

Displaced Persons

by

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*You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him,
for you yourselves were strangers in the land of Egypt.*

Leviticus 20:20

MONDAY

(April 17, 1995)

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Night and rain, the wipers' hissing breath, the crusted throat of street gone fluid: Alex Kvitsky slides along, sixteen hours into digestion by the cab. Within its lens he scans the avenue for DiChirico shapes in shadow. The cab's belly is damp and acidic, the windows fogging unless he turns up the defroster, which beckons sleep, or the air conditioner, whose chill he bears in bursts.

The radio babbles its own narrative, its voices raw and sleepless, tonalities rather than words. Presently, argument. A word recurs, "Mayor", a title? - Yes, a talker in the back prattled on about the Mayor. Sonofabitch, not his name, not a compliment. Alex nods, practicing agreeable, inoffensive.

So agreeable, he almost passes a figure elongated against the lightpole at 31st and 3rd. The cab slides, he lets up and steers, pumping the brake, halting with the man's torso framed in the passenger door. For a moment, the man does not move. Alex touches the side window button to ask if the man wants a taxi, but the sudden motor sound wakes him, he shifts his mass from pole to car. The passenger door opens with a precipitant rush and the scent of liquor. The man lurches in, sprawled on the vinyl seat, groaning.

Alex immediately see two possibilities: one, pull this drunk back out of the cab and set him by the pole; no one has seen him stop, he has not dropped the flag, and the man seems barely

aware of his own identity, let alone the cab driver's. Two, they drive to some incoherent destination, the man pukes in the back seat, has no money, refuses to pay. But it has been two hours since his last fare, even with the rain; Alex still owes for use of the cab.

Alex sighs. He gets out, stretches, and hobbles around to fold the man's legs in and shut the door. He notes splotches of vomit near the pole, already pebbled with rain. Well, maybe it won't be so bad if there's nothing left in his stomach.

Back at the wheel, Alex asks "Where to?"

No answer.

He slides back the scratched perspex panel to give the passenger a shake.

"Hey. Hey! Mister! Where to?"

Mister stirs.

"Home," thin, plaintive.

"Where? Where is home?"

From what follows, slurred, gobbled fragments in the shape of his language, Alex picks out "97th" and "West End." He repeats it as a question.

"Yuh."

Alex sighs and drops the flag. This fare will put him over the top, maybe enough to skip morning rush and get some sleep. For a while, all is quiet, and he drives, alert now to the presence behind him rather than the strobing of streetlights on the dashboard. Crosstown light cycles are not so bad without traffic, it won't be long till the drop off. But as they approach 10th Avenue, the passenger sits up suddenly and starts to talk.

“I am dying,” he says, distinctly.

“No sir. Are going home.”

A ponderous silence as they turn uptown.

“I am dying,” he insists.

Alex sighs.

“Yes, sir.”

“You think I’m kidding! I’ve been dying before you were born!”

Knowing not what to make of this, Alex makes nothing. Just drives.

“I am an authority, son. I’ve given this news to hundreds -- maybe thousands. So when I say my number is up, youuuuuuu bank it.”

They stop for the light at 42nd Street. Alex feels his waiting.

“How ... sorry to hear this.”

Bad. Fatigue shows. In the mirror, the passenger squints at the hack license, lit like an advert on the dash, a semblance of Alex, his name. Alex feels a fetid cloud, sweat, scotch, a piquant rot, over his right shoulder.

“Kvitsky, huh? Alex -- Alexei would be right, more like.”

“Yes, sir.”

Green light. Alex starts faster than necessary, pushing him back into the seat. A small ejaculation is followed by spluttering venom directed at Russian drivers in the aggregate and Alex in particular. Early on, Alex liked to find the top speed of a new cab on Conduit Boulevard when heading out to JFK Airport. Now, he just wants to deliver this drunk and get paid. He

slides the partition shut.

As he drives the wary quiet of the night avenue, he feels a thrashing behind. Tantrum, DTs, thirty blocks more and I am rid of him. For a moment, just a flash, Alex sees wide Tverskaya Street at the nadir of the night before he left Moscow. Then it is gone, he is still closed in the cab with a drunken squire, wondering only what happened to three blocks of West End Avenue while he was away.

A few groans claw at the sound hole, but the passenger is physically still. Alex turns up the radio from its background murmur to a caller demanding:

“Tell me this: Why hasn’t the mayor said word one about the kickbacks at the building department under his watch? It’s his freakin’ commissioner, for cryin’ out loud.”

“Like Tammany Hall all over again.”

“An’ ya gotta wonder how high it goes.”

Alex understands enough to infer that this is a page from his former life, politics and corruption. But politics is a common language with a million dialects. In time, one picks up the idiom, but the measure is not exact, and foreign cabbies don’t count anyway.

In the 90s now. Tall, stately buildings, like walls flanking the avenue and its generous walks. Climbing to 94th, 95th, DONT WALK signs start flashing, pass 96th. Alex turns down the radio and slides back the panel.

“Is good?” he asks, nosing the cab toward the southeast corner.

No reply.

Alex crosses 97th under yellow, clicks over another thirty cents and stops the meter. It

totals the fare and the night differential, grinding out a receipt. He tears it off, and proffers it to the passenger.

“Hey. We here.”

The man does not look good in the shadows of the back seat, all splayed and acute angles. Alex turns on the dome light. His fare reclines obliquely, staring at the airport rules sticker on the back of the partition. His chest is not moving.

“So,” Alex says, “you weren’t lying at that, you bastard.”

There is only what must be done. The doormen are not looking out, not yet, but who knows about cameras? Alex switches off the lights, and lurches out of the seat before there is time to think again. Close door softly, no extra noise, part of the rain, hard now, part of this night. Around the cab again, open the passenger door. He is completely splayed, though still flexible, but like a sack of wet sand. Alex gathers his legs and pulls.

When he is almost clear of the seat, Alex pats him down under pale streetlight for the fare. The wallet is in his breast pocket. Alex opens it to a photograph, the man topping a pyramid of smiling family in summer clothes. Money: he is loaded. Alex takes a twenty, and another for a tip. *I am not a thief.* But he is loaded. *Three more twenties would not be missed, for my trouble, after all.*

Alex replaces the wallet and levers him up, and walks the burden to an alcove at the base of a townhouse stair, his back screaming in knots. He sits him down, a burlesque of repose. The man is dead, and doesn’t care. Alex goes back to the car, as he did after finding Ilya Yevgenovich sitting stiffly on his stoop, two bullet holes in his brow. He had driven straight to

the airport, then, and booked the first flight to New York on his journalist's visa.

He drives on, checking his watch. The whole process was five minutes. Would it matter if he had called in? Not to the dead. And Alex has no wish to become visible.

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A man like Alex does not live in Manhattan. He's strictly "outer borough": in his case, Brooklyn. Greenhorns, the newly arrived, the precariously resident, live in brushed-aside areas like Midwood, any way they can.

Some live with family previously arrived. Some come for a certain job and whatever comes with it, or is substituted in its place. Others have no one, poor prospects here, none on returning. These sift their way through word of mouth from friends of cousins of countrymen wherever found, for jobs as night clerks, couriers, dish-wallahs, or hack drivers. This one has a room, that one a bed, with roommates, with bunkmates, with food and tea added to rent or with no food but what they can buy, barter or beg.

It is to such a place that Alex returns after turning in his cab. The pre-dawn half-hour trip from Long Island City to Midwood can be the longest of the day. Then he must park his little junker of a Tercel in agreement with the day's street cleaning rules, sometimes a long way off indeed.

But it is a place to go. He can afford it. And he is not alone.

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It is a day of change in the bunk room. Though the sun is not yet risen, Abram Teomasi, here known as Abram the Copt, is packing. That his bottom bunk on the inner wall is next to the

hall door makes the narrow room seem suddenly smaller as the denizens of the two other two-tier bunks framing the single alley window must squeeze past to use the loo.

“Look, we can all put in something for the week,” says Sharif, the senior greenhorn-in-residence and a fellow Egyptian. “Just till you get back on your feet.”

Youssef, the squat Syrian news hawker, returns from a wash with his towel around his neck and pauses at the congested entry.

“What is that? We outland cousins pay our friend’s rent? Oh, but he is determined.”

“And Ahmal? He was determined?” asks Siddiq, pulling on his Brookdale Hospital orderly’s tunic.

This punctures the trial balloon of chatter floated by Sharif. The hush extends even to Abram, who was never a bunkmate of the departed Algerian, who elected to return to a blood feud when his visa expired. As a Sudanese, Siddiq is more wary than most about repatriation, even though he was a doctor back home and is a nothing here. Abram himself breaks the silence, accompanied by the snoring of the Palestinian student Ramzi.

“Ah, what is the use? I don’t have job. And what, get another deli job? Work twelve hours a day for pennies after tax? This is not life.” He folds a shirt and carefully lays it in a stuffed sports bag. “Sharif, you are an educated man,” he continues in Cairene. “So is Siddiq. Tell me, how can a poet live in such a way? How the imagination fly? America is walls to the likes of us. I gladly trade my last Yankee dollars for the dust of home.”

Siddiq nods; he’s caught a little. Youssef snorts and takes a reasonably clean shirt from a folded stack at the end of his bunk.

Sharif buttons his white waiter's shirt reflectively.

"Perhaps the Russian or the Sikh could drive you to the airport?"

"No, no, they do not even know me, to do such a thing. It was not possible to return on a ship's crew, so at least I will savor the train to JFK."

"A long ride to savor," grumbles Youssef. "That is a day's journey there."

"The plane departs this evening," Abram smiles, thinking JFK to Frankfurt to Istanbul to Cairo. Like the Pope, I will kiss the ground, and give thanks to each safe arrival, each step of my way home. "I have one more day in New York."

They hear the outer door of the flat click open, creak, softly close.

"The Russian's back," Youssef sighs. He takes up a paper sack with an apple, some crackers, some cheese, tea and sugar, and a canteen of water. "Time to meet the papers. Safe journey, Abram."

Abram accepts being folded in the short man's bear-like embrace.

"*Imshallah*, my friend," he smiles, as a Coptic Christian must.

"*Imshallah*," nods Youssef. He's out the door to the inner hall, past the kitchen where Hana may have left a few pieces of fruit, and out to the building hallway, the vestibule, the damp pre-dawn streets of Midwood, Brooklyn, U.S.A.

The men in the bunkroom follow his departure, the distinct tone and interval of each door, like prisoners of long tenure. Even Ramzi, the student, stirs and resettles.

"I am applying for the university position," Sharif pipes up inconsequentially. "I have been promised an answer straightaway."

Abram zips his bag, seems to contemplate it for a moment, then rises and slings it over his narrow shoulder.

“I will write to you, Sharif. You have been a brother, and I will pray for your happiness.”

Sharif blushes and offers a hand.

“Thank you, my friend. We are responsible for our own success, and our own happiness. I shall persevere, and respond faithfully to your letters. Safe voyage.”

Sharif feels a surging within him that almost stops his breathing. It bursts forth in a sob that he tries to mask with a sudden embrace of the startled Abram. Three years. Abram has given up after two. One must persevere. Nothing is given. One must stand up and declare for it with the full force of one’s intellect and will. Three years at the diner, and he is a first shift waiter with a box full of manuscripts.

Abram has extricated himself, briefly embraced Siddiq, and departed. Now there are two empty bunks. They will be filled, Sharif knows, again and again.

Siddiq is at the door with his knapsack and shoes.

“Ready?”

Sharif pulls on the black vest, then his raincoat, and hoists his canvas manuscript bag. Before closing the door, he looks back at the airless bunkroom, the sleeping student, and sighs.

“Coming.”

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CANCER DOC FOUND DEAD IN DOORWAY

by Arup Pradhawy
*[Special to **The New York Post**]*

NEW YORK, April 17, 1995 -- Noted cancer specialist Dr. Bernard Lanceman, a pioneer in the use of radioactive implants to attack aggressive tumors, was found dead this morning of apparent heart failure in a basement doorway near his posh West End Avenue condominium.

Police received a tip just before dawn of a vagrant asleep in the basement alcove of a building at the corner of West End Avenue and West 97th Street. There they discovered the body of Dr. Lanceman, who was identified by a credit card receipt from a fashionable Midtown restaurant. His wallet was not found. Medical examiners determined that he had died within the previous two hours. No marks of violence were reported.

Dr. Lanceman was a frequent contributor to the Journal of the American Medical Association and held the Fordyce Chair of Oncology at Rockefeller University. A favorite cancer expert for many news magazines worldwide, fluent in German, French and Hebrew, Dr. Lanceman recently was reported to have been suffering from liver cancer. He was 62.

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Jesus Delgado draws up the collar of his raincoat and sips his coffee with disappointment. In a job with crazy hours, any routine is important, and none more so than his morning cafe negro from Julio's. But this morning there had been orders from the top, a call from Mallory to go right uptown. So here he is, in the rain, with a corpse, and unsatisfactory diner coffee. He sips again for warmth, sighs, and ducks under the yellow tape.

"Sergeant Delgado?" The young patrolman, Bellini, new shield, has him sized up before he flashes the gold badge. Promising. "Detective Fry is with Sergeant Herman. Captain Mallory told us to stay put until you came."

"Thank you, Bellini. How did you find things when you first showed up?"

The young cop coughs, drops shaking from his patrol cap.

"Well, he didn't fall. He was sitting in the doorway, very neat. No I.D., but there was a credit card receipt in his pocket, and a doorman on the block knew him."

"No violence?"

Bellini shrugs.

"Nothing off but the missing wallet."

"Opportunity," Delgado grunts, eyeing Mitch Fry looming over a beefy uniformed sergeant and the medical examiner's crew, all focused on an ashy human shape in the doorway.

"Good work, Bellini. Get dry and write it up."

“Thanks, sergeant.”

Delgado finds an angle to look at the man. Late sixties, wasted-looking, good clothes askew, cuffed trousers speckled with vomit.

“So,” he says to Fry, “how do you think he got here?”

“Discounting elves,” Fry rumbles after a moment’s pause, “foot or car.” Fry runs a hand through an aggressive shock of salt and pepper hair, which at once appears dry. “T’s a long walk from the restaurant on the receipt, so my bet’s on cab, and the sonofabitch ripped him off post-mortem.”

Delgado digests his partner’s observation with more bad coffee.

“And that’s what we’re investigating?”

Fry shrugs.

“He treated the chief’s brother, that much I know. A well-connected stiff.”

Delgado sips more increasingly tepid coffee, measuring the space between the curb and the doorway, trying to see it at four a.m., teeming rain and no one around.

“Who called it in?” he asks.

“The doorman in that building catty corner across the intersection. He noticed someone there at first light, and thought it was a vagrant who’s been hanging around here.”

Delgado stares at the ME’s people as they bag the corpse.

“So if we assume that he kicked off on his own, we’re all here because his wallet walked?”

Fry grunts.

“Some days, it’s just all about the paycheck.”

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“Booka. Booka! Hey, wake up, man!”

Booker feels the chill in his bones first, and smiles. Ain’t no fuckin’ jungle. Opens his eyes and he’s not so sure. Pup’s head is at the foot of his cardboard hooch.

“Whu’s fuckin’ wrong wit’chyoun, rookie? Cain’t a man sleep?”

“Cops been aksin’ ‘bout you, man.”

Shit. The back and the knees, the feet, all throbbing now. Stomach sharp and windy. He grits his teeth, which also hurt. Fuck, he’s awake now.

“What about Booker Royce?”

“Ain’t yo name theys sayin’, man. It’s yo turf, some ol’ dead guy on West En’ an’ Niney-Sevent’.”

Booker growls. Pup backs off. Booker slides to the opening, the box flap against the wall. Big, thick box for a laser printer, parked against the wall under the Henry Hudson Parkway viaduct, home for a big, thick man. Booker’s hooch is the prime spot, under vines and the parkway, sheltered by a tree, on a little rise.

Booker moves slowly, deliberately, because he wants to, not that he has to. He crouches at the opening, glaring at Pup.

“Anyone tol’ them it’s my turf?”

Pup shakes his foolish young head.

“Not me. But the cops know you--”

“Who fuckin’ asked ya?”

No cops in the Arches. So it ain’t that serious. They’ll wait. Fine. Let’m wait.

“You goin’ t’ the kitchen, Bukka?”

“Th’ fuck you care, rook. Just cause I saved yo ass from Shaver don’ mean you my bitch.” Booker uncoils, rising above the mud and gravel and glass to stare down at little hooded Pup. “You want the damn kitchen, boy, you jus’ go. Give them your soul, ain’t doin’ you no good here, you be daid by this time nex’ year you stay here. You listenin’, rook?”

Pup nods, almost crying. He knows, and Booker’s lectured him enough. Just has to stop believing Booker will protect him, the way he kicked Shaver’s ass all the way into the river when that one pulled a razor on Pup for his Salvation Army coat. That was deep winter, and no one seen Shaver since. People can disappear, just like that.

Pup shuffles off, and Booker is sorry for a moment. Then he’s just mean hungry, and the soup kitchen’s gonna be spied. Shoulda kept Pup handy to scam the Korean grocers, but the fruit’s tough these days. Bananas: Easy to chew, full of vitamins, perfect. He can patrol for bananas and coffee, keep the sidewalk clear of static for coffee, donuts, bananas. Koreans just want to do it themselves, hardass gooks. Maybe downtown a bit, Broadway Red’s turf, the Italian or Paki grocers.

He has to stop halfway up the hole, the big drain from Riverside Park. Can’t . Fuckin’ . Breathe ... He hangs on to the old ladder, cold damp rust smoothed by hand after hand, foot after foot, season after season, year after year. Booker’s lost count of his own trips up and down,

overworld, underworld. Like a damn ghost. The chill is good, separating him from South Carolina and whuppins, Vietnam and scared. Somewhere along the line cold started to feel better than warm, and nothing else really offered enough of a reason to keep on. That's how you get here, he chuckles. Breath comes back. Another. He grabs a slow lungful. Another. Ain't dead yet.

Booker comes out of the grown-over manhole, and pats the bare winter brush back in place. Spring is mostly in planted beds along the terrace walk, stupid mobs of useless colors. Some rook once came down the Arches with a pocketful of bulbs he swore were garlic or wild onion. He found out otherwise, and got kicked out ralphing all over himself.

Outta the green, into the City. The Yups flow around him like a breeze, like he's invisible, just some odor. Streets is easier, steadier, brown and grey like ol' Booker.

Broadway. Under fire in a black night in a stinkin' swamp in the Mekong Delta, he had promised himself that if he could just see Broadway, ol' Booker would never ask for more. And, don'tcha know, of all the prayers he ever thought, whispered or howled, this was the one the Lord granted.

Booker doesn't see so well anymore, but he knows the shape of Broadway Red, shuffling off the bench in the wide traffic island, heading to the east side of the street. Guess he tired of gettin' whupped; Booker feels a throb of gratitude, too stiff for any whuppin' today.

He turns right, in the flow of the weekday morning sidewalk: moms and strollers, old folks with dogs, actors acting carefree. He's heading for the Paki deli on the next corner when he sees two guys in heavy raincoats cross Broadway and turn his way. Fingered. Still, a man

doesn't run if there's nowhere to go.

"Hey, Booker, what's happenin', man?" the shorter man says, heavysset Spic with a tweed cap. He flashes a gold badge, then it's gone, magic.

Booker shrugs, keeping an eye on the big, bareheaded Irishman.

"Can you be more specific?" says the big one.

"Ain' hurtin' nobody." Declarative, not plaintive.

"Not prowling the fruitstands, Booker? 'Cause you know the Mayor doesn't like that."

"Giuliani kin kiss my ass."

"Can, but won't." Irish grabs his upper arm, a grip that says *I can take your arm off if I want*. "C'mon, let's get to know each other."

"Cain't just arrest a man," Booker protests without struggling; no use, and they might feed him.

"Questions, Booker, that's all. Questions," says the short one. "About a guy we found dead on West End Avenue."

"Anyone I know?" Booker says, cagey.

The little cop actually makes eye contact, heavy, like a camera.

"That's what we want to find out."

"Then you kin aks me here."

The little Spic nods. The big Mick lets go. Spic'n'Mick, Booker thinks.

"Okay, Booker: Where were you last night, late, like just before dawn?"

"I was in my spot, man, tryin' to get some shut-eye."

“Where’s that?”

“Down the Arches.”

“Under the Henry Hudson.”

“Yeah. Y’know, I could think a lot better with a little food in my belly, y’know what I’m sayin’?”

Spic’n’Mick trade a look.

“Donut?”

“BANANA. Perfect food.”

Booker and Spic wait while Mick goes and comes back with four bananas in a curved line. He hands over one.

The first bite is so sweet and soft and filling Booker fears he’ll choke, dry as he is. Slow. Slower. So white, perfumey, with that tart jellied middle, the source of life and corruption. He puts the bare peel in his pocket for later, craving another.

“So, when you were on West End near 97th, did you see anything?”

“No.” Damn, thinks Booker, that’s weak.

“Thought you said you were down the Arches?” says Mick the Quick.

“Yah, when you said. Y’all di’n aks about earlier. An’ no, I di’n see nothin’ earlier, neither.”

“No people? No cars? Completely empty?” asks Spic.

“Oh, y’know, some cabs ‘n such. The usual.”

“The usual. Did anyone stop?”

“I dunno. A cab, maybe.”

“‘A cab, maybe.’ Shakin’ the cup in the Park couldn’a been too good yesterday, Booker. The weather stunk. So you’re cruising West End last night, you see a cab stop and you tell me you’re not bustin’ a gut to shake down some spare change?”

Booker shrugs.

“Las’ night, night before, one time or another, what the hell’s the dif’rence, anyway?”

Mick leans in.

“A guy died. Dr. Lanceman, lived in the Washington Manor? He was left dead in a doorway, without his wallet. That’s the difference.”

Booker draws up to get space without backing off.

“It’s nothin’ to me. That’s cold, but it’s a fact. He was nothin’ to me alive, he ain’t nothin’ to me daid.”

“Did you see a license plate, a cab number?” Spic asks, writing in a little book.

“My eyes ain’t that good. I kin just about see you there, an’ maybe back a little ways.”

“And you weren’t trying to get out of the rain, and happen to run across somebody already there?”

“It’s happened. Jus’ not las’ night.”

Spic looks at Mick, shrugs, and closes his notebook. Mick hands over the rest of the bananas.

“If you hear anything,” Mick says, “get word to Manhattan North Precinct, Delgado and Fry.”

He hands over a card, and the two men walk away, leaving Booker with a few additions to his meager possessions: bananas, a blanket, a Bronze Star, a tin cup and a can of Sterno, and a wallet full of wonderful things he has not yet felt safe enough to explore.

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