

Excerpt from Solomon Kursh

A Novel

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Such a Nice Boy Such a Promising Young Man

Stanley Harold Sokolov, of the later baby boom, developed conventionally for twenty years. Like many kids in suburban Chicago, he learned the values and priorities paramount to Jews in history: raise a family, make a living to support them, and be a *mensch*, a complete man, with charity and compassion. The darkest period in Jewish history being so recent in his formative years, he also learned of the hazards in being a Jew. These lessons came from elders who had witnessed those times. With grim resolve, they shared their dictate: *Never again!*

But those same elders seemed eager to put those harsh times behind, to better focus on the brilliant future. The burden on young Stanley was predictable and common to boys of glowing promise. He shone with glittering potential in all things. By virtue of sheer will power—not his will power but that of the fawning *mishpocha*, the family, he would burnish and glorify its legacy. The future fairly shone in the *shayna punim*, the golden boy, and only the evil eye could darken such light. The darkness would not come, but, just in case, to fend off the evil eye, the family tore at their clothing for drama and spat with sincerity. “Feh!”

They didn’t actually tear anything; no need to waste quality goods, and the epithet alone has long proven effective as a safeguard without actually tearing. Not to worry anyway; Stanley was such a good boy, even if he dabbled in devilish ways. So they murmured, “Mm... Com’ere. I want a pinch of that.”

Expectations stacked up, as if Stanley would strap on a harness and pull his forebears into their dreams of greatness. He seemed that certain. He resisted as a kid might do, preferring freedom of choice in all things. The elders chuckled at his foolish notions; such were the ways of pups and kittens and kids. And they laughed, seeing his independence as strength, as affirmation of their hopes, like icing on the cake. They believed he would fulfill them. The future in his hands would shape up in stark contrast to recent misfortunes cast unto them in the years preceding Stanley’s birth. They referenced the Holocaust in oblique terms, without delineation or ghastly detail, because Jews around the world have often avoided attention, to best circumvent harsh consequence. From the Holocaust back to pogroms, back to King Achashverosh, back to the philistines, Goliath and the whole Jew-hating panoply, anti-Semitism spanned the aeons. Some Jews changed their names after WWII, to better fit in, as if embarrassed by the beating the Jews had taken. Others simply tried to let that beating ease into the past, but the Holocaust stayed open and raw, and mere reference to that dark time would get them sucking their teeth and wringing their hands. The Holocaust would linger forever, and some would remain fearful because of it.

As a bright boy with quick wits, Stanley thought the elders conformed to type and platitude. So much *kvetching* and zealotry seemed made to order, a set piece of cultural response, in which older Jews could take shelter and sustain each other. He wondered what they actually knew of conditions in Poland, France, and Germany from 1938 to

1945, beyond what they'd heard. Sanctimonious but removed, they seemed detached in spirit and in fact, and he also wondered: *What had they done? Were they sitting down when they learned of the horror, relaxed on a plush sofa with a plastic cover? Did they rise?*

He would not ask aloud. He anticipated the stock response: "Put a roof over your head and some brisket and farfel in your belly is what we did, you little...*schmendrik!*" But a *schmendrik* is a fool, which they would never call him for fear of inviting the evil one. He knew they would change the subject rather than respond, to protect him from the subject, or, more likely, to cover what they'd done, just as they'd covered the plush sofa. What they had done came to *bupkis*, and pressing the issue could bear only bitter fruit. What? Done? From Chicago? They had survived, as Jews; that's what they'd done. And then, Mister Smarty Britches, they did not put him out on the street and send him on his way. Well, Jews don't usually do that, but the elders of the family would have taken offense at any suggestion of their inconsequence. They had endured in order to live better lives, which difficult balance is not for a punk kid to challenge. So he didn't.

Nor did he doubt their self-perceptions, however melodramatic they seemed from where they relaxed. Sure, they played it up as victims, as if arrival in America fifty years prior made for a very close call. It didn't. Not really. But a good boy plays along. A good boy knows the difference between making a point and expressing a hurtful opinion. *Shayna* means pretty and *punim* is face, but *shayna punim* goes to idiom on the boys of glowing promise, who blend into the culture and its rich traditions with aspirations of greatness in the law or investment banking, in medicine or the arts, but not so much the arts unless the law or medicine or banking don't work out.

Stanley Sokolov was clearly handsome with Sephardic angularity and the Hashemite olive hue that attracted second glances, starting at an early age. He sometimes glanced back and wondered why any glances had occurred. He didn't mind glances from strangers or the family's chronic effusions of hope for fame, fortune, robust health and a direct connection with God. Glances and effusions seemed part of the package, his package, and he went along with the family, the neighborhood, and the parochial behaviors. That he should bear compassion for all things with intelligence and articulation like Einstein, no less, seemed reasonable for a young man destined to sit in a corner office with a view! He would thrive like a wise man, rich and famous, maybe as

a brain surgeon or a heart surgeon. He would be a great arbiter, perhaps a judge, or a master of moolah with huge caches of cash. He would succeed in any pursuit, with effulgent good cheer and good looks, as a shayna punim should do.

Stan seemed gifted and destined, aware and well mannered. Everyone knew these things, yet he alone knew that he could fail—or was that a belief? Never mind. *Feh!* But failure lurked, even as those nearby invoked: *kina hora!* Cast out the evil eye! For years he thought kina hora another small supplication to please the forces of fortune. Like *mazel tov*, mazel meaning luck and tov meaning good. But kina hora is based in fear of the evil eye. Kina hora is meant to block any negative force that would keep shayna punim Stanley from achieving full potential or whatever part thereof that God might be willing to grant.

He felt buffered with *Bubbi* and *Zeda*—the ultimate elders, the grandparents—casting out the evil ones. He studied adequately to get decent grades for better chances at a good school, Ivy League not required because it wouldn't happen, because a scholarship based on academic excellence or need would need a bit more of both to lure a top-drawer university. Straight-A students were fairly rare, and Stanley Sokolov was rarer still, a genius who never really applied himself because he didn't need to. But oh, if ever he did, and he would. Just you wait. Besides grades that did not reflect his true intellect, he didn't test well. He left the Scholastic Aptitude Test room a short while into the exam because, "It felt wrong. You can't test me."

Never mind. He went long on common sense, and therein lay his potential. What could be so wrong with a middleclass background, middling comfort and a monumental mind that might meander? Nothing was the correct answer. Stan Sokolov had his health, which was more than some, and he would achieve greatness at a school closer to home, where a good boy should be.

Morris Sokolov had taken pride as a provider and did fairly well in the rag business until he dropped dead when Stan was fifteen, leaving many accounts waiting for service to no avail, with Morris gone. If only he'd spent more time servicing the heart that gave out on him. If only he'd eased up on the nicotine and *schmaltz*—cigars and rendered chicken fat oozed over toast and salted. It just goes to show how a man must take a day of rest, must stop to smell a rose. He must reflect on the air he breathes, the color in his cheeks, some exercise, and the power above.

Never mind once again. Stan would excel at a state university, as necessary, and fulfill his father's legacy by doing well, by taking a wife and having children of his own. He would matriculate into practice of the law or medicine, accounting or research science, business or diplomacy, banking or the arts—*Accch!* The arts again, with the deprivation, the tatty clothing and ass kissing, if you have no connections. Better to pursue the Sokolov-Epstein sphere of connections in quality dry goods. It wasn't for nothing that Pearl, the mother, had been an Epstein, of the dry-cleaner Epsteins, or that dry goods and dry cleaning should wed for obvious enrichment to society. Stanley would benefit from these lives of stability and prosperity no matter where he went to college. Better he should stay close to home and marry in his own back yard sooner rather than later to enjoy the fruits of life to the maximum. Better to do what a man has to do like a mensch for all seasons. Better to live long and prosper, helping the wheel of life turn for goodness. Pearl, the mother, thought Stanley would do these things, and so did the aunts, uncles and cousins. He was such a good boy, after all.

Little did they imagine the tiny cloud on the horizon so far, far away would change Life on Earth. The Summer of Love in 1967 seemed so distant as to be foreign, and symptoms seemingly unique to California that showed up in Hyde Park were anomalous, mere amusements to a few wayward youth having fun.

Stan liked books and music as any teen might: comic books, the odd novel, and Top 40 pop chart music filling the bill. But then rock 'n roll changed its attitude, method, and feeling, taking on anti-social, political overtone to tip things over, spill them out. Suddenly thrumming a downbeat that felt like movement inchoate, the hard-driving music got things pumped down the road on a talent cavalcade that came on in waves. Rock 'n roll got revamped to jumpstart the beginning of time for a generation and for Stan Sokolov. Sixties music proclaimed a new future. Stan had measured the world in material ways, his potential latent as a seed in a husk, until irrepressible sounds made tiny fissures that hinted new life in and out. Stanley's heart opened. This was no *oy yoy yoy* but oh, man.

A pilgrim on the bellbottom byways was presumed irreligious, pagan, a wanderer and refugee. He sought asylum in the great wave of youth also seeking, rethinking that which had been forsaken. Stanley knew religion from bar mitzvah training. He'd been to

High Holiday services with Pearl and fasted for Yom Kippur because it fulfilled her. She said as much. He didn't get it but didn't press, keeping with good-boy guidelines.

The Jewish things had been easy. Pearl knew he went along to please her, and she hoped that going through the motions would establish a pattern. She extolled Jewish strength and endurance as characteristics no less worthy than sporting, athletic attributes. She reminded him that the ultimate challenge of not so long ago actually began generations ago with persecution, scapegoating, and random acts of hatred. The Holocaust was the consequence of complacency, denial, and weakness. Her summary came down to the key lesson: those who ignore history are doomed to suffer again—and if the general population is ordered into two lines, one will be for Jews to board the trains bound for Madagascar. Any young Jew in Chicago then knew that Madagascar was Third Reich soft talk for Bergen-Belsen, Birkenau, Buchenwald, Dachau, Ebensee, Flossenbürg, Gross-Rosen, Janowska, Kaiserwald, Mauthausen-Gusen, Natzweiler-Struthof, Neuengamme, Nordhausen, Sachsenhausen, Plaszow, Ravensbrück, Stutthof, Terezin, and Westerbork, which were concentration camps after all. These midway destinations often led to Auschwitz, Belzec, Chelmno, Majdanek, Sobibór, Treblinka and Trostenets, extermination camps. Madagascar was a tropical paradise where people were well fed, where honest work would shorten the war, and then everyone would go home. But the trains were not bound for Madagascar, as the Germans said they were or as the Reich propagated the promise in every ghetto and camp. Stanley Sokolov had looked it up in his Encyclopedia Britannica, and then he crunched six million Jews into twenty-four camps funneled into seven camps and into gas chambers and ovens daily for four years.

Pearl said, "The camps were barely thirty years ago. That's nothing in the context of history."

Stanley pondered and said, "Well... It's..."

And she answered. "I told you what it is. Thirty years is nothing. Nothing!"

Stan knew the score, more or less, but didn't feel as strongly as she would have liked. He would not challenge her heartfelt beliefs. He would not say, "What? The Nazis are comin' to Chi-town to take over the trains?" Because he was a good boy; so he held back. But he wouldn't crusade for righteousness either, not theistically or politically or personally. Israel was not Chicago, except maybe for the similar number of Jews living

in each place. He could not begrudge what she feared, but he felt no threat. Conflict in the world came from zealots and greed—that was plain to see. The Third Reich was a big deal in world and Jewish history with monumental atrocity thrown in. The German people hated the Jews as a knee-jerk reaction, because hating others absolved the pain of being themselves, and a loud voice encouraged the hatred from a podium. The lesson of those darkest hours came from a new angle when old *Bubbi* admonished in orthodox certainty and grandmotherly obscurity: “You can change your noses, but you can’t change your Moses.”

What? Change his Moses? What an odd phrase. And who would want to change his Moses or his noses? Stan had a big nose, angular and distinguished, more Roman than Jewish, actually. Such was the genetic difference between *Sephardim* and *Ashkenazi*—between Jews of North Africa and those of Europe. His nose hooked handsomely, like a nose of conviction and Roman lineage. How could a Hashemite nose genetically descended from North Africa be Romanesque? Well, the patrician view required a bit of imagination. And a young Jew could offer a profile so they might wonder.