

The Sea Beach Line

By Ben Nadler

Chapter One

It came to pass that four sages entered Pardes, encountering the divine. Ben Azzai died. Ben Zoma went insane. Akiva emerged with perfect faith. Elisha Ben Abuyah “tore out the roots” of the orchard, and emerged with perfect doubt. From that point forward, Ben Abuyah’s name was blotted out; the rabbis referred to him only as “Aher,” the Other.

The story, just a few lines long, appears in both the Babylonian and Palestinian Talmuds, but I read it in a photocopied packet of aggadot and post-Rabbinic tales in a Jewish Literature class in college. I had taken acid the night before, and when I came to class that morning I was in the post-trip void where colors and logic don’t work quite the right way, and you can’t sleep no matter how tired you are. I ran my fingers over the lines of the story. The Xerox toner felt thick on the paper.

The story opened up something inside of me. Piety didn’t really interest me, but I was fascinated by the path shared by these four sages. They had entered the heavenly garden of Pardes, achieving the highest of mystical experiences. Most intriguing was Aher, who found his own individual truth, which led him away from the bonds of his society.

I had been taking hallucinogens regularly and recreationally for five years, since I was sixteen, but once I read the Pardes tale during my junior year, hallucinogens took on a ritual importance. They were a way to shake the dust off the world around me, to make the hidden signs on my path glow. My consumption increased dramatically. My mind felt like a local train that had switched to the express track and was picking up speed.

The class soon moved on towards modernism without me. We had briefly discussed Moshe Luzzatto, who heard the voice of a divine messenger in eighteenth century Italy. I devoted myself to reading his guide, *Messilat Yesharim*, hoping that if I listened hard enough, and behaved rigorously enough, I could hear the same type of revelation. Despite my lack of piety, I tried to heed Luzzatto’s words as best I could, and follow “the path of the upright.” I started wearing a kippah, partly out of observance, because one had to live a righteous life before he could receive revelation, and partly because I saw myself as a character in a story and the kippah part of my costume.

In the university library, I read books by other seekers and tried to find myself in their texts. I learned from Kafka—who learned from the Belzer Hasidim—that everyone had their own door to pass through. It wasn’t always an angel or divine messenger who called your name. In Sefad, Israel, a rabbi received a letter from Rebbe Nachman—two centuries after the Rebbe’s death. Then there was Philip K. Dick, who was struck with gnosis in the form of a pink laser beam. In *VALIS*, his sci-fi-novel-cum-spiritual-memoir, Dick’s alter ego learned to thread together hidden narratives from symbols in the everyday world around him. I, too, believed that messages were waiting for me somewhere. I simply had to find them.

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After Oberlin expelled me in the fall of 2004, I went to live with my mother and stepfather in New Mexico. We agreed that I needed to sober up and get healthier—I'd pretty much stopped eating or otherwise caring for myself at school—before I tried to find a job or, my mother emphasized hopefully, reapplied to college. I was all for getting sober and healthy; drugs had taken me as far as they were going to, and my brain felt exhausted and bruised.

In the beginning, my mother tried to get me to talk to her. We would go to brunch or a museum while my stepfather was busy with work, and she suggested on several occasions that I attend counseling. Mostly though, I just spent time alone, walking through the arroyos. It rained every afternoon for the first month that I was there. In the evenings, the sun set over the mountains, painting an image of fire on the sky. Late at night, the coyotes howled like demons. I slept facing east so the sun would wake me.

Then, after two months in New Mexico, I received two signs. The first was a postcard from my father. Alojzy had not sent a postcard, or communicated with me in any manner, for several years. This postcard had been mailed three weeks earlier but had only just been forwarded from our old address in Long Island.

The postcard depicted a pin up style tattooed mermaid with the words “CONEY ISLAND” in big block letters. On the back Alojzy had sketched a cargo ship, a heavy freighter set against a New York City skyline. Each cargo container, smokestack, and antenna was detailed, though it wasn’t clear what flag the ship sailed under. The rough waters carried down to the bottom of the card, and the ship’s wake bled off the left edge. Skyscrapers twisted together in the background, forming a lattice work. Other than my name and old address, and Alojzy’s signature—which stretched across the starboard side of the ship, where the ship’s name would be—there were no words. A Brooklyn, NY postmark was printed by the American flag stamp.

Two days after I received Alojzy’s postcard, the second sign, a notecard from a Semyon Goldov of Brooklyn, arrived. It was addressed to my mother and folded into a small envelope:

Dear Mrs. Ruth Edel—

I am writing you to sadly inform you that Alojzy Edel is missing, and can only be presumed dead.

I have known the Alojzy for many years, and this is a great tragedy.

I thought you may want to know of this occurrence, both for the sake of sentimentality as you were once his wife, and also for the fact that there may be issues of estate or outstanding debts or accounts which you feel obligated to settle.

Do not hesitate to write to me if you have questions on these issues.

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Yours and truly, Mr. Semyon Goldov

The arrival of the two cards in the same week couldn't just be some sad coincidence. There was more to the messages than what I could see on the paper. Was Alojzy telling me that no matter what I heard, he was still alive? Was he saying goodbye? Was he calling for me? One way or another, I was being summoned to Brooklyn, my path lit by two signs. I called my sister Becca in Manhattan to ask if I could stay with her, and bought a one way plane ticket to New York City.

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Two weeks later, I found myself back down in Alojzy's world. The Q train stalled at the Brighton Beach station, and rather than wait—I had waited long enough—I got off and walked through my father's old stomping grounds.

I stepped down the green metal station staircase and onto the Brooklyn pavement, where people with angry and haunted faces pushed through me like I was invisible, a ghost. The majority of the people on the sidewalk were fifty or older, and many leaned on canes or folding shopping carts. Some people closer to my age filtered through the throng as well.

Brighton Beach Avenue was disorienting, blocked off from the sun by the elevated train tracks. Businesses refused to be contained by their doors, and merchandise tables, carts, and crates tumbled out onto the sidewalk. Cars and motorcycles wove past each other in the street itself, occasionally clipping one another, or popping up onto the curb. Though I could read a bit of Russian, it had been a long time since I'd seen so many non-English signs, and I was struck by the sight. Many of the signs were just English words like "food stamps" written in Cyrillic letters. The mixed languages confused my mind.

I didn't remember how the street numbering worked—Brighton Beach has a completely separate grid from Coney Island, where I was headed—but the area is not that large, and I soon found my way to the boardwalk. The ocean on my left, I headed west past the Aquarium and along into Coney Island, all the way up to the old fishing pier. No one was crabbing off the pier. But it was late in the day, and early in the year.

I turned off the boardwalk at West Eighteenth Street and continued north through the more desolate streets of Coney Island, where everything was covered in a layer of sand and grime. Everyone's heard of the boardwalk side—Nathan's, the Cyclone, the Parachute Jump—but the neighborhood side is more neglected, unseen except by the immigrants and other poor families in public housing, the desperate souls praying at the storefront churches, and the police officers who patrol the area. Most things in the world are like that: they have a visible side and an invisible side.

A public home for seniors occupied the block closest to the water. Old people, abandoned by their families and forced down to the very edge of the city, milled outside

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with their walkers. Across the street from the senior home was a somewhat neglected community garden. The tips of green stalks were just beginning to emerge from beds bounded with salvaged two-by-fours or truck tires. A rooster emerged from a dog house. He puffed up his chest and paraded back and forth on top of his black feathered boots.

On the next block, I passed a boarded up bait and tackle shop where my dad used to buy his crab traps and line. The store had been destroyed in a fire, and the bricks were blackened, the giant striped bass on the store's sign now barely perceptible on the warped metal. I wondered what had happened to the older Chinese couple who had owned the store.

Farther up the street, heroin and crack addicts loitered outside a padlocked Christian mission whose walls were painted with anchors and crosses. They were the undead, their bodies wasted away to skeletons. On the corner of Surf and West Eighteenth Street, a group of teenage boys stood outside a deli. Like many of the businesses on Surf, the deli announced its name and offerings in Spanish on a hand-painted sign decorated with palm trees.

“You looking for something?” one of the teenagers, a tall, skinny kid wearing a basketball jersey, asked me. I shook my head. I was looking for something down here, but it wasn’t dope.

2871 West Eighteenth Street was in the middle of the block. I double-checked the return address on the envelope in my pocket, but there was really no need; I’d read Semyon Goldov’s notecard so many times that I knew the entire thing by heart, including the address.

The building had clearly been a tenement house once, but the windows were now bricked over, and the whole structure painted black. Above the door was bolted a hand-lettered sign which read: “The R. Galuth Museum.” I’d pictured the encounter many times over the past few weeks, and expected that the building would be a residence of some sort, or maybe a shoe repair shop with pocketknives and refurbished radios in the window. Certainly not a museum.

I climbed the two cement steps, took a deep breath, and rang the doorbell. No response. I rang it again. Disappointed, I stood helplessly on the doorstep. Then I heard footsteps and heavy breathing through the closed door and could feel myself being scrutinized through the peephole. The door opened.

“Welcome to the Galuth Museum!” The pale skin of my greeter’s wrinkled face—wrinkled, you could tell, more from worry and torment than from age—was overshadowed by the orange and purple streaks of his acrylic sweater. The few words he’d spoken were enough to hear a strong Russian accent, which matched the syntax of the notecard. This was the right man, Goldov. He stepped aside so I could enter.

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The interior walls had been knocked out so that the bottom floor was one wide open space. White paint had been applied directly to the bricks, and the shape of each one could be made out. There were no windows, and the electric track lights were not quite adequate to properly illuminate the framed pictures that circled the room at eye level. A wooden bench in the middle of the room reminded me of the ornamental stone benches sometimes found at grave sites. In fact, the whole room felt more like a tomb or shrine than an art gallery.

Goldov drew my attention to a plexi-glass box mounted next to the door, marked “Museum Donations.” Next to that box was a smaller, tin box that said “Tzedakah”—charity, or righteous act—in Hebrew, and “Glupsk Yeshiva Fund” in English. I put a five-dollar bill in the “Museum Donations” box, to get off on the right foot.

We started our tour to the right of the donation boxes, with an old black and white snapshot that had been blown up beyond recognition and set behind plexi-glass.

“This, here,” Goldov said, “is the only known photograph of R. Galuth.” I squinted. It was a picture of a slim young man, wearing a suit and hat. “Very little is known of the life of Galuth, one of the most illustrious painters of the 1930s.” He seemed to be reciting a memorized script. “We know that he arrived in New York City in the mid-1920s, from Ukraine by way of Paris. He apparently returned to Europe in 1937. Nothing more was heard from him. Presumably, like so many great artists, he was killed by the Nazis.

“His home, for the earlier part of the period he spent in America, was this very house, though he later became a fixture in bohemian Greenwich Village. Very few of his paintings survived, but almost all of the ones that have are collected in this museum. On occasion, another Galuth painting surfaces, in which case we do our best to acquire it. So our collection continues to be growing. We have been very lucky that an anonymous benefactor subsidizes our work.

“Over here, we have one such painting.” I followed my guide down the wall. “Some consider it Galuth’s masterpiece. It depicts an unfortunate but true-to-life incident, in which goons were hired by the Sea Beach Railway to eject fare evaders. They murdered innocent passengers by throwing them from an elevated portion of the line.”

“It’s a very beautiful painting,” I said. It was a New York street scene, a whole world in one intersection. The old elevated tracks slashed across a purple evening sky. Cruel faces peered from the open windows of the stalled, rust-colored train car. A young woman, tangled in her long green skirt and half-unraveled braid, hovered in the air. She had an angelic quality, and you hoped that she was ascending, but the force of gravity in the painting was too strong to ignore.

The individuals in the gathered crowd—each one a full portrait—looked upward, unable to save her. Their long backs stretched up from the bottom of the canvas, and as a

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viewer I became one of them, fighting to push myself forward through the crowd, to get a better view of the girl in that last moment before she died. A boy in knickers picked a man's overcoat pocket, but the personal victory did not exempt him from his share of the collective pain.

"Yes," Goldov agreed. "Very beautiful. If you notice, even the expression on the face of this goon, this murderer, is masterful. If you will look at his eyes . . ." I looked into the man's eyes. Truthfully, they reminded me of Alojzy's. That wasn't so far-fetched, that the goons were men like Alojzy and his friends. Rough men who did as they pleased. Would Alojzy throw an innocent person from a train? I had been entranced by the picture, but was now jolted back to my purpose.

"Listen," I interrupted. "Thank you for showing me this, but I didn't come down here to see the museum. I actually came for something else. You see, Mr. Goldov. . ." He tightened up at the mention of his name. I saw his hands become fists at his side. I smiled, to show him that I came in good faith. "My name is Izzy—Izzy Edel." I stuck out my hand, but he did not reach to shake it. I took it back. "My mother received a letter from you. About my father. Alojzy Edel."

"You? A slim thing like you? You, coming into my museum in your fancy shirt and your yarmulke, are the son of Ally Edel? Is that not a thing!" I didn't think my shirt was particularly fancy, but it was true that button-down oxfords weren't Alojzy's style. And though my path was taking a different turn, I still wore the kippah out of habit.

"Well, now," I said to Goldov, "I've lived a different life than he's led . . ." Alojzy never had time for hallucinations or revelations. He was a practical man who spent every day fighting and hustling, a man who'd already been through everything and achieved perfect doubt.

"This I can believe," Goldov said. We stared at each other. "You know, Ally stole from me eight-thousand dollars, once. Restitution has not yet been made." I had been half-expecting something like this, considering the tone of Goldov's note. "I thought your family might want to tie up loose ends."

"I'm very sorry," I said. "But I'm afraid that's not a debt I myself will be able to make up to you. In fact, I'm sure if you added up all the child support he still owes for my sister and me . . ." This was a popular refrain of my mother's. The man waved away my comments with his right hand, then waved me up the stairs with his left.

"Come. Let's talk."

There were far more canvases upstairs than in the gallery. They were stacked all around, leaning together in both orderly and not so orderly piles. One mostly blank canvas rested on an easel by the window. Empty paint tubes littered every surface, and brushes

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stood upright in jars of turpentine. This was Goldov's studio. In the corner was a small bed with a metal frame.

"*Govarish po Rusky?*" he asked hopefully as he turned on his electric teakettle, which sat on the windowsill next to a hotplate and a small radio, all three of which were connected to the same rat's nest of an electrical outlet. "I assume not. I always chatted with your father v'Rusky. He spoke it quite well, for a Pole."

"*Da*," I said. "*Govaroo chut chut.*" I'd only started studying Russian because my college didn't offer Polish, and my three and a half semesters' worth were totally insufficient for the conversation I wanted to have. When Goldov spoke next, to offer me a seat, he did so in English.

"These are your paintings?" I asked him, feeling that I had to say something about them. Abstract expressionist in style, almost to the point of parody, they surrounded us. The disordered thoughts of a frustrated man congealed into acrylic globs. I surmised that the materials were chosen because the old man could not afford oil paints in the quantities he desired. The paintings might not have appeared so terrible to me if the Galuth painting weren't still haunting my mind, creating an unfavorable comparison.

"Yes, yes. My life's work. You know, in Soviet Union, all I ever wanted was to be free to be an artist. I was dismissed from the academy in Leningrad for 'abstractions indicative of a bourgeois nature.' And I always knew . . . if I would make it to the West, my creativity would flower. Such a scene I would make. I come here, I learn: they let you do whatever you want, because it's nobody that will care." It seemed like he wanted me to feel sorry for him.

The timer on the kettle buzzed. Goldov stood up and placed tea bags in two glasses, which he then filled with water.

"Would you like jam for your tea? I'm sorry I have no lemon." He pulled a half-full plastic tray from a box of orange cream cookies and placed it on the table. "I don't entertain so often."

"No, thank you. It's fine like this." He shrugged, then sat down and began to spoon jam into his own glass. "My father studied art as well." Though Alojzy never talked very much about his life in Poland before he moved to Israel, he had said he was expelled from the art academy in Warsaw in 1968. He'd implied it was because he was Jewish, but I didn't know if there were other contributing factors. In a way, my getting kicked out of college placed me in my father's footsteps.

"Yes, your father studied art under communism also. We both possessed solid appreciation of art, despite having had solid socialist art education inflicted on us. We were both expelled. Though I must say, the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw is not as respected as the one in Leningrad. You know, that was a typical move on Al's part, to be

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born a Jew in Poland, after the war. A Russian Jew in New York, that's nothing special. *Kak sebak ni rieznih.* But to be a Jew from Poland, in modern times . . . typical Edel. Always had to do things the wiseass way.”

“What is your connection to Alojzy, exactly?” I asked. Presumably they had had some sort of friendly relationship before Alojzy allegedly robbed him.

“Business partners. We sold art books, on the street in Manhattan. He sold other books also—and other *things* besides books as well.” I didn’t know what he was insinuating, other than that Alojzy was a hustler who would buy and sell stolen goods, which I already knew. “But art books, there is money in that. Art books are not cheap. People in lower Manhattan are mostly not poor. There was plenty of business. It was a profitable endeavor, until he stole our money and left town.” Goldov’s face contorted into something ugly.

“I’m very sorry that happened,” I said. Alojzy surely had his own side of the story, but I didn’t want to anger the man. He didn’t acknowledge my comment.

“I don’t hear from him again for almost two years after that. The next thing I do hear, he’s in jail in Las Vegas. Passing bad checks, I believe. He described it as just misunderstanding. He needed bail money.” The old painter sighed, then chased the sigh with a gulp of tea. “I sent it.”

“Why did you do that? If you say he’d already robbed you?”

“I wish I knew. I didn’t want to, but he persuaded me. Thing is, your father was, to me, like a drug. A bad habit. I could never shake him. Besides, I thought maybe he’d still pay me back someday. He always made promises to pay my money. With interest.” I raised my tea to my lips, but it was still too hot to drink. “Well, he’s shook now, apparently. They say he’s gone for good.”

“But who says he’s gone for good?” I demanded. “Was it reported somewhere?”

“I heard it only as a rumor. But these rumors are most often true.” It occurred to me that Alojzy could have started the rumor himself, if he believed someone was after him. If Goldov was in on it, he could be spreading the tale for Alojzy. If this was the case, I needed to press Goldov until he came across with the truth. On the other hand, considering this apparent bad blood between them, Alojzy might have specifically wanted Goldov to believe the story.

“I remembered your mother’s name—lucky she didn’t change it when she remarried—and the lady at the library helped me find her on the internet. We found her crafts internet page—the candles she makes look very nice, by the way, though I have also seen nicer—and I sent a postcard to the address listed on the page.” My mother actually had changed her last name, to Bernie’s name, Fischer. But I guess she did business under

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her old name. "I felt I should let your family know." He looked up at me. "My condolences," he added, without conviction.

"Thank you," I said. "But I really don't know if they're necessary. Your letter is the only indication I've had that he's dead. And you don't know this for sure, do you? You haven't seen any evidence?"

"Only rumor. But I don't have a reason to doubt either." The man held up his arms in a gesture of helplessness. "You could have written in regard to settling matters. You did not need to come down here for so little."

"But since I did, isn't there anything else you could maybe tell me about my father's life? What he may have been doing. Or be doing now? I haven't seen him since I was in high school."

"He's doing nothing now," Goldov said, setting his glass down on the table with a small thud. "Sleeping in the dirt." I didn't move. Goldov sighed. "Fine. After our partnership dissolved, he ended up selling books again by himself. Not so much the fine art books, more the cheap paperbacks. More time was spent chasing women than working. He could charm any woman. I saw him one time chatting up a nun. She blushed, but she listened." He seemed to be getting away from useful information, but I enjoyed hearing about my father and didn't interrupt. "People didn't walk away from Ally Edel. He carried himself fearsomely sometimes . . . he could be very intimidating. It was good to have a man like that with me on the street. He was not a guy who took any guff." Yes, that was Alojzy. He was a truly tough man. I hoped to become tough too. "It really was a loss, his death."

"If he is dead." I said. "His body must be somewhere." As long as there was no body, Alojzy was alive. The rabbis said that you should not mourn for someone when they were merely missing; you needed confirmation of their death from a witness.

"In potter's field on Hart Island, I imagine. That's where I'll be going. An unmarked grave, no words above it."

"Yes, I guess so." Who would hold a funeral for these men? "Do you know where he's been living?"

"No. Now and then, I did see him, but there was the money problem between us, always, so that kept a distance between us. The last time I saw him, he called me up, said he wanted to talk about the money he owed me, maybe paying some of it back." Goldov had far more information about Alojzy owing him money than about Alojzy dying. He could be using the rumor of Alojzy's death to try to squeeze me. Or he could have made up the story himself, as a plan to scam money from our family. "When we met up, well, of course he didn't have the money. All he had was excuses. I don't know what it was he

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wanted from that meeting. He didn't have to call me in first place. I left him there on the bench." He shook his head. "No, I'm sorry. I got nothing else for you."

"Fine," I said. "Can you think of anyone who might know more? Anyone who can verify his death, or trace the rumor? Or at least provide details about his life before that? Maybe I should check with the police or hospitals or something, see if they have records about him." I wasn't going to accept Goldov's account alone.

"No, I would not recommend going to authorities. Go if you want. But Edel lived . . . under radar. If he ever went to the hospital, it would be under fake name."

"Please. You have to give me something. I've come all this way. I can't leave without something. I really can't." Goldov looked at me with annoyance and disdain. He slurped up the rest of his tea, then finally spoke.

"*Ladno*. There is another bookseller, Mendy, who maybe knows something more about where he was living, or his business. He could be the one I first heard the rumor from. Maybe there are still some assets you can sell off, to settle the estate. Go harass him."

"Thank you. Is there a telephone number where I could reach him, this Mendy? Or an address maybe?"

"No." Goldov shook his head. "No telephone. And I'm not knowing his address. But he sells on West Fourth Street in Manhattan, by the southeast corner of the park there. He's out on the street most days, providing it doesn't rain."

"Thank you." He waved me off. "Come back to me if you learn anything about Alojzy's finances."