

TWO OLD WAITERS, TALKING**By****Murray Mednick****ELI****JOSEPH***The old-timers are playing gin rummy.*

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ELI: *Anything you can do I can do better.*JOSEPH: *If you can do it, I can do it.*ELI: *I can do anything better than you.*

JOSEPH: Okay, okay.

ELI: Who used to sing that?

JOSEPH: I don't remember.

ELI: It was Marty at the Old Falls Resort.

JOE: What a *putz* he was.

ELI: In and out of the dining room.

JOSEPH: That was him.

ELI: He used to steal, you know, he'd take stuff from your station. Silverware, cups and saucers.

JOE: Such a *putz* that way.

ELI: I had my busboy steal them back.

JOE: He's still alive?

ELI: Big time lawyer now.

JOSEPH: Shit for brains.

ELI: You don't need brains to be a lawyer. Everybody and his brother is a lawyer.

JOSEPH: I thought he was dead already. Marty.

ELI: He's in Florida, somewhere in Florida, on a beach.

JOSEPH: Old Falls. Longest walk I ever had, back and forth to the kitchen with loaded trays.

ELI: Everybody goes to Florida.

JOSEPH: Tell me about it.

ELI: Everybody goes to Florida.

JOSEPH: Still, we make a living.

ELI: Must be a mile to the kitchen from here.

JOSEPH: At least.

ELI: Your deal, Joe.

JOSEPH: Let's pause. You already owe me thousands of dollars.

ELI: Come on.

JOSEPH: Old Falls. You had to bribe the maître'd whose name I can't remember.

ELI: Burstein?

JOSEPH: No, Baldwin?

ELI: No.

JOSEPH: Rothschild. Not the bigshot Rothschilds. Barry. You had to pay him to get tables near the kitchen.

ELI: Money slipping in and out of people's hands, bribes and tips and gin rummy and the horses.

JOE: Those little brown envelopes with the dough.

ELI: My God, a whole lifestyle.

JOE: You couldn't just look at the money, you had go somewhere else to look at the money.

ELI: Smoky kitchens. Angry Asian chefs.

JOE: Filthy bunkrooms stinking of dirty clothes.

ELI: Sweaty bodies. Nasty jokes.

ELI: Guys jerking off while you're trying to sleep.

JOE: We did all right.

ELI: Did you get laid a lot?

JOE: I suppose. You?

ELI: A little. That's what the women were up there for. You know, snatch a young waiter for the night. The next day they hardly knew you, a total stranger.

JOE: The hotel is gone; the area is gone to seed, the old bungalows rotting, fading into the woods.

ELI: It's still a beautiful countryside. Sweet air.

JOE: The Hasidim have taken over.

ELI: What could they be thinking?

JOE: Only God knows.

ELI: Luckily, we make a living.

JOSEPH: We make a living, thank God. Good feet and a strong back and the patience of a saint. Eli?

ELI: What's the knocking point?

JOSEPH: Eight. Eli?

ELI: What?

JOSEPH: I was just in the bathroom.

ELI: Mazeltov.

JOSEPH: There's blood in the toilet.

ELI: What do you mean?

JOSEPH: There was blood in the toilet.

ELI: Whose blood?

JOSEPH: Not mine.

ELI: I didn't see anything.

JOSEPH: It could be nothing.

ELI: It's nothing.

JOSEPH: I meant obstruction.

ELI: What obstruction?

JOSEPH: Urinary.

ELI: No.

JOSEPH: Prostate.

ELI: No.

JOSEPH: An infection.

ELI: I don't think so.

JOSEPH: The kidneys. I'd check it out.

ELI: Check out your own kidneys.

JOSEPH: Come on, Eli.

ELI: Okay. I'll knock with eight.

JOSEPH: Good grief.

ELI: Add it up,

JOSEPH: You got twenty-three points.

ELI: Thank you.

JOSEPH: Congratulations.

ELI: Deal the cards.

JOSEPH: It's your deal.

ELI: Right.

JOSEPH: What were we talking about?

ELI: Being able.

JOSEPH: To what?

ELI: To do anything. We're helpless. We get stuck with egomaniacs running things.

JOSEPH: I wanted to always win.

ELI: Me, too.

JOSEPH: Always.

ELI: You got to play the hand you're dealt.

JOSEPH: That's how we learn.

ELI: How?

JOSEPH: By winning. Competitive action.

ELI: Oh.

JOSEPH: Winning.

ELI: I see.

JOSEPH: You've won your share of battles, Eli.

ELI: I guess so.

JOSEPH: Definitely.

ELI: I was not a downtrodden, second rate, violently persecuted person I thought I was.

JOSEPH: No.

ELI: Or mentally ill.

JOSEPH: You were, but you prevailed.

ELI: Come on, Joe. Fifty years of shrinks and rehabs. I came out intact.

JOSEPH: What's the point?

ELI: The point?

JOSEPH: The knocking point.

ELI: Eight.

JOSEPH: Eight was the last one.

ELI: Eight it is.

JOSEPH: Proceed.

ELI: I was a defensive little guy with an attitude.

JOE: Typical.

ELI: Of course, that's not the whole story.

JOE: Of course not.

ELI: The whole story may never be known.

JOE: Come on.

ELI: Murder and mayhem and psychopathy.

JOE: Was what?

ELI: Trapped. I'm claustrophobic to this day.

JOE: I know.

ELI: No, you don't.

JOE: Okay. I don't.

ELI: Being able to run and jump, and leap over rocky chasms –

JOSEPH: Eli –

ELI: And climb trees and play ball –

JOSEPH: Eli –

ELI: And get around on my own without crying about it – and accepting all the challenges and dares, the stones, and the insults. What?

JOSEPH: Play your hand.

ELI: I am playing my hand.

JOSEPH: Play a card.

ELI: I'll knock with three.

JOSEPH: Oh, for God's sake.

ELI: Read 'em and weep.

JOSEPH: Big deal. You get thirteen points.

ELI: Thanks very much.

JOSEPH: Shuffle the cards.

ELI: I was thinking about all the violence growing up.

JOE: We are not saints.

ELI: I wasn't worried about the meaning of things –

JOSEPH: We do not lie down anymore when attacked. We hit back.

ELI: The morality of things.

JOSEPH: You may remember, Cossacks rode into town, destroyed homes, stole the valuables, beat everybody up, killed a few people and rode on. Every Easter. A pastime. A tradition. Maybe a few kids fought back and martyred themselves but that was it.

ELI: True.

JOE: We are people of the Book, but now we are armed. Attack us and you pay a price.

ELI: Right.

JOSEPH: Even back in the day, in the neighborhood, you had to fight. It was no picnic.

ELI: I know. I was into the physicality of everything. The rough and tumble. It carried me from day to day and I never cracked up.

JOSEPH: Did you shuffle the cards?

ELI: Even when I got into a fistfight with the bullies or fought off my mother. My tormentors were mainly these two kids – I still remember their names – Charlie Weiner and Philip Rakmelowitz – two sons of low-grade hoods from the New York Jewish mafia.

JOSEPH: Dumb-ass Jews.

ELI: Their parents were into the pin-ball machine racket, maybe some gambling in the big bungalow colonies and hotels, slots, even bingo, not much else.

JOE: Uncouth.

ELI: You never saw them. They never came out of their houses. Wait. There was a family next door when I was a kid. The wife would come out and sunbathe on a towel. On the lawn, in full view. With her daughter, Arlene.

JOSEPH: What was that about your mother?

ELI: She attacked me. She attacked me day and night.

JOSEPH: Oh, come on.

ELI: With brooms and shovels and frying pans.

JOSEPH: I'm sorry I asked.

ELI: Don't be sorry, soon be dead.

JOSEPH: Stop saying that.

ELI: Old English proverb.

JOSEPH: What was the knocking point?

RLI: Eight.

JOSEPH: Never mind.

ELI: What?

JOSEPH: Gin.

ELI: Oh, for God's sake.

JOSEPH: What have you got?

ELI: Sixteen. Jeez. Deal. Where was I?

JOSEPH: Arlene.

ELI: Yeah, she was the daughter of Bingo Cohen, a dumb-ass mobster. She'd lie out there in the sun almost naked. Sharon—no, Ida -- was the mother. I can see her now, with her blonde hair in curlers, the old pink house robe she wore, a tawdry feel to it all. The dad, Bingo, you never saw. Except at high-end bingo games. They had a cousin, Rocky, who ran a portable merry-go-round on his flat-bed truck. Nickel a ride. You could hear hm coming a mile away.

Rock around the clock. Blaring over a loudspeaker.

JOSEPH: Where was this?

ELI: Right here in the Catskills. We played some rough games. What was it, you'd grab a kid and hang onto him. Beat him up a little.

JOSEPH: Ringalevio?

ELI: Ringalevio.

JOE: You split a kid's head open once with a rock.

ELI: Did I?

JOSEPH: That's the story.

ELI: If they got physical, I never hesitated.

JOSEPH: Blood was shed.

ELI: I fought like hell if I had to.

JOSEPH: Of course you did.

ELI: It's against the law to kill women and children.

JOSEPH: Obviously.

ELI: It's against the law to kill.

JOSEPH: Not of your own existence is threatened. Then it's time for the sword.

ELI: I agree.

JOSEPH: There's no morality if you don't exist. No morals for the dead.

ELI: And bombing the innocent?

JOSEPH: Yes. If they're in the way.

ELI: I don't agree.

JOSEPH: They should have bombed the deathcamps.

ELI: That I agree with.

JOSEPH: The deed is done. No time for debate.

ELI: It's too late. It's on our heads. **Gaza**. It's on all our heads till the end of time.

JOSEPH: There is no such thing.

ELI: As what?

JOSEPH: As the end of time.

ELI: We're in the fifty-four hundreds, Jewish time.

JOSEPH: When was the starting point?

ELI: I don't know. Maybe Adam and Eve. Maybe Moses on the Sinai.

JOSEPH: How've you been feeling?

ELI: How is that related?

JOSEPH: Not related.

ELI: Fine. Why?

JOSEPH: No reason.

ELI: Fine. I bet on a horse. Kenilworth, eight to one at Monticello Raceway, summer of '59.

JOSEPH: How is that related?

ELI: A major failure.

JOSEPH: Oh, come on.

ELI: I was an honors student and walked away.

JOSEPH: I've heard this story a hundred times already.

ELI: Drove a Cadillac from Pittsburgh to Miami Beach.

JOSEPH: What fun.

ELI: Luckily, I met Murgatroyd on the Beach. I was nineteen years old. Unbelievable.

JOSEPH: Reminds me. I worked a gig; it was way up in the sky.

WLI: When was this?

JOE: A couple weeks ago – a glass penthouse, 360 degrees, incredible wealth, you could see New Jersey, you could see Brooklyn and the Bronx. An apartment, two stories, glass and steel, modern, stain-glass window, bigshots from all over the world.

ELI: How did it make you feel?

JOE: I'm a Communist.

ELI: Envy?

JOSEPH: A little bit, maybe. I'm thinking Holy Toledo, this is truly amazing, to be able to live like that, on top of New York City. But it's not me, I own stock and everything, but it's not my way of life, to go after the big money. Even if I could.

ELI: Too late now.

JOSEPH: Definitely. It's over the top, Eli, a glass world, glass all around, you could destroy it with a sledgehammer.

ELI: Or fly a plane through it.

JOE: Definitely.

ELI: It's all random, don't you think?

JOSEPH: I'm a working-lass guy through and through – but I had a taste that night. Good-looking people on top of the world. Celebrities and nerd billionaires.

ELI: Accidentally in the sky.

JOSEPH: Movie stars and rock and roll.

ELI: There's a war going on.

JOE: Jew-hatred. It's in the soil, in the air we breathe.

ELI: I mean a shooting war.

JOSEPH: I'm not paying attention to it. I'm an American.

ELI: So am I. A Jewish-American.

JOSEPH: What's the big deal?

ELI: I'm asking: Where is the Jew in me?

JOSEPH; Why?

ELI: There's a war going on.

JOSEPH; There's always a war going on.

ELI: You're such a pessimist.

JOSEPH: There will always be a war going on.

ELI: We are complicit. It's tribal.

JOSEPH: Personally, I don't think so.

ELI: Are you a Jew?

JOSEPH: We're not Israeli.

ELI: There were the Hebrew letters and the sound of the language. The chanting and singing and bowing and praising.

JOSEPH: Is what?

ELI: The synagogue.

JOSEPH: No synagogue for me. Not once.

ELI: All synagogues are the same, the same all over the world.

JOE: So what?

ELI: From India to China to London to New York City. Exactly.

JOE: Okay.

ELI: Like Goa. 600 B.C.

JOE: You're kidding.

ELI: Nope. You could look it up.

JOE: I always wondered, you know, the rooftops of the city – Like TV aerial wires and pylons and water tanks, sticking up there in the sky like prods, like signals, or signs, of the civilization itself. I was a kid, you know, a kid's imagination. Seeing the world from the tenement roof. Watch the Sunset.

ELI: When I was little, I did not know that Manhattan was just across the river. I had no idea.

JOE: Where was this?

ELI: On Dekalb Avenue. You could throw a rock to the river. The towers of Manhattan, right there across the river. On the street there were pushcarts. Fruit and vegetables. There was an interesting alley, but it was closed.

JOE: The L trains?

ELI: I think so.

JOE: Boyhood.

ELI: There wasn't much Judaism in my house., is what I'm saying.

JOSEPH: Mine neither. My parents were Communists. And so am I. Forget the religion stuff.

ELI: I never thought of it as a religion. More like a legal document, rules and regulations, holidays customs... Literature. Stories and poems. Communism is a religion.

JOE: I don't think so.

ELI: Why not?

JOE: There's no God.

ELI: It's Messianic. Utopia. The Worker's State.

JOE: Good thinking.

ELI: Thank you.

JOE: Different perspective, a thousand feet high, I can assure you.

ELI: Assure me of what?

JOE: I forget now.

ELI: We never look up.

JOE: We used to shoot pigeons with BB guns.

ELI: Did you feel bad?

JOE: Maybe a little. Blood coming out of their eyes. Broken wings.

ELI: We are barbarians.

JOSEPH: When I was four or five, my parents took me on a trolley to Coney Island. So crowded you couldn't move. I hid under the boardwalk to get out of the sun and away from the people. I looked out at the ocean, and I thought of it as part of the sky. My father went into the water, I thought he was swimming in the sky.

ELI: Your parents were a great help to me, especially your father. He gave me credit for some intelligence and dignity. Talks about art and social justice. Politics. Spinoza.

JOSEPH: They never wavered, even with Stalin. They thought of him as a Party man, devoted to the Soviet Cause.

ELI: Spinoza. Spinoza was the guy. He figured it out. Five hundred years ago and he knew already what's what.

JOSEPH: Which is what?

ELI: God is Nature.

JOE: Naturally, so they threw him out from the congregation.

ELI: The Dutch. You'd be amazed. They own half the world.

JOE: How so?

ELI: Banks and real estate. You could look it up.
Some people understand money.

JOSEPH: I'm not one of them.

ELI: Forget about it.

JOSEPH: I have a terrible hand.

ELI: So, do I.

JOSEPH: Maybe a re-deal.

ELI: Good. My mother blamed God for our poverty. That was the extent of her religious beliefs.

JOSEPH: No matzos for me. No Passover. Labor Day. Labor Day, we put a flag on the lawn.

ELI: Maybe she had no clue about the holidays.

JOSEPH: Who is that?

ELI: My mother. We lived across from the village synagogue. They gave us boxes of matzos. You could see the congregation gathering on a Friday night, sad, devoted old men. There was an aura of sanctity there.

JOSEPH: Come on. Eli.

ELI: What?

JOSEPH: There was no aura of sanctity.

ELI: Seriousness.

JOSEPH: Habit. You want the card? Four of diamonds.

ELI: No.

JOE: Okay. My parents --They'd be troubled to see what's going on today. Their version of Apocalypse. The End of Days. Evil Russian dictator coming from the East. Rank stupidity and mayhem at the top. Fraud. Murder. Capitalism rotten to the core.

ELI: Who could argue with that?

JOSEPH: Most Americans. Remember, they elected a criminally insane grifter to the presidency. A con. A carny barker. And they might do it again.

ELI: He has been anointed, my friend, by the Christian right. He thinks he's God.

JOE: My parents would roll over in their graves.

ELI: It's beyond belief.

JOE: The end of the world.

ELI: Evil wins. Evil always wins.

JOE: Maybe not in the long run.

ELI: Why is that?

JOE: It's charismatic. They blow you over with Ego power.

ELI: Ego power.

JOE: Ego power. Fat-assed, red faced, leering ego power.

ELI: Americana.

JOE: That's what it is. Their egomania is a force, self-love blasting into your face like a shit-wind.

ELI: Whoa. If you're white and Christian forget about it. You could be God.

JOE: Apparently so. The Inquisition is on its way. We'll get it in the neck.

ELI: Are they born that way these creeps?

JOE: Monsters from the deep.

ELI: The DNA.

JOE: Where were we?

ELI: I forget.

JOE: Boyhood and Judaica.

ELI: Did you get bar mitzvah?

JOE: No.

ELI: Down the street was the Study House, where I went to Hebrew school. My mother insisted on it, kind of keeping the bar mitzvah tradition alive. Something you had to do as a Jewish kid.

JOSEPH: Did you learn anything?

ELI: We learned how to pronounce, and sing, the Hebrew, but not what the words meant. I sang well, at the time, and then got drunk on the slivovitz provided by my grandfather. After that there might be a knock on my door at 6 in the morning to come and make a *minyan*.

JOSEPH: My parents considered the bible as literature, not as a rule book for living. What's the knocking point?

ELI: Three. I don't remember a Rabbi being around at all. They say the German citizens walking past the synagogue on a Friday night were envious of the happiness and the chanting and singing.

JOE: So, they blew up all the synagogues.

ELI: Bingo.

JOSEPH: My great grandfather served in the German Army.

ELI: Gin.

JOSEPH: You must be kidding.

WLI: What's your count?

JOSEPH: I'm counting. Ten.

ELI: I'll take it.

JOSEPH: Deal the cards.

ELI: I had no real Jewish identity.

JOSEPH: Me, neither.

ELI: I thought that we are superior to the rest of mankind. The People of the Book. Martyrs to the civilized world.

JOSEPH: The whole thing is a pain in the ass. As far as I'm concerned.

ELI: Not while we're blowing up the world.

JOSEPH: Who is blowing up the world?

ELI: We are.

JOE: I don't think so, Eli.

ELI: Morally if not physically.

JOE: Anyway, I'll knock with one.

ELI: Damn.

JOSEPH: I was close. I needed a four of hearts for gin, and I'll bet you have it. Yup, there it is. What have you got?

ELI: I have twenty-one.

JOSEPH: Great.

ELI: Deal the cards.

JOSEPH: So. My parents were political people. Cultural people. They supported the arts, scholarship, education. The Party.

ELI: Taboos were being broken by the sons and daughters of immigrants, young people who wanted to shake off the religious yoke.

JOSEPH: When was this?

ELI: Growing up in the country.

JOSEPH: They wanted to get laid, basically.

ELI: It's true. We saw a lot of that – dirty talking by comedians, rumors of sexual scandals in the Hotels. Wives alone all week while the husbands came on the weekends.

JOE: That'll do it.

ELI: Listen to this: There was the Famous Four, four young married women in the village -- they rented an apartment in Monticello where'd they have their trysts. The four of them together, organizing the whole thing. Taking turns using the apartment. A schedule tacked to the kitchen wall.

JOE: What a sitcom that would make.

ELI: I think everybody knew but nobody said a word. My aunt Shirley was one of the four. She's a hundred years old yesterday. And a woman named Mookie. And there was a June, the wife of the local cop. She died in a car accident. There was another young woman, a beauty, also married, who lived across the street above the pharmacy.

JOSEPH: Shuffle the cards.

ELI: I'll tell you what.

JOR: What?

ELI: They had this youthful enthusiasm.

JOE: Lust for life.

ELI: Yeah. I'll never forget it.

JOR: What?

ELI: Waking up in the country the first time...

JOE: How old were you?

ELI: Six. I was sleeping in a windowsill. I heard birds singing and breathed the sweet air. It was a revelation. A tiny bungalow. Handmade by grandfather and an uncle. Smelly outhouse.

JOE: Yeah, it's nice to remember things.

ELI: Deep woods, a lake. Who was I then?

JOE: I have no idea.

ELI: Think of all the waiters and busboys we've worked with over the years -- now they're lawyers and doctors and dope fiends or dead.

JOE: Yeah. I was fourteen when I got my first gig. As a busboy. It was at a *Cuchulainn* out in the woods and the clientele were mainly Holocaust survivors. They were a silent broken people who spoke little and were very demanding about their food. There was some card

playing, some chess, but mostly they remained silent, spent a lot of time on the porch staring into the forest.

ELI: Kosher?

JOSEPH: The establishment was kosher, but there was very little else of Judaism going on – only a kind of sacred, silent sorrow. They hardly noticed me except to ask for things like more prunes or take this away, take that away, or give me more of this, more of that. I was only a kid. You would know.

ELI: I do know. Deal the cards, Joe.

JOSEPH: The food was of exceptional importance to them. My memory of that little hotel in the woods is of working my ass off under a lot of pressure. And of learning about the food. Not about the Shoah. Nobody talked about it until maybe twenty years later. We can't let that happen again. Even if we kill many thousands of women and children.

ELI: No. The knocking point is seven. We don't want to be Nazis. Pick up or play a card.

JOSEPH: Listen, I grew up a Communist, Jewish only by birth and attitude. But my family lost a lot of people. Dozens of families and friends, in Germany mostly, killed early in the war. Jewish socialists were the first to be hunted down and murdered.

ELI: What the fuck, man.

JOSEPH: What the fuck is right. These were assimilated people. Germans. They didn't know from Jewish. My grandparents on both sides, they figured it out early and emigrated, first to Holland, then here. I had cousins who went back, you know, after the war, to get revenge, to recover their honor. To recover what was stolen from them.

ELI: What happened?

JOSEPH: They came to a bad end. One jumped out of a hotel window. One disappeared. Vanished into thin air. A woman. Rochelle, a relative of my mother's... The hell with it.

ELI: I've been thinking, Joe.

JOE: Not again.

ELI: Never mind.

JOE: Okay. What about?

ELI: About Evil. The problem of evil.

JOE: Play a card, Eli.

ELI: it's in the people, lurking there in the blood.

JOE: Welcome to the real world.

ELI: Do you think Jesus gave blood to his disciples?

JOSEPH: Wait. Where did that come from?

ELI: It just came to me.

JOSEPH: You keep changing the subject.

ELI: It's an incredible image, the drinking of blood. The Passover. It was so they would know him after death.

JOSEPH: I wasn't there.

ELI: That's why they eat those little crackers.

JOSEPH: Come on, Eli.

ELI: What?

JOE: Who does?

ELI: Christians. They eat those little wafers as though they were the blood of Jesus Christ.

JOSEPH: Himself?

ELI: Yes.

JOSEPH: I don't care about any of that. Two thousand years of persecution. The man died as a Jew. Why do you bring it up?

ELI: He was saying that suffering was the way. Maybe.

JOSEPH: Maybe he was wrong.

ELI: Intentionally.

JOSEPH: Forget about it. The whole thing is a pain in the ass.

ELI: We suffer anyway, one thing or another.

JOSEPH: Listen. We've been getting it in the neck for thousands of years, no end in sight. We lost one third of our people...for Chris sakes.

ELI: And now we're the oppressor. We've come full circle.

JOSEPH: Where've you been? In a cave?

ELI: I can't get over it.

JOSEPH: Take care of your health.

ELI: I do.

JOSEPH: You suffer too much.

ELI: So do you.

JOSEPH: No. I couldn't care less.

ELI: All the bloodshed.

JOSEPH: Nothing we can do about it.

ELI: I grew up, you know, feeling Jewish, but having little to do with the Jewish Religion, per se.

JOSEPH: Me neither.

ELI: More like a system of holidays and family celebrations and rules for decent community living.

JOSEPH: And guilt.

ELI: Why is that?

JOSEPH: I don't know why.

ELI: Not meeting the mark, not being a good person, not being kosher and so on. Chosen. We are born with an obligation.

JOSEPH: To do what?

ELI: To suffer.

JOSEPH: Not funny.

ELI: To survive and multiply.

JOSEPH: To smite our enemies. To bring the one God to the Gentiles.

ELI: Not funny.

JOSEPH: It's ridiculous.

ELI: Okay. I'll knock with seven.

JOSEPH: Bully for you.

ELI: I had a good hand. Finally.

JOSEPH: Thirty-six points. Unbelievable.

ELI: I'll take it.

JOSEPH: Your deal.

ELI: Okay. Knocking point is ten. Ten of clubs. You want it?

JOSEPH: No.

ELI: I'll take it.

JOSEPH: Go for it.

ELI: And now we have right-wing Israelis in costume becoming the fascists of the Middle East.

JOE: What costume?

ELI: You know, the 17th century Hasidic costume.

JOE: Weird.

ELI: And they hate Arabs.

JOE; That's what happens.

ELI: When?

JOE: When there's a fight over land and water.

ELI: What the fuck.

JOE: We don't lie down anymore, or runaway and hide.

ELI: Prosecuted in the UN for war crimes.

JOSEPH: My mind turns to the Book of Job.

ELI: Why?

JOSEPH: I don't know why.

ELI: Okay.

JOE: The Challenge to the Creator. Remorse. Moral anguish.

ELI: The man even looks like a devil. You know who. The Prime Minister. The Butcher of Gaza. Big ears on a big head. Face flushed with self-love.

JOE: Flushed, I like that.

ELI: We have lost the moral high ground.

JOSEPH: Wait. There's the question of Land and water and the survival of the Jewish People. Am I right?

ELI: You're not wrong.

JOSEPH: My attitude, along with that of many other people, is facing in two opposite directions: sorrow for the murder of innocents, fear for our survival as a people. For, in other words, the State of Israel. Are you ready?

ELI: For what?

JOE: Gin.

ELI: Shit.

JOSEPH: What have you got there?

ELI: Yikes. Forty-three points. Is it game?

JOSEPH: Not yet.

ELI: Deal the cards.

JOSEPH: I value deeply the existence of a Homeland, of the Hebrew language, of a Jewish army. A refuge. The Jewish homeland.

ELI: It's not the end of the world.

JOSEPH: Yes, it is.

ELI: How so?

JOSEPH: You know the drill. 70 million white people rooting for the End Times. We bomb Tehran and the American Christians rise to Heaven in their pajamas.

ELI: Peckerwoods in the South. Racist and ignorant. It's not the end of the world.

JOSEPH: It's Messianic. The end of the world. Not unlike the Likud now, they think similarly about the Holy Land. Given to the Jews until the end of Time.

ELI: I thought you said there is no such thing as the end of time.

JOE: Yeah, what do I know?

ELI: Another view is that the oceans boil, and volcanoes erupt, and the world is destroyed by fire.

JOSEPH: I'm looking at the former President, the American Christian Son of God, I'm looking into his beady eyes and his phony face, into his rotting brains and the gall in his gut, his cracking bones, his sneaky look, and stinky feet – his fear -- I could go on. –

ELI: Go on.

JOSEPH: In other words, makes me sick. Lies cascading out of his pampered mouth like piss. Reminds me: You take a leak lately?

ELI: Yes. We discussed it already.

JOSEPH: Blood?

ELI: No blood. Don't even think about it. Gin.

JOSEPH: You must be kidding.

ELI: About time. What's the score?

JOSEPH: We're about even.

ELI: Let's call it a day.

JOSEPH: You all right? Eli?

ELI: What do you mean, all right?

JOSEPH: I mean all right. You're diabetic, arthritic, God knows what else.

ELI: Glaucoma, high blood pressure.

JOE: In debt to your old gin partner -- Joe.

ELI: I'm just thinking -- old age -- Pieces of flesh rotting by the minute. It's all so strange. Bodies running around on the planet. Wicked. Like zombies. God knows what will happen to us all.

JOSEPH: I know what will happen. AI. They'll have to slim down the population. They'll have simplified administrative control -- head-to-head. Mouth to ear. You won't need no stinking phones.

ELI: Oh. Great.

JOSEPH: No wires. Instant communication. Because we'll have little buttons in our brains. Implants.

ELI: Born that way?

JOSEPH: How would I know?

ELI: Sounds awful.

JOSEPH: No need to worry. Worry will be no more.

ELI: My mother spoke to God directly. Angrily. Like you fucked me over, God. I don't have a life. I don't know what to do. What can I do? I'm trapped!

JOSEPH: You can talk to God if you're a Jew. You can call Him out. You can remonstrate, you can protest. Like Job.

ELI: Gaza will turn to salt.

JOSEPH: What did you say?

ELI: *Gaza will turn to salt.*

JOSEPH: Where did that come from?

ELI: Lot. In the Bible.

JOSEPH: Do you understand the story?

ELI: Don't look back. Gaza is turning to salt. I have a vision of certain men, politicians, egomaniacs, flesh peeling from their bodies, brains tortured by electric shocks, feet in burning oil.

JOSEPH: If Jeramiah were here today –

ELI: He'd be an Arab.

JOE: Come on.

ELI: Imagine: fascist Jews.

JOE: Painful.

ELI: Brooklyn U.S.A. One foot in the Holocaust, the other in America, in a galosh.

JOSEPH: From the river to the sea.

ELI: Bodily functions failing one by one. Hypertension and diabetes. Savoring bowel movements.

JOSEPH: That was big in the hotels. A central topic of conversation.

ELI: I was unaware when I was a kid, except for the newsreels. Except for the Hasidim walking around the city in costume. My mother used to call them *fanatics*. *Lunatics*.

JOSEPH: Indeed.

ELI: Remember the bennies and the Dexedrine and the joints and the heavy trays and the arguments over silverware and cups and saucers –

JOSEPH: And who got what tables –

ELI: The competition. The dance of it all. Dancing around the tables, dancing in the kitchen.

JOSEPH: Best busboy I ever had was a kid named Murgatroyd Box down there in Miami Beach.

ELI: Which hotel?

JOSEPH: The Alamac on Ocean Ave.

ELI: I knew the kid. Big and strong with thick glasses. He could work two stations, no problem.

JOR: Yeah. He was such a big guy he blustered his way around the kitchen. Where is he now?

ELI: I thought I saw him one time, years ago, at Ratner's, downtown.

JOSEPH: Where'd you work with him?

ELI: The River View, in the Catskills. Two lifetimes ago.

JOSEPH: Yeah, I worked that joint. Three brothers owned it. They had an aunt in an upstairs room -- a survivor.

ELI: That's the place.

JOSEPH: We sent up special plates. No one was allowed to see her. From Ukraine. She'd witnessed a lot of killing.

ELI: And now we're doing the same.

JOSEPH: Stop.

ELI: Killing innocent people.

JOSEPH: Change the subject.

ELI: Women and children.

JOE: Change the subject.

ELI: No.

JOSEPH: Okay, don't.

ELI: I could jump off the fucking building.

JOSEPH: Go ahead.

ELI: Kid burned himself alive.

JOSEPH: We're old men, Eli.

ELI: I know that.

JOSEPH: We don't count for much anymore.

ELI: True.

JOSEPH: We're lucky we're still working.

ELI: Also, true.

JOSEPH: What else would we do?

ELI: Gin rummy in a rest home.

JOSEPH: Weekends and events. Not so bad.

ELI: I can't hardly walk, myself.

JOSEPH: Take it easy. Slow down.

ELI: I saw those IDF idiots when I was over there. Dumb-ass Jews looking to kill Arabs.

JOSEPH: I have no interest in going there.

ELI: I could get in front of them, get in front of a tank maybe, stop the killing.

JOSEPH: Good luck.

ELI: I was joking.

JOSEPH: You're dreaming.

ELI: You're right, Joe. It's pointless.

JOSEPH: Here's my attitude: Be strong and alert and be smart: Save your seps. Never go empty-handed in or out of the dining room.

ELI: Correct.

JOSEPH: And be nice to your family.

ELI: Also correct.

JOE: And the grandkids?

ELI: All good.

JOSEPH: Sooner or later the world will come down on us. Live Life to its fullest and thank God. Praise God and pass the ammunition.

ELI: Enough.

JOSEPH: What?

ELI: Bad conscience, Joe.

JOSEPH: Soon be dead.

ELI: Yes.

JOSEPH: Old English proverb.

ELI: Good.

JOSEPH: Blood in the water.

ELI: Meaning?

JOSEPH: We're at the end, we're coming to the end.

ELI: Tell me one thing, Joe.

JOSEPH: Shoot.

ELI: Do we go into the All and Everything?

JOSEPH: I'm going to Vegas, myself.

ELI: Good luck.

JOSEPH: I don't gamble.

ELI: What do you do there?

JOSEPH: I work. I play the slots.

ELI: That's gambling. Joe.

JOSEPH: The place was created by Jews, you know, Bugsy Siegel and Meyer Lansky.

ELI: I know.

JOSEPH: I spent time in East New York where they grew up. Pushcarts on Belmont Ave.

ELI: What else do you do in Vegas?

JOSEPH: I work. Usually there's some kind of conference, various topics for professionals. Events. The money 's good. I don't have to walk much. I serve drinks. Up in the sky. And I go to the shows.

ELI: Ezra, too?

JOSEPH: Yes, of course.

ELI: He must be 90 years old by now.

JOSEPH: He's in excellent shape. He still has his practice. He likes the blackjack tables.

ELI: He's still a shrink, right.

JOSEPH: Yes. He still has clients.

ELI: Ezra, who brought the Jews out of Babylon...

JOSEPH: Everyone looks up to him.

ELI: Wasn't my blood in the water.

JOSEPH: Whose was it?

ELI: Maybe it was yours.

JOSEPH: I don't think so.

ELI: I wake up in the morning with a full bladder. I must empty it right away, Then I have trouble walking. Pain in my legs, my joints. I must wait for the painkiller to work before I can do anything.

JOSEPH: Blood?

ELI: No blood. Just imagine –

JOSEPH: Go on.

ELI: We are electrical machines.

JOSEPH: Come on., Eli.

ELI: That's what we are. And we get shocks. And we need oxygen to breathe. Cells held together by fire.

JOSEPH: Wait –

ELI: Easy to kill. A blow to the head, an arrow in the heart. One tenth loss of oxygen we all die.

JOSEPH: I don't follow you.

ELI: We're coming to an end. Not like the movies, where the person rolls his eyes and lies still, it's more like the wiring and the cables wither and break and the connection is lost.

JOSEPH: I see.

ELI: No, you don't.

JOSEPH: Okay.

ELI: You have a certain presentation -- it says I'm okay and you're okay and time heals all wounds, but this one you can't heal. This one is forever.

JOSEPH: Which one is that?

ELI: The murder of innocents.

JOSEPH: Play your hand.

ELI: Survival. It's all about survival.

JOSEPH: Okay.

ELI: Our hands were clean.

Play a card.

ELI: Don't you remember – we'd walk out of the dining room before the rush and look at the sky and breathe the sweet Catskill air and I'd go down to the bar for two swift Irish whiskies. Fortified for the drama to come. Harvey was the barkeep.

JOSEPH: We had a maître d named Barron.

ELI: Barry.

JOSEPH: Right, Barry. Barry Rothschild.

ELI: Nice Jewish boy, he wore grey suits and took bribes and allowed a little theft here and there.

JOSEPH: He was a kid already married with kids.

ELI: And the smoking. Lucky Strikes. On the breaks. I sorely missed it. But I quit too late.

JOE: I never smoked.

ELI: I can't get my head around the situation.

JOSEPH: Which situation?

ELI: We are murdered in our sleep. We are murderers in our sleep.

JOSEPH: What do you want, Eli?

ELI: Mainly I want to relax and have a drink and watch a movie.

JOSEPH: Good. I watched one last night –

ELI: Don't tell me.

JOSEPH: It was about religion. Christianity... Jesuits tortured in Japan. To test their faith. Scorsese. Ending didn't work.

ELI: I have no faith.

JOSEPH: Not you.

ELI: That's the truth of it.

JOSEPH: It wasn't about you.

ELI: Everything is about me. Including the murder of women and children in my name.

JOSEPH: You had nothing to do with it.

ELI: I had everything to do with it.

JOSEPH: There's killing on both sides.

ELI: Okay, Joe.

JOSEPH: Life on Earth is about killing. Survival, like you mentioned.

ELI: There's something I'm trying to express – it's like there's a substance, very fine, of conscience, beneath history, along with history, I don't know, it stings – an illumination – never mind.

JOSEPH: I think you would do well to talk to someone. Like Ezra.

ELI: I'm talking to you.

JOSEPH: Someone professional.

ELI: We are Jews. The name resounds through the ages, the history of Man. A mission to the nations. And look what we've done.

JOSEPH: Remember the Shoah and the pogroms and the deadly humiliation for thousands of years.

ELI: I do remember.

JOSEPH: Maybe it's time to attack, to make history our own. To be the aggressor for a change, instead of the victim.

ELI: People will be flying through space riddled with bullets and arrows, mouths open in horror.

JOSEPH: Excuse me?

ELI: Sirens, alarms, falling buildings, red rain.

JOSEPH: Eli?

ELI: The Earth crust cracks, and lava spills out. There is no heaven. Bodies falling into the holes as though throttled by the air. Too much carbon dioxide. They can't breathe.

JOSEPH: I just want you to know –

ELI: What?

JOSEPH: I called Ezra.

ELI: What for?

JOSEPH: I'm no good in this situation.

ELI: What situation?

JOSEPH: This situation.

ELI: Who can be good in this situation, where all roads are doomsday roads on their way to Hell?

JOSEPH: We've known each other for a long time.

ELI: Yes, we worked the hotels. Dining rooms from here to Florida.

JOSEPH: Miami Beach.

ELI: Miami Beach. Hell of a place. What's your point?

JOSEPH: I'm just your friend.

ELI: Good for you.

JOSEPH: I can't handle it.

ELI: Remember the pills? Little yellow pills you could buy with a prescription. What were those?

JOSEPH: Speed, probably.

ELI: You could work long hours. I had two jobs once. I was seventeen. Worked the hotel and then late nights at the coffee shop where they served frappés and ice cream sodas. It's all running downhill now.

JOSEPH: I don't know what that means.

ELI: In the mind.

JOSEPH: Okay.

ELI: I fear for my soul in this incomprehensible universe where we are less than nothing barely existing killing machines.

JOSEPH: I'll call Ezra.

ELI: Call him.

JOSEPH: Well...I spoke to him already.

ELI: Why?

JOSEPH: He wanted to see you.

ELI: Why?

JOSEPH: I don't know why. He likes you. He'll be here at six.

ELI: Well and good.

JOSEPH: He's looking forward.

ELI: I'm sure he is.

JOSEPH: I'll be on my way. *(Rises)* Thanks for the game. You can pay me later.

ELI: You remember how it was? The dance of it all. Dealing with the customers.

JOSEPH: Yes. Definitely.

ELI: Food brings out the worst in people.

JOSEPH: Sure does.

ELI: That was the hardest thing, dealing with submission, having to obey and be nice, people treating you like a servant.

JOSEPH: Yeah.

ELI: Or like a dog. That was the hardest part for me. Took years. Years before I could accept the situation and not be angry and resentful, slipping little daggers, a mean look, or a whispered curse, or turning your back.

JOSEPH: Sounds familiar.

ELI: Turning your back on an old lady, she can hardly speak English, she's sitting there open-mouthed in a helpless rage.

JOSEPH: Yeah.

ELI: Finally, I got to where I could bear it without malice. Where my pride didn't get in the way. Where I could serve dispassionately, even with a smile occasionally, an act of kindness here and there.

JOSEPH: Maturity.

ELI: I was aware of it and thought of it as an achievement. And then I was in Local 11 in New York. I made it into the union. The Teamsters.

JOSEPH: And the family?

ELI: What family?

JOSEPH: Family. The grandchildren

ELI: You asked me that already.

JOE: Sorry.

E.LI: I hardly ever see no one.

JOSEPH: They have their own lives.

ELI: Of course they do.

JOSEPH: Independent.

ELI: Independent.

JOSEPH: Good to see you, Eli.

ELI: Sledding down Deutsch's hill on ice. I remember, we built a ramp and flew recklessly into the air on sleds. We attacked each other on the sleds. Zooming on the ice. Someone could have easily been killed. The older kids were psychopaths. Half-wits.

JOSEPH: Sadistic Jewish teenagers. They were hell to pay. Well, so long.

ELI: Think of the hostages.

JOSEPH: I do think of the hostages.

ELI: Trapped. Down to the bone.

JOSEPH: They should stop the fighting. Make a deal.

ELI: They won't do it. Why? The super-Jew whose name shall not be spoken -- wants to stay in power and glorify his name and have rabbis licking his boots.

JOSEPH: Well, I got to go.

ELI: Bye, bye.

JOSEPH: You need anything?

ELI: No.

JOSEPH: Ezra can be more objective. He'll know what to say.

ELI: About what? We're talking observation here. the failure to thrive. The murder of innocents. *(JOE. at door)* Evil, Joe, it's in the people. It's not hard to see. Creatures running around with eyes in the back of their heads. *They'll do anything to survive. (JOE exits)* It's fucking awful.. Human nature. Heads made of wood. My mother used to say. In Spanish. *Cabezas de madera.* They know not what they do. Believing all kinds of crap. I'm so disappointed. Ezra is an optimist. He comes from a good family. Me, I'm under a rock, I'm under a lid. I was an excellent waiter, graceful and fast. The women liked my looks. I had no idea. Lost. My head is splitting open from the weight of the sky. *(Doorbell rings)* The coating of the Earth is on fire. The rotation snaps to a halt. The stars shut down. *(Doorbell rings)* I don't know what to do.

Doorbell rings again loudly, insistent. ELI looks out helplessly at the audience. Black out.

Murray Mednick
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