather, their Jewishness expressed as Otherness. By this logic, living in New York City, a city where roughly ten percent of the population is Jewish, one won't feel one's Jewishness as an Otherness instead of as a natural state of being nearly as much as one might in Oslo or Aberdeen, as noted, for example, by the journalist Stevenson Swanson. In Swanson's article "N.Y.'s Unique Jewish Reality," he quotes a rabbi in New York as stating that in New York City, "You can walk through whole neighborhoods and see Jewish people, hear people speaking Jewish languages. It's a unique opportunity for someone to experience a Jewish reality."[128] By contrast, Jews in communities where they are a tiny minority often feel their Otherness—their Jewisness—a great deal more, because, as Gabriella Modan has demonstrated, "growing up in a place with few Jews…[can lead to]…a minority

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[127] Jewish Federation of Omaha: www.jewishomaha.com, accessed on March 23, 2011.

[128] Stevenson Swanson, "N.Y.'s unique 'Jewish reality,'" *Chicago Tribune*, 30 August 2003.

ethnic identity."[129] Meanwhile, in Israel, the largest and most homogenously Jewish community in the world, many Jewish Israelis have never considered their Jewishness, never been to a synagogue, and never felt much connection at all to the Jews of Los Angeles, London, Sydney, or Glasgow, as shown by T.F. McNamara, who argues that "non-religious Israelis (the majority) are not necessarily used to seeing themselves as 'Jewish' at all," because for them having a Jewish background is simply the norm.[130]

Understandably, meanwhile, a writer who doesn't grow up intensely feeling their Jewishness may not feel the natural inclination to express it in their writing. In Shukert's books, though, it seems that her Jewish identity is so deeply ingrained in her that it underlies much of her work, even when she is writing about issues not obviously related to Jewishness at all. Although she's from a different generation, in some ways her obsession with her Jewishness and how it sets her apart underlies everything she writes in a way that brings to mind earlier writers like Roth, and less so her contemporaries in New York, who just happen to be Jewish, and don't write *qua* Jews.

On the face of it, Shukert's second book, *Everything is Going to Be Great*, is but one in a vast genre of American books about Americans sojourning in Europe, going back at least as far as Mark Twain's *Innocents Abroad* and Henry James' *Transatlantic Sketches*, and running through the Hemingway and Fitzgerald era, all the way to the present day. In Shukert's book, she chronicles a badly thought-out trip she took through Europe in her early twenties, complete with stops in Paris, Vienna,

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[129] Gabriella Modan, "White, Whole Wheat, Rye: Jews and Ethnic Categorization in Washington, DC," *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 11.1 (June 2001), 125.
[130] T.F. McNamara, "Language and Social Identity: Israelis Abroad," *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 6.3 (1987) 219.

and Amsterdam. She had romantic interludes, moments of danger, and the other necessary ingredients for such a book. What differentiates *Everything is Going to Be Great* from its predecessors in the "Americans Abroad" genre, though, is that in addition to working on the dissonance between Shukert's American background and the Europe she is experiencing, on a deeper and more poignant level, the tension in Shukert's narrative turns more on her own consciousness of her Jewishness while spending time in Europe, a place with a particularly complicated history for Jews. It is in the moments when her awareness of this is at its strongest that she is at her sharpest in narrative skill, wit, and depth of emotion.

For instance, at one point during her time in Vienna, Shukert is speaking to a street vendor who sells sausages, and finds herself in a conversation that she finds rather disturbing:

> "And you?" said the man. "What is your background?"
> I downed the rest of my beer. "What do you think my background is?" I asked.
> He shrugged. "I don't want to insult you."
> I let that pass. "Well," I lied haughtily, "some of my family is actually from Austria. Some of them may have even lived in Vienna at one point."
> He snorted. "In the Second District, maybe. But not anymore." The man began to laugh.
> "Why?" I asked, laughing along. "What's the Second District?"
> Still laughing, he gave me a look that chilled my blood. "The Jewish district."[131]

Shukert has begun a relationship with an older Austrian man, and after she reports this conversation with the vendor to him, he seems "genuinely appalled," and mutters disgustedly, "Some people in Vienna."[132]

Shukert is reassured by this, until she explores it further:

> "This man," Berthold was shaking his head angrily. "This man has no right to say this to you."
> "Whatever," I said. "I mean, I know he didn't mean it as a compliment, but really, all he said was that I look Jewish."

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[131] Shukert, *Everything is Going to be Great,* 81.
[132] Ibid., 85.

> "No," Berthold placed his hand over mine and gazed deeply into my eyes. "No. You are beautiful."
> It's possible to be beautiful *and* Jewish, I wanted to say.
> "You do not seem Jewish," Berthold continued. "Please not to worry. Some people in Vienna are still full of hate."[133]

In his *Anti-Semite and Jew*, Sartre argued, *inter alia*, that it was in large part the feelings of the anti-Semite that created the feeling of Jewishness in the Jew, and when reading Shukert's account of these two conversations, one can't but help believe there is some truth to the observation.[134] Rachel Shukert, the character in the book, clearly feels her Jewishness more profoundly because of the anti-Semitism she encounters.

Later, when she and her Austrian boyfriend visit a flea market together, Rachel discovers a yellow Star of David leftover from the Second World War for sale, alongside some other trinkets and papers. She is stunned and in horror, but her boyfriend prevents her from buying it:

> "You don't want that," he said.
> "But I do," I said softly. "It was there for me to find."
> "Forget about it!" he shouted. "It's not nice! It's not something to buy!"[135]

In that moment, you can sense her feeling of being Jewish grow ten-fold.

It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to delve deeply into gender issues, but because Rachel Shukert is one of the few female writers I'm considering here, and because her work tangles with the issue of gender identity at its intersection with North American Jewish identity, it is worth spending some time here on that intersection.[136] There is little question that gender identities and ethnic identities are

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133 Shukert, *Everything is Going to be Great*, 85.
134 Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew* (New York: Schocken, 1948).
135 Shukert, 89.
136 As a side point, it should be conceded that the low number of female writers considered in this dissertation is not ideal, and was not, by any means, a conscious decision. The best explanation I can offer for the relative scarcity is that while I am certainly influenced by female writers—Joan Didion comes to mind, in particular—the specific work in the creative component of this

often intertwined across a variety of demographics, and Jews are certainly no exception. In fact, as several scholars have shown, the "popular notion that Jews embodied non-normative sexual and gender categories is long-standing."[137] In this context, Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini write:

> …the alleged failure of the male Jew to embody "proper" masculinity became the indelible evidence of the racial difference of all Jews. Within the terms of this transcription, the male Jew stands in for all Jews: it is the Jewish male's difference from "normal" masculinity that signs the difference of Jews as a group from, variously, Europeans, Aryans, Christians. As Ann Pellegrini has noted elsewhere, within the terms of the homology in which Jew = woman all Jews are womanly but no women are Jews.[138]

In essence, Jewish women are left stripped of a Jewish identity with which to grapple, essentially disappearing as independent actors of cultural importance. They are seen in the derogatory archetypes of the "Jewish American Princess" and the nagging Jewish mother, but neither of these roles have much agency of their own; they are seen from the perspectives of others and, when represented in literature or film, cannot fully be identified with by a reader or viewer. The female who is both a woman and a Jew all but disappears.

In her analysis of representations of Jews and gender in American film, Ruth D. Johnston writes:

> In the American context, the representation of the feminized Jewish male is transformed into material for humor, but the question remains: where does the representation of the Jewish male as sexual neurotic leave Jewish women, especially since the Jewish male so often longs for a gentile woman, who…becomes the schlemiel mirror or double? The Jewish female thus seems to be doubly displaced.[139]

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dissertation may stem more from the male authors I am discussing than from female writers who have had just as strong an effect on me in other areas of my writing.

137 Daniel Boyarin, et al., "Strange Bedfellows: An Introduction," in Daniel Boyarin et al. eds., *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 1.

138 Boyarin, 2.

139 Ruth D. Johnston, "Joke-Work: The Construction of Jewish Postmodern Identity in Contemporary Theory and American Film," in Vincent Brook, ed. *You Should See Yourself: Jewish Identity in Postmodern American Culture* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 215.

These are not concerns that *The Accidental Peacemaker* deals with head-on, as its interactions with questions of Jewish identity are mainly from a male perspective, but it does brush up against them in some respects. For example, when the narrator details the difference in results when he and his wife make use of a computerized simulation of Middle East diplomacy.[140]

Rachel Shukert, in her work—and like some of her contemporaries among young, Jewish female writers—claims both her Jewish identity and her female identity. She both lets them intermingle and examines them on their own, asserting her rights to each of them, and refusing to be subsumed as a Jew by the images of Jewish identity created and fostered by male writers and stereotypical imagery. For example, she asserts them both in her protagonist's romantic interactions with gentile males, and in her first book, *Have You No Shame*, she confidently portrays both a coming-of-age story of a young female in America's Midwest that is entirely recognizable to non-Jewish young women *and* a story of a young Jew struggling to come to grips with their Jewish heritage, which is familiar to most Jews of either gender.

Having said that, although her protagonists in both books are resolutely feminist and modern women, and they consistently and powerfully exist as women *and* Jews, it could be argued that in the way Shukert employs humour, these protagonists occasionally do come across as female versions of the archetypal American Jewish male, as portrayed by, say, Woody Allen. (For example, in the passage cited above about the sausage vendor, where her neurosis and paranoia is accentuated by interaction that is both dark and funny.) Exploring whether the influence of that archetype in the context of humour is so overwhelming that it is

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[140] See page 145.

difficult for young, Jewish female writers to escape it completely is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it is certainly a question that merits further study.

JEWISH IDENTITY AND ISRAEL

The intersection of Jewish identity and gender identity is a complicated issue, but an equally thorny aspect of Jewish identity with which American Jewish writers grapple is the relationship between American Jews and Israel, Diaspora Jews and Israel, or simply themselves and Israel. Before exploring how some North American Jewish authors have dealt with these relationships, some background on the historical context to the relationship between Israel and the West in general will be useful. (Even if, in the interests of brevity, it will be relatively simplistic.)

Between the founding of the State of Israel in 1948 and the 1967 War with its Arab neighbours, the relationship between American Jewry and Israel was quite simple. In fact, at that time the relationship between the United States and Israel, and even to some extent, the relationship between Western Europe and Israel, was a straightforward and mostly positive one. This dynamic changed following the 1967 war and the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. As the occupation solidified more and more and the measures used to maintain it grew more questionable, Israel's image abroad was tarnished and, for many, eventually soured.

Today, this means that an American Jewish writer who chooses to engage with Israel in the context of his or her quest to come to terms with Jewish identity faces a serious and complicated task. Even going back a few decades, however, Israel complicated the issue of Jewish identity anywhere else in the world by providing an image of Jewry in many ways based on strength and military might, instead of the traditional mainstays of Jewish self-conception: education, culture, and other forms of

soft power. The issue now is a highly political one, and although it was arguably always somewhat political, earlier it was more philosophical than political. For their part, Jewish writers have tried to deal with both the philosophical and the political aspects.

In Philip Roth's book *Operation Shylock*—which was discussed in some depth in the first chapter—Roth's story focuses on the relationship between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. The first chapter of this dissertation focused on the ambiguity of the link between the supposedly fictional events in the novel and Roth's real life events, and on Roth's use of doubles and counterlives, but the fact is that the book's main concern is quite plainly the debate about Zionism.

Just as Roth plays games of sleight-of-hand with the reader when it comes to the linkage of fiction and reality, though, he dances around the issue of where he (or the fictional version of him who narrates the book) stands on the constellation of questions that make up both the Middle East debate and the tricky issue of the American Jew's relationship to Israel.[141] As is so often the case, all he does is raise more questions.

The questions, however, are themselves fascinating and provocative. The man impersonating Philip Roth and visiting Israel is involved in a quixotic mission to do a reversal of Zionism and "save" the Jews by leading them out of Israel and back to Europe. He calls this "Diasporism." This alternate Roth, a reverse Moses, has detailed and well thought-out arguments for his plan, and although the plan is bizarre and more or less impossible, as one reads them, one can't help but be at least impressed by its flow and logic. The question of whether Roth the author himself buys into any of his renegade counterpart's political theories is almost immaterial. Roth is like a

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[141] For Roth's playfulness with fiction and reality, please see Chapter One.

trained debater: he can argue both sides of the issue convincingly. His alter-ego believes not only that Zionism has been a political mistake for the Jews and the world, but also a cultural one. For example, early on, he lectures to Roth about what he sees as the cultural paucity in Israel:

> What have they created like you Jews out in the world? Absolutely nothing. Nothing but a state founded on force and the will to dominate. If you want to talk about culture, there is absolutely no comparison. Dismal painting and sculpture, no musical composition, and a very minor literature—that is what all their arrogance has produced. Compare this to American Jewish culture and it is pitiable, it is laughable. And yet they are not only arrogant about the Arab and *his* mentality, they are not only arrogant about the goyim and *their* mentality, they are arrogant about you and *your* mentality. These provincial nobodies look down on *you*. Can you imagine it? There is more Jewish spirit and Jewish laughter and Jewish intelligence on the Upper West Side of Manhattan then in this entire country—and as for Jewish *conscience*, as for a Jewish sense of *Justice*, as for Jewish *heart*…there's more Jewish heart at the knish counter at Zabar's than in the whole of the Knesset!"[142]

As mentioned in the first chapter, it is very tricky to pinpoint exactly where Roth the author's true beliefs lie on this tortuous subject matter. To what extent do the tenets of "Diasporism" have a grounding in his own opinions? Is it just an intellectual exercise for Roth or does he see some truth in them? Towards the end of the book, he offers plenty of rebuttals to the phony Roth, but a reader is still left unsure exactly where the author stands on the issue. Once again, that's probably the point—the debate itself is what interests Roth the author.

Roth is, of course, far from alone among his generation of Jewish writers in grappling with Israel. Canadian writer Mordecai Richler (1931-2001) did the same thing in his 1994 book of reportage, *This Year in Jerusalem*. The book is a travelogue about Israel, in which Richler uses Israel as a way to help him define himself as a Jew. He does not do this, however, in the way that would probably most please Zionist thinkers and philosophers. That is, he doesn't attach his Jewishness to Israel, but rather defines it in opposition to Israel—not a political or moral opposition, but an

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[142] Roth, *Operation Shylock*, 122.

opposition based on difference. He is a Canadian Jew, firmly and proudly Jewish, but also firmly and proudly Canadian— and all that must necessarily be defined in contrast to the Israeli narrative, a narrative usually premised on Jewish identity trumping nationality.[143]

In the book, Richler is far from anti-Zionist in any political way. In fact, he has been raised with a lukewarm cultural Zionism that he still maintains. The book begins with his early knowledge of Zionist youth groups in Montreal:

> In 1944, I was aware of three youth groups committed to the compelling idea of an independent Jewish state: Hashomer Hatza'ir (The Young Guard), Young Judaea, and Habonim (the Builders).
>
> Hashomer Hatza'ir was resolutely Marxist. According to intriguing reports I had heard, it was the custom, on their Kibbutzim already established in Palestine, for boys and girls under the age of eighteen to shower together…[I]n my experience, the sweetly scented girls who belonged to Young Judaea favored pearls and cashmere twinsets. They lived on leafy streets in the suburb of Outremont, in detached cottages that had heated bathroom towel racks, basement playrooms, and a plaque hanging on the wall behind the wet bar testifying to the number of trees their parents had paid to have planted in Eretz Yisrael, the land of Israel.
>
> I joined Habonim—the youth group of a Zionist political party, rooted in socialist doctrine—shortly after my bar mitzvah, during my first year at Baron Byng High School.[144]

Richler tells us that he was moved to join this group because one of his friends, whose athletic prowess the young Richler had admired, had been a member. In other words, for Richler, as for so many other young North American Jews of his generation and later ones, Israel was simply part of the Jewish cultural mosaic in which he was raised.

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[143] A brief word on Richler's relationship to Canada: in Canada, Richler was seen by many as a national treasure, even if an often controversial one. He received the Order of Canada, among the highest honours the country bestows on its citizens, and he wrote several books and many columns and articles about Canada, its culture, and its politics. He was frequently critical—in particular about Quebec nationalism—but his criticism always clearly emerged from his deep affection for the country and its character. See, for example, Mordecai Richler, *Oh Canada! Oh Quebec!: requiem for a divided country* (Toronto: Penguin Books, 1992).

[144] Mordecai Richer, *This Year in Jerusalem* (Toronto: Knopf Canada, 1994), 4.

In his journey to Israel outlined in *This Year in Jerusalem*, however, Richler sometimes feels the need to show his difference. Even though he remains a supporter of Israel, he takes opportunities to show that his identity, even as a Jew, is not all wrapped up in the state. Towards the end of his journey, he writes:

> All at once, I was fed up with the tensions that have long been Israel's daily bread. I resented the need to stiffen every time an Arab came striding toward me. I was weary of the West Bank's loopy, God-crazed *yeshiva buchers* toting Uzis on the streets of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv. Ironically, the American-bred *olim* among them, playing latter-day gunslingers, actually owed more to their TV heritage of "Maverick" and "Rawhide" than they did to the teachings of Hillel, the great sage of the Second Temple period, or Rabbi Akiva ben Joseph (c. 50-137 A.A.), the legendary biblical scholar. I also didn't want to encounter any more appealing boys and girls in uniform, lugging submachine guns rather than briefcases stuffed with textbooks.
>
> I was raised to proffer apologies because my ostensibly boring country was so short of history, but now, after five weeks in a land choked by the clinging vines of its past, a victim of its contrary mythologies, I considered the watery soup of my Canadian provenance a blessing. After traveling through the Rockies, Rupert Brooke had complained that he missed "the voices of the dead." Me, I was grateful at last for their absence.[145]

The wariness that Richler feels with regard to Israel is characteristic of one way that North American Jewish writers situate themselves, but it is not the only one. For instance, it is instructive to read Saul Bellow's *To Jerusalem and Back* (1998) alongside Richler's travelogue. It is fairly similar to *This Year in Jerusalem*, and in it Bellow provides some similar reflections—but Bellow maintains more of a steadfast connection to Israel than does Richler.

In the book, Bellow recounts a sojourn of a few months that he took in Jerusalem and the observations and experiences he had during that time. Much of them revolve around his attitudes towards Israel from the perspective of a North American Jew. (Bellow, 1915-2005, was actually born in Lachine, Quebec, but grew up largely in the United States.) At the book's outset, as he arrives in Israel, he is

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[145] Richler, 238.

preoccupied with how France's *Le Monde* has been treating the country, and he has recently submitted a letter to the paper.

He writes:

> In my letter to *Le Monde* I had said that in the French tradition there were two attitudes toward the Jews: a revolutionary attitude which had resulted in their enfranchisement, and an anti-Semitic one. The intellectual leaders of the Enlightenment were decidedly anti-Semitic. I asked which of the two attitudes would prevail in twentieth-century France—the century of the Dreyfus affair and of the Vichy government. The position taken by Foreign Minister Maurice Jobert in the October War of 1973 was that the Palestinian Arabs had a natural and justified desire to "go home." I expressed, politely, the hope that the other attitude, the revolutionary one, would not be abandoned. I made sure that my letter would be delivered. Eugene Ionescu gave the editors one copy of it; another was handed to them by Manes Sperber, the novelist. The letter was never acknowledged.[146]

Looking back on this with the perspective of a few decades, it's hard to square it with the way conventional wisdom, even among Jews in the United States and Israel, has been reframed. Bellow seems to be equating the idea that the "Palestinian Arabs had a natural and justified desire to 'go home'" with anti-Semitism, which from today's viewpoint sounds at very least faintly ridiculous. It has become conventional wisdom that Palestinians have justified grievances against the Israeli occupation and that they are in a state of unwarranted homelessness. Besides a relatively small group on the Right in the U.S. and in Israel and in some quarters in Europe, there is a general consensus today that Palestinians need a proper state of their own, and so Bellow's argument seems antiquated.[147]

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[146] Saul Bellow, *To Jerusalem and Back: A Personal Account* (New York: Viking Press, 1976) 9.

[147] It is important to be clear here. There is, by no means, a general consensus on the contours of such a state or how its formation is to be implemented. Details like the status of Jerusalem, the Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories, and the rights of refugees in the Palestinian Diaspora remain extremely contentious points that are not likely to be resolved, even in the abstract, anytime soon. The notion that Palestinians should not in theory have a state *at all*, though, is held by few serious politicians in any country. (Yet this is what Bellow seems to have meant.) Even Israel's rightwing and often rejectionist party, the Likud Party, has now officially accepted the need for a Palestinian

Regardless of the politics, however, the fact that Bellow, as an American and a visitor, is so concerned with Israel and its well-being illuminates his conception of his Jewish identity. He is American, certainly, and in no way considers himself Israeli—the very idea of his book, a travelogue to Israel, would make little sense if he did—and yet Israel feels almost intrinsic to his idea of his Jewishness.

That is not surprising, given his generation. Even if much of the book is spent hearing other people's opinions about Israel, and grappling with its political and social realities, a fundamental tenet of his belief system is the importance of Israel's survival as a home for the Jews, especially in the wake of the Holocaust. For example, reflecting on Israel's chances for survival in the face of a hostile Arab world, he writes:

> But at this uneasy hour the civilized world seems tired of its civilization, and tired also of the Jews. It wants to hear no more about survival. But there are the Jews, again at the edge of annihilation and as insistent as ever, demanding to know what the conscience of the world intends to do. I understand that Golda Meir, after the October War, put the question to her Socialist colleagues of Western Europe: Were they serious about socialism? If they were indeed serious, how could they abandon the only Socialist democracy in the Middle East? And the "civilized world," or the twentieth-century ruins of that world to which so many Jews gave their admiration and devotion between, say, 1789 and 1933 (the date of Hitler's coming to power), has grown sick of the ideals Israel asks it to respect. These ideals were knocked to the ground by Fascist Italy, by Russia, and by Germany. The Holocaust may even be seen as a deliberate lesson or project in philosophical redefinition: "You religious and enlightened people, you Christians, Jews, and Humanists, your believers in freedom, dignity, and enlightenment – you think that you know what a human being is. We will show you what he is, and what you are. Look at our camps and crematoria and see if you can bring your hearts to care about these millions."
>
> And it is obvious that the humanistic civilized moral imagination is inadequate. Confronted with such a "metaphysical" demonstration, it despairs and declines from despair into lethargy and sleep. [148]

Although this sort of righteous indignation still manifests in certain quarters of the younger generation of American Jews, it has diminished considerably over the years. In the creative component of this dissertation, in fact, this is one of the themes

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state. See, for example, Rory McCarthy, "Netanyahu backs an independent state for first time," *The Guardian*, 14 June 2009.

[148] Bellow, 58.

explored. In general, the attitude of North American Jews to Israel—not just in simple measures like support for Israeli policy, but also in a more nuanced calculus of *personal connection* to Israel—is directly correlated to their age. Jews who "grew up" in the "shadows of the Holocaust," as one of the characters in *The Accidental Peacemaker* puts it, intuitively feel the need to support Israel's policies, and reflexively feel connected to it at a gut level. Younger ones, though—especially the non-religious— feel less and less strongly on both prongs of this analysis. There are, of course, many exceptions, but generally speaking, multiple studies show this trend. For instance, Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman begin the final section of their "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel" with this conclusion:

> Older Jews express considerable attachment to Israel, and very few are genuinely alienated from Israel. The same cannot be said for younger adult Jews. In sharp contrast to their parents and grandparents, non-Orthodox younger Jews, on the whole, feel much less attached to Israel than their elders. Moreover, in the past one could speak of mounting indifference to Israel as the major orientation of the unengaged. In contrast, these days we find instances of genuine alienation as many more Jews, especially young people, profess a near-total absence of any positive feelings toward Israel.[149]

JEWISH HUMOUR

I will now move on to consider the third metric of "North American Jewish writing" listed above, Jewish humour, which is germane not only to the creative component here, but also to a great deal of Jewish writing. The next chapter will discuss humour more broadly, but in concentrating here on Jewish humour specifically, my intention is in part to connect the preceding discussion to what follows, as well as to link the particularly Jewish aspects of humour to the other

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[149] Steven M. Cohen and Ari Y. Kelman. "Beyond Distancing: Young Adult American Jews and Their Alienation from Israel." Jewish Identity Project of Reboot. 2007, 20. See also Sam Abrams and Steven M. Cohen. "Israel Off Their Minds: The Diminished Place of Israel in the Political Thinking of Young Jews." Berman Jewish Policy Archive. 27 October 2008.

characteristics of "North American Jewish writing" that we have just finished discussing.

In the last hundred years, humour in the English-speaking world, as with most aspects of global popular culture, has been dominated by the United States, and American humour in this period has been contributed significantly to by Jewish humour. Wherever comedy has found root in US culture, whether Vaudeville, television, movies, and standup comedy, Jews have had a disproportionate influence on it. Jerry Seinfeld, Woody Allen, and countless others attest to that.

Jews have relied on their humour throughout modern times, using it as a defense and a refuge from a world that saw them as outsiders. As Sara Blacher Cohen writes about their initial experiences in the New World in her *Jewish Wry: Essays on Jewish Humor*:

> …they were aliens in a larger, more uncertain world. Cut off from *shtetl* solidarity, the enemy wasn't so easily identifiable and friends were not readily available. Longing for the old country and baffled by the new, their marginal status, that is, the psychological ambiguity of being on the outskirts, prompted them to make comedy out of constraint.[150]

Indeed, in the United States, still outsiders but eventually more accepted into the realms of popular culture than they had ever been before, they soon began to dominate much of the comedy in the country. From books to film to performance, they used their freedoms and acceptance in the U.S. to leverage their tradition of humour and satire.

The natural question, though, is what exactly defines that tradition? What are the contours of Jewish humour, as distinct from other kinds of humour? The fact is, of course, that if the elements of comedy are notoriously hard to define—and lose all

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[150] Sarah Blacher Cohen, ed. *Jewish Wry: essays on Jewish Humor*. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 6. For an overview of Jewish humour, please see Henry D. Spalding, *Encyclopedia of Jewish Humor: From Biblical Times to the Modern Age*. (New York: Booksales, 1992).

semblance of comedy when one tries to do so—the elements of a specific branch of comedy are even more ephemeral and hard to pin down. Nevertheless, boiling down Jewish humour to its essence has certainly been repeatedly attempted.

For instance, in "The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor," Eliot Oring presents several theories, including:

> If the background of Jewish suffering did condition the expectation of a distinctive Jewish humor, there was only a limited range of possibilities for articulating this history of suffering with humor. The possibilities were that the humor was *transcendent*, that the humor was defensive, or that the humor was pathological.[151]

In "Self-Effacing Wit as a Response to Oppression: Dynamics in Ethnic Humor," meanwhile, Samuel Juni and Bernard Katz contend that "such humor is best understood as an attempt to control victimization," and proceed to add a deeper psychological element to the "defensive' theory, arguing, *inter alia*, that

> Within the rubric of defense mechanisms, there is one further elaboration that would lead to a different interpretation of this approach. A common neurotic syndrome for victims of traumatic assault is the repetition compulsion. This behavioral symptom cluster finds victims gravitating toward situations that are similar to the event that traumatized them. The dynamics here are those of desensitization. Essentially, the individual tries to re-experience the trauma in an attempt to master failure and negate earlier deleterious effects. We posit that the telling of self-directed jokes by an abused outgroup entails the in vivo re-experiencing of the shame and aggression described in the anecdotes. The process is not oriented toward any external audience. Rather, it is the defensive intent of the joke teller to re-experience the negative event so that its harsh implication can be tempered.[152]

For my purposes in thinking about how various authors have employed Jewish humour, I posit that three characteristics of comedy are indicative of it "being Jewish": Jewish humour uses humour as a way of leveling people of different ranks (the ingroup and the outgroup, the powerful and the powerless, or the victim and the

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151 Eliot Oring, "The People of the Joke: On the Conceptualization of a Jewish Humor," *Western Folklore*, Vol. 42, No. 4 (Oct., 1983), 267.
152 Samuel Juni and Bernard Katz, "Self-Effacing Wit as a Response to Oppression: Dynamics in Ethnic Humor," *The Journal of General Psychology*, Vol. 128, No. 2 (April 2001), 129.

victimizier), is often self-mocking, and is defensive or at least stoic in the face of oppression or suffering.

A useful reference point here is Jonathan Safron Foer's. In Foer's *Everything is Illuminated*, each of these three markers of Jewish humour is starkly observable, even though you might expect them to be more watered down than in the books of Roth or Bellow given that his young age separates him further from the culture and wit of the Eastern European shtetl. While their manifestations are not watered down in the book, though, they are subtly different than in more traditional North American Jewish humour. Foer is, of course, two generations younger than these earlier writers, and it is evident—in the way that he relates to his Jewishness, his Americanness, and the humour that emerges from his protagonist's travels in Europe. Foer's book is in a sense a quintessential fish-out-of-water tale, which is simply another way of thinking of the "outgroup" leveling marker of Jewish humour, mentioned above. It follows his character as he visits the Ukraine, researching the Holocaust, and experiencing profound culture shock— which, in his amusing style of narration, provides abundant humour.

For example, one of Foer's narrators, in his broken-English, describes a possible interaction between an American and a Ukrainian border guard as follows:

> [The guard is] in love with America, but he will hate the American for being an American. This is worst. This guard knows he will never go to America, and knows that he will never meet the American again. He will steal from the American, and terror the American, only to teach that he can. This is the only occasion in his life to have his Ukraine be more than America, and to have himself be more than the American. Father told me this, and I am certain that he is certain that it is faithful.[153]

Authors like Richler and Roth have played the fish-out-of-water card for humour as well. In their cases, their characters were often Jewish fish in Gentile ponds, leading to insight and laughter from that convergence. Historically, of course,

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[153] Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything is Illuminated*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 33.

the image of the rootless Jew has been almost emblematic of the fish-out-of-water archetype—the outgroup individual who uses humour to level the field.

On the one hand, Foer's protagonist in *Everything is Illuminated* has this same dynamic at play around him. In a sense, in fact, he has it in an amplified way, since he is exploring a world in which he is among the only Jews, the rest having being wiped away completely. On the other hand, though, Foer's fish-out-of-water protagonist stems almost as much from being an American in Europe as it does from being Jewish.

Thus, Foer's protagonist plays a double role when it comes to the concept of being an outsider. He plays the Jew in a Gentile world, and he plays the American in Europe. But this is not just multilayered structuring on the part of the author. It is also reflective of the difference between his generation of North American Jews and the generations that preceded his. Identifying as much as North Americans as they do as Jews—or even more so—members of his generation often feel their difference from the rest of the world in both dimensions, national and ethno-religious, as shown as well, for example, in the case of Rachel Shukert, above.

Even so, there is no question that *Everything is Illuminated* is a "Jewish book," to the extent that anything can be defined as such: it is about a Jewish character investigating the story of his family's survival of the Holocaust. There is also no question that the humour employed in it fits much of the same criteria as seems to be required for Jewish humour, as defined above. That is, it uses humour to level people with power imbalances, is self-mocking, and is defensive in the face of oppression. Foer is mocking not only of others, but of himself, and his comedy serves to level the powerless and the powerful.

In the case of the protagonist in *Everything is Illuminated*, it is worth considering the notion that it is the demons of the past in Europe that are the powerful and the present-day residents and visitors that are the powerless. The Holocaust was obviously the most stark example of Jewish powerlessness in the face of anti-Semitism, and so for Foer's book to find laughter amidst its sadness is a victory for Jewish humour—not just an affirmation of Jewish survival, but an opportunity for that leveling that is so characteristic of the humour in Jewish literature and art. Beyond this, however, one could argue that the younger generations of Europeans—like the young Ukrainian in the book who guides Jonathan around while trying to understand what Jonathan is after—are themselves powerless against the deeds of their ancestors and against a history that haunts them no matter how they try to escape it. Thus, when Foer finds awkward humour in the interaction between his young Jewish protagonist and the young guide, or in the guide's own struggle to come to terms with his people's history, the humour is a way of reducing the past's power over the present, of leveling the powerful and the powerless.

Like Foer, his contemporary Rachel Shukert's humour fits neatly into the tradition of Disapora Jewish humour, in terms of poking fun at both the powerful and at oneself, as a way to level the world. In fact, when I interviewed her for the books website Open Book, she added an almost quantitative edge to this equation.

I asked:

> You write about real people and turn them into characters in your books. This is something I do in my books too, so I know it brings up all kinds of traps. How do you deal with the ethical issues that this entails?

She responded:

> I have sort of an unscientific equation (although I've thought about trying to turn it into an actual formula) that however bad I make them look, I have to make myself look a certain number of degrees worse. If a character says something stupid, I have to say something stupider. If a character is cruel or selfish, I have to be even crueler and more selfish. It's sort of like a preemptive penance for making fun of

people, I guess.[154]

In her writing Shukert puts this formula into practice. Although she seems to take immense pleasure in pushing the boundaries of taboo for the sake of humour, her most battered target is always herself. For example, in an early scene in *Everything is Going to Be Great*, she lightly mocks an American friend of hers who is head-over-heels in love with France in a way that only a tourist can be with a country, but then aims the real satirical brush at herself, when she describes a scene where she thought she was getting progressively better at speaking French as she drank progressively more wine.[155]

As mentioned earlier, Shukert's book deals with some heavy themes, but even amidst the discussions of the Holocaust and modern day anti-Semitism, she insists on finding humour, and is thus, like Foer, emblematic of the younger generation of Jewish authors' use of Jewish Humour. As she stated in the interview on Open Book, "In general, I'm distrustful of people who don't see at least a little of the funny side of horrible misfortune. I'm a Jew, what do you want from me? That's how we do things."

Justice Potter Stewart of the United States Supreme Court famously said, in reference to pornography, that even if he couldn't define it precisely, "I know it when I see it."[156]

In a way, one is tempted to say the same thing about North American Jewish writing. There are certainly plenty of Jewish writers or writers of Jewish descent who are in no way writing Jewish books. Their books and their writing are simply books written by Jews. Conversely, there are a number of non-Jewish writers who write

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[154] "Writers Talking: Gregory Levey in Conversation with Rachel Shukert," www.OpenBookToronto.com, 13 October 2010.
[155] Shukert, *Everything is Going to Be Great*, 6.
[156] Jacobellis v. Ohio, 378 U.S. 184 (1964)

books that could easily be deemed Jewish literature, or at least of interest to the Jewish community. Coming to a definition of what Jewish writing means with any kind of decisive finality, however, is an unlikely event.

Nevertheless, there are certain shared characteristics that connect the strands, and employing the lenses of Jewish language, Jewish identity, and Jewish humour is one way to locate those connections and situate a given piece of writing.

CHAPTER THREE:

YOU'D BETTER MAKE THEM LAUGH: ON POLITICAL HUMOUR IN WRITING AND OTHER MEDIA

"If you're going to tell people the truth, you'd better make them laugh. Otherwise, they'll kill you.

- Unknown[157]

In Chapter One, I sought to locate the creative component of this dissertation in the context of life writing. In Chapter Two, I sought to locate it within the tradition of North American Jewish writing. In the latter, after using the lenses of language and identity, I used the lense of Jewish humor. In this third and final chapter, I will continue to focus on humour, but will expand the discussion beyond humour in Jewish writing to humour in writing generally, especially at its intersection with politics today.

Towards the end of this chapter, I will argue that using humour within the context of fictionalized memoir—or the related genres of life writing discussed in Chapter One—can allow an author to probe or analyze sensitive political topics with less danger of needlessly offending readers, and thereby convey messages or discussions to those who might otherwise reject them immediately. In many respects, meanwhile, politics can be seen as a sort of role-playing, as has been noted, for example, by David E. Apter:

> [Political agents] are those actors who on a stage take on larger-than-life proportions while at the same time condensing, miniaturizing, and personalizing both the role and the issues for which the role stands…[Q]uite often the script will include a recounting of their own lives, vicissitudes, and triumphs, these becoming metaphoric for those of others…They stand for the relevant political coteries who, themselves both actors and manipulators of texts, can on necessary occasions serve as stand-ins and surrogates for the agent.[158]

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[157] This quotation is often ascribed to George Bernard Shaw or Oscar Wilde, among several others, but a definitive source for it does not seem to be available.

[158] David E. Apter, "Politics as theatre: an alternative view of the rationalities of power," in Jeffrey C. Alexander, et al., eds., *Social performance: symbolic action,*

Thus, in making the argument that fictionalized memoir is particularly appropriate for political topics, I will suggest that because in many respects politics can be seen as a sort of role-playing, using fictionalized memoir to play a role (especially with the added ingredient of humour to make that role more palatable to sensitive readers) may be especiallly useful in approaching political topics.

GUIDING FRAMEWORK

The study of humour has, of course, fueled a great deal of scholarship across a variety of areas. In anthropology, Ivette Cardea argues that

> …humour-based interactions might serve for psychological and ideological survival in the face of psychosocial stigmatisation. Irony, absurdity and paradox, might be used to contest and transcend, both in thought and in action, the logic of dominant and dichotomous systems of thought where the attributes of pathology are embedded.[159]

In psychology, Rod A. Martin's book, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach*, provides a wealth of psychological approaches to humour, drawn from psychology's different branches ("cognitive, social, biologic, personality, developmental, clinical, etc.").[160] On the functions of humour, Martin writes:

> The psychological functions of humor can be classified into three broad categories: (1) positive and social benefits of the positive emotion of mirth, (2) uses of humor for social communication and influence, and (3) tension relief and coping.[161]

In philosophy, Israel Knox defines humour as "playful chaos in a serious world," and writes:

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cultural pragmatics, and ritual (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 228.

[159] Ivette Cardea, "On Humour and Pathology: the role of paradox and absurdity for ideological survival," *Anthropology & Medicine*, Vol. 10, No. 1, (April 2003), 115.

[160] Rod A. Martin, *The Psychology of Humor: An Integrative Approach* (Burlington, MA: Elsevier Academic Press, 2007), xv.

[161] Martin, 15.

> The locale of humor must be noted, and this locale is always a world, a "frame- of-reference," that is serious. Humor is a species of liberation, and this liberation is due, in large measure, to the contrast to the playfulness of comedy's chaos and the seriousness of the world in which it occurs.[162]

In communication theory, Francisco Yus writes that:

> …jokes are often framed by linguistic markers foregrounding a specific intention. Humorous utterances (especially the so-called canned jokes) may be isolated in on-going conversations by explicit markers… The same might occur in non-canned jokes (spontaneous or otherwise),but in this case, the hearer has to make ex post facto hypotheses based on assumptions about the intended humorous quality of the utterance.[163]

All of these approaches are useful, and in some cases, reinforce each other, but it is beyond the scope of this project to delve deeply into any specific branch of the study of humour. Instead, as my starting point and guiding frame, I will use a quotation by Henri Bergson from his seminal 1900 work on the subject, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*:

> You would hardly appreciate the comic if you felt yourself isolated from others…Our laughter is always the laughter of a group…However spontaneous it seems, laughter always implies a kind of secret freemasonry, or even complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary. How often has it been said that the fuller the theatre, the more uncontrolled the laughter of the audience! To understand laughter, we must put it back into its natural environment, which is society, and above all must we determine the utility of its function, which is a social one…Laughter must answer to certain requirements of life in common. It must have a SOCIAL signification.[164]

Other significant thinkers have come to understandings of humour and its dynamics that are quite different, and perhaps even contradictory. Freud, for instance, believed that jokes provide a "relief" through a release of repressed urges, writing that nonsensical jokes provide a remedy to the frustration built up by the fact that "The power of criticism has usually grown so great in the later part of childhood and in the

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[162] Israel Knox, "Towards a Philosophy of Humor", *Journal of Philosophy*, 48.18 (1951), 543.
[163] Francisco Yus, "Humor and the Search for Relevance," *Journal of Pragmatics*, Vol. 5, Issue 9 (Sept. 2003), 1299.
[164] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic* (Rockville, Maryland: Arc Manor, 2008), 11.

period of learning which extends beyond puberty that pleasure in 'nonsense unbound' is only rarely bold enough to express itself directly."[165]

For our purposes, though, Bergson's argument that humour is primarily "social" is especially apt. Politics is, by definition, "social." One could certainly not have any political dynamics without a societal infrastructure of some kind. It should not be surprising, then, that if we pinpoint what we mean by "politics" to be the professional political arena, in which policy is made and civic leadership is determined, Bergson's observations about what makes "the comic" are quite helpful. We can laugh at it because we can all share in it.

HUMOUR AND POLITICS IN MEDIA

Before I turn to the specific case of books, however, I will briefly consider humour and politics in a more general context, with a look at the intersection between humour and politics in other media today. It is natural that there would always be an intersection between humour and politics to be mined, but it's noteworthy that in the North American political landscape over the past few years, humour and politics have become frequently, and almost confusingly, intermingled.

Over the past decade, for example, *The Daily Show,* a satirical late night comedy television program based on current events, has paradoxically become one of the prime sources of factual news data for a generation of Americans, as found by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, which discovered that:

> 16% of Americans said they regularly watched The Daily Show or the Comedy Central spin-off, the Colbert Report. Those numbers are comparable to some

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[165] Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Penguin, 2002), 123.

> major news programs. For instance, 17% said they regularly watched Fox News' The O'Reilly Factor, and 14% watched PBS' NewsHour with Jim Lehrer regularly.[166]

On October 30th, 2010, political comic Jon Stewart, host of the show, took his influence to a new level by staging a large-scale rally in Washington, D.C. The event was called "The Rally to Restore Sanity," and it was held at the National Mall in Washington, DC, the large public space situated near many of the most important government buildings in the capital, and the scene of such milestones as presidential inaugurations and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a Dream" speech. There were reportedly over two hundred thousand people in attendance, and a reported four million more watching from home. All this for something that was, at least on its face, a spoof. It was replete with absurdist skits, and attendees held up mock-protest signs with messages like "If your beliefs fit on a sign, think harder," "We should do this more often," and "Ironically, this rally is insane."[167]

On the one hand, this was entertainment. On the other, however, it was criticism of another—entirely earnest—rally that had been held on August 28th of the same year. Glenn Beck, rightwing host of a popular program on Fox News had held his own divisive rally called "Restoring Honor," which brought together approximately one hundred thousand people, and which produced starkly divided opinions from the two sides of the American political spectrum.[168] To Stewart and his followers, Beck's rally was the epitome of the extremist rhetoric and divisions that were pulling the United States apart and causing damage to the country and to the rest

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166 "Journalism, Satire, or Just Laughs? 'The Daily Show with Jon Stewart,' examined." Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism. www.journalism.org, 8 May 2008.

167 "The 100 Best Signs at the Rally to Restore Sanity and/or Fear," www.buzzfeed.com, accessed on 1 April, 2011.

168 The attendance figure was hotly disputed, which numbers ranging wildly. For analysis of the attendance numbers, please see Peter Grier, "Glenn Beck rally attendance: calculating how many really showed up, " Christian Science Monitor, 30 August 2010.

of the world. Their rally, "The Rally to Restore Sanity," was their antidote to all that. At the same time, however, by satirizing the Beck rally and the genre of fiery, partisan hyper-patriotic politics that it represented, Stewart and his followers were also highlighting the comic edge inherent in the rightwing politics of Beck and the populist rightwing movement known as the Tea Party, who made up the bulk of those who attended the Beck rally. In this context, there is little doubt that Jon Stewart's apparatus has tangible power in educating the public and steering opinion through humour, as shown by Geoffrey Baym in his study, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism." Baym writes:

> For the 2004 calendar year, Comedy Central estimates the nightly audience for the show's first run at 1.2 million people, with another 800,000 tuning in to one of the program's subsequent repeats (S. Albani, personal communication, February 24, 2005). National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) (2004) research has found that 40% of the audience is between the ages of 18 and 29, but perhaps surprisingly, the show also attracts an older audience, with 27% above the age of 44. The NAES data further reveal that the audience is more educated, follows the news more regularly, and is more politically knowledgeable than the general population.[169]

Stewart's influence is beyond simply quantitative, however; it's also in his substantive approach. According to Baym:

> In place of reductionist polemics, Stewart's politically oriented interviews pursue thoughtful discussions of national problems. The goal of the discussions is not the tearing down of the "other" side (although Stewart never hides his own political preferences) or some banal prediction of the shape of things to come, but rather an effort to gain greater understanding of national problems and their potential solutions.[170]

In fact, Stewart's "side" is not the only one increasingly using humour for political means. Glenn Beck's fellow FOX News personality Bill O'Reilly occasionally uses comedy to get across his hard-right message, and comedian Dennis

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[169] Geoffrey Baym, "The Daily Show: Discursive Integration and the Reinvention of Political Journalism," *Political Communication*, Vol. 22, Issue 3, (2005), 260; also see Jody Baumgartner and Jonathan S. Morris, "The Daily Show Effect: Candidate Evaluations, Efficacy, and American Youth," *American Politics Research*, Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 341-367 (May 2006).
[170] Ibid., 271.

Miller is a regular guest on serious news programs using his humour to make points that are generally supportive of the Republican Party.

Perhaps the most notable example of a right-wing political-comedy hybrid, however, is author and pundit Ann Coulter. Coulter has written numerous books and appears on television, radio, and at public events frequently, and although her message is unrelentingly rightwing and she is deeply concerned with serious politics, the tone and sarcastic wording she employs are often more suited to entertainment than punditry. To be sure, many of her statements are more caustic and hurtful than humourous, but there are plenty of exceptions. For example, "The swing voters—I like to refer to them as the idiot voters because they don't have set philosophical principles. You're either a liberal or you're a conservative if you have an IQ above a toaster," and ""If John Kerry had a dollar for every time he bragged about serving in Vietnam—oh wait, he does."[171]

Meanwhile, despite Jon Stewart's frequent protestations that he is not a political activist, merely a comedian, this is clearly not all there is to his role in society. The rhythms and themes of his show follow the patterns of American electoral cycles, and the power that the show wields in the political landscape is clear. Even many rightwing political figures, with whom Stewart and his followers are not usually allied, are regularly willing to appear on the show in order to appeal to the powerful, young, and politically-engaged voting block for which Stewart is a major standard bearer. During the 2008 presidential campaign, and the primaries leading up to it, every serious contender for the White House appeared on the show, some of them several times. More recently, on the eve of the 2010 mid-term elections,

[171] www.brainyquote.com, accessed on 1 April 2011.

President Obama went on *The Daily Show* to make a plea to young voters to support his party's chances in Congress.

Further, after Stewart's allegedly satirical rally, the Democratic National Committee organized an event called the "Phone Bank to Restore Sanity," designed to use the momentum and visibility of the rally to galvanize the party's supporters. They urged those attending the rally to volunteer at their call center, and released an invitation that said, "We need folks to turn the energy from that rally into action by contacting key voters across the country and making sure they have a plan to vote by November 2nd."[172] Given all that, it bears repeating: *The Daily Show* is a comedy show, hosted by a comedian, on a channel called Comedy Central.

Clearly, however, *The Daily Show* is hardly an anomaly. It is just one of the more visible elements of interwoven humour and politics in the zeitgeist. In addition to Coulter's consistent performances and the other examples cited above, we saw a similar dynamic in comedian Tina Fey's satirizing of Vice Presidential Candidate Sarah Palin during the 2008 president campaign, which did much to sully Palin's image.

Before proceeding to examine books in this vein, one more example from outside book publishing is worth noting: the rise over the past decade of the publication *The Onion*. A humour newspaper originally published at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, it has grown so popular in the last decade that its online version is regularly cited by the American mainstream media. *The Onion* takes nonsensical news items and writes them up in serious journalistic style, thereby making light of both its subject matter and of journalism. Some notable *Onion* headlines have included: "Nation Demands Tax Dollars Only Be Wasted On Stuff That's Awesome,"

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[172] Ben Smith, "Channeling the Stewart rally," Politico, 27 October 2010.

"Obama To Make Reassuring Eye Contact With Every Last American," and "Supreme Court Upholds Freedom Of Speech In Obscenity-Filled Ruling."[173] Its popularity has had a constant upward trajectory.

One *Onion* article headlined "Political Scientists Discover New Form of Government," included this fabricated quote:

> "We were attempting to recreate a military junta in a controlled diplomatic setting, and we applied too much external pressure," said head researcher Dr. Adam Stogsdill, a leading expert in highly reactionary ruling systems. "The resultant government has the ruthless qualities of a dictatorship combined with the class solidarity of a plutocracy—it's quite a remarkable find."[174]

In a more recent one, taking aim at the increasingly stark polarization of American society, the opening was:

> Barack Obama, the first black president, proved to millions this year that he is either trying his best to lead the nation during the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, or he is the modern-day incarnation of Adolph Hitler. One of the two.[175]

In both of these short passages, and in the articles from which they're taken, *The Onion* parodies not only journalism and politics, but also the intersection between them, and by doing so, it has—along with the other outlets discussed above—actually broadened that intersection.

HUMOUR AND THE MIDDLE EAST IN LITERATURE

Even the Middle East conflict has not been immune to satire, including in books. Several have been published using the situation in the region as material for comedic writing, although perhaps none of them calibrated in exactly the same way as

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173 "Nation Demands Tax Dollars Only Be Wasted on Stuff That's Awesome," *The Onion*, 13 July 2010; "Obama To Make Reassuring Eye Contact With Every Last American," *The Onion*, 9 June 2010; "Supreme Court Upholds Freedom of Speech in Obscenity-Filled Ruling," *The Onion*, 4 May, 2010.

174 "Political Scientists Discover New Form of Government," *The Onion*, 30 October, 2007

175 "Barack Obama—Either Doing His Best In One of The Most Difficult Times in American History, or Hitler," *The Onion*, 17 December, 2010.

is the material here in the creative component. For example, in Ray Lemoine and Jeff Neumann's 2006 *Babylon by Bus*, the authors tell the story of how they— twenty-something, non-political misfits—ended up, unprepared and completely out of place, in Iraq in the first year following the American invasion.[176]

In a way, this sort of book (and *The Accidental Peacemaker*) stems from Tony Horwitz' earlier book, *Baghdad Without a Map*, which detailed his own haphazard and mostly unplanned adventures in the Middle East, but Horwitz's aim was more serious, and he has in fact since become an important journalist.[177] Still, Horwitz offered a model for writers looking to write comedic explorations of the region, while maintaining the perspective of an outsider and an outsider's unburdened sensibility.

More recently, Joel Chasnoff's *The 188th Crybaby Brigade: A Skinny Jewish Kid from Chicago Fights Hezbollah* took aim directly at the Israeli-Arab situation.[178] The book, published in 2010, describes a period that the author, an American Jew, spent in his mid-twenties as a member of the Israeli military.

Chasnoff's book and *The Accidental Peacemaker* share some similar sensibilities, concerns, and drivers of humour. Chasnoff leans heavily on the "outgroup" aspect to humourous effect. As discussed in Chapter Two, the "outgroup" is a mainstay of Jewish North American humour writing, and of Jewish writing in general, and a nomadic history over centuries could account for this sense of always being outsiders. In the following early passage, Chasnoff, describes why he is an unlikely person to find himself in the Israeli army, and why it is not his natural terrain:

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[176] Ray LeMoine and Jeff Neumann, *Babylon by Bus* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006).
[177] Tony Horwitz, *Baghdad Without a Map: And other misadventures in Arabia* (New York: Plume, 1992).
[178] Joel Chasnoff, *The 188th Crybaby Brigade: A Skinny Jewish Kid from Chicago Fights Hezbollah* (New York: Free Press, 2010).

> I'm the last guy you'd expect to join an army. For starters, I'm a Jew. And let's face it, we Jews aren't known for our military prowess. Jews make movies about war. In the case of Kissinger, we helped escalate a war. But when it comes to actually fighting wars, that's not our gig. We prefer to leave that to the Gentiles...
>
> …But the main reason you'd never expect me to join an army is that I'm a peacenik. I hate guns. I've never been in a fistfight in my life. I grew up listening to Peter, Paul & Mary and Simon & Garfunkel, and I truly believe that, as John Lennon said, we should give peace a chance.[179]

Coming very early in the book as this does—before Chasnoff even explains how he improbably landed up in the army: his career in New York was proceeding poorly and out of desperation for a new experience, he immigrated to Israel, where he was drafted—this passage serves as a sort of narrative manifesto for *The 188th Crybaby Brigade*. Chasnoff is explaining that his book is going to fit into the "fish-out-of-water" model of life writing. He is a Diaspora, pacifist Jewish fish in the Israeli military desert. In fact, to anyone who knows Israeli culture and its machismo no-nonsense view of the world, this passage not only serves to demonstrate that Chasnoff is an outsider in the military, but that he is also probably even more so in this *particular* military. The passage points at traditional Diaspora Jewishness, and to American identity, such that Chasnoff sets himself up as an alien in two senses and frames his narrative at the outset from this point of view, and then proceeds to fully make use of one the most characteristic signposts of Jewish writing—finding humour in difficult situations.

The following is a sequence from later in the book, when Chasnoff begins his actual military duty as a soldier:

> A dark-skinned kid with black hair and long eyelashes shoves a piece of paper under my nose. "*Ata po?*" he says in Hebrew. "Is your name on this list?"
>
> I take the paper. "What is this?"
>
> "The Guard Duty List."
>
> I check the page. "No."
>
> "Then you're guarding," he says.
>
> "Guarding what?"
>
> "The bunk."

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[179] Chasnoff, 8.

> "How do I guard the bunk?" I've got no rifle, no bayonet. Just a pocket notebook and a pen.
>
> "How should I know?" he says with a shrug. "Just walk back and forth through the courtyard. Make sure no one goes in our rooms except guys from our platoon."
>
> "How do I know who's in our platoon?" I say.
>
> He puts a hand on my shoulder. "Look. Some sergeant told me to post a guard in the bunk. So just guard. *Beseder*?"
>
> Since I don't have a choice, I pace the open-air courtyard in the middle of the two-story concrete bunk and try my best to look important. [180]

In this passage, Chasnoff has chosen to zone in on the absurdity of his situation. He is reminiscent of the Woody Allen character in the film *Bananas*, a neurotic, out-of-place and cowardly participant in a foreign war. He marches back and forth with no weapon, guarding a bunk for no apparent reason because of the strange and incomprehensible orders of some higher up. It's Kafka at war. A different writer, perhaps one less calibrated to North American Jewish humour and writing, could easily have taken this same scenario and written a serious and dry portrayal. It is, after all, a dangerous and grave position the author is in, finding himself badly trained and (at this point) not even armed in one of the world's most notorious warzones.

For much of the book, in fact, this is the tack he chooses to take, grappling with an infamously intractable and bitter situation and emerging with humour instead of acrimony. To *only* take this approach, though, would be unfair to both his readers and the people of the Middle East—both Israeli and Arab— and Chasnoff has enough sense as an author to mix his comedy with pathos, thereby enriching both. This is arguably a fundamental part of what makes Jewish humour *Jewish*. While, as described in the second chapter, a quintessential part of Jewish humour has always been its way to find laughter in the harshest of conditions, it has also always served a more serious function than just pure entertainment: as a leveler, as an escape, perhaps even as a mechanism for psychological survival. So, to employ it to describe his

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[180] Ibid., 23.

experiences with the tragic situation of the Middle East, from the problematic angle of serving in the military, works as a way to allow Chasnoff the character, Chasnoff the author, and Chasnoff's readers to explore the Middle East situation without too much psychological damage.

The Middle East is at its core, however, tragic and not comic, and it is impossible for Chasnoff, or any writer, to escape that completely. Indeed, Chasnoff's comic assignment to guard is followed by a passage that, although also amusing in parts, is much more thoughtful:

> …Everyone looks alike, as if we're genetic mutations of the same creature – a creature with closely cropped hair and Semitic features in a starchy green uniform two sizes too big.
>
> As I watch my new platoon mates yelp and bounce off the walls like wild monkeys, I get the sick feeling that this is all a big mistake. I always thought it'd be so cool to be a gun-toting Israeli soldier. But now that I've done it, it's obvious I have no business being here. I look at their faces, which are so foreign, and I wonder if I will ever know them. I have this sinking feeling I will spend this year as the outsider of the platoon, alone, constantly reminding people of my name. It's like Dorit said: these Israeli kids will eat me alive. If I wanted to help Israel, I should've mailed a check to the Jewish Federation like everyone else.[181]

It's interesting to note that Chasnoff spends some time observing how he and his young Israeli colleagues look similar, "like genetic mutations of the same creature" with "Semitic features." Although that may feed into the Zionist idea behind the army itself, it is belied by Chasnoff's own feeling of being different, apart—American, and not Israeli. Amid the laughter, it is a poignant moment.

Still, there are threads of humour even here, and what they present is something quite interesting. Chasnoff is among Jews, and couldn't possibly be in a more Jewish environment, and yet because he feels foreign, he is still making use of that classic Jewish tool of humour, touched upon in the last chapter, the tragic-comic lament of the outsider.

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[181] Ibid.

In order to preserve his comedic tone, however, Chasnoff has to maintain some degree of distance, of stillness. In Henri Bergson's *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic*, Bergson argues that this is a necessary ingredient, that emotion must be at least partially shed. He writes that to "produce the whole of its effect…the comic demands something like a momentary anesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple."[182] In short, one cannot get too emotionally involved in one's subject matter if one wants to craft it into comedy.

This is a convincing notion, but it could also be argued that to write humourous prose, especially about sensitive subject matter, it may be necessary to maintain some level of empathy and emotion, if only so that one doesn't cross a line from comedy to cruelty. Even so, Bergson is surely correct to some degree: letting emotion overwhelm the situation must surely destroy one's ability to draw humour out of it.

ISRAEL AND HUMOUR

It is particularly interesting that Chasnoff draws humour out of his experience in the Israeli military establishment, because Chasnoff is able to mine world-class humour out of a context where it is in short supply. Certainly, Israelis and their Arab neighbours employ a great deal of black humour in dealing with their difficult situations, and in fact, they often do this at levels greater than with which Westerners would be comfortable. For instance, as Ofra Nevo and Jacob Levine have shown, there was "an outburst of joking [among Israelis] during the Persian Gulf War, when the Iraqis began sending Scud missiles into Israel," precisely because they "were confronted with a huge threat, while being deprived of the ability to actively

[182] Bergson, 11.

respond."[183] Even so, despite what one might suppose given that Israel is the country of the Jews, and given the rich history of Jewish humour, humour is arguably not as at home in Israel as it is in the rest of the Jewish world.

For instance, discussing the cultural gaps between American Jews and Israelis in *Slate*, respected author and journalist Jeffrey Goldberg wrote, "I've always thought the reason so many Israelis lack humour is because Israel has an air force. Who needs jokes when you have F-16s?"[184] As discussed, Jews have always been well known for their humour, using it as a defense and a refuge from a world that saw them as outsiders. In the United States especially, they have dominated comedy, from books to film to performance. In Israel, meanwhile, humour has never been something of particular prominence. There is, of course, the same sort of local comedy that you might find in any country, but whereas the small Jewish state has excelled beyond all proportion to its size in fields like science, engineering, and even serious literature, it has not contributed to the area of humour in the way that you might expect of a country made of Jews.

In a published discussion with the same Israeli journalist who conducted the dialogue with Jeffrey Goldberg I responded to Goldberg's quotation above, by saying that, "I think it's precisely those with F-16s that most need a sense of humor."[185] Despite this, as with other aspects of global Jewish identity and culture, this may be one of the traditional Jewish elements that Israel and Zionism have consciously discarded. The state was founded with the idea of escaping the accoutrements of what the early Zionists saw as signs of the weakness of the Diaspora. For example,

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183 Ofra Nevo and Jacob Levine "Jewish Humor Strikes Again: The Outburst of Humor in Israel During the Gulf War," *Western Folklore*, 53.2 (April 1994), 125.
184 Jeffrey Goldberg, "Israel Isn't a Real Country for Most American Jews," *Slate*, 5 October, 2006.
185 Gregory Levey, "The Israeli Government Is No Place For A Nice Jewish Boy," Jewcy, 17 April, 2008.

intellectual enterprises that weren't practical—such as abstract philosophy, art history, and humour. As Eyal Chowers writes in his "The end of building: Zionism and the politics of the concrete":

> Many influential Zionists…posed homelessness, as they understood it, as the chief problem of modern men and women and strove to combat this predicament though a shared project of construction…[but] the practical skills required by builders and craftsmen have little to do with virtues such as the critical thought and independence of mind required of the citizen.[186]

Sophisticated humour requires "critical thought" and "independence of mind," and while in this article Eyal Chowers makes some arguably over-broad, unnecessarily political arguments, he is convincing on this line of reasoning. He argues that the early Zionists, tied as they were to the physical and material, were not as connected to language and its powers as were Diaspora Jews, who had spent much of their landless history having *only* language and the concepts it could convey (such as religion, humour, and philosophy). By contrast, for the early Zionists…

> …tradition signified a false faith in the shared world of meanings established and transmitted by words. The ardent faith in the power of language was conceived—especially by Palestinian Zionists—as partly responsible for what they saw as the hopeless predicament of Jews in modernity. Words of prayer and learning prevented no pogroms, assured no political rights, and answered no economic wants.[187]

Humour, which, especially in the Jewish tradition (replete with jokes and stories, as it is) is usually conveyed in language, would presumably not have been seen as adding value to the project of building a workable homeland. Neither would it have prevented pogroms, assured "political rights," or answered "economic wants," and while Israel has certainly changed a great deal since its pre-state early-Zionist days, the philosophies and societal structures the early Zionists put in place have continued to guide its culture.

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[186] Eyal Chowers, "The end of building: Zionism and the politics of the concrete," *The Review of Politics*, 64.4 (Fall 2002), 602.
[187] Ibid., 604.

POLITICAL HUMOUR AND THE STUNT MEMOIR

In Chapter One, memoirs like those of Danny Wallace or A.J. Jacobs, which are created out of staged events, were discussed, as *The Accidental Peacemaker* can be seen to fit in their sub-genre. In the context of this chapter, it should be noted that perhaps that sort of writing— intentional, first person, comedic satire—is a particularly good way to explore politics, and even a particularly good way to explore the ever-thorny Middle East conflict. Readers' appetites for intentionally-staged memoirs may wane in the coming years, but it doesn't seem likely that they will go away completely, especially with increasing trends toward a public with more of an interest in books classified as non-fiction than fiction, and with reality television continuing to thrive.[188]

In fact, this approach allows a writer to do something similar to what makers of comedic but educational documentaries do—teach, while also entertaining, and thereby explore sensitive subject matter while not offending readers or subjects too much. It is not a stretch to think that writers may do similar books on other geopolitical conflicts, like the one on the Korean peninsula or the one in Northern Ireland, as well as more domestically-focused ones.

Politics is certainly about issues and substance some of the time, but it is often just as much about identity and role-playing, as mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. In that sense, using the format of the fictionalized memoir might be ideal to explore some aspects of the political arena, because it is a way to put oneself into a role and investigate all that flows from that placement. In terms of the Middle East in

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[188] For the public's appetite for non-fiction relative to its appetite for fiction, please see Rachel Donadio, "Truth is Stronger than Fiction" *The New York Times Book Review*, 7 August 2005.

particular, it might even be especially suited. The Middle East conflict is very much about roles, about who fits into which identity slot, and what that fit means for their politics, world view, thoughts, and actions. From our outsider perspectives, we often lazily group the parties in the conflict into Israelis and Palestinians or Israelis and Arabs, and expect them to fit neatly into those roles. Looked at in more detail, though, each of these identities fragment further into more tightly defined sub-roles. Palestinian society is fractured into a multitude of different splinters, based on religion, sect, party-affiliation, geographical or historical particulars, or family loyalty. A religious member of Hamas from a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip will have little in common with a cosmopolitan Christian businessman from Ramallah. Sometimes, for the sake of larger Palestinian goals or solidarity, they may agree on particular issues for a particular length of time. Most of the time, they will fit into their very compartmentalized places within the larger Palestinian mosaic.

On the Israeli side, meanwhile, things are at least as complex when it comes to zeroing in on identities and roles. There are the distinctions between Israeli and Diaspora Jew, explored to some extent earlier in this chapter and in Chapter Two, but there are more divisions as well. Israelis are often divided by national origin (Yemen, Ethiopia, Russia, Eastern Europe, and many other places), by where they live (in Israel proper vs. in the settlements in the West Bank, for example), by extent of religious observance, and by where they stand on the political spectrum. Moreover, all this is in reference to Jewish Israelis, but there are, of course, over one million non-Jewish Israelis—Israeli Arabs, Druze, Bedouin, and non-Jewish foreign immigrants.[189] In trying to reduce the politics of the Middle East to understandable

[189] CIA World Factbook, https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook, accessed on 1 April 2011.

portions, this matrix of confusing, overlapping, sometimes hard-to-define identities only makes it more difficult.

Given the convoluted tapestry, however, perhaps a good way to come to understand the conflict and the myriad roles and vantage points involved in it is to approach it by adopting a role and observing a complicated structure from an assumed angle. The technique of staging events to provide the raw material for a "memoir" and then fictionalizing it allows a writer to drop into a role for a period, even if just artificially and superficially, and to observe the situation from that angle, and then try to write about it. Ultimately, of course, this can never give any kind of quantifiable, objective account, but in the context of subject matter that is so divided along prescribed roles, it is a useful endeavor for both writer and reader. It pushes the boundaries of how we understand the Middle East situation, and in a small way, it pushes the Middle East situation into a shape approachable by people who might not even ordinarily try to understand it. As a related point, although *The Accidental Peacemaker* uses novelistic devices, it is also heavily influenced by journalistic tones, and it is probably the desire to educate and probe a real-world situation that gives rise to the latter.

To go one step further, while it may at first seem that adding a humourous element into explorations of such sensitive subject matter is treating them without the respect they deserve, the truth may actually be that by using humour, it can sometimes be possible to obtain more nuance. As I stated in the Author's Note of my first book, "Sometimes it is the comic details that best reflect the gravity of the larger picture."[190] This was not just a glib way of trying to escape criticism for making light of a serious situation. Although humour does not have a place everywhere and in every situation,

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[190] Gregory Levey, *Shut Up, I'm Talking: And Other Diplomacy Lessons I Learned in the Israeli Government.* (New York: Free Press, 2008), xiii.

and although probing, serious analyses of political dynamics are obviously vital, the lightness of humour and the way that it allows a writer to push into touchy subjects makes it a tool for all manner of exploration.

It is in the "comic details," in fact, where much of the conflict may lie. One important aspect of what I am trying to do in much of my writing, including in the creative component that is about to follow, is to show that even the world's most notorious political issues, often thought of in broad, theoretical, abstract terms, are actually driven by people, who bring with them all the idiosyncratic tendencies of people anywhere. By focusing on the funny aspects rather than the severe, life-or-death aspects, a writer can humanize conflict—to attempt to build bridges through comedy. Combining this possibility with the possibilities granted by using life writing based on staged events is a way to delve into the hard-to-reach places of a situation that are otherwise impenetrable and steeped only in tragedy and despair.

CONCLUSION

What follows immediately after this concluding section of the critical component is the creative component, *The Accidental Peacemaker*, and my intention up to here has been to provide a context for reading and situating it. As with any piece of writing, it can be read both at a surface level, and as the product of forces and interactions below that surface. By contextualizing it in the previous three chapters and the introduction before them, I have aimed to provide a view into some of those deeper forces, or at a minimum, a view into how I see them and how they have affected my choices while writing the creative component.

In Chapter One, on life writing, I explored the dividing line between fiction and memoir, and used Thomas Larson's *The Memoir and the Memoirist* as a foundation, along with the work of other critics and analysts.[191] Although Larson's work proved extremely useful in conceptualizing life writing, I did not *wholly* agree with him on the lines he endeavors to place between fiction and life writing. In reflecting on the work and reception of a variety of writers such as novelist Philip Roth and memoirist David Sedaris**,** I argued that from a practitioner's point of view, the dividing line between the two genres often seems murky. I bolstered this assertion by reflecting on the precariousness of memory, and how its fragility necessarily affects life writing. In a work like the creative component, a piece of life writing (specifically "fictionalized memoir"), there are elements of fiction and traditional memoir, but the more one tries to parse them out, the cloudier the distinction becomes. On the one hand, this might be frustrating, but on the other, it is simply the reality of this sort of fictionalized memoir—and perhaps the reality of other kinds of

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[191] Thomas Larson, *The Memoir and the Memoirist*. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2007).

writing, including traditional novels and memoirs, even though that reality may often be willfully ignored.

In Chapter Two, on North American Jewish writing, I situated the creative component against the backdrop of Jewish writers like Philip Roth, Jonathan Safran Foer, and Rachel Shukert. In the context of the work of scholars like Irving Howe, I explored what makes North American Jewish writing "Jewish," and used the sometimes-overlapping divisions of "Jewish Language," "Jewish Identity," and "Jewish Humour" to approach the Jewishness both of North American Jewish wirting. In the section on "Jewish Identity," I spent some additional time on the sub-issue of Jewish identity and gender, and the extra difficulties female Jewish writers may have in grappling with Jewishness. I also spent a good deal of time exploring Jewish authors' relationships with Israel, as I believe that it is particularly illuminating in terms of understanding an author's Jewish identity, and, of course, particularly appropriate in contextualizing the creative component. This creative component makes use of several common aspects of North American Jewish writing, including Jewish language, Jewish Humour, and the exploration of Jewish identity, and owes a lot to the North American Jewish books that preceded it.

Finally, in Chapter Three, on politics and humour, I expanded beyond Jewish humour. To that end, I used, *inter alia*, Henri Bergson's *Laughter* to examine what makes humour function, and demonstrated that at the moment in North America, humour is so often intertwined with politics that the two often seem inseparable.[192] The intersection of humour and politics is the particular nexus where I see *The Accidental Peacemaker* adding something of value. I suggest that by connecting that well-travelled intersection with life writing—particularly fictionalized memoir based

[192] Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of Comic* (Rockville, Maryland: Arc Manor, 2008).

in part on staged events—and Jewish writing, the creative component plays the three streams against each other in a productive way. More generally, it may be that by using humour and life writing to examine difficult political terrain, an author can draw out conclusions, observations, and nuance that would otherwise be too contentious to handle without offending.

It is, of course, utter hubris to imagine that one's writing represents something wholly new. What I've provided in the creative component is derivative of many different schools, streams, and trends in writing, both historical and contemporary. If it can be said to be at all original, that originality lies in the specific intersections I have sought between the disparate streams: humourous political writing, North American Jewish writing, and life writing, specifically fictionalized memoir using staged events. This cocktail offers fruitful possibilities, and may open up space for other authors to explore further difficult territory.

CREATIVE COMPONENT:

THE ACCIDENTAL PEACEMAKER

SECTION ONE:

MY STRUGGLES WITH DEMENTIA

I was in the hallway outside an auditorium, waiting to give a talk to the audience sitting inside, when the organizer of the event told me something that gave me cause for concern.

"Just so you know," she said, "your opening act has dementia."

I thought I must have misheard, and wanted to ask her to repeat herself, but she had already walked into the room to get things started.

My opening act has dementia? I thought. *What?*

To be honest, I was surprised to hear that I even had an opening act, since I was just a first-time author doing a talk about my book.

I stood just outside the room and watched a man in his early sixties take the podium and proceed to give a presentation that was part lecture about the Middle East, part prayer, and mostly gibberish. The audience, which was composed largely of middle-aged and elderly people, took it in stride, and later on I found out that this was the group's standard procedure. This guy was apparently a regular at these events and had a habit of yelling out nonsensical statements during people's presentations, so the thinking was that if they let him do his little talk before the real guest speaker went up, he was less likely to interrupt. Indeed, when he was finished, my opening act got a fair amount of applause. I took this as a good sign. Apparently I was dealing with an easy crowd.

That was the first time I had encountered literal dementia on my book tour, but because the book I was promoting was about the Middle East, more than a few of the people I was interacting with were a bit off the rails. I had encountered everything

from armchair extremists more fanatical than their on-the-ground equivalents to peace activists so strident in their pacifism that they seemed on the verge of violence. In fact, these bizarre, often frustrating interactions had driven me to set a new goal for myself.

Mostly because I was tired of hearing about it, I had decided that I was going to personally solve the Middle East conflict.

The situation in the Middle East is a festering wound, only without all the charm, and by the time my first book came out, I was tired of picking at it. When I was a twenty-five-year-old law student in New York, I applied for an internship at the Israeli consulate and was surprised to instead be offered a full-time job as a speechwriter for the Israeli Mission to the UN. A bit later, despite not even being Israeli, I was asked to move to Israel to be an English speechwriter for Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. That parade of absurdity was the subject of my book. You should read it, or at very least buy it.

As was apparent to anyone who finished the book, by the time I left Israel after two and a half years of writing speeches, I had had more than enough of the whole situation. I flew back to America, ready to forget the whole thing. But it wasn't as easy to escape as I had hoped.

For starters, I seemed to have unwittingly developed an area of expertise. I don't mean to suggest that I was anything like an actual expert on Israel—my Hebrew was still shaky and I never could figure out why Israelis drank chocolate milk out of a bag instead of a carton—but I'd gained some firsthand knowledge of how the Middle East functioned, or didn't.

As a result, when I decided to get into journalism and started to pitch articles, everyone wanted me to write about the Middle East. So soon I was interviewing

former colleagues in the Israeli government and analyzing the always horrible situation for various newspapers and magazines.

The analysis was usually simple:

1. People are killing each other.
2. That is nothing compared to the threat of violence on the horizon.
3. There is a glimmer of hope that things will be worked out for the best.
4. But they probably won't.

It didn't take a Ph.D. in Middle East Studies to put together this incisive analysis. I made frequent phone calls to interview people in Israel, but because I was now back in North America, many of the experts I was contacting were in the United States. I spoke with American politicians and their aides; lobbyists; Middle East activists of various stripes; military folks; and fund-raisers. And as I published more articles, I was approached by more and more laypeople. Laypeople whose convictions were firmer and more entrenched than any I had encountered in the Middle East itself.

"We should attack Iran," an audience member at one of my speaking events would say, leaving it entirely unclear who she meant by "we" or if she herself was willing to join in the fighting.

"I prefer to think of Hezbollah as political activists, not terrorists," someone else would write in an email, which to me sounded like arguing that Italy was not really a country, but more like a pizza party.

I got a lot of emails from people all over the political spectrum, many of them feverishly ideological. In addition to the ones that were purposefully addressed to me, though, I had apparently been put on a good deal of email mailing lists about the Middle East, and my inbox was regularly bombarded with vitriol of all stripes. One

particular list, run by a man named Ted Collins, sent out an email almost every day, all of them long and angry. Collins, I knew, ran a rightwing website that demonized anyone even vaguely on the left or centre of the political spectrum, but I wasn't sure how I had ended up on his list. Occasionally I read Collins' emails to see what was angering him and his followers at that particular moment, but mostly I just deleted them without opening them.

It was all a bit overwhelming. Before I'd found myself entangled with the Israeli government, I hadn't known all that much about the Middle East situation. By the time I finished my stint abroad, my eyes had been opened wide to the dysfunctional way the region often worked. But I still had the vague idea that if the situation were being handled by the people I'd grown up with—by those from New York or Los Angeles or Toronto—then everything could have been solved by now.

It turned out that I was horribly wrong. As soon as I started to work as a journalist, I was blown away by the fervency and emotion that discussions of the Middle East elicited in North America. Everyone I encountered—whether they fell on the right among the hawks or on the left among the doves, whether they were Jew, non-Jew, or Arab—seemed sure that if they were just given six months and the authority, they could solve the Middle East conflict once and for all. Probably without leaving their armchairs, or taking a break from yelling at CNN.

Even in Israel, where I'd interacted with Israelis from all over the political spectrum, or at the UN, where I had met various Arab officials, I had encountered very few true Fundamentalists. The majority of those who actually lived in the region dealt with the issue of peace in a practical way, and they seemed to have a firmer grasp of the realities of the situation. For the most part, they seemed to realize that

very little could be cast in black-and-white terms, and that the only way to achieve anything in the peace process was to be pragmatic rather than strictly ideological.

Not so in the West, where there was no room for nuance when discussing the Middle East. People I encountered here were set in their opinions. Something as trivial as reality was never going to change their minds.

Shortly after I returned from Israel and started writing about my experiences in the Middle East, I began to get requests to appear as a guest on radio and television shows. The invitations came in from right-wing shows, left-wing shows, shows aimed at Jewish listeners, and even from Al Jazeera. It was at one of the first of these—a show that was broadcast on national television in Canada—that I realized just how nasty and unproductive these discussions could get.

I had received a phone call from a producer asking me if I would be a part of a panel discussion. The panel, along with a studio audience and the audience at home, would watch a documentary about Palestinian prisoners in Israeli jails. After that, we could discuss it and field questions from the audience.

Sure, I thought. *Why not?*

Well, soon I would find out exactly why not.

On the day of the show, I arrived at the studio and met the producer in the lobby, along with Harris, a political activist from Washington, and Oded, the Israeli who had made the film.

"You three are the moderates on the panel," the producer told us, and we looked at one another as if trying to discern signs of ideological affinity.

There were a fair number of people involved, the producer explained, among them far-left activists, far-right, pro-Israel activists, former Palestinian prisoners, and Lewis Brotstein, a controversial professor at Delong University in Cleveland.

I was peripherally aware that, at the time, Brotstein was in the midst of a battle to get academic tenure. The child of Holocaust survivors, he was a vocal and acerbic critic of Israel, and his tenure application process had turned highly political.

He and Stanley Kobman, the Yale Law School professor and ardent supporter of Israel, were engaged in what amounted to verbal warfare. A few years earlier, Brotstein had published a book devoted to attacking Kobman's Middle East stance and accusing him of plagiarism. Kobman had reportedly tried to stop the book from being published—apparently asking Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger to intervene, since the book was published by the University of California Press. The two academics were now involved in an ongoing personal conflict. Some were even saying that Kobman had tried to dissuade Delong from granting Brotstein tenure.

Oded disappeared with one of the producers, and Harris and I were led into one of the green rooms, where assorted people were waiting for the show to start. I couldn't identify some of them, but one group was clearly the former Palestinian prisoners. Looking at them, I thought of my stint in the Israeli government. I had begun it with a reflexive support for Israel and its policies; by the time I had finished, I still only wished the country the best, but had begun to see more complexity in the issues than before.

Still, while I knew that Israel often locked up Palestinians for what might seem to an outsider like mild offenses—throwing stones at heavily armored tanks, for example—I also thought that a solid portion of jailed Palestinians were there for good reason. So I couldn't help but wonder who exactly I was sharing the stage with.

Eventually, we were called to the studio. There, scattered among the bright lights and camera equipment, were about a hundred audience members. Our chairs

were labeled with our names and set up in a circle. The audience sat around us in a bigger circle.

One of the Palestinian former prisoners was seated directly beside me, and we greeted each other and shook hands. We made small talk and I wondered what he would think once he found out that I had been a mouthpiece of the government that imprisoned him. I didn't know if he had tried to blow up Israelis or if he had just sworn at the wrong border guard, but I did know that he had recently been in an Israeli jail and I had recently been in the Israeli government, and we were chatting just like two strangers seated beside each other at a wedding—one from the groom's side and the other from the bride's.

Before anyone on the panel was officially introduced, we watched the movie together. It was a portrayal of the culture and difficult conditions Palestinian prisoners had to weather in Israeli jails. I thought it was interesting but fairly innocuous—from what I knew about Israel, it wouldn't have been particularly controversial there, where criticism of the state's policies from a multitude of different angles was the norm.

But, as it turned out, the video was extremely controversial on this side of the world. Right after the movie ended, the host launched the discussion and it quickly grew heated. A few right-leaning panelists denounced the film for being too sympathetic to the Palestinians and not mentioning Israeli suffering. Some on the left criticized it for not showing what they believed to be the true extent of the plight of Palestinian prisoners. For a long while, the Palestinian former prisoners stayed quiet, but when the host asked the one beside me to speak about his impression of the movie, he said that his experiences had been much more grueling than those portrayed in the film. This enraged the far-right activists, who started yelling. That, in turn, enraged the far-left activists, who started yelling louder. Things were not going well.

The host only introduced his guests after they jumped into the fray. And since I'd quickly realized that this was not an argument I wanted any part of, I was not opening my mouth. So I just sat up there—a silent, nameless figure on a violently heated panel.

Soon the argument had veered away from the movie itself and back toward the old hackneyed Middle East debate. Those on the far Left talked about colonization, checkpoints, and brutal Israeli soldiers. The panelists on the far Right talked about terrorism, suicide bombing, and biblical land claims. Those on the Left seemed to believe that Israel was the cause of all of the Middle East's problems, as well as the deficiencies in American foreign policy. To the Right, Israel was always correct—even if its security measures were disproportionate or its settlement policies unproductive. The panelists on the Left thought that any measures Israel took to protect its citizens' lives were discriminatory, that its policies were designed to oppress the Palestinians, and although they didn't say it explicitly, it sounded like their prescription was for Israel just to simply cease to exist. Those on the Right thought that every waking thought of each Palestinian was to kill all the Jews on the planet. When they looked at a Palestinian, all they saw was Hitler. As they argued, in louder and louder voices, it was almost as if the two sides couldn't even hear each other at all.

A few times Harris and a couple of the other relatively restrained people managed to push their way into the conversation, trying to strike some kind of middle ground before being yelled back into silence. It was during one of these exchanges that I noticed an interesting little aside.

In the front row of the audience, just behind my Palestinian neighbor and me, were a couple of his friends. Before the show had started, they had been chatting a bit

in English, and had greeted me as well, unaware of my backstory. Now, as Harris and a few other nonfanatics tried—more or less vainly—to have their voices heard, one of these audience members leaned forward to speak to his friend, the Palestinian former prisoner beside me.

"It's easier to deal with the extreme Zionists," he whispered. "Much harder to deal with the moderates."

The Palestinian nodded in agreement. With the panelists screaming tired clichés back and forth, it was the most interesting observation I'd heard so far.

Meanwhile, the shouting continued, and I remained quiet, increasingly aware that I was the only one who wasn't getting involved, while a studio and television audience looked on, probably wondering why I'd been put on the panel in the first place. Self-conscious, I started staring downward to avoid the camera, which meant that I found myself looking directly at Lewis Brotstein's socks.

Wow, I thought, *Lewis Brotstein is wearing some pretty flamboyant socks.*

They were a medley of colors in an intricate pattern, and as I continued to stare at them as a distraction, I wondered if he always wore socks like that or if he had just chosen to wear them because he was on TV. Anyone watching the show would have seen a group of people ferociously debating the Middle East, and one person staring at his copanelist's feet.

Eventually, the host asked for members of the studio audience to comment, and a succession of them did, mostly spouting the same angry arguments aired by the panelists, only in far less lucid forms.

The final one, though, brought the emotional pitch up a notch. He was a teenager of Palestinian descent, but English was his native tongue, and it was clear that he was just as North American as me. Immediately after getting ahold of the

microphone, he launched a barrage of angry insults at the right-wing pro-Israel crowd on the panel, berating them and accusing them of "stealing my country."

One of the panelists took the bait and started yelling back.

"But it's not your country!" he screamed. "It's *our* country!"

The teenager's eyes started to tear up, and he continued to scream until his microphone was taken away and everyone was quieted down.

It wasn't really either of their countries, I thought. They both lived on the other side of the world, and enjoyed the kind of security and peace of mind that those living in the region—both Israeli and Palestinian—could only dream of. But they both believed they had the answer to the conflict, just like everyone else on the panel.

And that's when I decided that I would be the one to finally make Middle East peace. If nothing else, I figured, it would shut everyone up.

By the time I began my book tour, the idea had crystallized in my mind.

I would speak to as many people as possible from all over the political spectrum—from the biggest players in the Middle East debate to the cranks who kept bombarding my email in-box—and I would try to figure out what each of them was proposing. In doing so, I hoped to better understand America's perspective on the issue, and maybe even come to some solution. The 2008 presidential campaign was about to begin, and all signs suggested that the Middle East would play a serious role in the results of the election—and that the results of the election would play a serious role in the Middle East.

Over the coming months, I would meet with the various factions and explore the full range of theories—from the sensible to the totally crackpot. I'd participate in some of the outlandish activities that the Middle East debate spawned in North America and try my hand at peacemaking as a sort of freelance diplomat.

Even though I was tired of talking about Israel, I was excited about my journey. I thought that, in a curious way, it might be my only way to escape the conflict. At the very least, hopefully, I would begin to understand why so many people were so obsessed with the subject—and why I myself could not stop engaging with it, despite being absolutely sick of the whole thing.

After I finished my book talk that day, drawing approximately the same amount of applause as the man with dementia, several people from the audience approached me, as they usually did at these events. They would tell me their opinions about the Middle East or ask me strange and irrelevant personal questions, like whether or not I was married. As the line formed, I noticed that my "opening act" had stepped forward, and I didn't know what to expect when he made his way to the front of the line.

"Do you live in Israel?" he asked once he had reached me.

"No," I told him. "I did for a little while, but I came back."

"It's nice to meet you!" he said, and shook my hand.

"Thank you very much." I smiled. I was relieved that this conversation was turning out to be quite sensible.

"Do you live in Israel?" he asked again.

I wasn't sure exactly how to proceed, but other people were now asking me questions, which allowed me to move on without seeming too rude. One woman asked me if it was too dangerous for her grandchildren to visit Israel. No, I told her, and urged her to encourage them to go.

"You know there is no such thing as a Palestinian?" a man asked me, starting to repeat a tired argument I had heard many times before. "They only came to the area after the Jews started arriving. The Jews are the real Palestinians."

I just smiled and nodded, which was generally my strategy when arguments from the far Right or the far Left were foisted on me. All the while, I noted that my opening act was still standing around.

At many of the Israel-related events I spoke at, senior citizens made up a good portion of the audience, but that day the average age was even older than usual. This meant that the event organizer had some additional concerns beyond the usual logistics.

"I better go to the table where they're selling your book," she whispered to me as I continued to speak to the handful of people standing around. "There is one old woman who has to be watched. Otherwise she steals books."

Then she was gone to deal with this potential threat, and my opening act was standing right in front of me again.

"Do you live in Israel?" he asked once more.

"No," I told him again. "I did for a little while, but I came back."

"It's nice to meet you!" he said, and shook my hand.

"Thank you very much," I said and smiled.

"Do you live in Israel?" he asked.

The coming months were not going to be easy.

SECTION TWO:

NEITHER LEFT NOR RIGHT,

I'M JUST STAYING HOME TONIGHT

Shortly after I decided to be the one to make peace in the Middle East, I found myself going to a lunch meeting with someone who worked at a Jewish nonprofit in New York. A mutual friend had thought we would get along and that maybe we would be able to work together on a project of some sort.

Only as I arrived at the restaurant, a small Italian place on the Upper East Side, did it occur to me that I had no idea what this person looked like. I just knew that his name was Wayne, and I had the vague idea that he was in his thirties or early forties. So when I walked in, a little late, and found that the only person standing by the door was well into his sixties, I was a bit surprised.

"Wayne?" I asked tentatively.

"Yes," he said with a big smile, shaking my hand.

Okay, I thought, so Wayne was a bit older than I'd anticipated.

"I'm Gregory," I said. "It's nice to meet you. I'm sorry I'm a bit late."

He looked at his watch, and his brow furrowed.

"I actually thought I was a bit early," he told me.

But before we could discuss this any further, the maître d' appeared and asked us if we wanted a table for two.

We told him that we did, and followed him across the restaurant to an empty table. Then, just as we were about to sit down and I was already wondering if it would be appropriate to order appetizers, my lunch companion suddenly stopped.

"Wait," he said, "did you ask me if my name was *Wayne*?"

"Yes!" I said, alarmed.

"My name is Barry," he told me.

He sounded almost apologetic, and we both paused for a long while, assessing the situation.

"Then why did you say yes?" I asked him eventually.

"I thought you had misspoken."

When Wayne arrived and we sat down at our table, I quickly forgot about the awkwardness with Barry. It was impossible to pay attention to anything other than Wayne, who was so full of manic energy that it seemed possible that he would accidentally knock cutlery or glassware onto my lap at any moment. He was English, which I hadn't known before, and as soon as we sat down together, he started swearing profusely. I liked him immediately.

"You were a bloody speechwriter for the Israeli government?" he asked. "How the fucking hell did that happen?"

As politely as I could, I told him to read my book. I had even brought him a copy, and I handed it to him.

"Fuck!" he said for no apparent reason, staring at the cover.

We ordered our food, and Wayne told me about what his organization did. It had very little to do with the Middle East, but it was interesting stuff. Because I had been immersed in Middle East–related activities for a while, I sometimes forgot that organizations like his existed—American Jewish groups who stayed out of the Middle East fray.

Then he asked me what my next project was.

"I'm going to try to make peace in the Middle East," I told him.

"You're shitting me," he said. "Why the fuck would you try to do that?"

Especially because of his English accent, I thought his constant swearing was somehow funny, but the volume at which he was doing it was starting to make me a bit uncomfortable. A group of Asian tourists were eating lunch, and I noticed that a few of them were casting concerned glances in our direction.

I lowered my voice a little, hoping he would follow suit, and told him about my reasoning. I was sick of hearing about the situation in the Middle East, I said, and if solving it myself was the only way to end it, then that was what I had to do. I explained that my plan was to talk to a wide collection of people engaged with the debate, and see if I could broker a solution—guided by the line I had heard from the Palestinian former prisoner's friend about how it was harder to fight a moderate than a radical. In the end, not only would I hopefully put one of the world's longest-running conflicts to rest, I would also write another book about the experience.

"So you're going to spend months talking to all those Israel nutters?" he asked.

"I think I have to," I told him.

He took a sip of his water, and seemed to be considering what I had told him.

"That's fucking stupid," he said.

I wondered if this was going to be the reaction I got from everyone as I tried to move forward on my project, and I asked him why he thought so.

"You've just fucking told me that you're sick of talking about the Middle East and hanging around with all those bloody nutters," he said. "And now you tell me that you're going to waste your time doing more of that when you actually want to be doing something else. Of course that's fucking stupid."

Suddenly I had an idea.

"Will you be one of my advisors?" I asked him.

"What?"

I explained to him that I had been thinking that it might be useful for me to get a handful of people whom I could run ideas by as I proceeded. Wayne wouldn't serve as a political advisor, exactly, but more as a devil's advocate.

"I'll fucking do it," he said. "I'll check up on you, but I'm not doing it because I think it's a good idea—which I don't—or to help the bloody book you might write. I'm doing it because I'm worried about your fucking mental health. I think this is going to destroy you. That's why I'm doing it. I'm worried about your fucking mental well-being. I'm worried about your fucking marriage."

Okay, I thought, *nice to meet you too.*

I had to admit that Wayne might have had a point about my marriage. When my wife, Abby, and I had just started dating, I was speechwriting for the Israeli government in New York and she had to deal with me having to shape my schedule to take into account events halfway across the world. Later, when I was recruited to write speeches in Jerusalem, I had to persuade her to drop out of school to go with me, even though we'd only been dating for six months. She inexplicably agreed, and when we decided we'd had enough of the whole endeavor and moved back to North America, she was relieved that we were leaving the Middle East behind.

So when I first told her that I was seeking to get myself involved in the situation again, even if it was mostly just from our apartment, she was less than thrilled.

"I thought you were done with all that," she said.

"Just when I thought I was out," I told her, "they pull me back in."

She didn't seem to think that was particularly funny, and so I explained to her, as I had to Wayne, that trying my hand at peacemaking might be the only way I could myself escape the grasp of the Middle East.

"Go play your little games," she said, "but when this is over, I don't want to hear anything more from you about the Middle East. This is it for you."

That seemed reasonable, and I took it as her consent to proceed. There was no denying that it was pretty condescending, but I chose to ignore that. After all, peace in the Middle East depended on it.

Before I actually delved into freelance diplomacy, I decided to announce my intentions.

And the way to do that, I figured, might as well be Facebook. I had only been a user of the site for about a year—having failed to resist its growing dominance—but I had somehow amassed a large network of contacts, many of whom I didn't know at all. They had approached me as a result of my book, my journalism, or just out of the online ether. And many of them frightened me a bit in their fervent obsession with the Middle East and their frequent determination to convey that through Facebook.

In fact, I had been surprised to find that among Facebook's legions of users, there were a good number of people actively involved with the Middle East debate. From high-profile Washington lobbyists to important Israeli journalists, to activists and operatives of all stripes. It was a bit surreal to find them there, but I had connected on Facebook with many of the people I had first encountered in the real world policy debate.

So, on the day I decided to make my plan public, I logged on to change my status update, the little one-liner at the top of Facebook pages used to keep all your Facebook contacts abreast of your activities. For months, my status update had been

blank. I had, apparently, been doing nothing, or at least nothing worth mentioning. Now, though, I had a bold announcement.

I changed it to: "Gregory Levey is Going to Make Peace in the Middle East in Six Months or Less Without Leaving His Apartment."

The responses and replies began flooding in almost immediately, both from actual friends and from my random contacts.

"I'm going to make pasta," my friend Matt wrote in response.

"Good luck!" a college kid in California I didn't know wrote. "Let me know where I can help."

It was impossible to tell if he was being snarky like Matt or if he was sincere.

"God's speed!" wrote a Somali woman whom I'd met in law school.

"Did you steal Olmert's Facebook status?" asked a left-wing Middle East activist I'd once met.

I even got quick responses from a number of people who had engaged with the Middle East in important ways.

"Fine," wrote a Republican operative who had worked as a high-level liaison to the Orthodox Jewish community, "but genocide is cheating."

Then an actual former Mossad officer whom I was in contact with wrote, "Greg, it's not a peace process, but an industry with a revolving conveyor belt of career-minded journalists, clueless peace activists, lazy diplomats, and ivory tower hacks all trying to say they've made a difference. Cynical enough for ya?"

I actually did think that my home office was as good a place as any to start on the journey to solving the Middle East conflict. I had an almost comically large number of books, magazines, and journals about Israel and the Middle East, some of

which I hadn't read at all, and I figured a good beginning to my venture would be to bone up on my knowledge.

I'd amassed all the material before and during my stint in the Israeli government, and in the time since, working as a journalist. There were books on the various Middle East wars, on its diverse population groups, and on the different periods in its history, written from all along the political spectrum. Just below *Elvis in Jerusalem* I found *How to Cure a Fanatic. The Case for Israel* was beside *The Case Against Israel.* A book about Jews living in Arab lands was beside several books about Arabs living in Israel. There were books ranging from wild conspiracy theory—one went on and on unconvincingly about Israel's supposed connection to the death of Princess Diana—to those that were eminently sensible but dry and academic.

I had an enormous book called *The Palestinian People*, as well as shelves full of books about the broader region, including relatively large sections on Iraq and Saudi Arabia, and books about relevant issues like diplomacy, statecraft, and espionage. Most of the information I would need in order to come up with a plan, I thought, had to be right here.

I picked up Henry Kissinger's *Diplomacy*, and paged through it to a section about the Middle East. He was discussing the 1956 Suez Crisis, when Israel, the United Kingdom, and France had launched military operations against Egypt, only to be forced out by U.S.–sponsored resolutions at the United Nations. On that episode, Kissinger wrote, "It takes perseverance to find a policy which combines the disadvantages of every course of action, or to construct a coalition that weakens every partner simultaneously. Great Britain, France, and Israel managed just that feat."

I knew the historical context that had precipitated that war and its end, but it still always seemed odd from the perspective of the present day. The French had

conspired with the Israelis, and the Americans had stopped them at the United Nations? That didn't sound right at all.

I noted, though, that the core issues in the Middle East hadn't really changed—a depressing thought. There was the issue of Israel's security and the right of the Jewish people to have a country of their own in what they saw as their ancestral homeland. But there was also the issue of the Palestinian people's right to self-determination in what they understood to be their own ancestral homeland. Then there were the micro issues—and sticking points—that never changed all that much either. There was the question of the status of Jerusalem and the West Bank. The question of borders. The question of resources. There was the question of whether the Arab world would recognize Israel. And there was the question about the fate and rights of the Palestinian refugees who had been displaced at Israel's founding.

"Often enough, I am asked to predict when and how peace will come to Israel," I read in the memoirs of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister. "I am always obliged to give a disappointing answer by confessing that I have no predictions to make."

But many of the other books did make predictions, as well as prescriptions, discussing the assorted plans for peace that had been put forth over the years. They varied in details and structure, but were similar in essential ways and seemed to blend into each other.

There was the Partition Plan. The Allon Plan. Saunders's peace plan. The Barak Offer. Clinton's compromise. The Arab Peace Initiative. The Quartet Road Map. The Geneva Accord. The Oslo Accords. The Disengagement Plan. And that was just a start.

Looking at the list was depressing and dispiriting. None of them had really worked. Would the Levey Plan be able to do any better?

Browsing through my bookshelves, I also discovered some interesting curiosities. A few years ago, for example, a twelve-year-old Arab citizen of Israel had entered a trivia contest about Zionist history—and won. Somehow the kid's knowledge of Israeli history and culture had beaten out his Jewish opponents. I learned that when Ariel Sharon had been commanding forces in the Six-Day War, he had sometimes, in the lulls between battles, lain down on the desert sand and gone quickly and soundly to sleep, to the astonishment of the frazzled soldiers under his command. And that at one point Yasser Arafat had secretly owned a percentage of Bowlmor Lanes, the fancy bowling alley near NYU that I had sometimes bowled at when I was a student there.

I also read about Orde Wingate, a legendary British army officer who had served as a mentor and trainer for some of the early Zionists fighting to establish a state, including Moshe Dayan, later the famous eye-patch-wearing Israeli war hero. Wingate, I read, had lounged in his tent each night, holding forth on military strategy and philosophy to his young Jewish disciples, while using some kind of special, small comb—to brush out his pubic hair.

On that note, I thought, it was time to get started on my plan.

The next step was to try a unique piece of software called iPeace. Invented by Chen Shamir, a former captain in Israeli military intelligence, it was designed to simulate the Middle East conflict and educate people on the difficulties and nuances involved in Middle East diplomacy. That sounded like a noble goal to me, since people always had black-and-white views of what was a very complex situation.

iPeace had been out for a couple of years, and I had been meaning to give it a shot. Now, at the outset of my quest, it seemed like a good time to do it.

I logged on to the site which, among other things, had a supportive quote from Arun Gandhi, grandson of the Mahatma, and a virtual store selling "Peacegear." The store carried hats, mugs, and tote bags all sporting the word "iPeace." It also carried boxer shorts with iPeace written on the front. Something about those boxer shorts struck a chord with me. They seemed to take the Middle East conflict and humanize it, or even reduce and lighten it in way that felt productive. In this sense, I thought they aligned with my own quest, and I quickly ordered myself a pair of them.

Then, before actually trying the program out, I decided to give its creator a call.

"Basically," I told him when I got him on the line, "I'm trying to make peace in the Middle East, and I thought that trying your simulator might be a good way to start."

"Uh-huh," he said.

"I'll be writing a book about the whole thing," I babbled on, "if it all works out."

"I see. But it will be a novel, right? It's fiction?"

"No," I told him, getting a bit tired of having different versions of this same conversation with everyone. "It's nonfiction. I'm actually trying to solve the conflict."

I wanted to ask him how long it would take for my iPeace boxer shorts to arrive, but managed to hold back and ask instead about the process he and his colleagues had used to create iPeace. They had initially designed the game at a major American university, using focus groups of Israeli and Palestinian students and then experts from Palestinian and Israeli think tanks and universities to make the

simulation react to a decision maker's actions in the same way the Middle East would. These consultants also advised them on small details the designers didn't know about, such as the color of keffiyeh worn by particular factions, in order to make the simulation that much more realistic.

They were very careful about bias in the game, Shamir told me, and endeavored to make it symmetrical in difficulty, no matter which side you played. They also wanted to make it "nonlinear," he said, so that your actions in one context didn't lead to the same results if performed in a different political context. For example, if tensions were high within the game and a player tried to implement a confidence-building measure, the result would be very different than if he or she did the same thing when tensions within the game were low.

"Most people don't understand cause and effect in the Middle East," he said. "But they play the game with all the factors in action, and they say to me, 'Now I understand cause and effect.' And they get more sympathetic with the leaders and say, 'Oh, it's tough to be a leader!'"

I asked Shamir what was the most interesting thing he learned from people's reactions to the game, and he immediately said it was watching people play the opposite side.

"For example," he said, "I'd see Arabs playing the game from the Israeli side and they'd get frustrated by the actions of Hamas and start bombing them in retaliation. Then they'd try to rationalize it to me, but it was clear they suddenly understood the challenges of the other side better. It's a very profound thing to watch."

When I started the simulator myself, I half expected it to be like playing a video game, which I hadn't really done in about fifteen years. But if I was expecting

Super Mario Brothers set in Jerusalem, it only took a moment for me to be disabused of the notion. Somber music started playing, and I started seeing images from the last century of Middle Eastern history. Riots, bombings, tanks, and desperate-looking refugees. Not exactly the light video-game fare I remembered from my childhood.

Then I saw the famous footage from 1993 of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat shaking hands on the White House lawn, awkwardly forced together by President Clinton. I had been fifteen years old when that had happened and not politically engaged at all, but even in my oblivious teenage state, I had been able to realize that something momentous and hopeful was happening. Finally the endless conflict that always provided the background noise to other world events would be solved.

Then, of course, everything fell apart. There was another intifada, and more wars, and thousands of deaths—and somewhere in the middle of all that I had briefly worked for the Israeli government—and now here we were again, with Palestinians and Israelis dying, extremists on both sides running amok, and everything even worse than before that fateful handshake.

So far, this video game was just depressing me.

iPeace gave me the choice of playing the Israeli prime minister or the Palestinian president. Since it was the side I understood better, I decided to take the Israeli position for my first try. I then took a few minutes to learn about the various actions I could take as the country's leader. I could use security measures, like covert operations or full-scale military maneuvers. I could engage in political measures, like speaking to the Palestinian leader, the United Nations, or the United States. Or I could build infrastructure for either Israelis or Palestinians.

At the bottom of the screen, there was a panel where I could gauge my approval ratings from the Israeli and Palestinian populations and assess other measures of my progress.

Okay, I thought, starting the simulation up. *Let's make peace.*

And immediately there was a giant suicide bombing in Jerusalem, killing many Israeli civilians. Things weren't off to a good start.

I decided to respond, but in a moderate way, so as to keep the Israeli population satisfied but not inflame the Palestinians too much. Instead of a full-scale military action, I launched a covert operation against a terrorist leader in Gaza. Then I poured money into the Palestinian infrastructure. If their day-to-day lives were improved, I reasoned, they would be less likely to use violence.

But the Palestinian president called my goodwill "condescending," which I couldn't help thinking was rather ungrateful.

My own defense minister was then quoted saying something deeply offensive to the Palestinians, which stirred the tensions even more. *Who is this guy?* I wondered, but the truth was that I remembered events precisely like that derailing Israeli leaders when I worked for the country. The game, so far, was pretty spot-on.

Because I was perceived as being soft on the Palestinian militants, my approval rating among the Israeli population was dropping. To assure them that their security was of paramount importance to me, I continued construction of the controversial security barrier that separated Israel from the Palestinian territories. In real life, I had always thought the barrier was a good idea in principle—these two peoples clearly could not get along, so why not separate them—but I'd never been happy with its route, which went through occupied Palestinian land.

But in iPeace, I had the option of continuing the construction while sticking to the 1949 armistice lines instead of encroaching into the West Bank. I thought it was ideal.

Unfortunately, though, nobody else seemed to agree, and tensions just got worse. There were riots in Gaza and the West Bank, and the Israelis didn't think I was doing enough to protect them.

Grasping at straws, I sent a joint Jewish-Arab orchestra to Europe to demonstrate cultural cooperation. Almost immediately they came back of their own volition, saying that given the current circumstances, it was inappropriate.

Can you guys really make that decision yourselves? I wondered. *I'm the prime minister!*

But the fate of my cultural mission was soon the least of my concerns, as pretty much everyone wanted me out of office, and tensions boiled over completely.

It had only been three weeks of simulation time when the news came. I had caused "the Third Intifada."

Game over.

"It didn't work," I told Abby. "I caused the Third Intifada. And it took only three weeks."

"Let me try," she said, and I shrugged and got up from my desk so that she could sit down at the computer. I watched as she started, but I quickly got bored and left the room. My working assumption, in any case, was that the game was rigged so that it was impossible to actually make peace. I figured that might be the lesson it was teaching.

In fact, I knew that a former director of the Mossad and senior Israeli negotiator, had once been asked by the Israeli media to play iPeace—and hadn't had

good results either. I had watched the footage online and saw that after just a few minutes of playing, he too had been declared a failure. He had thrown up his hands and declared that nothing could be learned from iPeace.

When I'd asked Chen Shamir about that, he laughed a bit and told me that he had to be careful what he said. When the former Mossad director had played, Shamir said, he had launched round after round of hard-line military actions against the Palestinians, and only then tried to conduct diplomacy. Even then, however, he hadn't engaged in actual dialogue, but had made demands of the Palestinians. Then he had claimed that iPeace was unrealistic when these decisions hadn't produced results, saying they were the actions that would be taken in the real world.

At this point, Shamir laughed again.

"Yes!" he said. "But they haven't worked in real life either, have they?"

So, while Abby launched into what I assumed would be another fruitless attempt at Middle East peacemaking, I went to our living room to read a bit from the big book I'd found on my shelf called *The Palestinian People.*

"In the middle decades of the twentieth century," I read, "Palestinians developed a self-identity as a people set apart."

Then after a little while, Abby yelled from the office, "I reached the first milestone!"

The first milestone? I had no idea what that was, since I had reached nowhere near that point. I had only caused death and destruction. The first milestone, apparently, had something to do with cooperation with the Palestinian National Authority and some level of autonomy for Gaza. That definitely sounded like progress, but I was sure her success wouldn't last and went back to my book.

"I reached the second milestone!" Abby said a few minutes later.

She had now successfully run Israel's diplomacy for six months of game time, and apparently regional tensions were much lower than when she had started.

Well, good for her, I thought. *But this is all going to end badly anyway.*

But at regular intervals for the next hour or so, she would update me with disturbingly positive news. The Palestinian president was eager to cooperate with her—he had shunned me completely and refused to help me bolster Israel's security against Palestinian terrorist groups—and this was yielding results.

I wasn't following exactly what she was doing, but I probably should have been, since her approval ratings from both the Israeli and Palestinian population continued to climb. Rallies were even being held to show support for her. She soon informed me that a rail link had now been built to connect the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. That sounded utopian—and farfetched. I put my book down and went back into the office to investigate whether she was making it all up.

But just as I got in there, peace was being declared and she was being awarded a peace prize.

"See, it's not that hard," she said.

I smiled, a little envious, while at the same time proud. Abby, it appeared, understood the needs of the Middle East a lot better than I did, or at least had managed to convince the computer program that she did. She had taken a fairly dovish strategy, not making any moves that would inflame the situation in the Middle East by angering the Palestinians, but at the same trying to keep the Israeli population assured that she had their security in mind at all times. It was a tightrope wire that she had somehow managed to walk—and apparently the simulator was programmed to reward this approach.

It was now playing triumphant music and showing images of peace and cooperation. But even though Abby had beaten the game on her first attempt—not to mention making peace in the Middle East—I noticed that she looked a little upset.

"What's wrong?" I asked, confused.

"It's sad," she said. "It feels so good, but you just can't help but wish it were real."

SECTION THREE:

THE ISRAEL CONSTELLATION AND THE PERFECT AVOCADO

I waited anxiously for my iPeace boxer shorts to arrive. Meanwhile, though, I knew I had to move on without them. After my disastrous attempt at making virtual peace, I was considering my next move carefully. I had decided that it might be time to venture out of the apartment—even for a little while—to ask for advice. And I knew who I wanted to ask.

Just down the street was a fruit stand run by a Palestinian grocer. Or at least I thought he was Palestinian. Dealing with Middle East issues for the past few years, I had interacted with a good numbers of Arabs and was sometimes able to identify which area of the Arab world they came from. I thought this grocer looked either Palestinian or Jordanian, or possibly Lebanese. In any case, I figured he might have some valuable insights that all the supposed experts didn't.

I knew, though, that if I wanted to break the ice and start talking politics with him, it would have to be a gradual process. I couldn't just walk in there and say, "Can I please have some carrots? Oh, and, what did you think of the progress made at the recent summit of the Middle East Quartet?"

I needed to move slowly and gain his trust before he would open up to me. To do this I would have to become a regular customer. But this presented a problem.

"Their produce is terrible," Abby said when I told her my plan.

"I know, I know," I said.

It really was. I normally would have wanted to support a little independent business rather than the big supermarket farther down the street, but I generally

avoided it, because every time I had bought produce there, it had been absolutely awful.

"We can't start buying from him," Abby said. "His stuff is disgusting."

But in the interests of Middle East peace, I thought, we would have to make sacrifices. Mealy peaches or overripe blackberries might need to be among them. So the next morning I headed straight to the stand, smiled at the grocer, and struggled to find a perfect avocado. After a while, I found a few that seemed, at best, edible.

"Hi," I said, hoping for some conversation, but all he did was nod and ring up my purchase.

When I tried the avocados at home, they tasted like soap.

But I persisted. Whenever I was walking by, I'd stop in and buy some moldy apples or some potatoes that tasted like sour milk, and I would awkwardly try to make small talk. After a while, he began to recognize me, but this was admittedly a long way from discussing international law or the contours of a potential peace.

Meanwhile, our apartment was overflowing with mediocre fruit and vegetables.

"Why did you get so much asparagus?" Abby would ask.

"I had to," I'd say. "I was hanging out with the grocer again."

Sure, it was asparagus now, I thought, but it was only a matter of time before the grocer and I were engaging with the core ideas of the Middle East problem.

Those ideas weren't hard to come by from other directions. The last few years had seen turbulence and upheaval, not just in the Middle East—which was par for the course—but also in the war of ideas *about* the region that was constantly waged in the West. There were new lobbying organizations forming, fresh voices on the issues, and some important new currents in the debate.

One of these new developments had first broken when I was living in Israel, and I still remembered that morning well. I'd noticed that an article had come out in the *London Journal of Politics* called "The Israel Constellation." Written by Drew Reynolds and Terrence Wallace, two respected political scientists—Reynolds was at Stanford and Wallace was at Princeton—it was clearly going to cause controversy.

"The Israel Constellation" argued that, for decades, the heart of U.S. Middle East policymaking had revolved around Israel and that this had directly resulted in animosity being targeted at the United States from the Arab and Muslim world. More cuttingly, it suggested the relationship between the U.S. and Israel did not result from some deep overlap of strategic assets, but from a powerful domestic lobby in the United States that drove American policy along a trajectory divorced from real U.S. national interests, a lobby that also stifled opposing voices. It supposedly consisted of lobbyists, journalists, government officials, and fund-raisers—many of them Jewish.

Coming as this did from highly reputable academics, it was sure to be a bombshell.

But when the article came out, and I asked a top official in the Israeli government if he had seen the piece, he didn't seem fazed by it at all. For him, it was just the latest incarnation of an old anti-Semitic forgery, and so it could be dismissed without being addressed at all; when I offered to give him a copy, he didn't even want to look at it.

"Eh," he said, waving his hand to dismiss it. "It's just *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* again."

The Protocols, of course, was the famous forgery from czarist Russia that depicted a Jewish plot to control the world's levers of power. In the West, they had long been regarded as nonsense. But in the Arab world, they were seen as legitimate

even today. In fact, friends who had visited the various Arab capitals had told me that Arabic copies of them were prominently displayed in bookstores and souvenir shops in those cities.

I thought the Israeli official's dismissive attitude was a misguided, and perhaps even dangerous, one. The little synopsis I read online definitely made the article seem replete with exaggerations, but I thought that ignoring a major article by respected researchers in an important publication was probably not a good strategy for Israel to take. If there were any grains of truth in the piece at all, it would probably get some traction.

Over the next few weeks, Israel's most vocal defenders in the United States came out swinging, some of them leveling accusations of anti-Semitism and others attacking the article and its authors on more substantive grounds. This included other equally-renowned academics attacking its scholarly merits and calling it "grossly distorted."

The morning that I first saw Reynolds and Wallace's essay was many months ago now, but the controversy stirred up by it continued to rage. They followed their article with the publication of a book-length version, accompanied by a barrage of publicity—and a simultaneous flurry of debate.

In fact, Sammy Kimling, national director of the Agency for Anti-Defamation, published his own book at the same time, which provided an array of counterarguments to Reynolds and Wallace's claims and suggested that the allegations they were making were really driven by an anti-Semitic narrative.

Even in just scanning the original article to get a sense of it, I had seen that it had logical problems. For instance, the group of characters and organizations that Reynolds and Wallace grouped together was too divergent to be reasonably

considered a unified force. It included so many individuals and organizations across the American political and journalistic landscape as to be just about incoherent.

But some of their argument was provocative. There was no question that there were powerful interests in the American political landscape that drove policy in ways that weren't necessarily indicative of how the majority of Americans would feel if they actually considered the issues. And, I thought, in ways that sometimes weren't even in the American interest, in the sense that they often deepened the level of anger in the Arab world toward the United States. Even as an employee of the Israeli government who didn't deal with policy matters, I had encountered some lobbyists and operatives from the United States and elsewhere whose actions seemed a little skewed—more aggressively pro-Israel than the Israeli government itself.

Even so, there were many aspects of their argument that made me quite uncomfortable, because at times the two political scientists seemed to come very close to pointing the finger at American Jews as a dangerous fifth column. I knew some people would read it and reflexively label it anti-Semitic, and although I definitely did not want to be like that—muzzling debate and minimizing real anti-Semitism—I too felt there was something unseemly about an article that could be construed as an argument that The Jews were controlling the government.

Although I wrote a bit about the controversy for some magazines, I mostly ignored the debate. Then something odd happened. I heard that several of *my own* journalistic articles about how DC lobbyists affected U.S.–Middle East policymaking were cited in the book-length version of the article. This took me aback a bit, and pushed me to think about the argument more.

On the one hand, I definitely found some of what the authors were discussing compelling and important. Middle East policy did often seem highly influenced by

various interest groups, which included not just pro-Israel sorts, but also those connected to the oil establishment, who could never be said to be pro-Israel at all. The heart of the matter was that these forces and others—such as the weapons supply industry and pressure groups formed by Evangelical Christians—held significant sway over U.S. policy in the Middle East. On the other hand, it seemed reductive to ascribe so much power to the so-called Israel Lobby, and a bit simplistic. But after finding out that some of my own journalism was actually referred to in the book, I felt I should at least read it and see what had been changed or added to the original article.

Some of the academic sloppiness the article's critics had pointed at had been addressed, but the essence of it remained the same. Reynolds and Wallace argued that American support for Israeli policy was often misplaced and was driven less by American national interests than by the influence of those grouped into their "Constellation"—Jewish organizations, lobbyists, journalists, and policymakers. Further, according to Reynolds and Wallace, it was extremely difficult for anyone to actually discuss this situation openly

The authors were criticized—and occasionally praised—in almost every publication I could think of, and appeared on a multitude of television and radio programs as well. If debate on the Israel issue was being stifled, it certainly wasn't evident from their situations.

For my own project, I decided that approaching them might be interesting, and when I did, Terrence Wallace gave me a day and time to call him in his office at Princeton.

Meanwhile, it was my friend Luke's birthday, and we arranged to meet at the pub down the street to have a celebratory beer. I ended up getting to the corner a little

early and, to kill time, I crossed the road to the fruit stand. Normally I came in during the day, but this was a little before ten at night. Maybe, I thought, there would be a different vibe.

I walked in and quickly picked out some fruit and vegetables. A cucumber, some blackberries, a bag of carrots, and an apple. I didn't even examine the produce at all, and was essentially just grabbing things off the shelf randomly. As I did this, the grocer watched me warily. When I brought the produce up to the counter and he started ringing it all up, I decided to raise my level of intensity.

"How are you?" I asked. "How's the night going?"

A little desperate as I asked this, I even found myself using the cheesiest of all hand gestures: the rolling, double finger gun.

"I'm okay," he said, stepping back a bit. "Thank you."

He seemed frightened, I thought. This whole grocer thing was really not going as planned at all. I paid him for the groceries, but wasn't quite ready to give up yet.

"You have a good rest of the night now, okay?" I said, hating myself a little for how I was acting.

"I will." He nodded, clearly wanting me to leave. I half-wanted to bring up my upcoming conversation with Terrence Wallace and ask him his opinion on it, but that seemed a bit premature.

And as I walked back out into the street, it occurred to me that part of the problem was that the grocer almost certainly thought I was hitting on him. After all, I kept showing up and making awkward small talk, while lingering a bit too long, making strange hand gestures, and buying inordinate amounts of produce.

When I arrived at the pub, Luke was there, and I handed him the bag.

"Here," I said, a bit dejected. "Happy birthday."

"Why are you giving me a bag of produce?" he asked, looking inside, and I proceeded to tell him what was going on with the grocer. He just shook his head and put the bag down on the table.

Luke was a close friend, but although we could discuss books, film, music and almost any other subject—and did in fact do so regularly—when it came to politics, he always seemed to quickly lose interest in the conversation. This was especially true when it came to Middle East politics, which he didn't seem to register at all. Unsurprisingly, since I had first told him about my new project, he had treated it with a weary indifference that bordered on aversion.

"So this isn't working at all yet," he said, and I had to agree.

"And there's also another problem," I told him. "To be honest, I'm beginning to suspect that the grocer might actually be Mexican."

Unfortunately, this was the truth. As the days wore on and we hadn't had a real conversation, let alone one about the peace process, I was even starting to doubt my ability to recognize the grocer's descent.

"If he does turn out to be Mexican," I told Luke, shrugging, "at least I'll be able to get the Mexican perspective on the Middle East conflict."

"How is the rest of it going?" Luke asked, ignoring what I had just said. I told him about my failed attempt at iPeace, and about the Israel Lobby and the conversation I was going to have with Terrence Wallace.

"I'm just at a fact-finding stage," I rationalized. "I'm trying to learn before actually going forward with making peace."

What I didn't tell him was that I was starting to feel the first little flickers of doubt about my project. In the end, I wondered, was I just playing video games, making awkward phone calls to strangers, and harassing my local grocer?

What am I doing? I worried intermittently. *Where is all this leading me?*

But I didn't admit any of that to Luke. I just made more allusions to "fact finding," while staring hard at the bag of subpar produce I had given my friend as a birthday gift, and nodding in a way that I imagined looked shrewd.

I called Terrence Wallace a couple of days later. Before we launched into our discussion, he asked the same question as everyone else. What exactly was I doing?

"I'm trying to personally solve the Middle East conflict," I said, for what already seemed like the hundredth time.

At this, he paused, but then had a slightly different response than the others I had been getting.

"That's sort of what I was trying to do as well," he said. "Good luck to you."

I laughed a little uncomfortably, not entirely sure how to understand that statement. Then I asked him what he thought of the current direction of the Middle East.

"The trends are very discouraging if you play out the current set of policies," he said. "Even beside theories of demographic shift, with generational changes and the reverse aliyah problem, it's not clear where the happy ending is. I'm by nature optimistic, but given the hardened attitudes on both sides, at the moment it's hard to see a good result."

There was a lot in this statement to unpack, but I chose to focus on what he called the "reverse aliyah problem," and asked him to explain what he meant by it.

Aliyah, which is a Hebrew word that literally means "ascendancy," is used to describe a Jewish person's immigration to Israel. Since even before the creation of the Jewish state, Zionists have called out for Jews from across the world to "make aliyah" in order to complete the "Ingathering of the Exiles" that Israel's creation was intended

to represent. A number of organs of the Israeli government are tasked with facilitating aliyah, and they are aided by several outside organizations. There is even a long list of trips and special programs for Jewish youths and families living in the Diaspora that are explicitly intended to entice them into making aliyah. They're sponsored by Jewish organizations, Jewish and Christian philanthropists, and the Israeli government, and although they differ tremendously in focus—from religious-based tours to trips that focus on the social and nightlife opportunities for young people in the Holy Land—for many of these programs, pushing immigration to Israel is the goal. Aliyah was the engine that drove Israel's first half century of existence. It was initially its reason for existing, and it then became the source of much of its energy and potential.

So what did Wallace mean by the "reverse aliyah problem"?

Reverse aliyah, for Wallace, was just what it sounded like. Frustrated by the dangers and difficulties of living in Israel, or tempted by the opportunities offered elsewhere, a lot of Israelis were leaving the country. Further, many Jews from elsewhere who had immigrated to Israel were finding themselves in over their heads and departing. In addition, even many of the Israelis who were not abandoning the country completely were half-abandoning it, or preparing to abandon it. They were splitting their time between homes in Israel and homes abroad, sending their children to foreign universities, or just clamoring to get second passports—suggesting, Wallace argued, that they were seeking "escape hatches." To some extent this had always been an issue for Israel, but he believed it was increasing at a fairly rapid clip and would become a real problem before too long.

Why, though, was this a problem for those hoping for Middle East peace? Sure, it presented a drain of human capital for Israel, but what were the implications for the peace process?

According to Wallace, the majority of those Israelis leaving the country or securing escape hatches were, as one would expect, the more cosmopolitan ones—and those more at ease with the outside world. Usually, he said, this meant that they were more broad-minded and the people perhaps more amenable to compromise. In the long run, the fact that *they* were leaving, or preparing to leave, might mean that Israel's willingness to make concessions for peace might dissipate. Combined with a hardening of attitudes among the Palestinians, that was a potentially lethal combination.

"It's possible to imagine a world," Wallace told me, "where both populations get even more uncompromising."

And that is what he proposed was happening.

I changed tacks a bit, and asked Wallace if he was happy that he and his cowriter had published *The Israel Constellation* and with how things had gone since then.

"I'm very glad we wrote it," he said. "That's what academics are supposed to do—tackle big and important questions."

He paused for a moment, and when he spoke again, it sounded to me like he was choosing his words carefully.

"Given the environment," he went on, "I'm reasonably pleased with how things have gone. Our major goal was to get a discussion started on something that had become taboo in mainstream foreign policy circles. Veiled comments or hushed

conversations were allowed, but not open discussion. I thought that was an unhealthy situation."

"Do you think your book had an effect?" I asked.

"Because of a combination of individual activity and conditions in the world, I think there has been an effect," he said. "There was our book and Jimmy Carter's book."

Jimmy Carter had published a book around the same time called *Palestine: Peace Not Apartheid*, which directed heated criticism against Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories and their effect on the peace process.

"Carter didn't retreat or shrink back," Wallace said. "He got out there and gave lots of talks. People can disagree with his views, but Carter has a well-deserved reputation of being a very moral, principled person. That gave him a lot of credibility."

It was interesting, I thought, how one's opinion about Carter could serve as a sort of litmus test. Many of the people I knew in the pro-Israel establishment had a firmly entrenched distaste—even hatred—for Jimmy Carter. And credibility was the absolute last thing they would have ascribed to the former president.

Once, in New York, I'd been chatting with a few people, among them a woman who was deeply involved with various stridently pro-Israel causes, including organizations that provided financial support to the most controversial of Jewish settlements in the West Bank. The conversation was about the role of past-presidents in peacemaking efforts, and it eventually turned to Jimmy Carter

"Carter," the woman said with a dismissive snort. "He just wants to finish what Hitler started."

According to Wallace, Carter's book as well as his own, in addition to the growing prominence of the blogosphere and some new developments in the political landscape, were helping to create changes in the dynamics of the debate. Although I definitely didn't agree with his reductive analysis of the U.S.-Israel relationship, I had to agree with him that these factors had opened up the Middle East discussion over the past couple of years.

"There's a little bit more oxygen now," he told me, "but it's still difficult to publish things like this in the United States, and you pay something of a price."

It was now time, I thought, to pose a more direct question.

"How should I go about solving the Middle East conflict?" I asked him.

"The most important step that could be made now is to have an open and honest discourse about the history of the region," he said. "The more you understand what has happened, the more you'll be able to see what has to be done."

When I put down the phone, I spent a while considering the call. Wallace had seemed fairly reasonable. It was hard to see him as the raving anti-Semite some had made him out to be. I reminded myself, though, that it had been said many times before that genteel anti-Semitism was the most dangerous kind. Nobody was going to buy a skinhead pundit or a neo-Nazi scholar, but a smooth-talking person who *seemed* well intentioned might all too easily slip by.

Still, it just hadn't really sounded like that's what he was when I talked to him. My impression was that he was being sincere and honestly believed that the accusations against him were unfounded and that his work was making a positive contribution to peacemaking efforts by widening the parameters of debate in a constructive way. This didn't mean it actually was, of course, because there was still the possibility that he could be wildly deluded.

Were he and his compatriots really trying to contribute to Middle East peace as he told me, I wondered, or were their intentions as malicious as others claimed?

I decided to email Wayne, the foul-mouthed Brit, to ask him his thoughts on Terrence Wallace and *The Israel Constellation*. He had agreed to be my advisor, after all. So I wrote to him and told him that I needed his advice.

I sat back and waited for a response, but none came. Instead, a few minutes later, I received an email invitation to attend a conference in Washington.

The invitation came from an official who worked for AISC, the American Israel Strategy Committee. If there was one organization that most exemplified what Reynolds and Wallace called the "Israel Constellation," it was AISC, the influential and sometimes controversial pro-Israel lobby group based in Washington DC, which always came up in any discussion of the American–Israeli relationship.

AISC was founded as an advocacy boutique in the 1950s, but it had grown into a 100,000-member organization, led by a professional staff in Washington. It was involved in advocacy and lobbying of both Congress and, to a lesser degree, the White House, to help steer American policy in what it considered a pro-Israel direction. A bipartisan organization, it had close relationships with members of Congress from both parties—and backed those politicians and candidates whose views on Israel it supported. Its membership was mostly Jewish but also included other dedicated supporters of Israel, and its mission was to protect Israel's security—often by pushing an unflinchingly hard line on the Jewish state's right to defend itself.

AISC was attacked in certain quarters. In some people's minds it was the embodiment of the nefariousness that Reynolds and Wallace wrote about, the puppet master pulling the strings of American policy. Or, even more ominously, it was alluded to by some in quintessentially anti-Semitic terms, fitting age-old racist

narratives: the Jews controlling the government. In fact, over the years there had even been the occasional call for AISC to register as a foreign agent, which would have both stigmatized and hamstrung the organization.

But the criticism didn't only come from the American side of the Atlantic. Left-wing pundits in Israel often critiqued it as well, and when I had served in the Israeli government, I had sometimes even heard some of the more dovish Israeli officials express frustration at the hawkishness of AISC. For example, when there were tentative Israeli moves toward rapprochement with Syria, the resistance of many in the AISC fold to encourage similar American moves was a thorn in the Israeli side. And when Yitzhak Rabin was prime minister of Israel in the 1990s, he crossed swords with AISC a number of times, publicly accusing it of interfering in matters best left to the government of Israel.

Meanwhile, many political analysts on the Right, the Center, and even the Left had much more benign assessments of the organization. Lobbying, after all, is an important and entirely constitutional part of the way that the American system of government works. There are lots of different lobbies representing various interests, some of them—like the NRA—more powerful than AISC, and some of them pushing particular viewpoints on foreign affairs. Moreover, AISC was just doing what it could to ensure that an important American ally and strategic asset in the Middle East received the support needed to maintain its security. It was just reminding American government where its priorities should rightfully be.

As usual, I felt that there was probably some middle ground between the conflicting views. I had certainly sometimes seen AISC step rightward of the views I thought were held by most Americans and even by many Israelis—and push American policy in that direction. At the same time, I didn't think there was anything

too conspiratorial going on and that the people of AISC were well intentioned, really doing what they believed was in the best interests of both Israel and the United States.

But one thing I was positive about was something that everyone seemed to agree on: AISC was important. I was at least going to have to come to understand it better, which was why the invitation from one of its officials was tempting. I knew him from some journalistic work I had done, and he had always been welcoming and open.

"Come down to Washington," he said. "Come to our policy conference."

The AISC "policy conference" was a sort of yearly Woodstock for AISC's membership, both for its grassroots activists and for its high-level operatives and their allied politicians. The problem was that attending would mean having to venture farther from my apartment than just the grocer on the street corner.

At one point in the next few days, as I weighed whether to go down to DC for the policy conference, I wandered into the little grocery kiosk. Halfheartedly picking up a pineapple and heading up to the grocer at his cash register, I noticed something was a bit different in the store. Instead of the radio, the kiosk's little speaker system was playing Arabic music.

Hearing it, I paused on my way up to the register, still holding the pineapple. Yes, it was definitely Arabic music.

Good, I thought, *at least I'm not totally off base in my ethnic profiling. Unless, of course, he is a Mexican who just happens to like Arabic music.*

Approaching the counter, I started bobbing my head to the music, as if this were my favorite song. And then something amazing happened: the grocer saw me doing that, and he started bobbing his head too. Then we bobbed our heads together.

Years before, I had briefly studied Arabic, but almost nothing had stuck. I was able to say "I'm studying Arabic at New York University," but that wasn't very useful in conversation, and hadn't actually been true for years. I couldn't say or understand much else.

As a result, as the grocer and I bobbed our heads in unison, it occurred to me that I had no idea what the lyrics I was acting so enthusiastic about might mean.

"The Jewish infidel monkey dogs must be driven into the sea," the singer might have been saying. Or possibly it was just the Arabic version of "Don't tell my heart, my achy breaky heart."

I was sure, though, that he was not singing about how he was studying Arabic at New York University. I would have been able to catch that.

In any case, I continued bobbing my head and smiling, and so did the grocer, until it started to feel a little weird.

This was only going to make it seem even more like I was hitting on him, I thought. And when it felt like this had been going on forever—the two of us bobbing our heads together to the Arabic music while I held a pineapple—I knew I had to end it.

"What language is that?" I asked, even though I knew. I thought this might be a bridge to conversation.

He told me it was Arabic, and then I asked him where he was from, and he told me he was from Lebanon—but of Palestinian descent. Finally I was getting some traction, I thought, and it was a lot easier than eating bad produce for months on end.

But just as I was about to try to take the next step and casually bring up Middle East politics—"So, how 'bout them Hezbollah? How do you like their

chances this season?"—another customer arrived at the cash register with some items to purchase.

"Don't do it," I wanted to tell her. "The produce here is terrible. I'm just here for the geopolitical consulting."

But I let her go in front of me, and the moment passed. I'd have to continue this conversation when I came back from AISC.

SECTION FOUR:

WHAT HAPPENED IN ROMANIA

I was at my desk, planning my trip down to Washington for AISC, when my phone rang. I answered it, and the woman on the other end of the line told me that she was a television news producer.

"We wanted to know if you'd come on the show in a few hours to talk about what happened today at the meeting about the Middle East," she said.

I paused. I had no idea what meeting she was even talking about, and since I followed the situation in the region pretty closely, that was odd.

"Sure," I said after a moment's reflection. "I'd be happy to talk about what happened at the meeting."

I probably wouldn't normally have agreed to appear on TV to talk about something I knew nothing about, but I thought this might be useful for my own project. And anyway, I reasoned, I'd just look up what happened at whatever meeting they were talking about and hopefully I'd be more or less okay to speak about it on TV.

So a few hours later I was on my way to a TV studio. I had spent a half hour reading about the meeting, which had been held by La Francophonie, the organization of French-speaking countries. This was not an organization whose activities I followed particularly closely—or at all—which explained why I wasn't aware of the goings-on at the meeting. But what had happened was pretty interesting. In examining recent hostilities between Israel and Lebanon, La Francophonie's membership had forwarded a resolution that expressed sympathy for the Lebanese victims of the violence without doing the same for their Israeli counterparts. It was the sort of

unbalanced resolution I knew well from my days at the UN, criticizing Israel for its military actions—admittedly sometimes fairly—without putting them in the proper context of the constant threats it faced. At the UN, if it was a Security Council resolution, the United States would usually veto it. But the United States was obviously not a member of La Francophonie. And so, despite its meek reputation, it was Canada—led by its prime minister, Stephen Harper—that stepped in to block the passage of the resolution as it was written. Given that Canada is not usually a power player in international organizations, this was a surprising development, and I was expecting to be asked questions about its implications, as well as substantive ones about the underlying resolution.

Relatively confident that I would be able to discuss all this, I got to the studio and found that the only person there was a technician. I would be interviewed remotely by a host in a different studio, he explained, as he seated me in front of a large camera and put a headset on me.

"The producer there will give you all the instructions," he said as he left. "Just listen, and they'll talk to you soon."

I nodded and sat there, staring into the black screen in front of me. After a minute or so I heard the producer on the earphones.

"Mr. Levey," he said, "can you hear me?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good," he said. "This is a live interview, so are you ready?"

"Yes," I said.

"So in ten seconds," he continued, "we're going to talk about what happened today in Romania. And . . . ten . . ."

I gasped. What happened today in *Romania*? There must have been some mistake. I had no idea what had happened that day in Romania. In fact, I never had any idea of what happened in Romania.

"Nine . . ."

"Wait!" I said to the producer at the other end of the line. "What do you mean Romania? This was supposed to be about the Middle East meeting."

"Really?" he asked. "Hold on."

And then he was gone, and I was staring into the blackness of the monitor, continuing to count down where he had left off. Eight. Seven. Six.

"Five," I said to myself, convinced that in just another few seconds I would be live on television, being interviewed about what had happened in Romania—whatever that was.

"Well," I would expound, making it up as I went along, "the situation in Bucharest is complicated and nuanced. On the one hand, we have to be careful not to ascribe too much importance to the events there today, but on the other hand—"

Then I would rip my headpiece off and run out of the studio, screaming about having to go talk to my grocer. All on live television.

"Three," I continued counting. "Two . . ."

And just then the producer was back.

"The meeting of the Francophonie took place *in* Romania," he said.

And suddenly we were live and on the air. I managed to handle the interview without too much trouble, discussing the perceived imbalance of the Francophonie resolution. But anyone unfortunate enough to see that television appearance would have noticed that in my first seconds on the air my eyes were wide and, because my

mouth was dry from nerves, I was licking my lips in a weird way that looked like I was trying to be seductive.

I recovered from my unnerving TV appearance and prepared to head off for AISC. But since my conversation with Terrence Wallace was still swirling around in my head, I decided that I should balance it by talking to Sammy Kimling, the national director of the Agency for Anti-Defamation.

Kimling was one of Wallace's sharpest critics and often an AISC ally. The AAD, a watchdog group that worked to fight anti-Semitism, was one of the pillars of the Jewish establishment in the United States—as active and influential in its realm as AISC was in its own. It didn't focus on Israel like AISC did, but given that modern manifestations of anti-Semitism were so frequently connected to Israel, they often waded into the Middle East debate as well.

Although Kimling was respected in many quarters, some—especially younger Jews—had serious misgivings about him. There were sometimes concerns, for example, that he was too eager to report incidents of bias or hate, having a tendency to cry wolf, and that this painted the Jewish community as a whole as reactionary.

"Is the problem of anti-Semitism in the U.S. getting better or worse?" I asked Kimling when I got him on the phone.

"The answer is yes," he said.

That's a very odd answer, I thought.

"In terms of attitudes," he said, "it has gotten better. In terms of classic anti-Semitic attitudes, forty years ago one-third of Americans were seriously infected by anti-Semitism. Today, anywhere from twelve to fourteen percent are. That's the good

news. But the bad news is that that's still forty million Americans who are seriously infected with anti-Semitism.

"The other part of the bad news," he continued, "is that one- third continue to believe that the Jews killed Christ, and thirty percent believe that American Jews are more loyal to Israel than to the United States. So while things are generally better, the ingredients are still very serious, and there are still lingering concerns. Jews are seen as not loyal. They're seen as tied to Israel for better or worse."

This brought up a question in my mind. To what extent, I wondered, did Israeli policies, and the turmoil constantly swirling around Israel, actually *cause* anti-Semitism for Diaspora Jews? The State of Israel was founded as a refuge for Jews escaping endemic anti-Semitism, but so often today it seemed like anti-Semitism in the rest of the world was tied into concerns about Israel. Could Israel be making the problem worse for those of us living outside the country?

I tried to articulate this question to Kimling, trying to be careful to not sound anti-Israel myself but conscious of the fact that this ultrasensitive question could be construed as just that. Probably as a result of me trying to be delicate about it, though, I wasn't totally sure Kimling got what I was driving at. It was hard to tell from his response.

"Every time there is violence in the Middle East," he said, "it legitimizes the anti-Semitic platform."

I had an urge to press this issue a little more, because I thought it was central to understanding the relationship between Diaspora Jewry and Israel. One could argue that, at least in North America, real, dangerous anti-Semitism was largely a thing of the past, and was now just relegated to fringe groups. Most North American Jews of my generation did not feel oppressed because of their being Jewish, and didn't feel

that their background kept them from pursuing opportunities in whatever field they wanted, or socializing in and even marrying into social circles on all strata of society. Having said that, though, when the issue of Israel came up in conversation, or when the Middle East exploded into one of its periodic episodes of bloodshed, sometimes there were uncomfortable moments where American Jews felt like other people were connecting them to unpopular Israeli policy. That is, the only anti-Semitism they experienced was often a result of Israel, instead of having Israel be their saviour from it. I wasn't sure I bought this, but it was definitely arguable.

I considered pushing Kimling further on the issue, but decided against it. Besides possibly taking our conversation into a long digression, when I knew he only had limited time for me, I worried that it might impact the way he spoke to me. After all, in many ways, this sort of accusation pulled the rug out from under his own work. In any case, I thought, it was time to dive into my real reason for talking to him.

"Okay," I said. "My key question is how should I personally make peace in the Middle East?"

"Anybody can sit down for fifteen minutes and map out a peace settlement," he said immediately, and I considered telling him about my disastrous attempt at iPeace, "and both you and I know what that would entail. A two-state solution. An exchange of land. A reasonable and rational approach to Jerusalem. And, of course, no right of return."

Most of this did indeed seem reasonable to me, though I knew that many Palestinians didn't see giving up their "right of return" as such a foregone conclusion. Also, while a "reasonable and rational approach to Jerusalem" sounded good, I knew the devil would be in the details on that one—and that reason and rationality were not exactly in large supply in the Middle East. Even if I personally mostly agreed with

Kimling's plan, I knew plenty of people who would map out entirely different solutions. What seemed obvious to him was not necessarily so obvious to others.

I asked Kimling if he thought the U.S.-Israel dynamic was beginning to change a little, as Terrence Wallace and others had suggested.

"It has only changed for those who want it to change," Kimling said. "It's only people who are trying to promote an agenda who try to say there is change. Those things that unite us as nations are so much greater than those that divide us."

This was a common rhetorical technique among Israel's supporters—pointing out the similarities and shared interests of the United States and Israel. I thought it had a lot of merit to it, but at the same time, I didn't think that if someone was trying to alter the relationship in order to foster a Middle East solution, they were necessarily trying to *divide* the two countries. Kimling was satisfied with the status quo, whereby the United States supported Israel's right to call the shots when it came to how quickly or slowly it wanted to move in the peace process, even if Israel's policies might be counterproductive for its own long-term survival.

"What do you think of Reynolds and Wallace and their thesis?" I asked.

"It's abject nonsense," he said, "and part of the charge that we control the media. If it was true, they wouldn't have had the field day that they had. They accused me of not wanting to debate them, which is nonsense. They want to put themselves in victim mode."

Finally, I moved on to the divide between Kimling's AAD and younger Jews, who often weren't as engaged with the AAD's mission as their parents were, and who had sometimes taken aim at him and what they saw as his exaggerated focus on anti-Semitism. For example, one political cartoon drawn by the cartoonist Eli Belvery and published in *The Jewish Daily Press*, one of the Jewish establishment's most

venerable publications, had depicted Kimling as a paranoid reactionary. It had him proclaiming, "I fight stereotyping by being a stereotype!"

"Those sorts of people are just trying to get attention," he said. "I think it's fine, but I don't think they're a significant part of the American Jewish population. By all polls, Jews see anti-Semitism in the U.S. as a major concern. Those people make a point by appealing to the other side—to those without memory."

He explained that he was referring to the Holocaust, and that he believed that anyone with a real understanding of history wouldn't be so cavalier. For Kimling, as for a lot of Jewish people of his generation, the Holocaust would always stand as a powerful reminder that even a hint of anti-Semitism should not be countenanced, because there was no telling where it might lead.

I asked him specifically about Eli Belvery's cartoon, and he answered, "I think what Eli Belly does is fine, but I would have thought *The Jewish Daily Press* was more serious…"

At this point, I stopped paying close attention, distracted, because I knew Eli personally.

Belly? I thought, as Kimling went on. *Did he just call Eli Belvery 'Eli Belly'?*

I had a chance to tell Eli about this soon afterward, when I was visiting him in his apartment in the East Village. There were comics and comic-book art all over the walls, and books on everything from art to Jewish history. Beside a large window looking down at the traffic on Third Avenue, he had an easel set up, with a comic in progress. Belvery was in his late thirties, but perhaps because he had a wild mop of curly hair and because of his colorful apartment and his irreverent cartoons, he seemed much younger.

"Is it okay if I call you Eli Belly too?" I asked.

"No," he said.

Moving on, I asked him what he thought about Kimling's assertion that he—and people like him—were just trying to get attention.

"In my comic about him, I was not making fun of the threat of anti-Semitism," he said. "Anti-Semitism in the Muslim world and Europe is dangerous. But I'm making fun of an individual who has built an entire career frightening Jews.

"It is in these people's vested interests to make the genuine threat of anti-Semitism bigger than it is. In the case of Kimling, he actually increases anti-Semitism. He's a walking stereotype. The whiney guy on TV who jumps on every case to complain about it—playing into the role of the paranoid Jew. Like a character from an earlier generation. Which, of course, he is."

For Eli, people like Kimling were not just oversensitive. They were actually insecure about their own places in the world and used their hypervigilance to bolster their senses of self-worth.

"Are you a self-hating Jew?" I asked.

"No, I'm a self-loving Jew," Eli said, "and I hate that term. I'm proud to be a Jew, but these people define themselves by pretending to psychoanalyze opponents—they are sniveling, insecure Jews who need to pump themselves up by insulting others."

Sammy Kimling was hardly Eli's only target. He had drawn cartoons satirizing a wide range of figures, one of which in particular had set off a recent flood of controversy. The cartoon was about an imagined Evangelical tour of Israel, and had taken aim squarely at Evangelical Christian supporters of Israel, depicting them as bloodthirsty and anti-Semitic. The cartoon had been bitterly attacked not just by

Christian groups, but also by Jews and Israelis, and this criticism was discussed as far afield as a major Pakistani newspaper, *The Pakistan Daily*.

"Why did you think that one cartoon in particular raised the anger of so many people?" I asked him.

"Well," he said, "there were a lot of people in the Evangelical community who thought that I was depicting them as messianic lunatics hungering for the Apocalypse."

"Were you doing that?" I asked.

"Yes," he said.

Naturally, I asked Eli what he thought I should do to make Middle East Peace.

"A three-state solution," he said.

A three-state solution?

Various versions of the two-state solution were the ones most commonly floated around when people threw out ideas for peace, but what was a three-state solution?

There would be a moderate Jewish state and a moderate Palestinian state, Eli explained, and then there would be a third state where the extremists from *both* sides would live, fighting it out forever, as they seemed to wish to do. That third state would be called "Fundamentalistan."

Eli obviously wasn't being wholly serious, but he wasn't joking exactly either.

"It's humour born of frustration," he said. "The tragic truth here is that peace is impossible while each side has extremists subtly or overtly dictating policy."

Before ending our conversation, I went back to the topic of Kimling one more time, and asked Eli what he thought about Kimling's assertion that those who felt far removed from the Holocaust generation didn't see the world in the same way as their

parents and grandparents did. He seemed to pretty much agree with him, but framed it differently.

"It's true we don't look at everything through the lens of the Holocaust," he said. "Those who grew up in its shadows do. And it skews everything for them."

In a sense, I thought, the way American Jews thought about the Middle East often turned on their own relationships to the Holocaust. The closer they felt to the Holocaust era, the more sensitive they generally were about Israel's security, and the more concerned they were about its short-term prospects. The question was whether keeping the Holocaust in sharp focus was useful or detrimental in contextualizing the Middle East today—or somewhere in between. Was it useful to include people in the debate who felt the Holocaust was merely history? Was it useful to include people still scarred by it?

If Belvery and Kimling were in agreement on anything, it was that the rift between their two worldviews was generational in nature.

And for me personally, this rift was about to hit home.

Just after I met with Eli, I got a call from my uncle. Obviously, he knew about my first book and what I was up to now, and in the call it became quickly evident that he wasn't particularly happy about either of them. At first the conversation went okay, but when I made some joke about the Israeli settlers possibly planning to colonize Japan, it took an unpleasant turn.

"You know," he said, a rougher tone entering his voice, "you just don't get it, do you?

"Get what?" I asked.

"You don't get what Israel means to us, to people who remember when we didn't know if it would survive. To people whose families were murdered by the

Germans. You just don't understand what it means to us who grew up after the Holocaust—when it felt like it was our only lifeline."

This was a bit overwhelming, especially since it felt like it had come out of nowhere. I was pretty sure that I did in fact have a fairly good understanding of the importance of Israel to Diaspora Jews as an emotional homeland and as a life raft in case things abroad started tending a little toward, well, 1939. I probably didn't feel it as viscerally as did Jews of older generations, or as did Jews in countries where it was still a little dicey to be open about one's Jewish identity. But that didn't mean I didn't "get it."

Besides, Israelis themselves often made light of their difficult situation. The country had a lot of black humour. For example, when they were off duty, the Israel Defense Forces' combat engineers—the troops charged with using explosives to blow up structures in war zones—sometimes wore T-shirts with their unit's name on them and pictures of soldiers who were smilingly showing off their missing limbs. But even besides the fact that Israelis were themselves no strangers to humour satirizing their difficult situation—humour that worked quite differently to wry, self-deprecating Diaspora Jewish humour, but was humour nonetheless—my joke that had incited the negative turn in our conversation had been about the settlements. It hadn't been about Israel's right to exist or about suicide bombers or anything of that kind. To the extent that the settlements delayed peace, I thought, they were a threat to Israel's long-term viability. If my uncle cared about Israel as deeply as he claimed, then wouldn't he be as concerned about them as me?

"Look," I said, "I've ordered some underwear that should solve everything."

"It's all a big joke to you, isn't it?" he asked. And then he hung up on me

EXPLANATORY NOTE:

There is a gap in the creative piece here, and there are more that follow, in order to have space to give a full sense of the narrative flow of the work. The next section is set shortly after the last section, but in the gap, the narrator has attended the AISC conference and been told that the Middle East conflict is manifesting in the online virtual world known as "Second Life." I recognize that at times these gaps in the narrative might leave a reader feeling as though they are missing relevant details. Nevertheless, these gaps are necessary so that, in the space available, the full arc of the entire narrative can be conveyed. I have endeavoured to ensure that all relevant details are easily surmised from context.

SECTION FIVE:

THE OTHER MIDDLE EAST

I had never tried Second Life, and had already written it off as just another manifestation of breathless dot-com hype. I thought it was primarily used by unhappy married people to have virtual affairs with other unhappy married people across the country and end up as the bizarre story at the end of the evening news.

I was right about that. But it was used for other things too, apparently.

Second Life is a virtual environment, accessible from your home computer, where you create a character to represent you and set about giving that character a full virtual life. You buy them clothes, make friends, buy land, build houses, attend parties, date, get married, go to lectures and concerts, engage in political causes, and do pretty much anything else—including, yes, have virtual sex and possibly end up on the real-life evening news.

The politicians running for office all had "campaign offices" in Second Life, and many major corporations had presences as well. Reuters even had a Second Life news bureau. Just recently, the first Second Life millionaire had arisen. This wasn't someone who had made a million "Linden dollars"—the virtual currency used in Second Life—but someone who had made a million real dollars, money she could remove from the virtual world. And she had done it by selling Second Life real estate. Virtual real estate.

And as in everything else, the Middle East and all its troubles had found its way into this virtual world. There was a virtual Israel, virtual Arab neighborhoods, and even virtual Middle East terrorism.

I told Abby all this and said I was going to start playing Second Life as the next stage in my effort to make Middle East peace.

"That sounds stupid," she said. But I was determined. My peacemaking efforts in real life weren't bearing much fruit yet, so maybe the virtual world was my only hope.

So I logged on and created a character who I thought looked vaguely like me. Then I started walking around the virtual world.

For the first few minutes, I didn't find very much. Just green grassy fields, and something that looked like an old, broken wagon. Where was all the action I had heard about? Where were the chainstores, the millionaires, and the virtual pickup bars? Where were the other people? Supposedly there were millions of "residents" of Second Life, but I couldn't find any of them.

Just when I was about to give up on this whole venture, I discovered that instead of just randomly strolling around looking at virtual fields and virtual broken wagons—how, I wondered, did a virtual broken wagon even come to be?—there was a way for me to teleport myself to other locations.

I tried it and discovered a listing of events that were happening at that moment. I picked one of the events randomly, not sure what it was, and clicked on it. A moment later my avatar was being transported to somewhere else in the Second Life universe. And I appeared in front of a woman in a nurse's uniform having sex with a dragon wearing a top hat.

Well, this is awkward, I thought, knowing that somewhere out there in the real world there were two people controlling these two avatars. I had never experienced awkwardness online before, but there was no mistaking it.

Eventually I managed to find the places in Second Life where the Middle East situation really was manifesting. I found the virtual Israel, and I spent some time walking my virtual self through it. Along the way, I saw online versions of many Israeli landmarks, such as the most famous skyscraper in Tel Aviv. There was even an online version of the Western Wall, and right beside it I encountered an online version of some members of Chabad Lubavitch, a messianic and evangelizing sect of Judaism. As in real life, I avoided them. But besides them, I didn't see much street life in the streets of virtual Israel.

After a while, I found my way into a café in what was known as "the Jewish neighborhood of Second Life." Surely, I thought, I would find people there who might be able to tell me about how the conflict played out in their virtual world.

"Abby," I called out from my office. "I found the Jewish neighborhood of Second Life, and I'm going into a café there."

"You're an idiot," she called back cheerily, going about her business in the other room.

I pressed on. And inside the café, I did indeed find some life. There were about half a dozen characters sitting around the café, drinking virtual coffees, and I went over and sat down at a table near a couple of them. And soon, as weird as it was, I was having a conversation with them about what they called "the Jewish community of Second Life" and the Middle East question.

At the café, I asked some of the other patrons about Israeli-Palestinian issues in Second Life, and they were quick to confirm what I had been told. The conflict played out in Second Life in a big way. There had been several "terrorist attacks" at the virtual Western Wall, they said, and the guy who ran the Wall was thinking of shutting it down.

The terrorist attacks, they explained, consisted of electronic sabotage and vandalism, whereby the Wall and the area around it was defaced with anti-Semitic graffiti, including swastikas that could not be easily removed. But they also told me that they had heard that a jihadi group operating in Second Life had actually killed people—that is, people's *avatars*—and there was concern that something like that could target virtual Israel.

"There's a lot of anti-Semitism in Second Life," one of them told me.

In fact, they said, at times when the *real* Middle East was particularly turbulent, the hostility would spill over directly into Second Life. If there was a raid on Gaza, for example, Second Life Israel would be overwhelmed by virtual protesters, who would make it difficult or impossible for its regular visitors to go about their virtual lives. There would be hurled insults and racist comments, and the usual back-and-forth about occupation, terrorism, and historical rights.

"These Palestinian people show up in Second Life Israel," one of them continued, "and they harass me for 'stealing' their land and occupying Palestine and all that. But it doesn't make any sense. I've never even been to the real Israel. In RL, I live in Pittsburgh. I'm not occupying anything."

"RL," I had learned by this point, meant "real life," as opposed to Second Life, but I wasn't expecting the first guy's invocation of the outside world to earn him a rebuke from one of the other people in the café.

"Hey!" she said, or, rather, typed. "No talking about RL identities."

"It's a major faux pas," a third avatar explained to me, since I had told them all that I was new to all this.

A Second Life faux pas, I thought. You were allowed to disguise your identity as a horse wearing a ballet outfit, but it was apparently socially unacceptable to

discuss real life. I was about to throw my hands up with all this and leave the virtual café, when one of these coffee-shop jockeys said something that caught my interest.

"They've even established a Jewish militia in Second Life," he said, "to protect us."

"Actually," one of the coffee-shop guys said, "if you go out to that synagogue out there, you'll find them patrolling."

Now this was getting really bizarre. But obviously, I had to investigate further. So, with some good-byes to my new virtual friends in the virtual coffee shop, I steered my online self outside.

"I'm trying to find a Jewish militia's virtual patrol," I called out to Abby.

The virtual Israel these people had constructed was remarkably developed, especially since I still didn't really understand what the point in all this was. There were celebrations and meetings, virtual religious services, communal areas like the one I was in, and even a fully functioning newspaper for the Jewish "residents" of Second Life called *2-Life.*

Later on, when I left the world of Second Life, I went to the website for that newspaper and paged through some of its issues; I found that it was a fairly sophisticated publication. Someone was putting a lot of time into it. Published several times a year, it gave a rundown of the issues and events facing the Jews of Second Life. These included new developments and projects in their online community, and threats, including a group of Second Life neo-Nazis.

Second Life neo-Nazis. Virtual extremist groups. Online patrols. I wondered what my friends—who spent their days doing normal things like going to work—would think about how I was spending my time. It was like I had entered an alternate bizarre universe, I thought, and then remembered that I pretty much had.

I walked a little distance away from the coffee shop and soon found the synagogue I'd been sent to. I walked through the empty synagogue, marveling at how much detail had been put into its design, and came out the other side, where I saw an avatar coming toward me. A man with a Star of David on his shirt.

"Hello," he said.

I greeted him and asked him if he was with the Jewish militia.

"Who wants to know?" he asked.

I told him that I was looking into how the conflict manifested "inworld"—a word I had learned from my coffee-shop buddies—and he proceeded to explain that he was indeed patrolling.

"For what?" I asked. "Or who?"

"For Palestinian terrorists or Nazis," he said.

"So you're just sitting at home," I typed in, "and patrolling around online for Palestinian terrorists or Nazis?"

His response: "No talking about RL."

Right, I thought, *a faux pas*.

I asked him if I could accompany him on his "patrol," and he agreed. To my surprise, though, we didn't just stay in Second Life Israel but instead ventured to areas that were decidedly not Israeli. Some kind of Palestinian area. A virtual Arab street market. A virtual Morocco.

And all the while, we paraded around, with this guy strutting around with his Star of David shirt. Clearly hoping for some virtual trouble.

We never found any virtual trouble, and I eventually abandoned that virtual militiaman, but when I did some more reading later, I found that the things those guys in the Jewish coffee shop had told me were true. But there was more too. Rumor had

it that besides political campaigns having operations in Second Life, so did actual organs of the U.S. government, such as the FBI and possibly even the CIA. The reason for all this, supposedly, was that terrorists—real-world terrorists—were suspected to be using Second Life for their own goals.

That sounded ridiculous, but what did I know? They could conceivably have been using it for a number of purposes: communication, training, even transferring money. Anything was possible. After all, I had gone on a patrol for online Palestinian terrorists. I had no idea what else might be out there.

But in any case, by now I had decided that my peacemaking future was not online but back in the real world—where something huge was about to happen.

EXPLANATORY NOTE:

In this gap, Barack Obama is elected president of the United States, and the narrator discusses the implications of this development for the Middle East. He tries to contact a long list of serious American political figures, but does not manage to connect with any of them. He also mentions that he has a contact in the new White House named "Kevin," and debates whether to approach him. Meanwhile, he hears that one of the pioneers of the Israeli peace movement, "Shaul Yoav," wants to speak to him.

SECTION SIX:

GIVE ME A CHILD FOR HIS FIRST SEVEN YEARS

Things were suddenly moving. I had my iPeace underwear, and one of the fathers of the Israeli peace movement was going to call me. It was too late in the day in Israel now for me to expect a phone call from Yoav, but all this had given me confidence to make a decision about what to do with Kevin, my White House contact. I would call him again and follow up.

So I made the call to the White House and got a serious-sounding operator whose tone of voice suggested that I might be calling to report an imminent attack on the homeland. Kevin wasn't there, but she said that she'd be sure to have him call me back.

I hung up and sat back in my chair, a bit more optimistic. The wheels were turning at least a little.

I hoped that when I heard from Shaul Yoav or Kevin I would be able to move forward in a big way. But in the meantime, I decided to go backward a little—and revisit the place where I had first heard about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

That's how I ended up outside my former elementary school later that afternoon, watching the kids play in the schoolyard. I smiled as I saw one of the younger kids licking a dirty brick wall. I had probably once licked that same wall, I thought nostalgically. It had been in this very playground that another child had once whipped around his jacket, catching the zipper on my forehead and slicing it open in a long clean cut. And it had been here that I had once run straight toward a much bigger

kid, convinced that he would move out of the way before I reached him, and as a result been knocked unconscious for the first time. Those had been good times.

It had also been here that I had first heard the word "Palestinian" and been educated in Zionist history and philosophy, which is why I had come here today. To see if going back to where it had started for me would help me move forward.

In the Middle East, the way that children were educated was a controversial issue. In Israel, for example, there had long been a debate about how to teach children about the origins of their country. Was it appropriate to tell them about the Palestinians who had been displaced at Israel's founding? Even if one believed that that displacement was a necessary but unfortunate moral imperative, did that mean that children growing up in a complicated place should be weighed down by the burden of that history? In recent years, there had been more of an effort to engage with the less appealing parts of Zionist history, but for most of Israel's existence, the more unsavory bits had generally been ignored or passed over quickly. The displacement of the Palestinians, the bloody actions sanctioned by some of the state's founders to secure a home for the Jewish people, the suffering of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, and the difficulties and injustices often experienced by Arab citizens of Israel had been largely ignored.

Palestinian children had it worse—and weirder. Over the past few years, for example, one of the more popular characters on Hamas TV was a Mickey Mouse lookalike named Farfour, who preached about Islamic supremacy and told children about the glories of martyrdom, recommending that they "annihilate the Jews." There had also been a character named Nahoul the Bee, who, like Farfour, was eventually martyred on the show at the hands of the Jews. More recently, there was a brown bear named Nassur who had come to Palestine to join the holy war, and had reportedly

hinted on air that he had come from Iran. He was joined by a giant Jew-eating bunny named Assud.

But even in North America, the issue of how children, especially Jewish and Arab children, learned about the conflict was interesting and important. And this school, between getting my head cut open and stupidly running into bigger children, was where I myself had first gotten inklings of it.

It had been eighteen years since I had graduated from eighth grade, but as I sat in the car outside, watching today's version of who I had been play in the schoolyard, the memories came flooding back.

It was a Zionist Jewish school. Each morning we had sung the Israeli national anthem, and on special days we had been made to dress up in blue and white, the colors of the Israeli flag. Our Hebrew and Jewish studies teachers had been Israeli women who, it had always seemed to me, had been kicked out of the Israeli army for excessive brutality and sent directly to our school. At the time, I was pretty sure that the most infamous one—with the appropriate name, Witchler—had probably been personally responsible for the vast majority of violence in the Middle East.

And when our graduation had been approaching, it had been Witchler—whom I remember as being eight feet tall and carrying a police baton at all times—who had taken charge of our ceremony. Instead of it being a dignified or celebratory event, though, she and some of her colleagues had other ideas. Our graduation would be a musical in which we pretended to be various ethnic stereotypes and danced around in vaguely offensive costumes while singing songs with mildly racist undertones. My impression of a graduation, even an eighth-grade graduation, involved caps and gowns, and maybe some marching. In our graduation, though, we were being divided into groups representing the various Jewish factions from around the world that had

immigrated to Israel. Instead of wearing caps and gowns, we had to dress up as Yemenites, Ethiopians, Russians, and assorted other nationalities.

"Why are they doing this to us?" I remember my friend David asking me. "I just want to get my diploma and go to high school next year."

"I don't know why they are doing this," I told David. "I think they just hate us."

As graduation approached, instead of going out to the playground at recess, we would be summoned to a practice.

"To the multipurpose room!" Witchler would shriek at us. "Now! Now!"

And as if we were being conscripted into a war we didn't believe in, we marched off sullenly. There, in the multipurpose room—whose only purpose I could ever discern was as a place to make us do humiliating things—we divided into our assigned ethnic groupings and rehearsed. The groups each had a moment in the spotlight, singing songs about their respective countries and doing what our Israeli teachers imagined were native dances.

At one point in the performance, I remember, everything stopped for a moment so that a kid named Philip could say his one line.

He would step forward proudly and, apropos nothing, proclaim, "Tunis is the best!"

And then the different groups would begin dancing again, or singing about their particular cuisine. Or whatever inanity they had been engaged in before Philip's big line.

But while nobody was happy about the graduation situation, I felt especially bad for a boy named Steven Gold, whose life Witchler was making particularly hellish. Steven had somehow unwittingly displayed some aptitude at singing that the

rest of the boys lacked—with all of us going through puberty, I'm not sure what they expected from our adolescent voices—and he wasn't happy about it.

"You'll be our star," Witchler had said, and not in a way that left any room for a decision on his part.

"I don't want to be the star," he told me later, and I nodded sympathetically. Of course he didn't. None of us would have wanted to. As far as I could tell, in fact, none of us even wanted to be up on that stage at all, let alone "starring" in this bizarre production.

In our preparations, meanwhile, there were strange songs about the foods of Tunisia and the dances of South America, and the implicit threat that if we didn't cooperate in this circus, we might not graduate and would have to do the same thing the following year. Also, it was stressed to us that our graduation ceremony was in part about us, but in larger part about the "ingathering of exiles" in Israel—the different nationalities we were all role-playing on stage. Even as we prepared to leave the school behind, we were told, we were doing our bit for the Zionist cause.

I can't actually remember which group I was assigned to—though I seem to have a vague memory of having to dress up as if I were from Yemen—because I was the one kid in the school who was actually kicked out of the graduation ceremony. I refused to sing the songs and just mouthed them instead, and when Witchler noticed this, I was punished by being banished from the part of the performance where we were assigned to ethnic groups.

Even to this day, that was one of the happiest moments of my life. I was thrilled that I wouldn't have to be onstage with the rest of my classmates as they were forced through a public humiliation that was sure to leave psychological scars on everyone involved. In fact, I remember a few of them being envious of me, not

because they felt any misgivings about the odd ethnic stereotyping—we were all a little young for that—but because even besides that, the whole thing felt more than a little off.

When I later compared notes with a friend who attended a nearby public school, I was jealous to learn that his graduation ceremony had had no embarrassing songs and dances and no bizarre multicultural show tunes. It was pretty much just shaking hands and being congratulated for finishing eighth grade. Maybe with caps and gowns, but definitely not with folk dancing and ethnic stereotypes.

So now, all these years later, looking at the kids playing in the schoolyard, I wondered if their graduation ceremonies would be like mine was. Would that kid licking the wall have to dress as an Ethiopian tribesman and sing songs about escaping to Israel? And more to the point, what were they learning about the Middle East? It wasn't as if I expected it to be any more nuanced than what my classmates and I had learned—after all, the oldest among them was just thirteen years old—but I wondered if the curriculum had developed at all. In the time since I had left the school, so much had changed. There was far more recognition about the need for a Palestinian state, but there had also been so much blood spilled in failing to reach that goal. We had learned about the conflict in stark, easily understood terms of good and evil. Were these kids learning about it with any more complexity?

Hold on, I thought, *is that teacher looking at me?*

Indeed, a teacher in the schoolyard was staring at me, with an odd look on her face. I didn't recognize her, but I wondered if it was possible that she recognized me. Could it be that she remembered me as the kid who had been kicked out of graduation for refusing to sing songs about the beauty of Yemen? More likely, I decided, was that she just found it suspicious that a strange man was just outside the school gates,

staring at the children. It was lucky, I thought, that she didn't know how delighted I had been earlier about the arrival of my "special underwear."

I smiled at her and nodded. It was time to leave.

But how much nuance can you expect a child's education to have? Is it possible to try to teach kids to see the complexity in the situation and avoid one-sided thinking? As I headed away from my old school, I didn't know. But I did know that I'd once seen a school try to do just that.

When I'd been working at the UN, one of my side duties had been to give little lectures to visiting groups of high school and college students about the Israeli perspective on world affairs. One of these groups had been particularly interesting, not only because they were from a Muslim high school, but because of the reason they had requested to meet with someone from the Israeli delegation. The national Model UN was coming up, and they were going to be playing Israel.

It was a bit disorienting when the group filed into the conference room. They were mostly of South Asian descent, with a smattering of Arab faces among them, and most of the girls wore hijabs. But they immediately started asking questions about how they should best state Israel's case at the Model UN.

The kids were from a Muslim high school in Queens, and their teacher—a religious Muslim herself—had told me that she had specifically requested that her students be assigned to play the Israeli delegation.

"They are exposed to one side of the political debate about Israel," she told me, "and I felt it was important for them to really understand the other side."

My discussion with them was fascinating.

"As Israel," one of the girls wearing a head scarf asked me, "how can we convince the others that all we're trying to do is protect our citizens from terrorism?"

She asked the question earnestly, and she looked completely serious, but I couldn't help myself from smiling because of how incongruous this was—the image of a religious Muslim wholeheartedly taking the Israeli position. Even so, I answered the question as best as I could, and the student who had asked it took diligent notes, and then her classmates proceeded to pepper me with a long list of similar questions about diplomatic strategy from the Israeli position.

It was clear that these were good students and good kids. Their questions were astute, and they had done their reading. There was no question that they knew more about Israel and its people than I had when I had been in high school. And after a while, I began to forget that they were religious Muslims and that Israel's well-being was probably not of paramount importance to them.

When our meeting was over, they told me that the Model UN was soon and would be held at the actual UN building in New York, using the real UN chambers and conference halls. They, the "Israeli" delegation, would be sitting in the real Israeli delegation's seats and trying to accomplish the same goals the actual Israelis struggled with each day.

I had to see it.

So, with the teacher and the kids' permission, on a Saturday not long after that, I showed up at the UN to find it transformed into a surreal, younger version of itself. At the time I was used to frequenting the building's corridors and working amid the hundreds of adult diplomats, which made it especially odd to see the metamorphosis it had undergone. Teenagers in suits walked around in small groups, talking in hushed tones and carrying folders and stacks of documents. As they walked by, I heard words like "Security Council," "veto power," and "General Assembly." If

not for the occasional pierced eyebrow and the lack of gray hair, I could easily have thought that it was just another workday at the UN.

When I found my group, they were having a discussion about a draft resolution that they were about to introduce for voting. In hushed discussions, they strategized about who their likely allies were, and who they needed to lobby. Apparently this didn't go well, because later I saw one of the girls in the discussion come storming out of a UN chamber. She was a sixteen-year-old named Laila, who wore full Muslim religious attire.

"Why does everyone hate us?" she asked the rest of the group.

Later, over coffee in a UN café, the school's Pakistani principle told me that some of the kids' parents were not happy with this experiment.

"They did not want their children to defend Israel's actions," he said. "I had to speak with them and try to convince them. They wanted us to switch countries. Some of them are still not at all happy that their children are involved in this."

So when I encountered Laila again, I asked her about this generational issue.

"At family gatherings," she said, "you always hear about the conflict, about the way that Israel uses advanced military equipment and the Palestinians just use stones. But now I understand a little more. It is surrounded by hostile nations, so now I see Israel's military necessity."

After one session, where the "Palestinian" delegation—who all had thick Mexican accents—had been particularly hostile, one of Laila's young Bangladeshi classmates declared, "We in Israel have to be good at self-defense, ready to defend ourselves at any time."

She realized I was listening and paused, clearly recognizing how odd this sounded coming from her.

"By assuming another viewpoint, you make a stranger out of yourself," she told me. "But at this moment, I am an Israeli."

Over the course of the day, as these little delegates shuffled in and out of meetings in the actual UN chambers, I continued to try to probe a little more into what they really thought. One of them told me that she had been feuding with her father as a result of this project, and that he had been one of the parents who had tried to stop it.

"He is very angry that I am doing this," she told me, "because Israel kills Muslims."

And, after a few more attempts, I was able to get some more out of Osia too.

"Jews have a right to a country," she told me, "but why does it have to be in Palestine? Why do they have to be intruders?"

"Do you have any Jewish friends?" I asked her and one of her friends, and they both shook their heads.

"Honestly," Laila told me, "I think you are the first one I have ever really met."

Then she went to retake her seat as the Israeli delegate at the General Assembly.

But if all this was surreal, the final results of the Model UN were a lot more grounded in reality. I sat with the Israeli delegation as the results were announced by the judges. Across dozens of categories, they scored no wins at all. Perhaps they had not deserved any, I thought, or perhaps they had faced concerted and crippling opposition, like Israel so often was at the real UN. Whatever the case, this caused the kids to drop their diplomatic facades. After the weeks of preparation they had gone through for this day, the kids looked heartbroken. A few of them even burst into tears.

"Why was Israel treated so badly?" one of them asked as the event came to a close.

On my way home from my old Hebrew school, I passed the little fruit stand and looked in. My grocer wasn't there—another man was filling in for him—and I walked on, disappointed. With memories of both my time at Hebrew school and of my time spent with those Muslim kids at the UN, I was in a sort of spacey, unfocused mood.

But when I got back to my desk and checked my email, there was an important reminder of the progress I had been making earlier in the day. Kevin from the White House had emailed me.

Yes, he said. We needed to talk.

EXPLANATORY NOTE:

In this short gap, the narrator tries unsuccessfully to connect with the White House, and has a brief, political conversation with the Israeli peace activist, "Shaul Yoav."

SECTION SEVEN:

I AM NOT PROUD OF MY BEHAVIOUR

I wanted to speak with the grocer. It had been a while since I had conversed with him, and I wondered if my recent experiences and conversations might help me to further break the ice. Perhaps he had some thoughts on AISC, on the new administration in the White House, or on Shaul Yoav.

So I marched down to the grocery store, hoping he would be there this time, unsure if he would even remember me, and not certain on how I planned to proceed. Maybe, I thought, he would be playing Arabic music again, providing me a bridge to conversation.

I found him outside the little stand, smoking a cigarette and watching the passersby. I smiled at him and approached, and he looked at me and nodded, without a smile. His expression seemed to say, "This idiot again. The one who used a pineapple to try to hit on me."

But I was determined to change his impression of me. And so I went into the little kiosk and, after another couple of moments, the grocer put out his cigarette and followed. Instead of Arabic music, he had the radio on, which was playing a local news report.

He looked at me. I looked at him.

Then I looked at some broccoli.

I was pretty sure he remembered me—the grocer, not the broccoli—and so I decided to just jump into conversation.

"How are you?" I asked.

"Fine," he said, and didn't add anything further.

It was interesting, I thought, that I was spending so much time with people who wouldn't shut up about the Middle East, but was having so much trouble getting into a conversation about it with this guy. It also occurred to me that because of the circles I was running in these days, I was starting to forget how touchy a subject the Middle East was—how full of land mines it was and how most normal people avoided the subject whenever they could.

And here I was specifically trying to bring it up. With a Palestinian. With someone who, at least by the compass of ethnicity, was on the opposing side of the conflict.

But should it really have been such a touchy issue? Neither of us lived there. Neither of us would die in the endemic violence there. Did the weight of history—in his case, personal history—mean that we couldn't just discuss it rationally? Would I necessarily offend him? Would we necessarily hate each other?

A commercial was playing on the radio now. An excited voice proclaimed that because the economy had fallen apart and housing prices were so low, they were offering a deal whereby you could buy a house in Florida and a house in the Northeast for one low price.

"Forget about winter," the excited voice said, "with your own place in the sun."

It felt fitting that they were talking about real estate, about housing, when this whole Middle East thing really boiled down to the same thing. It was about ownership, about domesticity—about a sense of home. In North America, there was lots to be had if you had the money. In the Middle East, it demanded a higher premium.

I noticed suddenly that the grocer was looking at me funny, and I wondered if he was thinking the same thing.

Then I realized that I had been standing there quietly for a while, listening to the radio. And I noticed that one of my hands had somehow drifted to an avocado and was resting on it lazily.

But then something interesting happened. The commercial ended and the news came on again, this time talking about international news. Specifically, the Middle East.

"A new spate of violence in the Middle East," the news reporter said.

I considered this, and wondered if it could even be thought of as news. Violence in the region was so expected and constant that he might as well have reported on "the strong possibility of there being weather today," or said, "This just in: our researchers have determined that you are listening to the radio."

But, obviously, this gave me a great bridge to political conversation with the grocer, and I pondered how to best proceed.

"Hey," I might say, "you're from the Middle East. What do you think of the new spate of violence? How does it compare to the old spates of violence? They don't make spates like that anymore, huh? Huh?"

"The Middle East," I said lamely, pointing upward to indicate the radio report, even though the radio was clearly not up at all, but behind the cash register.

Then I just stopped, as if that sentence fragment said it all.

He shook his head, and I was unsure if he was indicating his disapproval of the violence in the Middle East or of me. By this point he was probably equally sick of both. But it turned out he was actually talking about the Middle East.

"It never stops," he said, shaking his head. "Terrible."

Finally the two of us were in business.

"Why do you think it never stops?" I asked.

"Because they're all crazy," he said. "All crazy. All of them."

It was time to finally come clean.

"You know," I told him, "the reason I came here is to ask you about the Middle East."

He looked at me with an expression that was part suspicion and part confusion, which I knew I deserved. And for the next minute or so, I quickly explained to him what I was doing—my quest, my book, and all the different people I was talking to for my project.

He nodded for a moment before speaking. I didn't know what he was going to say, but when he answered, it wasn't what I expected.

"So you don't want to buy that avocado?" he asked.

And with that I realized that at some point I had picked up the avocado that my hand had previously just been lightly touching, and I was now cupping it in front of me. I looked down at it and saw that it was slightly grayer than an avocado should be and that it felt wholly overripe.

"No, I want to buy it," I said, aware that would mean coming home with yet more inedible produce.

"Good." The grocer nodded.

Empowered by this, I pushed on.

"So," I asked, "do you think the Middle East situation will ever be solved?"

"Nah. Nah, never."

"Why not?"

"They just want to fight," he said.

"Who?"

"All of them."

I continued pressing him and eventually got a handle on his basic take on the situation. He definitely had a harsher view of Israel and Israelis than I did—"they're all trained murderers," he said, and leveled the majority of blame on them—but he cast his fellow Palestinians in a pretty negative light as well. He said that if they stopped their violence, then he thought that Israel would no longer have what he called "the excuse" to occupy Palestinian land and keep the Palestinians under its thumb. They were led into this counterproductive violence, he said, by desperation because of Israeli actions and by their religious leaders, who were more interested in maintaining their own power and privilege than in helping their people. And, he added, the trouble could also be blamed on the other Arab countries who "even preferred the Jews to them."

"It's a big catastrophe," he told me, "full of people who just want to make it even worse every day."

"And you think there are people to blame on both sides?" I asked.

He nodded, then asked, "Do you know who Sharon was?"

I felt awkward, and wondered if I had a responsibility to explain a bit about my past as a speechwriter for Sharon, while also explaining that while I had agreed with the older Sharon who I believed had tried to create the conditions for peace through the evacuation of Israeli settlers from Gaza, I did not agree with the younger, militant Sharon who had been seen as such a villain by so many Palestinians. I quickly decided against it, though: I didn't think it would help me engage with the grocer.

Yes, I simply told him instead. I knew who Sharon was.

"Sharon started this," he said. "Sharon. And Hamas made it worse. Sharon and Hamas."

"So what should I do?" I asked.

He squinted his eyes at me, confused. Clearly, he had really not taken it in when I told him what I was trying to do.

"What would you do?" I asked. "What's *your* plan?"

"My plan?" he said, pausing. "Well, I'm thinking of going out to work for the highway companies out West. You know, with all the development going on, there's a lot of jobs out there."

I wanted to tell him that he shouldn't go off to work for the "highway companies," whatever that even meant. I wanted to say that he should stay at the produce stand, and that maybe together we could put an end to the Middle East conflict. We were just getting started.

But I didn't have time to say any of that, because just then, on the street outside, I saw someone I knew.

I told the grocer I would be back for the avocado, and raced out to catch up with him. His name was Alon—and he was Israeli.

Here's the story about Alon. And: I'm not especially proud of my initial behavior.

At a party Luke had thrown a few months before at some downtown hipster bar, I met Alon. He was my age, and had recently arrived from Israel for a job. At some point in the past, Luke, whom Alon now worked with, had told him about my own connections with Israel, and Alon wanted to know a little more.

We were in a loud, dark bar, surrounded by people with skinny ties and T-shirts with aggressively ironic references to 1980s pop culture. People who drank

Pabst Blue Ribbon while discussing the relative merits of indie rock bands so obscure that even some of the musicians in the bands hadn't heard of them. And it was there that Alon and I discussed my experiences with Middle East politics and his impressions of the forces at work in his homeland.

Now here's the part I'm not proud of. Toward the end of our conversation, Alon said that one stark difference he noticed between Israel and North America was that in his opinion, people in Israel were more sincere. In particular, he said, he was referring to the way he felt people in North America had said welcoming things to him upon his arrival on this side of the world, promising that they would help him get settled, take him out, and act as a support grid for him. Then they just receded and didn't provide any real help. That would not happen in Israel, he told me, where people meant what they said.

I had heard this complaint many times before from Israelis living abroad and, to be perfectly honest, it had always irritated me. Not only had I not found the Israelis in Israel particularly helpful to newcomers—an Israeli cab driver had once dropped me off on the side of the road because I hadn't understood a joke he had been trying to tell me—but I didn't think those of us from our side of the world were more unwelcoming than we ought to be. It was true that we didn't overwhelm newcomers with immediate warmth, but I'd spent time in a lot of other countries—including, of course, Israel—and I didn't think we were any worse than anyone else. And certainly not worse than Israelis, who sometimes actually bragged about their national level of rudeness.

And so that's why I made the decision I did. The decision I am not proud of.

I would be warm and welcoming to this newcomer beyond anything that was expected—or anything that was appropriate. I would be nice to him to the point where

he would begin to resent me. I would call him all the time to check on how his day had been, and show up at his door with soup if he was sick. I would invite him to awkward dinners at romantic restaurants with Abby and me, without warning her ahead of time, and I would insist that he come with me to any family event I had, even if it was out of town. Sure, I didn't know him at all, and was busy trying to make Middle East peace, but if he *thought* only Israelis were able to be good hosts, then he had another "think" coming.

I looked over and saw that Abby, who was chatting with a friend of Luke's, was watching me out of the corner of her eye, no doubt wondering why I was spending so much time talking to this stranger, and what that weird half smile on my face was about.

"You're just being a jerk," she said to me on the way home, after I told her about my plan. "And you're doing exactly what he says we do. Being insincere. Promising to help and then not doing it."

"But I *am* going to do it," I said, proceeding to tell her about the phone calls, the soup, the family gatherings and, despite my initial intentions, the romantic dinners.

She just nodded, taking it all in stride, and only flinching a bit at the part about the romantic dinners.

"Eventually, though," she said, "you're going to stop doing it and—"

"No," I cut in, "I will never stop. I will continue bombarding him with kindness until he begs me to leave him alone."

"You're being a jerk," she said again.

But Alon didn't think I was a jerk when I text messaged him the next day to tell him that it had been nice to meet him. (Yes, I had asked for his phone number,

which had only been a little weird.) And he didn't think I was a jerk when I called him the day after that to invite him out with some friends of mine, or when I requested him as a friend on Facebook the morning after that.

But here's the thing. As I started hanging out with Alon, I began to legitimately like him a lot, and I started to feel bad about the whole plan. Pretty soon, we'd actually become real friends, and I began to worry that he'd find out the reason I'd initially started spending time with him was just to prove a point.

Maybe, I thought, *I was being a jerk after all.*

But I was hopeful that he might never find out. And there was no reason he had to, unless I wrote it down in a book or something.

Alon had grown up in southern Israel, and his family still lived there, in relatively close proximity to the missiles that were flung over the fence by Palestinians in Gaza. As a kid, he had been an active member of the Labor youth movement, which was connected to the center left Labor Party that had dominated Israeli political life for the first half of the state's existence. Although the party continued to play an important role in government, in recent years it had been repeatedly trounced in the polls and relegated to junior member status in various coalition governments. No more did its liberal, dovish approach to governing play a serious role in Israel's halls of power. Right-wing hawks had overtaken it in popularity among the Israeli people.

"The country has changed a lot," Alon said to me once. "It scares me what is happening there."

Alon was by no means a far Leftist. His views were pretty firmly those of his Labor Party, which was reasonably close to the Center on the spectrum of possibility. It was a social-democratic party, which though never outright hawkish was willing to

support the use of force when necessary. The present-day version of the party had been compared to Bill Clinton's Democrats or Tony Blair's Labor Party.

Alon told me he was proud to be an Israeli, and he had dutifully served in the army. There, his job had been in the military's central headquarters in Tel Aviv, doing something he couldn't tell me about because it was "secret," but which he also assured me was "totally uninteresting."

But he said that he saw Israel swinging further to the Right, both on foreign affairs and in its treatment of minorities within its own borders, and he didn't like it. He also didn't seem to really like how the conflict manifested over here.

"Let me ask you a question," he once said to me, when we were riding the subway together—he was going to an Elton John–Billy Joel concert, and I had run into him on the subway platform. "Why do so many people here care about the Middle East? I mean, why does it matter to you all so much?"

I told him I didn't know. And, of course, this was one of the main questions spurring my own project.

"Because I'm Israeli," he said, "Jewish people are always inviting me to some rally or fund-raiser for Israel. I look at the flyers and try to figure out where the money is going, and a lot of the time I can't figure it out. So, let me ask you, where is it going?"

I shrugged and told him I didn't know. It was probably different on a case-by-case basis. As far as I understood it, some of that money, depending on the organization behind the particular event, did indeed go to helping regular Israelis struggling through the difficulties of daily life in a war zone. But, I told him, I also knew that sometimes the money went for the expansion of settlements, or to Israeli politicians not amenable to peace.

Alon nodded, scowling. It was interesting, I had thought, to consider what Israelis like Alon felt about the North American Jewish community and the other cheerleaders for Israel on this side of the Atlantic—and it was something I hadn't spent a great deal of time reflecting on. Instead, even back when I had been briefly embedded in Israeli society and the Israeli Government, I had looked at the relationship almost purely from the other direction.

In any case, when I ran out from the fruit stand to intercept Alon on the street, I wondered briefly if maybe it was an opportunity for an impromptu summit. I could just pull Alon into the fruit stand and introduce him to the grocer, encouraging him to buy some of the stand's "fabulous" produce in order to butter up the grocer. Then, over carrots and pineapples, the three of us would iron out the details of a Middle East peace plan. Both of them seemed pretty conciliatory, so maybe it was possible. Afterward, they would present it to their respective governments. Then there would be a ceremonial signing of a declaration of peace in front of the fruit stand, and the gathered world dignitaries would all share a snack of mediocre fruits and vegetables.

But, instead of all that, Alon had some things he wanted to tell me.

The first: "My father didn't like your book."

"Oh," I said. I wasn't sure how to respond and was amused by his typical Israeli directness. I didn't know his father at all, nor that he had even read my book. "Well, that's too bad."

"I gave it to him because I thought he'd like it," he said, "but he thinks you're a whiner."

I nodded. That was definitely a possibility.

But this was pretty much a dead end as far as conversation went, and so I was glad when he changed the subject to a Dutch girl he had recently gone on a few dates with.

"All she does all day is yell about how evil Israel is," he said, "and how horrible Israelis are."

I was confused. This was someone he had been seeing?

"It's like that's all she cares about," he went on. "Now, I'm obviously not Mr. Right-wing, but it starts to bother me eventually, you know?"

"How did you meet her?" I asked.

"She was outside the supermarket," he said, "yelling stuff about the occupation."

"I see." I nodded. "Then I guess it shouldn't have been a surprise that she was so passionate about the Middle East."

"No, I guess not."

His new love interest had been outside the supermarket, handing out leaflets about what she saw as Israel's crimes and stopping passersby to let them know about them. Alon the Israeli had struck up a conversation, and there had been some attraction, and then some dates. He had since decided that he didn't want a relationship with the firebrand, but was still hanging around with her—and spending most of that time arguing.

"She's a communist," he said, "an actual communist. And all of her friends are too. I've never met people like this before. She's fascinating."

I asked him if maybe I should talk to her for my project.

"I thought you might want to do that," he said. "I'll ask her, and I'm sure she'll say yes. She wants to discuss this stuff all the time."

He paused, then added, “But I have to warn you. Be careful what you tell her. She’s a very strange person.”

SECTION EIGHT:

PEOPLE WITH NOTHING BETTER TO DO

It was the first time in my life I thought I had come close to causing someone's head to explode just by speaking to them. It wasn't Alon's friend, but someone probably more interesting.

Her name was Hanin Rekat. She was in her late thirties, and was a former negotiations advisor to the Palestinian Authority and now the executive director of the Center for Palestinian Affairs, a nonprofit that worked to disseminate the Palestinian point of view in the United States in order to help guide American policy. The Center for Palestinian Affairs was one of the primary think tanks in the United States devoted to the Palestinian cause, and when I had contacted them to see if one of their people would meet with me to get a Palestinian take on the American relationship to the region, Rekat had seemed like the perfect choice.

I had arranged a meeting with her, but had not given her the full scoop on my background. Until now, when I told her that I had once been a speechwriter for Ariel Sharon. And that's when, looking at her facial expression, I became concerned that her head might be about to blow up.

Among Palestinians, Sharon had probably been the most hated Israeli leader, and Rekat probably hadn't expected one of his former underlings to show up in her office. I wanted to explain to her the random way that I had ended up in Israel in the first place—whimsically applying for an internship at the New York consulate while in law school, and having one opportunity just cascade after another after that—and that my own politics were far more dovish than the old general's had been. And that I wasn't even Israeli. But I wasn't sure if there was time for all that before I heard a

popping sound and she was left headless. Her eyes were bugging out and her face looked pale. She backed up in her chair a little as she took in what I had just told her.

Just as I was about to try to assure her that I was not here to occupy her office, though, she began to calm down, apparently deciding that I was not necessarily her enemy. And we eased into a pleasant conversation, which began with me asking her about her job in the United States.

"It's always an uphill struggle," she said, "especially when trying to reach lawmakers and influential institutes. They're always flooded by the views of one side, and so our perspective is new to them, and scary."

Rekat told me that several of the Center's board members advocated a single Palestinian state in all the land that currently comprised Israel and the Palestinian territories, but that her personal view was more moderate. She believed that the just solution entailed Israel withdrawing entirely behind the pre-1967 armistice lines—including from all of East Jerusalem and its holy sites—and that Palestinian refugees should be allowed to choose whether to return to their former homes in Israel.

"What do you think are the prospects for reaching those goals?" I asked.

"They're positive," she said, "because with the election of Netanyahu, the true face of Israel has been exposed. It shows the whole world what the Palestinians have been trying to say: We're the ones who don't have a partner for peace. At least now there's clarity.

"Israel doesn't have security because of its territorial appetite," she went on. "It's about territory, not terrorism."

For Rekat, as for a lot of other Palestinians, Israel clearly used security concerns as a pretext to avoid having to give up territory. Even though growing settlements in the West Bank and an increasing Jewish presence in East Jerusalem

stoked the rage that led to Palestinian terrorism, these forces showed no sign of abating.

I didn't agree with her that Israel's actions had nothing to do with the constant threats to its citizens' lives, but there was no denying that an influential segment of the Israeli population was mostly focused on holding on to territory. If Israel wanted to argue that its military actions and the restrictions it placed on the Palestinians didn't stem from at least some territorial appetite, the settlers were not helping its case.

"Do you think there are any signs of change in the U.S.?" I asked.

"It's still too early to tell with the new administration," she said, "but there is some change on the ground. The 'Israel can do no wrong, let's stand by her' mentality has changed. In the American Jewish community, it's now okay to criticize, and to say that criticism is in Israel's interests. That's also true on Capitol Hill, which will be helpful for the president when he has to take a tough position."

Presumably, what she meant by "a tough position" was needing to pressure Israel into making concessions that would supposedly help bring about a just resolution—the kind of thing prior administrations and congresses did not have the political cover to do.

I told Rekat that I had been going through periods of doubt in my quest, and that the reason I had started it to begin with was fatigue with the Middle East situation. Did she ever feel the same sort of disheartening frustration? I asked.

"Yes," she said, without a moment's hesitation. "Especially when it's always the same people in control. On the Israeli side, the same faces come back again and again. On the Palestinian side, it's 'until death do us part' with our leaders."

When I asked her if she had any particular criticism for those on her side of the conflict, particularly of the extremists who used violence at every opportunity, she said that she most definitely did, but that it was Israeli aggressions and injustices that gave them their motivations and opportunities.

"What pushes you to keep going?" I asked.

She thought about it for a moment and then said, "It's not necessarily the positive things or the quiet times that remotivate me. Sometimes the things that disgust you also motivate you. For example, thinking about the lives of the children of Gaza."

I could tell that this was not merely rhetoric. She looked genuinely pained just thinking about their situations, and I didn't blame her: the children of Gaza truly had it rough. And in the end, any potential peacemaker had to be driven by coming to the aid of those—on both sides—who were suffering.

"The whole conflict is so male dominated," I said, thinking of Abby's success at iPeace. "Do you think that if women had more of a role, the situation might be improved?"

Rekat smiled and said, "I used to think that if women were in charge, things would be different, but then women like Thatcher come to mind. The only difference, I think, would be the style of negotiations. They would be less driven by ego than when men do it."

And speaking of ego, I had one last question for her.

"How can I personally solve the conflict?" I asked.

"Well, if you do," she began, "we won't be employed anymore."

I nodded. This would probably be a sad by-product of my success.

"I could say 'Get all sides to abide by UN resolutions,' but that sounds naïve," she went on. "And a lot of people like the idea of building trust and confidence incrementally, but that doesn't work. So just have Israel quit the territories, and then we'll work on understanding. It's the cold turkey approach."

When I got back from my meeting with Rekat, I found a very odd email. It was from Brenda, the departmental assistant at the university where I taught classes. She said a middle-aged couple from Albany had shown up at the university, looking for me. There had to be some mistake, I thought. I didn't know anyone from Albany, and there was no reason a middle-aged couple from there should be trying to find me. I called Brenda to get some more information.

"They're very charming," she said to me, "that Rabbi Paskovitchi and his wife. And they want to have dinner with you and Abby tonight."

Brenda was young and from Kansas. They were a middle-aged Orthodox couple from New York State. The fact that she had clearly taken such an instant shine to the Paskovitchis was a little odd.

"Do it for me," she said. "They're very nice. At least call them."

I liked Brenda, and she seemed so intently interested in the Paskovitchis' happiness that I couldn't help agreeing to call them. But before I did, I checked something with Brenda.

"Yes," she said. "They want to take you *and* Abby to dinner."

They had clearly read my first book, in which I wrote about Abby. But I wasn't sure she would be so eager to get involved.

"Abby," I said after my call with Brenda, "do you have any interest in going to dinner with a middle-aged couple from Albany?"

"What?" she asked. "Who are they?"

"I don't really know," I said. "It's a rabbi and his wife. They must have read my book and they want to take us out for dinner."

I explained that I thought that there was always the possibility that the Paskovitchis might hold the key to Middle East peace. It would be irresponsible not to meet with them.

"But don't you think this is a little odd?" she asked.

"Of course I do, but Brenda thought we'd get along."

"With a middle-aged couple from Albany?"

"They're the Paskovitchis," I said. "They're not just any random middle-aged couple from Albany."

But Abby had a point. In fact, the more I thought about it, the weirder it seemed that the Paskovitchis—no matter how charming they were—would waltz in from out of town, show up at the university, and expect Abby and I to go to dinner with them that very night. Nevertheless, I decided to call them at the hotel they were staying at, unsure exactly what I was going to say.

"Hello," a male voice answered when I called the number Brenda had given me.

"Is this Rabbi Paskovitchi?"

"Gregory!" he boomed. "So good to hear from you!"

Do I know this guy? I wondered. I didn't remember him from anywhere, but he was acting like we were old friends.

"Thank you," I said. "Thank you for, um, coming to the university to find me."

"Of course," he answered. "We're in town from Albany and we thought we'd take the opportunity to finally meet you. We really enjoyed your book and we wanted to talk in person. In fact, I went ahead and made dinner reservations for the four of us for tonight. Abigail will be joining us, won't she?"

You already made dinner reservations? I thought. *We've never even met or communicated before today.*

"Well, she—"

"We want to talk to you about Israel," he said.

Of course you do, I thought.

I told him that dinner wasn't going to work—I legitimately did already have plans that night—but that I would be glad to meet him and his wife for coffee at their hotel the next day. Abby, however, wouldn't be able to make it.

When I met them at the hotel, they were exactly as Brenda had described them. Moshe, a middle-aged rabbi from Albany, and his wife Miriam.

And she had been right. They were extremely charming.

I liked the Paskovitchis immediately, and before I knew it, I had forgotten that this was an odd situation at all. Of course I was meeting with complete strangers who had just shown up at my office to discuss Israel. Why wouldn't I be?

They had been to Israel many times, they told me, and had even met some of the people I had written about in my first book.

"I wonder what his reaction was when he read that!" Miriam said, referring to one of the people whose charming eccentricities I had documented in my book. "He must have been proud. Or maybe embarrassed. It's hard to say, isn't it?"

I told her that I didn't know what anyone thought about anything. All I had tried to do in the book was to be as honest as possible about my own odd story.

"Let me ask you," the rabbi broke in, "did your experience in the Israeli government and at the UN make you more or less optimistic about the chances for peace?"

This was a question that I got a lot, and nobody was ever particularly happy with my answer.

"Less," I said.

There were a lot of reasons for this, of course, but I quickly went through some of them with the Paskovitchis: endless animosity, religious fundamentalism on both sides, Palestinian rejectionism, Israeli intransigence, and what often seemed like a total inability of everyone involved to do anything with any modicum of organization or planning.

What I didn't tell them was that on my return, I had had the idea that if the people back home in North America had been given the problem to solve they could have managed it—and that, for the most part, this hope had been squashed when I actually engaged with those people on the issues.

"What do you think?" I asked. "You seem to be pretty knowledgeable about the situation."

"I'm a religious person," he said, pointing at the skullcap on his head, "and I understand why Jews want to have control of Jerusalem and be able to live in parts of the West Bank that have biblical significance."

Oh, no, I thought. *This stuff.*

It seemed to me that whenever religion entered the conversation, there was almost no point in even continuing. When the two sides were talking about legal rights, political logistics, or even historical imperatives, it was possible to discuss substance and make some progress. But once it got into competing religious claims or

contrary biblical narratives—about feeling a burning need to live in a specific geographic location because of, as he put it, its "biblical significance"—I never saw much hope of reconciliation.

But then Rabbi Paskovitchi surprised me.

"But when it comes to finally making peace," he continued, "I really don't think these things should play an important role."

I didn't hear this sort of thing often from religious people. I heard it from secular players in the debate, but when they said it, I didn't think it carried as much weight. When a religious person—a rabbi—said it, it was intriguing.

Maybe the Paskovitchis really were the key to making Middle East peace after all.

"But religious extremists are a big part of the problem," he said. "Extremists on both sides."

And Miriam nodded.

"It's just a shame," she added, "that they're always fighting about things in the sky, when there is so much on the ground that they could be working on together."

I nodded in full agreement. The Paskovitchis from Albany, I thought, were a breath of fresh air. They were not paranoid, not obsessive, not dogmatic, and not locked into any unbreakable ideology. Above all, they were pragmatic.

As our chat proceeded, I realized that they didn't have any particular questions they had been dying to ask, or a special agenda in meeting me. They didn't even have any forceful views that they wanted to tell me about, as so many did. They really did just want to hang out.

When our conversation was over, I thought that even if it had been somewhat strange, I was glad that I had met with them. And even if I still found it odd that they

were so interested in talking about the Middle East that they had shown up at the university to see me, I thought that if there were more people like them involved in the debate—intelligent, broad-minded, lighthearted, and humane—there might be a little more hope. I had little doubt that if the Paskovitchis were given the reins of statecraft and peacemaking, they would make quick work of the situation in the Middle East.

Even so, when we walked together to the front doors of the hotel, the rabbi said something that took me aback a little.

"In the future," he said, "should we contact you on your cell?"

In the future? I thought. What was going to happen in the future? Did I have a *future* with the Paskovitchis?

I stared at them. They were smiling and jolly and sort of grandparently. And I couldn't help but picture our future together. Then Miriam told me something that only extended this bizarre line of thinking further.

"Remember," she said, "you'll always have a second home in Albany."

"You should totally take advantage of that," Luke said, when I told him what had happened. "A second home in Albany is not something to turn your back on."

I rolled my eyes. Sometimes I got the feeling that our entire friendship was based on Luke mocking me.

"You should just show up there at the beginning of the summer," he said, "and tell them that from now on you'll be 'summering in Albany.' Then stay for two months. Maybe the road to peace goes through Albany."

I shook my head. I had passed through Albany a couple of times, and I didn't find this likely.

"Maybe they showed up because they're obsessed with the Middle East," Luke said, "or maybe they're just people with nothing better to do—like you."

And as entertaining as Luke seemed to find making light of my project, I still thought that there was something encouraging about the Paskovitchis. It wasn't just that I agreed with them on many issues—hopefully it wasn't, anyway. It was also that they were able to listen to and understand arguments from many directions and, even more important, they were able to avoid dehumanizing and degrading those who they did not agree with. It was a shame there were not more Paskovitchis among the stakeholders in the debate.

"It sounds like you're sort of obsessed with these people," Luke said.

"They're very charming," I told him.

Luke didn't realize, I thought, what a contrast the Paskovitchis were to some of the other people I regularly came into contact with. The professionals were generally fine, with a few exceptions, but the run of the mill hobbyist pundits who constantly emailed me and showed up at my book events, all of whom seemed to think that they could solve the conflict in six months or less without even leaving their apartments, all of whom had nothing better to do—they were mostly unbearable.

I thought of a few of the more irksome ones and shook my head. And then something unsettling occurred to me. I didn't know why it had never crossed my mind before, and I felt stupid because it hadn't, but Luke's last name was Collins.

Could Luke and Ted Collins be related?

"Wait," I said. "You're not related to *Ted* Collins, are you?"

Luke paused and smiled.

"Uh, he's my father."

I was startled, and unsure what to say. Ted Collins was one of the most active Middle East internet warriors I had encountered. He ran a popular right-wing blog that pushed extreme positions. He had an extensive mailing list, numbering, I'd heard, in the tens of thousands, and a well trafficked website that occasionally even got noticed by the media. Recently, for example, I'd read an article in a major magazine tearing into Collins for his important role in the campaign of personal attacks targeting Obama.

Collins was one of the most active purveyors of the anti-Obama vitriol. Several times a week he would write articles of his own—or post articles of other right-wing hobbyist pundits—and send them out to his list. Generally, they alleged that Obama had anti-Semitic intentions, or that he was going to bring about Israel's ruin. He also went beyond this to some of the other attacks being floated. Obama was secretly Muslim, for example, or he was not eligible to be president because he had been born abroad and his birth certificate had been forged.

This was Luke's father? How did I not know this? Why had he never told me, as I moved forward in my current project—or before, when I'd been working in the Israeli government?

Then it occurred to me: Maybe the reason Luke had been so mocking of me trying to make peace, I thought, was because he had long had to deal with his father's own attempts at dealing with the Middle East—as out there as they were. In fact, as I sat there in front of Luke, flabbergasted, it occurred to me that in all the years I had known Luke, I could only remember him mentioning his father once. We had been talking about books and literature, and Luke had mentioned that when he had been a little boy his father had often read Shakespeare to him before bed, working their way through most of his plays. That was it. I didn't think that Luke had mentioned him

even one other time. Why had he been so tight-lipped about his dad? And the idea that the same man who used to read his son Shakespeare—an image that to me bespoke liberalism and broad-mindedness—sent out emails so offensive as to be almost libelous was astounding.

"Really?" I asked Luke. "Ted Collins is your father? Ted Collins, the—"

And suddenly I was unsure what I should say. Luke seldom spoke about the Middle East, and I wasn't sure what he thought of his father or his father's politics. I didn't want to insult him, but this was now murky terrain.

"The, uh—" I said.

"Yeah?"

"Well, I wouldn't say 'psycho,' exactly, but he's a little . . . out there."

"How do you know him?"

"I don't," I told him, "I mean, not personally, but I come across his . . . work . . . now and then. And I get his emails."

Luke started laughing.

"Oh, no," he said, actually slapping the table. "You get those emails?"

I nodded, and he laughed more.

"How did you get on his list?"

"I'm not sure."

"Well," he said. "Once you're on, you can never get off."

"I've noticed."

"No," Luke told me, suddenly seeming a bit less amused. "I'm serious. I've tried to get off that list many times. It's impossible. Once you're on, you're stuck."

"Well, what do you think of his activities?" I asked.

"I don't know," he said. "I mean, I personally think that he may have a real psychological problem when it comes to the Middle East. I think he's obsessive about it. You know, before this he was really, really into researching the real history of Jesus, and now he's really, really into the Middle East. I think it could be sort of compulsive or escapist."

He went on in this vein for a while, getting at something a bit sad—that his father might use the Middle East as a sort of crutch to help him cope with some emptiness or frustration in his own life.

"First it was the historical Jesus," he said again. "Now this."

"Why do you think he needs this stuff?" I asked. "Is it as a crutch?"

Luke paused for a moment, pursing his lips. He looked far more serious and grave than I was used to seeing him.

"Yeah," he said, "I think so. When my mom died when we were kids, he took on everything, and I don't think my sisters and I realized how messed up my mom's death made him until we were grown up. When my little sister went to college, and we were all finally out of the house—that's when he started with all this stuff. First the obsession with the "truth about the historical Jesus." And now the Middle East. I guess he has a compulsion to fight these battles outside so he doesn't have to fight stuff inside."

Luke paused again. This was more sincere that I ever saw him, and he obviously realized it and decided to pull back.

"Or maybe he's just nuts," he said, and laughed.

But this idea was both sad and interesting, I thought. And it was a possibility. In fact, I wondered if maybe this same analysis could be applied to some of the other obsessive voices always chiming in when it came to the situation in the Middle East.

Obviously not the professionals—although maybe it was possible that the same could be said for some of them—but perhaps for all the screaming voices on the left and the right, there were psychological needs that drove their focus on a place that was so far away and so far removed from their daily lives.

"Do you think your dad would be willing to meet with me?" I asked.

"Probably, but I'm not sure I'd recommend it."

"But I could email him and—"

"If you start emailing him," Luke said, "I recommend getting a dedicated email address for it—otherwise he'll overwhelm you completely."

Then Luke half-smiled, and I wasn't sure if I was imagining it or not, but it seemed to me like maybe I had touched a patch of hidden sadness in my old friend—if maybe Luke was thinking about how those days of his father reading him Shakespeare had faded away completely.

A little nervous about what his reaction might be, I emailed Ted Collins and introduced myself. Now that I knew he was Luke's father, this felt especially odd.

"I hold regular gatherings at my house for a small group of zealots," he wrote back immediately. "Maybe you could join us for one of them."

A small group of zealots? I thought.

I really wasn't sure I wanted to attend one of these "gatherings," but was definitely curious about what went on at them.

"Oh, those things," Luke said, when I told him about it later. "Yeah, I heard about them. I'd stay away if I were you."

I decided that it might be more productive to meet with Ted one-on-one than in the company of his "small group of zealots," and I emailed him to see if he would

be interested in meeting for coffee. I didn't mention his "small group of zealots," but sort of hoped that he wouldn't bring them along.

While I waited for him to respond, I pictured the scene if he did bring them with him to the Starbucks where we might meet.

Ted, his zealots, and I would stand in line at the counter.

"What can I get for you?" the barista would ask us.

"I'll have a coffee," I'd say.

"We'll have a united Jerusalem as the eternal capital of the Jewish people forever!" the zealots would shout in unison.

When Ted Collins responded to me, though, he gave no indication that he planned to bring his band of zealots with him. I was pretty relieved, and we set a time to meet. Luke, meanwhile, was amused by this turn of events, but was not without some words of warning.

"Talking politics with my father in a public place," he said, "can be an . . . interesting . . . experience. Be careful."

I wasn't eager to be involved in any kind of public scene, where racist or violent statements were being thrown around—which seemed possible, given some of the positions taken in Ted Collins's internet writing—and as the date of our meeting approached, Luke's warning echoed in my mind.

When he arrived at the coffee shop, he didn't have a retinue of zealots with him, which I thought was a good start to a productive conversation. As we shook hands, I tried to decide if he looked like Luke.

"I'm trying to make peace in the Middle East," I told him when he sat down, "and so I'm speaking to people from all along the political spectrum. Which is why I wanted to speak to you."

At this, Ted laughed a little. It was apparent that he knew just where he fit on the spectrum. And as we began to get into substance, it was clear he was perfectly comfortable there. He was disarmingly soft-spoken and genteel, but his opinions were razor-edged.

Now that Obama was president, I asked him, did he have any second thoughts about all the negative allegations he had made about him during the campaign?

"Every single thing I said about Obama was true," he said, "and I still believe everything. Obama is a Muslim and since he is not a natural born citizen, he is not eligible to be president."

"What do you make of it when people say that sort of talk is racist?" I asked.

He waved that off.

"Leftists," he said, "trot out racism to shut you up."

I didn't have much interest in getting into an extended discussion with him about the politics around the president, so I switched directions and asked him what he thought of the latest Middle East trends.

"They're moving to the point where it's possible to strong-arm Israel," he said. "And all this is planned. Someone is machinating, and they're building up a lot of steam."

Anytime someone starts talking about mysterious forces "machinating," I start to get uncomfortable with the conversation. But I pressed on a bit, asking who "they" were. He was happy to expand on it. The *New York Times*, the State Department, the United Nations, Barack Obama, and a good portion of the Democratic Party.

"Okay," I said, looking over at the people next to us to see if they were listening. "So on the Middle East, what do you think the solution to it all is?"

"Well, first of all," he said, "there is no political solution. If there is a solution, there's only a military solution. But there probably is no solution. We just have to manage the situation. Why do we need a solution?"

I had heard this sort of argument before, and as far as I understood it, it meant solidifying the status quo in the most tenable fashion possible. At best, I thought, this was a pessimistic approach that was doomed to fail in the long run—the status quo simply was not sustainable. At worst, it seemed like a sinister move by the more powerful side to maintain its position at the expense of the other side.

"Well, surely," I said, "you must agree that the situation is not good. That there are injustices on both sides."

"When people go on about the injustices done to the Palestinians, it drives me up the wall," he said. "The Palestinians would rather remain stateless. It gives them good income, with no responsibilities."

I tried to take this in, thinking about all the Palestinian children I knew were suffering at this moment—about the children of Gaza that Hanin Rekat had mentioned. If Ted knew that I was thinking this, I thought, he would immediately consider me weak, naïve, or misled.

"So what do you want?" I asked. "Or rather, what do you think should happen?"

"The whole narrative has to be changed," he said. "Israel has legitimate rights, and too many people forget that. We need to start talking about rights, and stop talking about security."

Presumably, what he meant by this was the whole debate should not turn on protecting Israeli and Palestinian lives, as much as it should on an abstract, almost academic sense of who was entitled to what. For Ted, Israel had historical and legal

rights to all the land it held, and continuing to make use of those rights was an imperative that went beyond any pragmatic concerns.

Wow, I thought. *I wouldn't rush to tell the people actually living in the Middle East that they should forget about their security.*

"So how should I make peace?" I asked.

"The Palestinians won't compromise at all, and we shouldn't compromise," he said, "so you might as well try to grow a third leg. It's not happening."

As I walked away after our conversation, I found myself thinking that he was different from the persona that came across in his online output. The same extremist ideas were there, but the way he voiced them in person was starkly different. He was articulate and laid-back and I could even sense a wry sense of humour—and in these things I could see his son Luke. I wondered what Ted had thought of our conversation.

A few days later, I was sitting with Luke at a pub, and he was able to tell me. "He thinks he convinced you," Luke said. "On everything."

I smiled and sipped from my beer. This was not the case, but it was intriguing to hear that this was the impression Ted Collins had gotten from our conversation. I wondered aloud how many others of the people I had come in contact with felt the same thing.

"I guess everyone thinks their own views are totally reasonable," I said, "and that they're impossible to argue against effectively. Nobody thinks they're crazy."

Luke nodded.

"No," he said. "Not even you."

EXPLANATORY NOTE:

In this gap, the narrator is contacted by "Kevin," his acquaintance at the White House, but misses the call and does not manage to have a conversation with him. He decides that he must travel to Washington, DC in order to implement one final push for peace. Ahead of his visit, he contacts a selection of people involved in the conflict, and then travels to Washington to see them.

SECTION NINE:

WITH ALL DUE RESPECT, YOU MUST BE ON CRACK

Over the next few days, I ran around DC, meeting with various other pundits, journalists, bloggers, and activists to see if anyone could tell me anything substantively new, and finding out that they pretty much couldn't. But it was what I had scheduled for my last day in the capital that I was most interested in.

That last day I had back-to-back appointments that promised to offer quite a contrast to each other. The first was with Ahmad Al-Massri, the head of the Palestinian Mission to the United States and a former advisor to Yasser Arafat.

The second was with Limor Tzafir, an Israeli American who was a close personal friend and sometime advisor to high-ranking members of the new right-wing government in Israel, including the prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu.

Even though I had made repeated calls and sent emails to the Israeli Embassy, I had never heard back from them. I'd contacted a friend who had worked in the Israeli prime minister's office with me, and he'd connected me to someone in the embassy, but this still had not yielded any results. Even when I left messages indicating that I was writing an article for *Newsweek*,I had received no response. I hadn't used my last name, so it wasn't as if this were because of a personal problem with me. I wondered if they were just too busy to make peace.

The truth probably was, I knew, that an unsolicited call from a journalist they didn't know wasn't really a priority for them. They didn't know my history with the Israeli Government, and I wasn't sure if it would have particularly helped if they did, but I knew from having worked in government, that the pace of life at the embassy was usually frantic and didn't leave much room to maneuver. Staffers often moved

from one crisis to the next, and issues that weren't pressing often got lost in the flow of events.

But I figured that Limor Tzafir, with her tight connections to the people in the prime minister's office in Jerusalem, would serve as an ideal proxy.

In fact, this last day of my trip was as close as I was going to come to actually bringing the Israelis and Palestinians together in any meaningful sense. When I had started this endeavor, I had harbored vague fantasies of getting senior officials from both sides into a room and hashing out an agreement once and for all. But it seemed that these back-to-back meetings were as good as I was going to get.

One thing that had crossed my mind, though, had been the idea of just scheduling both meetings at the same time and place.

"Meet me at Starbucks at eleven," I'd say to both of them, and then when they both showed up at the same time, we'd have a little laugh about the mix-up and then they'd sit down and make peace over butterscotch blondies and iced coffees. Or possibly just try to stab each other in the face with Starbucks spoons.

In any case, as I saw it, this morning represented the high point of my peacemaking activities. I was going to try to find common ground between them. If I could just facilitate even a partial meeting of the minds, maybe it would be enough of a foundation to build something on. I could shuttle between the two offices, and then when we'd nailed down the basic skeleton for our peace plan, Al-Massri would send word to his superiors in Ramallah, and Tzafir would call up her friends in Jerusalem. Then I'd call Kevin, my contact in the Obama administration and bring him up to speed. Soon we'd all be on the White House grounds, shaking hands for the cameras.

Today was the day. And I knew that it called for an extra bit of luck. So, when I got dressed and got ready to go, I finally put on my iPeace boxer shorts.

Before I left her house that morning, Abby's sister Melissa decided to tell her kids what I was up to.

"Do you know what Uncle Greg is going to do today?" she began. "He's going to try to make peace. Do you know what that means?"

The two boys, who were immersed in eating string cheese, didn't respond.

"It means," their mom went on, "that he's trying to stop people from fighting. Do you have any ideas for him about how to do that?"

Jonah, the younger one, didn't answer. He was too busy chewing a disproportionately large piece of cheese. But Ben put down his cheese for a moment and suddenly looked thoughtful.

"They shouldn't be mean," he said. "And, and, and—"

He was getting out of breath, trying to sputter out the rest of his diplomacy lesson.

"And," he continued, "and, and, and, if they are mean, and they fight, you should give them a time-out."

He picked up his string cheese again and began chewing it, and he and his little brother both looked at me for approval.

"Yeah," Jonah added, nodding.

I smiled and thanked them for their advice, wondering if maybe it might actually be useful.

I'd walk into the Palestinian Mission, sit in front of Ahmad Al-Massri, and say, "It's just time to stop being so mean."

Or I'd go into Limor Tzafir's office and say, "If you guys don't stop fighting, I'm going to have to separate you."

When I'd been in touch with the Palestinian Mission to arrange the meeting, I'd reflexively expected them to ask for my passport details so that they could check up on me for security reasons. That, of course, had been a part of every interaction I'd had with Israeli officials, and most I'd had with Americans.

But no. All I had to do, they said, was show up. And then "Roy would take care of everything."

I had no idea who Roy was, but I was glad that he was on the job, and also a little pleased that they didn't seem to care about checking up on me. I didn't have anything to hide, really, but I wasn't sure what they'd think if they realized I had once worked for the Israelis. Even when I had worked for the Israeli Government, I had been very much an outsider, and one with a role in communications and not strategy or policy I didn't really think that someone could still reasonably associate me too closely with the government, but I still figured that the connection would be enough to raise Palestinian eyebrows in a way that wouldn't be particularly helpful.

So I just showed up at the address the Mission had given me, a relatively nondescript building near Dupont Circle, and went upstairs.

And, sure enough, Roy was up there waiting. He didn't look Palestinian, I noticed, but East Asian instead. As I waited to be shown in to meet Al-Massri, I wandered around the foyer a little. It was quite amazing, not just in its austerity, but also in the way it seemed to be so temporary. Furniture and artwork were just sort of haphazardly placed around the room, and there were files stacked up chaotically, as if the Mission was preparing to move. The only item that seemed intentionally positioned was a three-dimensional model of Jerusalem sitting on a table by the entrance.

I had seen similar models in Israeli offices, actually, and I couldn't really see much of a difference in this one. The troubled city looked the same, with no readily discernible signs of politics.

When Roy led me into Al-Massri's office, I found two suited middle-aged Palestinian men there, standing up and talking. I assumed the one standing behind the desk was Al-Massri, but had no idea who the other one was.

"Hi," the one I didn't know said, putting out his hand for me to shake.

"Hi. I'm Gregory Levey," I told him, grasping his hand and waiting for him to tell me who he was, or at least give me his name. He didn't, and seemed to be waiting for me to give him more info about myself instead.

It's a long story, I thought, and just stood there looking at him. After a few moments of this—which felt a little awkward—he just nodded and left the room.

Almost immediately, it became clear that Al-Massri actually didn't have much more information about what I was doing there than his colleague did. In fact, he seemed pretty unclear on how this meeting had been arranged or what I was doing in his office.

"So . . ." he said, sitting down and indicating for me to do the same. "Why are you here?"

I explained the situation as best as I could and, with little more than a shrug, he accepted the idea that I was there to make peace. Essentially, he didn't seem to particularly care and gave off the impression that people came into his office trying to make peace all the time—which was probably the case.

"So . . ." I began uncertainly. "What was Chairman Arafat like?"

"He was very nice," Al-Massri said with another shrug.

Needless to say, that wasn't exactly what I'd heard. But as we spoke, Al-Massri himself did really seem very nice. He was warm and welcoming and very generous with his time, and he seemed a lot more grounded than many of the Middle East debaters native to the United States.

In fact, he himself was aware of this irony:

"Sometimes people here sound more radical than people there," he said. "It's often easier to talk to the Israelis."

He told me that although it was still too early to tell, he thought the messages and moves emerging from the new White House were encouraging. It was heartening, he explained, that Obama spoke about the rights and the suffering of both sides.

"The problem," he said, "is that people have to see actions. So Obama will have to either lose credibility or have a serious confrontation with the Israelis. We have heard lots of talk before, and we want to see actions. Palestinians want schools, education, hospitals. They want a better life."

Al-Massri paused, and pursed his lips.

Then he said, "You need to tell Americans that what happened to the Jews and the Palestinians is that we were both victims of history. What happened in Europe was not done by Palestinians and Muslims. It happened in the heart of Christianity in Europe, and it is not an excuse for what the Israelis do to us now."

I thought of my uncle, and our conversation.

Generally, Al-Massri was calm and friendly during our talk, but I did get him worked up twice. The first time was when I asked about the Israeli disengagement from the Gaza Strip—which had been orchestrated by Ariel Sharon, while I had been working for the Israeli government.

"The Israelis never left Gaza," he told me. "They control the air, the water, and the land. And the conditions in Gaza are terrible. The poverty. People are dying. I agree that the rocket attacks against Israel from Gaza should stop, but people have to understand the situation in Gaza too."

Al-Massri was clearly getting upset. He spoke fairly calmly, but I could see a barely concealed simmering anger.

"When Sharon left unilaterally," he continued, "he made a mistake. He never worked with the Palestinian Authority to allow it to get credit for it from the people. That allowed Hamas to get the credit."

What I did next was try to conduct some shuttle diplomacy. I was heading to see Prime Minister Netanyahu's friend and sometime advisor next, I told him. What did he want me to tell her? What did he want me to tell the Israelis?

"Tell them this," he said. "If they don't get peace now, when are they going to get it? Why do they think things will always stay in their favor? Say to them that if the Israeli fear today is coming from a distance away—from Tehran—why do they fear the Palestinians? Tell the Israelis that if we get a state, you will get relations with fifty-seven other countries. Tell them that today the Israelis are the ones never missing opportunities to miss opportunities. Tell them that there is momentum today, and they should not ignore it. The ball is in their court."

But besides all that, Al-Massri also had something personal to say. Why, he wanted to know, couldn't he take his family to visit Jerusalem? In a few weeks, he told me, he would be taking his children—one was fourteen and the other was twenty-three—to visit their homeland. While they were in the West Bank, he said, he really wanted to take them to see Jerusalem. By this point they were all American citizens, he said, but even so, they would not be allowed in.

"Really?" I asked. "Even though you're all American?"

He nodded.

"Here in Washington," he said, "I meet with the Israeli ambassador at the best restaurant in town, and we enjoy lunch together. There, the Israelis would stop me from taking my kids to see the holy sites in Jerusalem."

This definitely didn't seem right to me, and I couldn't believe it was true. This was the case even for Palestinians who were also American citizens?

"Really?" I asked, still skeptical.

"I challenge any Israeli to prove me wrong about this restriction," he said. "I'll be there on the twentieth of the month. Under any condition, can I go to Jerusalem?"

Al-Massri seemed understandably disgusted by this. But he also seemed a little disgusted by his situation in DC. The Palestinian Mission in Washington, he told me, had to report all their activities to the State Department every six months in order to maintain their status. Worse, because of all the lawsuits against them, the Mission was not even able to have a bank account, or checks. All their expenses for office work and the day-to-day operations of the Mission, he said, all the way down to pencils and paper, had to be paid for privately by its employees, who were later reimbursed.

"How can you run a place like this?" he asked, waving a hand in front of his face, as if he were eager to brush it all away.

And, in fact, he was. After his trip to the Middle East with his kids, he would not be returning to the diplomatic pressure cooker in DC. He was going to be moving to Amsterdam instead.

"Are you happy to be going there?" I asked him.

"Very," he said, and smiled.

"I've just come from the Palestinian Mission," I told Limor Tzafir when I arrived in her office. I still thought that maybe I could do some shuttle diplomacy between her and Al-Massri.

"Lovely," she said, and the sarcasm in her voice told me that maybe that wasn't going to be so easy.

Tzafir said that she had recently been spending a lot of time in Israel, talking to "top people" about where things might be heading in the region—and the prevailing attitude was wholly pessimistic. I knew that the prime minister was a friend of hers and that she had previously drafted policy recommendations for him, but she told me that Israel's current national security advisor was "like family" to her.

"So what's your current thinking on peacemaking?" I asked.

"I'm tired of it," she said. "I got to the point of burnout. This is a puzzle I can't figure out a way to solve. Especially after Hamas took over."

"So what do you think of this White House's progress and plans?"

"I think that by the time the Obama crowd catches up and catches on, they'll be in trouble up to their necks," she said. "But they need to go through their own failures with the Arab-Israeli conflict, and realize some things. One: they can't solve it. And two: it's not that important anymore."

"What do you mean?" I asked. "Not that important anymore?"

"I think we're at the end of the Arab world," she shrugged. "With Iranian domination of the region, we may have reached the end of Arabism."

This was obviously an enormous statement, but it was not the first time I had heard it. Iranian dominance, some analysts believed, was growing to such an extent in the region—following the overthrow of Iraq and the growing power of Iran-backed

Hezbollah—that it was completely overwhelming the power of the Arab states, even with their shared identities and interests, their "Arabism."

Not sure where to go from there, I brought up some of the things Ahmad Al-Massri had said to me and mentioned his challenge, explaining that he couldn't take his children to visit Jerusalem.

Tzafir nodded and said, "That really is unfortunate."

"What should I tell the Palestinians?" I asked her.

Tzafir rolled her eyes.

"I'd tell them that it's time to have an honest discussion about Palestinian nationalism. It was an experiment that got a lot of support—far more than the early Zionists did—but it has failed miserably. Why? Why is their story so devastatingly bad? Certainly there are settlers that burn their fields and all that, but come on. These guys had their chance."

It didn't seem like there was much possibility of a substantive meeting of the minds between Tzafir and Al-Massri. In fact, if there was any common ground between them at all, it was precisely in the hopelessness of peacemaking, in the dismal odds of there ever being any successes and the feeling that the thing to do was just to throw up one's hands and give up.

Indeed, when I asked Tzafir directly what I should personally do to help bring about peace, she shook her head as if to brush it all away, and said, "The dream of peace is only a temptress."

Being publicly called the "stupidest man on earth" is not the type of thing you brag about, even if it is by a former deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Treasury. Still, it feels like a bit of an accomplishment. I wasn't the tallest man on earth, and I

wasn't the richest man on earth. But maybe I was the stupidest man on earth. At least, I thought, it was a superlative people from my high school might be jealous of at our next reunion.

After my meetings with Al-Massri and Tzafir, here's how I got the label.

One day, just before I had closed in on this final push to make peace, an editor I knew at *Newsweek* had contacted me with a proposition.

Would I be interested in writing a Middle East opinion piece for them? he wanted to know. In particular, would I be interested in arguing something more than a little controversial?

It sounded crazy to me when he first suggested it—and still sounds crazy to me—but his idea was that I would argue that President Obama should make George W. Bush his Middle East envoy.

It was hard to think of anyone who would consider this a good idea. Obama would never want to squander all the goodwill with which he was beginning his term. Bush would never want to be anyone's messenger. And the Palestinians and the rest of the Arabs would hardly be amenable to anything that Bush brought to the table after he had spent eight years angering them.

But the idea behind this *Newsweek* piece was not to literally suggest that Obama send Bush. It was to shake things up a bit and implicitly suggest that a diplomatic middle ground needed to be found, whereby Israel would still trust the United States even as the White House pushed for ambitious moves toward peace. For me, it would also serve as a sort of culmination of my final trip to DC, a place to try to assimilate all I had learned into one—obviously bad—plan.

Basically, all I was suggesting was that in order for Israel to make the concessions necessary for peace, the moves that would please people like Ahmad Al-

Massri, Israelis like Limor Tzafir would first have to trust the Obama White House in the same way that they had trusted the Bush one.

Before long, *Newsweek* ran the article. And then all hell broke loose.

It seemed to me that if you actually read my article all the way through and had at least some degree of ability in reading comprehension, it was pretty damn clear that it wasn't meant to be taken literally. Were none of these people reading the whole article before responding to it? Was the Middle East such a hot potato that people came out shooting at any new idea at all before even really considering what it represented?

The *Newsweek* website was flooded with comments, most of them angry, about what I had written, and I suddenly got more than my usual daily share of heated emails. Most of them were from a whole new wave of ranting cranks, but I also got emails from some of the connected and consequential people I had encountered over the past few months. Rather than disapproving, they just seemed amused and baffled by my modest proposal.

I forwarded a copy of the article, along with some of the angriest emails, to Wayne, the British guy who had warned me early on that this whole quest was foolhardy, with an email saying, "I guess you were right."

Later in the day I received a response from him. It said only, "I fucking told you so."

Well, maybe, I thought, *if you'd been a better "advisor," or rather an advisor at all, this wouldn't have happened*. But I didn't write back, because I was too busy being treated by a punching bag in the press.

Besides all the emails, the piece got attacked and lampooned in what seemed like an endless number of websites and publications, including *The Atlantic, The*

American Prospect, and *The New Republic.* And on his website, a former deputy assistant secretary of the U.S. Treasury labeled me the "Stupidest Man on Earth."

For the next two days or so, it seemed like every minute I would get a new irate response, find a new article criticizing me, or receive a new angry email or phone call. This went on and on, until friends and family started contacting me to see if I was holding up okay under the barrage of pushback. And while I had expected the anger to die down after a while, it actually seemed like the responses just got more and more bitter.

Toward the end of all this, I received my favorite one, from some random internet citizen.

"With all due respect, Mr. Levey," he wrote to me, "you must be on crack."

Was this all I had to show for all my months of trying to solve the conflict? For my discussions with Ahmad Al-Massri, Limor Tzafir, and all the rest?

Had it all been just so that I could be called the stupidest man on earth, and accused of being on crack?

SECTION TEN:

MAKING PEACE

When I left DC, I was a little worn out. There were too many voices and too many opinions for me to sort it all out. Echoing in my mind were the words of Ahmad Al-Massri and of Limor Tzafir. But also of the letter writer who had accused me of being on crack—and of my little nephews saying that everyone involved should just be given a time-out. It was me, I thought, that needed a time-out.

I hadn't made peace. That was for sure, but I at least wanted to believe that I had done *something.* But before I settled back at my apartment to figure it all out, there was one more thing I had to do.

My friend Jacob, who lived in Israel, was visiting New York, and he had been invited to a bizarre event, and been given permission to bring along a few friends. A man called "Sir Randall," who was apparently some kind of eccentric billionaire, was holding a party called "Peacestock" at his "castle" in the Hamptons. It cost five hundred dollars to attend, with all the money going to Sir Randall's "Peacemaking Trust," but our admission would be complimentary because of Jacob's well-connected friend. When he explained it to me, my immediate thought was, *No way in hell am I going to that.* But as I considered it a bit more, I realized that I couldn't really say no, given my project. It was just too perfect.

The idea of going to any flamboyant party in the Hamptons didn't appeal to me at all, let alone one put on in a castle by someone named Sir Randall. But the fact was that the party revolved around the concept of peace and peacemaking—Sir Randall's other moniker was "Captain Peace"—so how could I turn it down? And

when I read a bit more about Sir Randall, it became clear that no matter how odd he sounded, his life story and his instincts were somewhat related to my own project.

Sir Randall's father was a Holocaust survivor who had made it through two concentration camps. Dozens of members of his family had been murdered by the Nazis. After reaching the United States with nothing, he had gone into the natural gas business, amassing a huge fortune—despite, or perhaps because of, reportedly suffering from severe post-traumatic stress disorder. His son Randall had initially worked for his father, but had eventually quit to pursue his interest in music. Specializing in techno remixes, he had managed to have some success of his own.

And with the family fortune, he had started the "Peacemaking Trust." It was a little unclear to me what the Trust did, but its literature suggested that it worked to help American soldiers suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and to generally foster peace. He had been inspired to do this, I read, by the events of September 11, and by Palestinian suicide bombings against Israel in the Second Intifada.

And that's how Sir Randall became known as Captain Peace—a title I coveted.

I warily accepted Jacob's invitation, and Abby and I met Jacob, his wife Nicole, his sister Zvia, and Luke at Bryant Park in midtown Manhattan. Sir Randall had arranged for four or five buses to take his party guests from there out to his castle.

We boarded one of the buses, along with a couple dozen other confused-looking guests. There were middle-aged white hippies, young sharply dressed African Americans, a healthy selection of New York hipsters, and even one elderly woman with a walker. Because of the theme's party, many of them were holding or wearing flowers.

While we waited to depart, I chatted with Jacob's sister, whom I hadn't seen in a while. Zvia was a few years younger than Jacob, and was finishing up a master's degree at a top U.S. university. Although she'd visited Jacob in Israel a good number of times, she'd never lived there, and had no plans to.

"Maybe I'd visit for a few months—at the most," she said. "It's hard to get around. The people are not helpful, and abrasive. I don't like Middle Eastern food, and I don't think Israeli men are attractive."

I laughed. I always forgot how cutting Zvia could be.

"What did you think when Jacob went off there?" I asked her.

"I thought that he moved there because he didn't want to pay rent in New York," she answered. "And I'm still pretty sure that's the real reason why he went. Not his supposed 'Zionist dream.'"

She then went on to say that she had been surprised by how long he had been there—five and a half years at that point—but that she still thought that when Jacob and Nicole had kids they would come home to New York.

"It must be scary to raise kids there," she said.

I'd once had a conversation with a U.S. State Department Foreign Service trainee about that subject. She had been visiting Israel when I'd been living there, and the two of us had been sitting on the beach in Tel Aviv, when a young Israeli woman and her two small children had appeared in front of us and begun playing at the shore. One of the kids splashed the other, and they both laughed. The mother watched them and smiled.

And Lauren, my Foreign Service trainee friend, said, "If I were an Israeli or Palestinian woman, I wouldn't have kids. There's no point."

The ride to Sir Randall's estate seemed to take forever. I'd never been so far out on Long Island before, and the idea of having to travel all the way back a few hours later was daunting.

"I wonder what time we're going back," Nicole said.

"Hopefully very soon," I said, already exhausted.

And then we saw it. A castle. An honest-to-God castle—and, somehow, I got a burst of energy.

I guess I sort of expected it to have been a big house, or even a sprawling mansion. Not an actual castle, with towers, a moat, and a drawbridge—and, we'd been told on our way there, a torture chamber. But that's what it was. A castle, towering out of the green Hamptons landscape. No one else I knew had one of those.

As we got off the bus, there were security guards in suits waiting for us, as well as what seemed like a lot of people taking our photos. Most of the party was held behind the castle, where there was a large pool, surrounded by flowers and little bonfires and blanketed by smoke from a smoke machine. Along with all that, for a few minutes after we arrived, the whole place was awash in a pulsing strobe light that seemed designed to cause an epileptic seizure.

"That's totally going to make someone fall into the pool and drown," Zvia said.

The castle itself looked down at us all, a huge flag draped over its side. It was an American flag, except instead of the stars there was a peace sign, and overlayed on top of the stripes, in large letters, were the words "Sir Randall." I wondered if this sign was always there, or if it had been put up just for the occasion.

Staring at the peace sign on the flag, I thought about my own peacemaking quest. Was this what I was missing? A giant castle? A huge flag? Billions of dollars? Possibly.

There were mats, pillows, and even actual beds arrayed around the pool, and we found a place to sit in a corner, on a large bed that looked like it could have come from somebody's bedroom. On it, as on many of the other beds and mats, was for no apparent reason an enormous stuffed rabbit. I leaned back on it, and tried to get a sense of who the other people at this event were. They ranged in age from about twenty-one to eighty, and they wore all manner of dress, from formal to full-out hippie garb.

But for a long time there was no sign of Sir Randall himself.

Only when the grounds had filled up with the roughly four-hundred attendees, and all of them were a couple of drinks in, did we get the first sighting of the man himself.

"That must be him," I heard someone nearby say.

"Sir Randall," someone else said in a whisper—which was unnecessary, since nobody was going to hear over the music and the noise of the crowd.

But I didn't see him and wasn't sure where everyone was looking.

"That's Sir Randall," someone else said, and beside me, Abby figured out where he was and pointed for me.

Sir Randall was above us. He was standing on the castle's main balcony, gripping the railing and staring out into the distance as if it didn't even cross his mind that there were a few hundred increasingly intoxicated strangers milling around in his backyard. He stood there in a way that seemed to invite all of us to look up at him

while he surveyed his kingdom. He was in his fifties, I estimated, older than I had expected.

Also: Sir Randall was wearing a cape.

I thought I was seeing things at first, but there was no mistaking it. As he stood up there, gazing out, a full-scale cape billowed out behind him in the breeze.

"If you can't wear a cape at your own party," Luke said, "then you can never wear one."

Abby nodded and said, "If I threw a party like this, I'd wear a cape too."

I looked at her and frowned. I didn't like that image at all.

"I'm sure his Holocaust-surviving father would love all this," Zvia said.

A few seconds later Sir Randall turned and strode back into the castle, his cape blowing out behind him. I went to get myself another drink, and by the time I was back, reclining on the huge stuffed rabbit, Sir Randall had returned to the balcony and was gazing out again. This time another guy was with him. They seemed to be discussing something. The second man was not wearing a cape.

I wondered about this other guy. Was he an advisor? A friend? What was his role in the efforts of Captain Peace? And how did he get to this place in life? What path did you have to take to end up hanging out with the cape-wearing Sir Randall on his castle balcony, while the rest of us plebes looked up at you?

Meanwhile, Luke and Zvia had gone off to find the restrooms in the castle and had come back with some pretty astonishing news.

"Sir Randall has an entire room full of stuffed rabbits," Luke said. "An entire room."

I looked at the white rabbit I was leaning up against, and at the others scattered about the grounds, and tried to picture a whole room full of them.

"Let me just stress," Zvia said, "that these are *different* stuffed rabbits than the ones out here. These ones are his party rabbits, I guess. Those are for other occasions."

"I think it's pretty unfair," Luke added, "that he has a whole room just for them. I don't even have a whole room just for my living room. It has to share the space with my kitchen."

Maybe it was because of this slap in the face that Luke started to up his drinking at the party. I found this a bit concerning, given his prior history. He was one of those people who seemed totally sober for most of the evening, and then when he suddenly crossed a line, it was like a switch had been flipped from "charming and sober" to "dangerously crazy," and then anything at all could happen. So, as Luke continued to drink at Sir Randall's, I started to worry that he might flip that switch and do something that would land us in Sir Randall's torture chamber.

When it did happen, we were both leaning on the stuffed rabbit, watching a half-naked man and a half-naked woman in the pool have exhibitionist half sex, and I was discussing my peace project with him.

"Maybe I've just been wasting my time," I said, "or everyone's time. I don't know what I thought I was doing."

He gave me a sympathetic smile, while two men just near us went up to one of the little bonfires and tried to use it to light cigars.

"That's a bad idea," I said.

"Yes, it is," Luke said. "Yes, it is."

I told him some details about my latest trip to Washington. About how both Ahmad Al-Massri, the Palestinian, and Limor Tzafir, the Israeli, seemed ready to throw up their hands with regard to the whole situation.

In retrospect, I told Luke, I had become aware that during the course of my whole project, I had spoken to far more people on the Jewish and Zionist side of the spectrum than on the Palestinian side. This was a serious flaw, and I felt bad about it. Maybe it had been my undoing.

I also complained that none of what I had done had really led anywhere. Although I had heard opinions from all over the spectrum, I hadn't made any real progress. As my journey was coming to a close, I didn't have a whole lot to show for it, except the iPeace boxer shorts, some new friends and, probably, some new enemies too.

But no peace, and no signs of it on the horizon either.

I had still had no luck connecting properly with Kevin at the White House. And Bill Clinton, Jimmy Carter, Henry Kissinger, and most of the other big shots had never gotten back to me at all.

"They probably get these kinds of requests all the time," Luke said.

"Yeah," I said, "from other people trying to make peace."

"But you know," he went on, "the more you do this stuff, the more you continue it—even after your book is done—the more access you'll probably get, and the deeper you'll get into that whole world."

I nodded and smiled. I was grateful for his encouragement, but the fact was that I didn't really want to continue with it, and definitely didn't want to get deeper "into that whole world." The main reason I had begun this project was that I was tired of the whole debate and all the people involved. In the long run, I wasn't interested in getting deeper into it at all. I was interested in getting out. But in the short term, I had been hoping to make some progress toward peace. I don't think I had ever been quite stupid enough to honestly think I would be able to broker a real peace deal, but I had

at least thought that I might be able to reconcile a few of the opposing voices, or even just come to a deeper personal understanding of the conflict. It felt, though, that I had failed even in these relatively modest goals.

Maybe it was the wine I was sipping, or the general atmosphere of absurdity around us, but I started telling him about my iPeace underwear, and wondering aloud if it would have helped anything if the people in DC had known I was wearing it.

Suddenly a waft of marijuana smoke drifted by—and that was when it happened. That was when Luke passed the switch-flipping point. He looked at me, now unfocused, and then mumbled something about how I should stop talking about my underwear so much. I could see in his eyes that we had lost him for the night.

Then, sniffing at the air as the marijuana scent faded away, he said, "I'll be right back."

And that was pretty much it for Luke. He had passed the point of no return, and although I saw him periodically as the party progressed, he was never even vaguely coherent again.

A little later we were ushered into the castle itself. Without being told what was about to happen, we were directed into a large room on the ground floor that had a built-in stage on one side and large speakers on the other.

"The guy has black lights permanently set up in his house," Abby said, pointing at the ceiling.

That was true, and as a result of the black lights, we were all glowing, as the next part of the evening's festivities began. Squeezed into that performance space, glowing and bathed in threads of smoke from a smoke machine, while outside half-naked models lounged beside huge stuffed rabbits, we may have thought we knew what weirdness was. But really, the weirdness had only just begun.

Because now Sir Randall stormed onstage. He was wearing a different cape now, a more flamboyant one—bedecked with a peace sign. This was clearly his performance cape.

Then the music started up, and Sir Randall began dancing wildly on stage, flinging his arms around, and making aggressively animated facial expressions, while two female backup dancers gyrated on either side of him. The song was a fast dance-music remix of "Kumbaya."

"Kumbaya," he sang. "Kumbaya."

And then: "Kumbaya! Give them love!"

As far as I could tell, these were the only words in his loud, frenetic version of the song—just shouted out at increasingly manic volume and speed.

When the song reached a particularly up-tempo part, Sir Randall suddenly produced two bright glow sticks and held them out in front of him. Then he upped his dancing a few notches in intensity, and I started to think he might collapse or have a heart attack.

"Kumbaya!" he shouted again. "Give them love!"

It was beginning to feel like I was in some kind of cult. I looked around the crowd, curious as to what my fellow attendees were doing and thinking. After all, I thought, we were all subject to Sir Randall's whims at this point. We had no way to get back to New York City without his buses—I didn't even really know *where* we were in the Hamptons—and the caped figure prancing around on stage, with his purported torture chamber presumably nearby, seemed capable of just about anything.

But when he finished his energetic techno version of "Kumbaya" it looked like Sir Randall was about to pass out from exhaustion, and he just flopped offstage

and disappeared. Those two minutes were his whole performance, and we were now led back out into the castle grounds.

After that, Sir Randall was absent for a while, and I figured he was recovering. When he finally did reappear later, he was wearing yet another cape. This one was a little more subdued than either of his two earlier ones.

"Now *that's* a guy with a lot of different capes," Jacob said.

At the end of the night, when it was finally time to get on the buses back to Manhattan, we were all pretty grateful. It had been a night to remember, but at a certain point Sir Randall's hospitality began to tire us all out.

Zvia said that she wanted to take one of the big stuffed rabbits home with her, but there were people leaning on the one near us, so she didn't. This turned out to be a wise decision; as we left, another girl walked quickly ahead of us, carrying one of the rabbits, and one of Sir Randall's burly suit-wearing security guards yelled out, "We have to rescue the bunny!"

Apparently, even though Sir Randall—"Captain Peace"—was so full of love and kindness that he felt the need to share it with the world, he was pretty possessive of his stuffed rabbits.

My friends and I stood there in astonishment as half a dozen of the security guards ran after the girl with the rabbit, and were then followed by a black SUV. I didn't see what happened, but none of us saw that girl or the stolen rabbit again. She may still be in Sir Randall's torture chamber.

We were handed gift bags and wearily got on the bus. On the drive home, I sat beside Abby, and the others in our group sat farther behind. And very soon after departing from outside the castle, the bus was more or less silent. Most people were sleeping, or pondering the night we had had.

"I feel dirty from this experience," Abby said, and fell asleep beside me.

I looked in my gift bag, and found a neon green pillow with a peace sign on it and a CD that had several different versions of Sir Randall's rendition of "Kumbaya."

Excellent, I thought. *Excellent.*

I lay back on the pillow and closed my eyes. Everything was quiet as we shot through the Hamptons darkness.

Except for one thing. The silence was pierced at one point by what was unmistakably Luke's drunken voice from the back of the bus.

"Jacob is my best friend," he shouted out in a singsongy tune, for no apparent reason. (The next day I would hear that during the bus ride, he had inexplicably removed his pants.) And then things were quiet again.

But I couldn't sleep. Something about the night had put me in a reflective mood, and my mind was flooded by images and words from the preceding months.

Had I learned anything from it all? Was I any closer to understanding what was needed to create peace? Was it time for me to get my own cape?

After a while, I finally began to drift to sleep, and as I did so, I had a sort of blurry, half-dream where Wayne, the foul-mouthed Brit, told me that he had been right all along and that I should never have even tried.

Back in my apartment, I had to consider the sad fact that I was more or less finished with my attempts to broker peace, and the reality was that there was not yet peace in the Middle East.

I thought about this while I put on Sir Randall's CD, and listened to him sing his various "Kumbaya" remixes. On one of them he had a recording of Barack Obama

giving an inspirational speech in the background, while Sir Randall sang "Kumbaya" overtop of it.

"Enough," Abby told me eventually, "I can't listen to that anymore. The whole thing is so creepy. I just want to forget that we were even there."

Indeed, while I had planned to take the neon peace sign–decorated pillows home with us along with the CD, Abby had made me leave them behind.

"I don't want those things in my house," she had said.

But when she was off at work—Abby had a new job, where unlike me, she was doing something obviously productive—I put the CD back on. Listening to it, and wearing my iPeace boxer shorts, I turned on my computer and booted up the iPeace simulator.

I chose to play the side of the Israeli prime minister again, so that I could compare my performance to my earlier attempt, and see if I had learned anything. In that role, I tried to plug in the policies and ideas my various advisors had advocated to me. The all-out war of Ted Collins. The dovishness of Hanin Rekat. AISC's right of center approach. Shaul Yoav's left of center approach. And combinations thereof.

I made endless concessions to the Palestinians. I waged war against the Palestinians. I tried to walk some middle ground. But nothing worked. Either I started the "Third Intifada" again, or the Israeli populace voted me out of office. Apparently, in the months I'd been peacemaking, I had learned absolutely nothing.

Reluctantly, I shut off the game.

I left the apartment and, singing Sir Randall's "Kumbaya" under my breath, I walked down the street to the fruit stand.

"Kumbaya," I mumbled. "Kumbaya! Give them love!"

But when I got to the stand, I found that my grocer wasn't there. Instead, an old woman was standing behind the counter.

"That guy who works here . . ." I said, proceeding to describe him.

"Yes," she said.

"Do you know if he is going to be in today?"

She shook her head.

"He won't be here anymore," she told me.

"What?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

"He went West," she said, "to work on the highways."

He had apparently been serious when he told me about his plan to go West. I still didn't really know what this meant for him, but I knew what it meant for me. As I closed off my project, I wouldn't be able to discuss it with him, or tell him how it had all ended. I wouldn't be able to ask him if I had been wasting my time or if I had been doing something worthwhile.

"Thanks," I said to the old woman, and walked off.

The grocer was looking westward, I thought, while I had still been trapped looking East. He had managed to firmly escape the Middle East and its power, and now I would have to do the same.

I got back to my apartment and sat down at my desk. Over the past few months, I'd come to question a lot of my assumptions about the Middle East situation, but I hadn't really found any answers. In a sense, the way to fix the situation seemed pretty obvious. Divide the land into two states, split Jerusalem fairly, remove the bulk of the settlements, and have the Palestinians renounce any further claims.

The real trick was getting there, without the extremists on both sides—who basically seemed to share the same goal: endless war—torpedoing the whole thing.

Absently, I checked my email and voice mail for some word from Kevin at the White House. But there was none. Wherever it was "overseas" that he had been heading to when he had called me, maybe he hadn't yet returned.

It was sadly perfect, I thought, that I had never been able to connect properly with Kevin or his White House colleagues. Firstly, of course, even after all my exploration, I wouldn't really have known what advice to give to Kevin to pass along to the president. If I had tried, it probably would have been incoherent and involved stuffed bunnies.

But it also felt sort of symbolic that I hadn't been able to connect with the White House. Even if I had come up with a real peace plan, apparently, I wouldn't have been able to give it to the people who mattered most. As Limor Tzafir had told me, the idea of peace was just a temptress.

In any case, I knew I couldn't continue trying to reach Kevin. My project had run its course and, let's be honest: I now had to sit down and write this book about it.

As I did that, Kevin's boss, the president, was working with a Middle East mired in tragedy and continually teetering on the edge of outright catastrophe. At the new opening session of the UN's General Assembly, he made a speech calling on both sides to step up to the peacemaking plate, and facilitated a short, unproductive meeting between the Israeli and Palestinian leaders.

There were an increasing number of rumors and predictions that the lack of movement on the peace front was on the verge of causing a third Palestinian Intifada. All it needed, some were saying, was an inciting incident. A spark. But since the Israel-Iran situation threatened to itself ignite the region at any moment, the

Netanyahu government seemed to have little time or willingness to devote its energy to the Palestinian track.

Some of the Palestinian leadership, meanwhile, appeared to have lost patience—just like their representative in DC had. Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president, was threatening not to run for reelection and to walk away from it all. And Palestinian prime minister Salam Fayyad was reportedly considering doing an end run around the "peace process" by simply declaring a Palestinian state. There were even reports that the Obama White House might be considering supporting this move and, that hearing this, Israel was sending nervous messages to the U.S. to reconsider.

Even Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* wrote a piece advocating an American disengagement from the peacemaking game.

"Take down our 'Peace-Processing-Is-Us' sign and just go home," he wrote. "If we are still begging Israel to stop building settlements, which is so manifestly idiotic, and the Palestinians to come to negotiations, which is so manifestly in their interest, and the Saudis to just give Israel a wink, which is so manifestly pathetic, we are in the wrong place. It's time to call a halt to this dysfunctional 'peace process.'"

I thought that there was definitely something to this but couldn't help thinking that just giving up would be a tremendous betrayal of all the Israeli children who wanted to live a life free of the constant fear of terrorism, and of all the Palestinian children who were suffering from hunger, a lack of medical supplies, and the threat of being caught in the crossfire once again.

Didn't we owe them more?

I wrote to David Blavik, a long-time DC-based Israeli reporter, asking him what he thought of the changes that seemed to be afoot in Washington's Middle East dynamics, and the pessimism that seemed rampant.

"Americans," he wrote back, "have to understand that Israel is a real country with real concerns and needs—that has to make real decisions. And that such decisions can't always be in line with the liberal agenda and the noble intentions and tendencies of supporters who live comfortably and enjoy the luxury of being comfortably protected by the might of the greatest empire in the history of the world."

There was one sliver of good news for me, personally. Out of the blue one day, while I was trying to craft everything I had experienced into this book, my uncle called me. As we talked, I discovered that when he had spoken angrily to me on the phone before, he had apparently not yet even read my first book. On this call, his voice sounded starkly different.

"Now that I've read your first book," he told me, "I understand it more. You were trying to show that everyone involved in the conflict are just humans, right? With all the stupid and silly things that humans do?"

"I think so," I said. "That, and to make readers laugh."

"That's good," he said, "because with the giant mess over there, and all the suffering—which isn't going to stop—maybe that's all we can do in the end."

After we said good-bye and hung up, I found that I was smiling, but I wasn't sure if I was happy or sad. The conflict in the Middle East wasn't going anywhere, I knew, but I would now at least be able to tell Abby that I was ready to stop playing my "little games," as she had put it.

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