

SITKA

ALASKA

NUMBER ONE NATIONAL BESTSELLER

MICHAEL
CHABON

The YIDDISH
POLICEMEN'S UNION

A NOVEL

INCLUDES
AN EXCERPT OF
**TELEGRAPH
AVENUE**

THE PULITZER PRIZE-
WINNING AUTHOR OF
THE AMAZING ADVENTURES
OF KAVALIER & CLAY



THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION



A Novel
MICHAEL CHABON

HARPER  PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI • AUCKLAND

DEDICATION

To Ayelet,
bashert

EPIGRAPH

And they went to sea in a Sieve.

—EDWARD LEAR

CONTENTS

Dedication

Epigraph

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

11

12

13

14

15

16

17

18

19

20

21

22

23

24

25

26

27

28

29

30

31

32

33

34

35
36
37
38
39
40
41
42
43
44
45
46

Glossary

An Excerpt from *Telegraph Avenue*

Title Page

Dedication

Epigraph

I Dream of Cream

Copyright

About *Telegraph Avenue*

P.S.

Author's Note

Praise

Other Works

Credits

Copyright

About the Publisher

Nine months Landsman's been flopping at the Hotel Zamenhof without any of his fellow residents managing to get themselves murdered. Now somebody has put a bullet in the brain of the occupant of 208, a yid who was calling himself Emanuel Lasker.

"He didn't answer the phone, he wouldn't open his door," says Tenenboym the night manager when he comes to roust Landsman. Landsman lives in 505, with a view of the neon sign on the hotel across Max Nordau Street. That one is called the Blackpool, a word that figures in Landsman's nightmares. "I had to let myself into his room."

The night manager is a former U.S. Marine who kicked a heroin habit of his own back in the sixties, after coming home from the shambles of the Cuban war. He takes a motherly interest in the user population of the Zamenhof. He extends credit to them and sees that they are left alone when that is what they need.

"Did you touch anything in the room?" Landsman says.

Tenenboym says, "Only the cash and jewelry."

Landsman puts on his trousers and shoes and hitches up his suspenders. Then he and Tenenboym turn to look at the doorknob, where a necktie hangs, red with a fat maroon stripe, already knotted to save time. Landsman has eight hours to go until his next shift. Eight rat hours, sucking at his bottle, in his glass tank lined with wood shavings. Landsman sighs and goes for the tie. He slides it over his head and pushes up the knot to his collar. He puts on his jacket, feels for the wallet and shield in the breast pocket, pats the sholem he wears in a holster under his arm, a chopped Smith & Wesson Model 39.

"I hate to wake you, Detective," Tenenboym says. "Only I noticed that you don't really sleep."

"I sleep," Landsman says. He picks up the shot glass that he is currently dating, a souvenir of the World's Fair of 1977. "It's just I do it in my underpants and shirt." He lifts the glass and toasts the thirty years gone since the Sitka World's Fair. A pinnacle of Jewish civilization in the north, people say, and who is he to argue? Meyer Landsman was fourteen that summer, and just discovering the glories of Jewish women, for whom 1977 must have been some kind of a pinnacle. "Sitting up in a chair." He drains the glass. "Wearing a sholem."

According to doctors, therapists, and his ex-wife, Landsman drinks to medicate himself, tuning the tubes and crystals of his moods with a crude hammer of hundred-proof plum brandy. But the truth is that Landsman has only two moods: working and dead. Meyer Landsman is the most decorated shammes in the District of Sitka, the man who solved the murder of the beautiful Froma Lefkowitz by her furrier husband, and caught Podolsky the Hospital Killer. His testimony sent Hyman Tsharny to federal

prison for life, the first and last time that criminal charges against a Verbover wiseguy have ever been made to stick. He has the memory of a convict, the balls of a fireman, and the eyesight of a housebreaker. When there is crime to fight, Landsman tears around Sitka like a man with his pant leg caught on a rocket. It's like there's a film score playing behind him, heavy on the castanets. The problem comes in the hours when he isn't working, when his thoughts start blowing out the open window of his brain like pages from a blotter. Sometimes it takes a heavy paperweight to pin them down.

"I hate to make more work for you," Tenenboym says.

During his days working Narcotics, Landsman arrested Tenenboym five times. That is all the basis for what passes for friendship between them. It is almost enough.

"It's not work, Tenenboym," Landsman says. "I do it for love."

"It's the same for me," the night manager says. "With being a night manager of a crap-ass hotel."

Landsman puts his hand on Tenenboym's shoulder, and they go down to take stock of the deceased, squeezing into the Zamenhof's lone elevator, or ELEVATORO, as a small brass plate over the door would have it. When the hotel was built fifty years ago, all of its directional signs, labels, notices, and warnings were printed on brass plates in Esperanto. Most of them are long gone, victims of neglect, vandalism, or the fire code.

The door and door frame of 208 do not exhibit signs of forced entry. Landsman covers the knob with his handkerchief and nudges the door open with the toe of his loafer.

"I got this funny feeling," Tenenboym says as he follows Landsman into the room. "First time I ever saw the guy. You know the expression 'a broken man'?"

Landsman allows that the phrase rings a bell.

"Most of the people it gets applied to don't really deserve it," Tenenboym says. "Most men, in my opinion, they have nothing there to break in the first place. But this Lasker. He was like one of those sticks you snap, it lights up. You know? For a few hours. And you can hear broken glass rattling inside of it. I don't know, forget it. It was just a funny feeling."

"Everybody has a funny feeling these days," Landsman says, making a few notes in his little black pad about the situation of the room, even though such notes are superfluous, because he rarely forgets a detail of physical description. Landsman has been told, by the same loose confederacy of physicians, psychologists, and his former spouse, that alcohol will kill his gift for recollection, but so far, to his regret, this claim has proved false. His vision of the past remains unimpaired. "We had to open a separate phone line just to handle the calls."

"These are strange times to be a Jew," Tenenboym agrees. "No doubt about it."

A small pile of paperback books sits atop the laminate dresser. On the bedside table Lasker kept a chessboard. It looks like he had a game going, a messy-looking middle game with Black's king under attack at the center of the board and White having the advantage of a couple of pieces. It's a cheap set, the board a square of card that folds down the middle, the pieces hollow, with plastic nubs where they were extruded.

One light burns in a three-shade floor lamp by the television. Every other bulb in the room apart from the bathroom tube has been removed or allowed to burn out. On

the windowsill sits a package of a popular brand of over-the-counter laxative. The window is cranked open its possible inch, and every few seconds the metal blinds bang in the stiff wind blowing in off the Gulf of Alaska. The wind carries a sour tang of pulped lumber, the smell of boat diesel and the slaughter and canning of salmon. According to “Nokh Amol,” a song that Landsman and every other Alaskan Jew of his generation learned in grade school, the smell of the wind from the Gulf fills a Jewish nose with a sense of promise, opportunity, the chance to start again. “Nokh Amol” dates from the Polar Bear days, the early forties, and it’s supposed to be an expression of gratitude for another miraculous deliverance: Once Again. Nowadays the Jews of the Sitka District tend to hear the ironic edge that was there all along.

“Seems like I’ve known a lot of chess-playing yids who used smack,” Tenenboym says.

“Same here,” Landsman says, looking down at the deceased, realizing he has seen the yid around the Zamenhof. Little bird of a man. Bright eye, snub beak. Bit of a flush in the cheeks and throat that might have been rosacea. Not a hard case, not a scumbag, not quite a lost soul. A yid not too different from Landsman, maybe, apart from his choice of drug. Clean fingernails. Always a tie and hat. Read a book with footnotes once. Now Lasker lies on his belly, on the pull-down bed, face to the wall, wearing only a pair of regulation white underpants. Ginger hair and ginger freckles and three days of golden stubble on his cheek. A trace of a double chin that Landsman puts down to a vanished life as a fat boy. Eyes swollen in their blood-dark orbits. At the back of his head is a small, burnt hole, a bead of blood. No sign of a struggle. Nothing to indicate that Lasker saw it coming or even knew the instant when it came. The pillow, Landsman notices, is missing from the bed. “If I’d known, maybe I would have proposed a game or two.”

“I didn’t know you play.”

“I’m weak,” Landsman says. By the closet, on plush carpet the medicated yellow-green of a throat lozenge, he spots a tiny white feather. Landsman jerks open the closet door, and there on the floor is the pillow, shot through the heart to silence the concussion of bursting gases in a shell. “I have no feel for the middle game.”

“In my experience, Detective,” Tenenboym says, “it’s all middle game.”

“Don’t I know it,” Landsman says.

He calls to wake his partner, Berko Shemets.

“Detective Shemets,” Landsman says into his mobile phone, a department-issue Shoyfer AT. “This is your partner.”

“I begged you not to do this anymore, Meyer,” Berko says. Needless to say, he also has eight hours to go until his next shift.

“You have a right to be angry,” Landsman says. “Only I thought maybe you might still be awake.”

“I was awake.”

Unlike Landsman, Berko Shemets has not made a mess of his marriage or his personal life. Every night he sleeps in the arms of his excellent wife, whose love for him is merited, requited, and appreciated by her husband, a steadfast man who never gives her any cause for sorrow or alarm.

“A curse on your head, Meyer,” Berko says, and then, in American, “God damn it.”

"I have an apparent homicide here at my hotel," Landsman says. "A resident. A single shot to the back of the head. Silenced with a pillow. Very tidy."

"A hit."

"That's the only reason I'm bothering you. The unusual nature of the killing."

Sitka, with a population in the long jagged strip of the metro area of three point two million, averages about seventy-five homicides a year. Some of these are gang-related: Russian shtarkers whacking one another freestyle. The rest of Sitka's homicides are so-called crimes of passion, which is a shorthand way of expressing the mathematical product of alcohol and firearms. Cold-blooded executions are as rare as they are tough to clear from the big whiteboard in the squad room, where the tally of open cases is kept.

"You're off duty, Meyer. Call it in. Give it to Tabatchnik and Karpas."

Tabatchnik and Karpas, the other two detectives who make up B Squad in the Homicide Section of the District Police, Sitka Headquarters, are holding down the night shift this month. Landsman has to acknowledge a certain appeal in the idea of letting this pigeon shit on their fedoras.

"Well, I would," Landsman says. "Except for this is my place of residence."

"You knew him?" Berko says, his tone softening.

"No," Landsman says. "I did not know the yid."

He looks away from the pale freckled expanse of the dead man stretched out on the pull-down bed. Sometimes he can't help feeling sorry for them, but it's better not to get into the habit.

"Look," Landsman says, "you go back to bed. We can talk about it tomorrow. I'm sorry I bothered you. Good night. Tell Ester-Malke I'm sorry."

"You sound a little off, Meyer," Berko says. "You okay?"

In recent months Landsman has placed a number of calls to his partner at questionable hours of the night, ranting and rambling in an alcoholic dialect of grief. Landsman bailed out on his marriage two years ago, and last April his younger sister crashed her Piper Super Cub into the side of Mount Dunkelblum, up in the bush. But Landsman is not thinking of Naomi's death now, nor of the shame of his divorce. He has been sandbagged by a vision of sitting in the grimy lounge of the Hotel Zamenhof, on a couch that was once white, playing chess with Emanuel Lasker, or whatever his real name was. Shedding the last of their fading glow on each other and listening to the sweet chiming of broken glass inside. That Landsman loathes the game of chess does not make the picture any less touching.

"The guy played chess, Berko. I never knew. That's all."

"Please," Berko says, "please, Meyer, I beg you, don't start with the crying."

"I'm fine," Landsman says. "Good night."

Landsman calls the dispatcher to make himself the primary detective on the Lasker case. Another piece-of-shit homicide is not going to put any special hurt on his clearance rate as primary. Not that it really matters. On the first of January, sovereignty over the whole Federal District of Sitka, a crooked parenthesis of rocky shoreline running along the western edges of Baranof and Chichagof islands, will revert to the state of Alaska. The District Police, to which Landsman has devoted his hide, head, and soul for twenty years, will be dissolved. It is far from clear that Landsman or Berko Shemets or anybody else will be keeping his job. Nothing is clear about the

upcoming Reversion, and that is why these are strange times to be a Jew.

While he waits for the beat latke to show, Landsman knocks on doors. Most of the occupants of the Zamenhof are out for the night, in body or mind, and for all that he gets out of the rest of them, he might as well be knocking on doors at the Hirshkovits School for the Deaf. They are a twitchy, half-addled, rank, and cranky bunch of yids, the residents of the Hotel Zamenhof, but none of them seems any more disturbed than usual tonight. And none of them strikes Landsman as the type to jam a large-caliber handgun against the base of a man's skull and kill him in stone-cold blood.

"I'm wasting my time with these buffaloes," Landsman tells Tenenboym. "And you, you're sure you didn't see anybody or anything out of the ordinary?"

"I'm sorry, Detective."

"You're a buffalo, too, Tenenboym."

"I don't dispute the charge."

"The service door?"

"Dealers were using it," Tenenboym says. "We had to put in an alarm. I would have heard."

Landsman gets Tenenboym to telephone the day manager and the weekend man, snug at home in their beds. These gentlemen agree with Tenenboym that, as far as they know, no one has called for the dead man or asked after him. Ever. Not during the entire course of his stay at the Zamenhof. No visitors, no friends, not even the delivery boy from Pearl of Manila. So, Landsman thinks, there's a difference between him and Lasker: Landsman has occasional visits from Romel, bearing a brown paper bag of *lumpia*.

"I'm going to go check out the roof," Landsman says. "Don't let anybody leave, and call me when the latke decides to show up."

Landsman rides the elevator to the eighth floor and then bangs his way up a flight of steel-edged concrete steps to the roof of the Zamenhof. He walks the perimeter, looking across Max Nordau Street to the roof of the Blackpool. He peers over the north, east, and south cornices to the surrounding low structures six or seven stories down. Night is an orange smear over Sitka, a compound of fog and the light of sodium-vapor streetlamps. It has the translucence of onions cooked in chicken fat. The lamps of the Jews stretch from the slope of Mount Edgecumbe in the west, over the seventy-two infilled islands of the Sound, across the Shvartser-Yam, Halibut Point, South Sitka, and the Nachtasyl, across Harkavy and the Untershtot, before they are snuffed in the east by the Baranof range. On Oysshtelung Island, the beacon at the tip of the Safety Pin—sole remnant of the World's Fair—blinks out its warning to airplanes or yids. Landsman can smell fish offal from the canneries, grease from the fry pits at Pearl of Manila, the spew of taxis, an intoxicating bouquet of fresh hat from Grinspoon's Felting two blocks away.

“It’s nice up there,” Landsman says when he gets back down to the lobby, with its ashtray charm, the yellowing sofas, the scarred chairs and tables at which you sometimes see a couple of hotel residents killing an hour with a game of pinochle. “I should go up more often.”

“What about the basement?” Tenenboym says. “You going to look down there?”

“The basement,” Landsman says, and his heart describes a sudden knight move in his chest. “I guess I’d better.”

Landsman is a tough guy, in his way, given to the taking of wild chances. He has been called hard-boiled and foolhardy, a momzer, a crazy son of a bitch. He has faced down shtarkers and psychopaths, has been shot at, beaten, frozen, burned. He has pursued suspects between the flashing walls of urban firefights and deep into bear country. Heights, crowds, snakes, burning houses, dogs schooled to hate the smell of a policeman, he has shrugged them all off or functioned in spite of them. But when he finds himself in lightless or confined spaces, something in the animal core of Meyer Landsman convulses. No one but his ex-wife knows it, but Detective Meyer Landsman is afraid of the dark.

“Want me to go with you?” Tenenboym says, sounding offhand, but you never know with a sensitive old fishwife like Tenenboym.

Landsman affects to scorn the offer. “Just give me a damn flashlight,” he says.

The basement exhales its breath of camphor, heating oil, and cold dust. Landsman jerks a string that lights a naked bulb, holds his breath, and goes under.

At the bottom of the steps, he passes through the lost-articles room, lined with pegboard, furnished with shelves and cubbyholes that hold the thousand objects abandoned or forgotten in the hotel. Unmated shoes, fur hats, a trumpet, a windup zeppelin. A collection of wax gramophone cylinders featuring the entire recorded output of the Orchestra Orfeon of Istanbul. A logger’s ax, two bicycles, a partial bridge in a hotel glass. Wigs, canes, a glass eye, display hands left behind by a mannequin salesman. Prayer books, prayer shawls in their velvet zipper pouches, an outlandish idol with the body of a fat baby and the head of an elephant. There is a wooden soft-drink crate filled with keys, another with the entire range and breadth of hairstyling tools, from irons to eyelash crimpers. Framed photographs of families in better days. A cryptic twist of rubber that might be a sex toy, or a contraceptive device, or the patented secret of a foundation garment. Some yid even left behind a taxidermy marten, sleek and leering, its glass eye a hard bead of ink.

Landsman probes the box of keys with a pencil. He looks inside each hat, gropes along the shelves behind the abandoned paperback books. He can hear his own heart and smell his own aldehyde breath, and after a few minutes in the silence, the sound of blood in his ears begins to remind him of somebody talking. He checks behind the hot-water tanks, lashed to one another with straps of steel like comrades in a doomed adventure.

The laundry is next. When he pulls the string for the light, nothing happens. It’s ten degrees darker in here, and there’s nothing to see but blank walls, severed hookups, drain holes in the floor. The Zamenhof has not done its own wash in years. Landsman looks into the drain holes, and the darkness in them is oily and thick. Landsman feels a flutter, a worm, in his belly. He flexes his fingers and cracks the bones of his neck. At the far end of the laundry room, a door that is three planks nailed together by a

diagonal fourth seals a low doorway. The wooden door has a loop of rope for a latch and a peg to hook it on.

A crawl space. Landsman half dreads the phrase alone.

He calculates the chance that a certain style of killer, not a professional, not a true amateur, not even a normal maniac, might be hiding in that crawl space. Possible; but it would be pretty tough for the freak to have hooked the loop over the peg from inside. That logic alone is almost enough to persuade him not to bother with the crawl space. In the end Landsman switches on the flash and notches it between his teeth. He hikes up his pants legs and gets down on his knees. Just to spite himself, because spiting himself, spiting others, spiting the world is the pastime and only patrimony of Landsman and his people. With one hand he unholsters his big little S&W, and with the other he fingers the loop of rope. He yanks open the door of the crawl space.

“Come out,” he says, lips dry, rasping like a scared old fart.

The elation he experienced on the roof has cooled like blown filament. His nights are wasted, his life and career a series of mistakes, his city itself a bulb that is about to go black.

He thrusts his upper body into the crawl space. The air is cold, with a bitter smell of mouse shit. The beam of the pocket flash dribbles over everything, shadowing as much as it reveals. Walls of cinder block, an earthen floor, the ceiling a loathsome tangle of wires and foam insulation. In the middle of the dirt floor, at the back, a disk of raw plywood lies set in a circular metal frame, flush with the floor. Landsman holds his breath and swims through his panic to the hole in the floor, determined to stay under for as long as he can. The dirt around the frame is undisturbed. An even layer of dust lies over wood and metal alike, no marks, no streaks. There is no reason to think anyone has been fooling with it. Landsman fits his fingernails between the plywood and the frame and pries off the crude hatch. The flashlight reveals a threaded tube of aluminum screwed into the earth, laddered with steel cleats. The frame turns out to be the edge of the tube itself. Just wide enough to admit a full-grown psychopath. Or a Jewish policeman with fewer phobias than Landsman. He clings to the sholem as to a handle, wrestling with a crazy need to fire it into the throat of the darkness. He drops the plywood disk back into its frame with a clatter. No way is he going down there.

The darkness follows him all the way back up the stairs to the lobby, reaching for his collar, tugging at his sleeve.

“Nothing,” he tells Tenenboym, pulling himself together. He gives the word a cheery ring. It might be a prediction of what his investigation into the murder of Emanuel Lasker is bound to reveal, a statement of what he believes Lasker lived for and died for, a realization of what will remain, after the Reversion, of Landsman’s hometown. “Nothing.”

“You know what Kohn says,” says Tenenboym. “Kohn says we got a ghost in the house.” Kohn is the day manager. “Taking shit, moving shit around. Kohn figures it for the ghost of Professor Zamenhof.”

“If they named a dump like this after me,” Landsman says, “I’d haunt it, too.”

“You never know,” Tenenboym observes. “Especially nowadays.”

Nowadays one never knows. Out at Povorotny, a cat mated with a rabbit and produced adorable freaks whose photos graced the front page of the *Sitka Tog*. Last February five hundred witnesses all up and down the District swore that in the

shimmer of the aurora borealis, for two nights running, they observed the outlines of a human face, with beard and sidelocks. Violent arguments broke out over the identity of the bearded sage in the sky, whether or not the face was smiling (or merely suffering from a mild attack of gas), and the meaning of the weird manifestation. And just last week, amid the panic and feathers of a kosher slaughterhouse on Zhitlovsky Avenue, a chicken turned on the shochet as he raised his ritual knife and announced, in Aramaic, the imminent advent of Messiah. According to the *Tog*, the miraculous chicken offered a number of startling predictions, though it neglected to mention the soup in which, having once more fallen silent as God Himself, it afterward featured. Even the most casual study of the record, Landsman thinks, would show that strange times to be a Jew have almost always been, as well, strange times to be a chicken.

In the street the wind shakes rain from the flaps of its overcoat. Landsman tucks himself into the hotel doorway. Two men, one with a cello case strapped to his back, the other cradling a violin or viola, struggle against the weather toward the door of Pearl of Manila across the street. The symphony hall is ten blocks and a world away from this end of Max Nordau Street, but the craving of a Jew for pork, in particular when it has been deep-fried, is a force greater than night or distance or a cold blast off the Gulf of Alaska. Landsman himself is fighting the urge to return to room 505, and his bottle of slivovitz, and his World's Fair souvenir glass.

Instead, he lights a papiros. After a decade of abstinence, Landsman took up smoking again not quite three years ago. His then-wife was pregnant at the time. It was a much-discussed and in some quarters a long-desired pregnancy—her first—but not a planned one. As with many pregnancies that are discussed too long there was a history of ambivalence in the prospective father. At seventeen weeks and a day—the day Landsman bought his first package of Broadways in ten years—they got a bad result. Some but not all of the cells that made up the fetus, code-named Django, had an extra chromosome on the twentieth pair. A mosaicism, it was called. It might cause grave abnormalities. It might have no effect at all. In the available literature, a faithful person could find encouragement, and a faithless one ample reason to despond. Landsman's view of things—ambivalent, despondent, and with no faith in anything—prevailed. A doctor with half a dozen laminaria dilators broke the seal on the life of Django Landsman. Three months later, Landsman and his cigarettes moved out of the house on Tshernovits Island that he and Bina had shared for nearly all the fifteen years of their marriage. It was not that he couldn't live with the guilt. He just couldn't live with it and Bina, too.

An old man, pushing himself like a rickety handcart, weaves a course toward the door of the hotel. A short man, under five feet, dragging a large valise. Landsman observes the long white coat, worn open over a white suit with a waistcoat, and the wide-brimmed white hat pulled down over his ears. A white beard and sidelocks, wispy and thick at the same time. The valise an ancient chimera of stained brocade and scratched hide. The whole right side of the man's body sags five degrees lower than the left, where the suitcase, which must contain the old boy's entire collection of lead ingots, weighs it down. The man stops and raises a finger, as if he has a question to pose of Landsman. The wind toys with the man's whiskers and with the brim of his hat. From his beard, armpits, breath, and skin, the wind plucks a rich smell of stale tobacco and wet flannel and the sweat of a man who lives in the street. Landsman notes the color of the man's antiquated boots, yellowish ivory, like his beard, with sharp toes and buttons running up the sides.

Landsman recalls that he used to see this nut a lot, back when he was arresting

Tenenboym for petty theft and possession. The yid was no younger then and is no older now. People used to call him Elijah, because he turned up in all kinds of unlikely spots, with his pushke box and his indefinable air of having something important to say.

“Darling,” he says to Landsman now. “This is the Hotel Zamenhof, no?”

His Yiddish sounds a bit exotic to Landsman, flavored with Dutch maybe. He is bent and frail, but his face, apart from crow’s-feet around the blue eyes, looks youthful and unlined. The eyes themselves hold a match flame of eagerness that puzzles Landsman. The prospect of a night at the Zamenhof does not often give rise to such anticipation.

“That’s right.” Landsman offers Elijah the Prophet a Broadway, and the little man takes two and tucks one into the reliquary of his breast pocket. “Hot and cold water. Licensed shammes right on the premises.”

“Are you the manager, sweetness?”

Landsman can’t help smiling at that. He steps aside, gesturing toward the door. “The manager’s inside,” he says.

But the little man just stands there getting rained on, his beard fluttering like a flag of truce. He gazes up at the faceless face of the Zamenhof, gray in the murky streetlight. A narrow pile of dirty white brick and slit windows, three or four blocks off the tawdriest stretch of Monastir Street, the place has all the allure of a dehumidifier. Its neon sign blinks on and off, tormenting the dreams of the losers across the street at the Blackpool.

“The Zamenhof,” the old man says, echoing the intermittent letters on the neon sign. “Not the Zamenhof. The Zamenhof.”

Now the latke, a rookie named Netsky, comes jogging up, holding on to his round, flat, wide-brimmed patrolman’s hat.

“Detective,” the latke says, out of breath, and then gives the old man a squint and a nod. “Evening, Grandpa. Right, uh, Detective, sorry, I just got the call, I was hung up for a minute there.” Netsky has coffee on his breath and powdered sugar on the right cuff of his blue coat. “Where’s the dead yid?”

“In two-oh-eight,” Landsman says, opening the door for the latke, then turning back to the old man. “Coming in, Grandpa?”

“No,” Elijah says, with a hint of mild emotion that Landsman can’t quite read. It might be regret, or relief, or the grim satisfaction of a man with a taste for disappointment. The flicker trapped in the old man’s eyes has given way to a film of tears. “I was only curious. Thank you, Officer Landsman.”

“It’s Detective now,” Landsman says, startled that the old man has retrieved his name. “You *remember* me, Grandpa?”

“I remember everything, darling.” Elijah reaches into a hip pocket of his bleach yellow coat and takes out his pushke, a wooden casket, about the size of a box meant for index cards, painted black. On the front of the box, Hebrew words are painted: L’ERETZ YISROEL. Cut into the top of the box is a narrow slit for coins or a folded dollar bill. “A small donation?” Elijah says.

The Holy Land has never seemed more remote or unattainable than it does to a Jew of Sitka. It is on the far side of the planet, a wretched place ruled by men united only in their resolve to keep out all but a worn fistful of small-change Jews. For half a

century, Arab strongmen and Muslim partisans, Persians and Egyptians, socialists and nationalists and monarchists, pan-Arabists and pan-Islamists, traditionalists and the Party of Ali, have all sunk their teeth into Eretz Yisroel and worried it down to bone and gristle. Jerusalem is a city of blood and slogans painted on the wall, severed heads on telephone poles. Observant Jews around the world have not abandoned their hope to dwell one day in the land of Zion. But Jews have been tossed out of the joint three times now—in 586 BCE, in 70 CE and with savage finality in 1948. It's hard even for the faithful not to feel a sense of discouragement about their chances of once again getting a foot in the door.

Landsman gets out his wallet and pokes a folded twenty into Elijah's pushke. "Lots of luck," he says.

The little man hoists his heavy valise and starts to shuffle away. Landsman reaches out and pulls at Elijah's sleeve, a question formulating in his heart, a child's question about the old wish of his people for a home. Elijah turns with a look of practiced wariness. Maybe Landsman is some kind of troublemaker. Landsman feels the question ebb away like the nicotine in his bloodstream.

"What you got in the bag, Grandpa?" Landsman says. "Looks heavy."

"It's a book."

"One book?"

"It's very big."

"Long story?"

"Very long."

"What's it about?"

"It's about Messiah," Elijah says. "Now please take your hand off of me."

Landsman lets go. The old man straightens his back and raises his head. The clouds on his eyes blow over, and he looks angry, disdainful, and not in the least old.

"Messiah is coming," he says. It isn't quite a warning and yet somehow as a promise of redemption, it lacks a certain warmth.

"That works out well," Landsman says, jerking his thumb toward the hotel lobby. "As of tonight we have a vacancy."

Elijah looks hurt, or maybe just disgusted. He opens the black box and looks inside. He takes out the twenty-dollar bill that Landsman gave him and hands it back. Then he picks up his suitcase, settles his floppy white hat down over his head, and trudges off into the rain.

Landsman crumples the twenty and drops it into his hip pocket. He grinds his papiros under his shoe and goes into the hotel.

"Who's the nut?" Netsky says.

"They call him Elijah. He's harmless," says Tenenboym from behind the steel mesh of the reception window. "You used to see him around sometimes. Always pimping for Messiah." Tenenboym clacks a gold toothpick against his molars. "Listen, Detective, I'm not supposed to say anything. But I might as well tell you. Management is sending out a letter tomorrow."

"I can't wait to hear this," Landsman says.

"The owners sold out to a Kansas City concern."

"They're tossing us."

"Maybe," Tenenboym says. "Maybe not. Nobody's status is clear. But it's not out

of the question that you might have to move out.”

“Is that what it’s going to say in the letter?”

Tenenboym shrugs. “The letter’s all written in lawyer.”

Landsman puts Netsky the latke on the front door. “Don’t tell them what they heard or saw,” he reminds him. “And don’t give them a hard time, even if they look like they could use one.”

Menashe Shpringer, the criminalist working the graveyard shift, blows into the lobby in a black coat and fur hat, with a rattling of rain. In one hand Shpringer carries a dripping umbrella. With the other he tows a chrome caddy to which his black vinyl toolbox and a plastic bin, with holes for handles, are strapped with bungee cord. Shpringer is a fireplug, his bowed legs and simian arms affixed to his neck without apparent benefit of shoulders. His face is mostly jowl and his ridged forehead looks like one of those domed beehives you see representing Industry in medieval woodcuts. The bin is blazoned with the single word EVIDENCE in blue letters.

“Are you leaving town?” Shpringer says. It’s not an uncommon greeting these days. A lot of people have left town in the past couple of years, fled the District for the short roster of places that will welcome them, or that have tired of hearing about pogroms secondhand and are hoping to throw one for themselves. Landsman says that as far as he knows, he is not going anywhere. Most of the places that will take Jews require that you have a near relative living there. All of Landsman’s nearest relatives are dead or facing Reversion themselves.

“Then let me say goodbye to you now, forever,” Shpringer says. “Tomorrow night at this time I will be basking in the warm Saskatchewan sun.”

“Saskatoon?” Landsman guesses.

“Thirty below they had today,” Shpringer says. “That was the high.”

“Look at it this way,” Landsman says. “You could be living in this dump.”

“The Zamenhof.” In his memory, Shpringer pulls Landsman’s file, and frowns at its contents. “That’s right. Home sweet home, eh?”

“It suits me in my current style of life.”

Shpringer smiles a thin smile from which almost every trace of pity has been erased.

“Which way to the dead man?” he says.