

Killing Maria

By

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CHAPTER 1

The hint of things to come started with Maria complaining about gaining weight and suffering from the heat. She visited Bess Weber in her ground floor apartment the summer before the boy was born. She cursed her husband Emilio because he refused to buy her maternity dresses. Maria fretted and sweated, sipped the tea Bess served and asked if she kept beer in the house. Bess shook her head and offered Maria more tea.

One late afternoon, Bess had all the windows open of her first floor apartment. It did little good. A hot wind was blowing off the East River bringing humidity and the smell of the garbage scows heading out into the Atlantic Ocean.

"You're lucky," Maria said, using a day-old newspaper to fan her face. "Your husband stays close to you. You see him all the time. Emilio is too old for me. Look at me, missus. How old do you think I am?" Maria pinched her cheeks to display the fat and pulled at her forearm to demonstrate the flab.

Bess peered at her over her bifocals. "Why, you're a young woman."
"I'm not old enough to vote and I look like my mother. Emilio

could vote before I was born." Maria glanced toward the kitchen with its shelves of spices and lacquered wooden racks for her plates and dishes. "Your kitchen, you always have it so clean."

"Is he really that old?"

Maria returned her steady gaze with an almost defiant shrug, "I have nothing for myself missus. You're lucky. You have a strong man and two handsome sons. You own this apartment house. It must be nice to be rich." Bess heard something sensual with her eyes half-closed, tapered fingernails smoothing the wrinkles of her tight dress. Bess was startled by her sharpened awareness of Maria, the shape of her mouth, the lift of the eyebrows, and found an attractive woman behind the chubby pregnancy.

"Esperanza is already so pretty. She has your looks."

Maria shrugged. "A girl will end up no better than me." She patted her belly. "Men only want to get on top of you. They'll even marry you to make you do it and then forget you when you're pregnant or too old. Men are bastards." Maria pushed herself off the chair. "I'm too serious."

Bess thought her unwashed body smelled of a woman in heat.

After the boy was born Maria appeared with Baby Chico, who tried crawling into anything that was left open. Even Max seemed charmed by the baby sometimes, breaking off work to play with Chico. Bess noticed the way Maria's eyes followed Max as if appraising his arms, legs, and thighs. Bess was ashamed for thinking that Maria appeared to be staring at his crotch.

Alone one day, Maria said, "When I was a young girl."

"But you're still a young girl," Bess interrupted.

"...in Puerto Rico," Maria continued, "I was always safe. Here in Brooklyn, so near the docks, nobody is safe." Bess heard a deep sigh, suddenly wary of the way Maria now seemed to do more personal talking about things she would rather not hear. Maria was a tenant, not a personal friend. Not Jewish. "That's trouble for me. I don't have a man to protect me. You have your husband and sons even if they are Jews. I'm alone. There's an old man always at work, washing dishes and making soup. What kind of a man is that? I have to protect myself with the men who want to stick it in me."

Shocked, Bess concentrated on her sewing, so distracted that her fingers moved carelessly, forcing her to undo some stitches. The candor was unnerving. She refused to think about such things. Sex was a

private affair between husband and wife; so private in fact that she would never even discuss it with Max. Sex took place in the dark, under the covers, and not too often for fear of being misunderstood. A woman valued the respect of her husband above all things.

Bess grew up in Berlin. Once she was trapped by two Brown Shirts. They fondled her breasts and reached between her legs. Bess was wearing a heavy corset that reached below her hips. Fondling nothing but stiff bone, they shouted that next time they would strip her naked and show her what for. Since then Bess wore a steel knitting needle in her thick black hair, her weapon of last resort. When Maria mentioned needing protection, Bess unconsciously reached and tapped the point of the needle.

Maria wore tight, short dresses, not crossing her legs when she sat, both feet on the ground, her thighs wide open always shocking Bess because Maria never wore underwear.

“So how do you protect yourself?”

Maria seemed to weigh the question, rolling her eyes and looking up toward the ceiling. Finally, sounding saucy, provocative, she said, “Missus, you’re too old now to remember. You forget men are crazy for it,” she prattled, not recognizing the shock on Bess’s face. “They’ll protect you for a while for some of that. That’s how they are, missus.”

Bess became attentive to the heavy footsteps on the stairs in the middle of the day and the Latin music echoing down the stairwell. One day Bess asked Max about the husband who went to work early in the morning, came home late at night, and had one day off during the week, but never on weekends.

Max seemed surprised by the question as if it would never have occurred to him that Bess might be interested. “A hard-working man, the kind of man a wife should be proud of. He never runs around. He spends his time at home except maybe when he has a drink with friends at that Irish bar on Atlantic Avenue, the one that’s called Paddy’s. The poor man has a bad case of arthritis. Sometimes he can barely open his hand or lift his arm.”

“How do you know so much?”

“Know so much? Why shouldn’t I know so much?”

From all this, Bess decided that Emilio was a sick man who had drinks at the Irish bar with friends and otherwise stayed at home. And men visited Maria in the afternoon. Maria made Bess nervous. She experienced

sensations of unknown fears, sensations so strong that her palms sweated, and she calmed down only after a cup of tea with a cube of sugar under the tongue. The fears seemed to jump out on their own accord whenever Maria left her, or while listening to the heavy footsteps on the stairs, or hearing the music coming down the stairwell. She understood. Maria was a predator. She would use any man to help her survive. Bess worried that Maria might even use her sons. Bess considered Max immune to the wiles of any woman. They were married before God. There was a commandment about not coveting women. But she had two teenage sons living at home. The worry gave her headaches.

One day Maria appeared with a swollen face and bruised lips. Bess hurried her into the bathroom and cleaned her with warm water, towels and soap. Maria's tears flowed, her sobs, the hurt of the wounded and betrayed. She pressed her cheek against the breasts of her surrogate mother.

"I want to die. There is nothing for me."

Bess smoothed her black hair, reaching out to comfort her. The moment of sympathy vaporized when Maria added, "What kind of man would send his own cousin to fuck his wife? How can I call the police? Who will believe me?" Maria was too preoccupied with her own misery to see the disgust, the harsh judgment stamped on Bess' face. "Emilio gave me to him. My own husband sends his cousin to my house to drink wine, and then he forces himself on me, makes me fuck him. I fought but look at my face. You should see my body. He burned my tit with a cigarette. I hate Emilio. I wish I were dead."

Bess didn't want to hear any more. She wanted to shove the woman away, out of the apartment before Max and the boys returned. She wanted to be rid of this wickedness in her home, corrupting the space with her sins. But Maria slipped off her housecoat and Bess cried at the sight of a breast marked with evenly spaced cigarette burns, the seared and inflamed nipple.

"Oh, you poor child," she moaned and rushed to hold her tight. Bess coaxed Maria into her bedroom to rest on her bed. She covered Maria with a blanket and lay down beside her. She struggled with the conflicting emotions of intense pity but feared for the vulnerability of her sons who were unprepared for the hunger of a woman like Maria.

Mortified by such cruel thoughts, Bess held Maria and prayed for forgiveness.

CHAPTER 2

It was an early sunrise. Max Weber opened the furnace door, shuffled to the nearby pile and with an effort, scooped up a shovel of coal. Grunting, he returned to the furnace and heaved. A fine mist of coal dust from the open furnace covered his face and hair. Sneezing, he held a finger to his nostril and blew. Though taller than five foot ten, Max appeared smaller because of his thick shoulders and a habit of slumping forward with his head bent toward the ground. The coal dust camouflaged his thick, close cropped, almost pure white hair.

Max leaned against the basement furnace and sighed with pleasure as the heat comforted his aching muscles. He thought of relaxing in a steam room, sweat oozing from all his open pores. He imagined jumping into the ice-cold pool, so cold it would make his head feel like it was freezing inside.

“Forget that now.” He moved to the dust-covered, street-level window and cleared a round opening with a rag.

Look at God’s day, he thought. It’s a beautiful morning. Even the pavement looks friendly. Maybe this is how God consoles the beasts

of burden. They get up the earliest, even when it's dark and cold, to collect the garbage and light the furnaces. God makes this the most beautiful part of the day to appease all the poor bastards like me. He doesn't give us much else.

Max smoked, leaned his head against the windowpane and stared through the hole in the dust. Soon it will be Easter, he thought. The goyim will think again of how we killed the Jew: Such nonsense, bleeding hands and a statue that gives blood. Then they come to take ours. The bastards.

He watched a small woman in a long black coat hurry across the street. How old is she? He wondered. Seventy? Eighty? Who knows? Look at her rushing to the garment district to sweep the cuttings off the floor before the union men come and pretend to sweep the floors. The bastards.

He could not stop the voice. "Remember Max? There was a time you used to think there go the old farts like that old lady and made fun of them. Now you don't have to look no further than the wrinkled face in the mirror. You're one of the old farts Max. Now you know what it's like: the headaches, the bones that hurt, the energy that comes so slow and gives out so fast, and the look from strangers that says, "Get out of the way, you old fart." You used to think it yourself, move over you old cocker, the world doesn't have time for you. Now you're trapped inside an apartment house in Brooklyn. You used to be a young man taking care of your property, proud of what you owned. Now you're an old man in an old apartment house. It used to belong to you. Now you belong to it.

Max laughed out loud. You're crazy with such nonsense. If you're lucky, they'll lock you up. Then someone else will light the furnace, mop the stairs, and polish the wood. Would that be asking too much? Maybe you're already in hell. The devil gave you this job of keeping the furnace going, fixing the plumbing, and wiping up the shit the tenants drop all over my house.

Max mourned the loss of spring in his muscular legs. Now they were like stones to be dragged from one place to another. The weight of his chest, one time the source of great strength, was now like an anvil attached to his neck. It pulled him down and he walked bent over. Angry because of his failing body, Max cursed God's day and the way He stole the years from him. Even when I walk, it's not a walk anymore. It's only an old man's shuffle. I ask, "Is this someone you

know? Someday God will give this old man's shuffle to someone else. You had your turn, Max. That's enough. Give someone else a chance. Now I know you're crazy. Idiot, go upstairs and breathe where that lousy kid pissed in the hallway again. Smell the piss Max, and you'll feel sane again. Everything in your world stinks of something."

Max checked the furnace one last time and slowly climbed the stairs to the top of the landing. He stepped out into the dark first floor hallway. Locking the door, he went to the front of the house. Outside, he stopped on the top stair to breathe crisp fresh air.

"Not so bad," he said, "not so bad after all." He looked up and followed the racing pigeons circling above his roof in an ever-widening arc. "Even the pigeons sound happy this morning." He called to the circling dozen, "You happy this morning? You thinking about who you're going to crap on today?"

He laughed. "Maybe not so bad after all. The sun is out. I'm alive. I've got some of my health. So maybe it could be worse. It's not so bad." Max started to jog when he hit the pavement. With legs moving stiffly like a wind-up mechanical soldier, Max tried to speed up but a stitch grabbed underneath his rib cage. "You old fool, so you feel good," he declared. "Leave some for tomorrow."

The apartment house took up the corner of Atlantic Avenue and Columbia Street. On Atlantic Avenue, directly across the street was Aristotle's coffee shop. It always smelled of fresh-brewed coffee. Even with the door closed, the aroma drifted out into the street. Aristotle claimed his strong Greek coffee was his gift to America.

Max crossed the street with mixed feelings and entered the small restaurant. The pots of boiling water for the soup steamed the windows. Later in the day, Aristotle opened the front door to let the steam out, but early in the morning, the steam warmed the restaurant for the customers who came for breakfast and coffee.

A small old man with a mustache beat at the dirty floor with a worn broom. Max avoided the cloud of dust and moved to the counter.

"Aristotle, what good is what he's doing? He's just making dust, moving the dirt from one part to the other."

"Hey Max, that old man is a real hero. He killed hundreds of Turks in the fighting. So what, how he moves the dirt? My customers don't care. Only you."

Max thought Aristotle took him for a fool. "What fighting?"

Aristotle made a face. "The big war before the bigger one to save civilization. Don't you know anything?" Max swore never to ask him anything again.

The old man with the broom, laughed and Max heard the soupy, paper-thin sound of emphysema. "Hey, Jew, what's the matter? You don't know how a Greek hero sweeps? I'm the best sweeper this side of the bad side of Athens. What do you think?"

Aristotle hurried to the coffee urn. "Hey, Max, me and you we'll have some Aristotle coffee. The best there is." Aristotle made the coffee strong insisting that in Greece, everything must be strong because men needed to be stiff all of the time, just in case. He balanced two white mugs under the spigot. "I'll give you a cup of good Greek coffee made special by me for old farts like you. It'll put goat sperm in your balls. What do you think?" He leered and opening his mouth displayed a toothless empty space.

Max grunted and looked sour, considered this Aristotle a foul-mouthed old man. Aristotle placed a steaming cup in front of Max and sipped at his own. "I forgot," Aristotle muttered, upended the sugar bowl and let the granules cascade into the cup. "That's better," he said. "Here, take sugar. It sweetens your tongue. Makes it better for the girls."

Max pushed the sugar aside. He studied the massively wrinkled face, the toothless mouth occasionally bracketed with cheap false teeth, the wild uncombed hair made whiter by the dark complexion. "How old are you, anyway?"

"I tell you," Aristotle shouted because of partial deafness. "I'm old enough to know how to really do it and not that old that can't. I got a wrinkle on this ugly face for every time I stuck my horn in. That's my age." Aristotle laughed and slapped Max on the shoulder. "I've been alive a long time. But you're the old man. You understand the difference?"

Max pushed his hand away. "Why do you say that? Besides, you've got a dirty mind, talking like that."

"My friend, what's a dirty mind? In Greece, a dirty mind is not the man who thinks about doing it with a woman. In all due respect to you my friend, meaning no insult, a dirty mind is the man who thinks a woman who fucks is a bad woman. That's a dirty mind. A woman who satisfies a man, God says that woman is beautiful. The man who thinks

her dirty because she likes to screw, that man is guilty of a sin. The church preaches that." Aristotle slapped his knee and laughed in Max's face. "Maybe Plato said it. It sounds too good for a Greek priest."

Reluctantly, Max admitted envying the old man, his joy in women, his sheer pleasure of keeping women close to his heart, whether he slept with them or not. As if punishing himself, Max always returned to listen and wonder at someone so free from the burdens of time that every day he had a new laugh and an old story about loving women. And as always, Max left angry and frustrated, promising to never again return but always did.

Max came to hear yet only censured. The ecstasies of Aristotle gave him hope, yet he criticized. "You should be ashamed. You're a man with eight children and twenty grandchildren. You should talk nice." Max stared into the steaming coffee and wanted to ask the jittering old man whether or not it was true what he said - did he have a woman every night? Was it true that he lay down with young girls who liked him because of the wisdom of experience that only came from age? Was it true? Instead, Max growled, "Why don't you keep this place cleaner? It looks like pigs eat in here."

"Pigs is right," the old man answered amiably. "That's who eats here. Maybe if I charged higher prices and got better customers, I would keep it clean. But my customers don't care. No one cares. Not even the food inspector, he doesn't care. He comes in here and I can see on his face right away: Where's the money? There could be crap on the floor and he would think everything is fine as long he has the money. I wrapped it up in an old bacon bag, good and greasy but he didn't care. This place is for pigs. Even the money from pigs can be spent."

Annoyed, his face starting to color, Max said, "I'm no pig," but really want to ask, what it's like to feel the breast of a young woman. I can't remember firm tits and nipples that get hard when you rub them. I feel like I never knew.

"Hey, friend," Aristotle said softly, "Don't get so mad. Why do you get so mad for? I'm joking, just like always. Why do you bite my head off this morning? What's the matter, you use too much coal?"

Max searched the wrinkled face for ridicule. "There's nothing the matter," he muttered. "I got lots of things on my mind. Lots of things to do."

"You always think of work. You got to get yourself a woman. Stop thinking that you can only take a piss with it. I'll tell you. I'm seventy-five years old. I'm older than you but I'm younger than you."

Max dropped a dime on the counter.

"Hey, keep your dime. We're having a friendly talk between friends. I give you advice. It's worth more than a dime."

Max started for the door.

Aristotle shouted, "You need to be young. Get some Greek pussy. She'll put life in that dead cock of yours."

"You've got a dirty mouth," Max growled from the doorway. He slammed the door behind him and started across the street. His legs felt heavy. His shoulders dropped. Max felt tired for so early in the day. He looked up at his five-story building and noticed the Lombardi window was open. Standing in the street by the curb, ignoring the passing cars and honking horns, he mumbled, "Look at that, that fat bitch. She complains nothing keeps her warm but there she is with the window open. Soon I'll shut down until next winter completely, then let her complain. Selfish bitch."

His eyes moved above the roofline and noticed the pigeons circling overhead. A long pole made a slow sweep, moving them off. The pole came down and the birds headed into the sun. Max heard a sharp whistle. The cripple is up there on the roof across the street. Such beautiful pigeons. Look at them. His thoughts trailed off, watching them return to circle and drop toward his roof.

"They're going to shit on my roof," he complained. "They only shit on my roof. Why don't they shit on their own roof? I'll kill those pigeons someday."

Entering his apartment Max smelled the baking bread and heard the sound of eggs frying in butter. In the semi-darkened room, the lace cloth covered the dining room table and seemed to glow.

A wedding gift from his mother, he caressed the handmade cloth but thick calluses blocked all feeling. Max looked beyond the living room into the open kitchen. He admired the neatly tied bun at the nape of his wife's neck, the unlined face concentrating on the eggs. Her frown gave her the appearance of admonishing the eggs to dare to cook in any way except the way she prescribed. His eyes traveled down her back toward the thick ungirdled waist and concentrated on the cheeks, his eyes narrowing into a hard stare as if trying to see through the cotton. Max felt a surge of desire, thought to grab her hips and pull her back onto himself. He experienced the giddy elation of having a monstrous erection, imagined reaching underneath her dress, exposing her right then and there, shoving up and driving forward.

"The eggs will be done in a minute. Did you wash your hands?"

He jerked back, turned his face to hide his blush, the shame of his desire - I'll be crazy soon. Where do these ideas come from?

"Max, what's the matter?" She came out of the kitchen. "Are you sick?" She touched his brow. "Your head is cool. Don't you feel well?"

He smelled the residue of dough on her hands. "No. I'm fine." The lingering erection upset him. Running from the feeling, he decided it must be that crazy Greek, with all his lies, upsetting him like this, making him think filthy thoughts. Still, he could feel the erection and turned his body so that she wouldn't notice. She would mock him for his dirty thoughts. He closed his eyes to stop staring at her breasts, closed his hands to deny the temptation of reaching for her body. That damn Greek.

"Where are the boys?" Max demanded, determined to change the subject, talk about something he understood.

Surprised, Bess said, "In school. Where else should they be?"

"Will they be home for supper?"

"Jacob has examinations, so he won't be home for supper. David has a basketball game. He won't be home, either. They're getting so big. They have so much to do it seems they never come home. Pretty soon they'll be gone altogether."

"David has a long time to go."

"And Jacob? Is he already out the door?" Bess gave him a severe look. "Have you talked to him recently?"

Max ignored the question. Let things run their course, he thought. Nothing helps with that boy, anyway. He ignored her worry, put aside the way her voice betrayed worry over their inability to reconcile. Jacob and Max. Max and Jacob. What does he want to be called? Jake? He wants to be called Jake? Like some goy? So much the better. Then I won't have to know him at all.

"Max, have you tried to talk to him like you promised?" she persisted.

Max turned her aside. "Jacob is never here to help me. What's the good of those big muscles of his? Mister weight lifter. What's the good of them? He might as well be out the door now."

"Max, what are you saying? They both will leave soon enough. Enjoy them while they're here."

"When they leave, they kick you aside because you're old and no good to them anymore."

"Who's old? We're young. We'll be able to do what we want, go where we want. Have a vacation for once."

"We'll go out and dance every night at one of those crazy places the bums go to."

"Stop burying yourself," she laughed. "I'm a young girl still. Life begins after fifty." But Bess looked worried, the way she frowned and pressed her lips together, studying the way he moved, the way he seemed to sink into himself.

"Forty. Life begins at forty," he spat. "For us it's already past."

"Well, for us, it'll be fifty and over. Who's to tell the difference?" Her nose twitched. "My eggs are burning. I've got fresh bread for you." She returned with thick slices of homemade bread. The melted butter oozed over the crust and spread across the plate. She placed the fried eggs in front of him.

He examined the centers. "Cold-storage eggs. They stink. Who can eat these? It's a waste of good money." He pushed the eggs across the table. "A cup of coffee, that's all."

"What's the matter with you? You're sick."

"I'm not hungry. Coffee."

"Eat the eggs and bread. You'll feel better."

"I feel all right. Just gimme a cup of coffee. I'm not hungry."

"Maybe you should go see a doctor?"

"I don't need a doctor. I'm not hungry. Just coffee."

"Well if you're not sick then eat like a man."

"A cup of coffee. No more."

"You must be sick," she said with finality, "or else you'd eat. You always eat. I better call the doctor."

His face turned red. "What am I, an animal? Am I tied to my stomach? I don't need a doctor. I'm not sick. I'm not hungry. I just want a cup of coffee. No more. That's all. Coffee." He banged the table with an open hand.

She restrained a smile. "All right don't eat. Get sick. See if I care. You're getting to be a cranky old man."

"Yes, old man," Max sighed.

"It's an expression. What's wrong with you today?"

"I feel like an old man."

"Have done with it," she said. "I'm going shopping. I'll make sure

I'm gone all day. Talk to the walls about being an old man, but don't include me. I hope that makes you feel better."

"Nothing makes me feel better!" he shouted in frustration.

"That's what I thought." Bess nodded. "You're sick."

Later that afternoon, alone and dispirited, Bess off somewhere shopping, suddenly terribly tired, Max did something quite unusual, he lay down for an afternoon nap, promising himself it would just be for a minute, he would only close his eyes for a second. No more.

Max sweated, flopping about on the bed, kicking away the light cover, and rolling on the damp sheet. He was suddenly awake and the sheet stuck to his back: I pissed all over myself, was his first thought. Pissed all over myself, that's what I did. But it doesn't smell like piss. I'm sweating. The whole bed is wet. Everything is wet from top to bottom. Old men sweat like this. Thank God, it's not piss. He rolled off the bed and stared in dismay at the gray dampness covering the sheets. Why didn't you go to the steam bath? That's what you should have done. Sleeping in the daytime is no good. That's what's wrong, sleeping in the daytime. You need the steam room. Max sighed, grateful that Bess had gone shopping and he had time to let the bed dry out.

He felt better after a hot shower. He stared at the wrinkles, crisscrossing scars of age that covered his face. He pressed his palms against the mirror to shut out the sight of a weathered image. He tried to make a fist but the thickened skin and bruised knuckles wouldn't close all the way. He regretted losing the ability to close his hand, to make a fist so large and firm that Bess rubbed it with pride and joked that he should have been a prizefighter.

"Who needs a fist, anyway?" he said to his reflection in the mirror. "God made hands to work with not to beat other men. God also gave the jackass a strong back. You have a strong back. So God made you a jackass who looks like a man."

He pulled himself upright. "You walk on two feet. The ape walks on two feet and can climb trees. Maybe God hasn't finished with you yet." His eyes never left the mirror inspecting his mouth, his brow, and the shape of his ears, hoping he'd find his image improved. Instead, the reflection only showed a sagging mouth, a wrinkled face.

Fleeing the apartment, he escaped into the building. The carefully mended carpeting, the walls that he plastered and the banister that he

oiled comforted him. He hunted for something that needed him. He stood in the alcove below the first floor stairway and pressed his ear to the wall, listening for the sounds of the building. He could almost sense the movement of the walls and floors, the tenants on the five floors, the sounds of living amplified inside the thick walls.

He thought he heard fat Lombardi going to the bathroom and the echoing crack when she dropped the bathroom seat. He heard a soft step on the fourth floor. Mancuso the bachelor oiled the hinges of his front door, maybe some kind of gangster, but on time with his rent and never a bother. What Mancuso did outside was not his business. Even Mancuso's business with Missus Cocozzo who lived next door to him, as long as they both paid the rent and kept the peace. He recognized the hard step of the Irish dockworker on the third floor, always drunk on Friday night. Max could almost predict the time when he would hear the thump of his wife, when she hit the floor.

He knew the condition of the pipes that ran up through the middle of the building, the sound of water being drawn, the rush of bathroom waste coming down. He understood the changes in the timber over the years. The wood was drying, and the joints were beginning to crack. He feared the bastard building inspector who came with his hand out. He would ask him for even more money.

The building provided comfort and security. Max drew strength and assurance from its shape and size, from the traces of himself, from the imprint of thousands of steps on all floors. The building maintained the fragile continuity of his life. But with time came the cracks and tilts that could not be repaired. Max touched the warping and aging and judged himself eroding at the same pace. They were companions in the losing battle against decline. His silence disguised a hunger that sometimes was barely under control.

Sensing the music from the top floor, he pressed his ear to the stairwell wall. He felt the throb and beat of the music. Such crazy Puerto Rican music. How do they get such music?

"She owes for the rent," he muttered. "I'll go collect."

He smoothed his hair, tucked in his shirt and hurried up the stairs. What's the matter with you? What's the hurry? Running to your own funeral? You're going to collect the rent not borrow money from the bank. See, you're breathing hard.

At the top of the stairs on the fifth floor, Max stopped to catch his

breath. "You get older and older and tomorrow you're dead." Aristotle's mocking echoed in his head. He visualized the wizened face and sparkling black eyes, the mouth with no teeth. "Get yourself some Greek pussy. She'll put life into that old cock of yours." The thought of Aristotle's taunting, his growing older, provoked his anger and without thinking, he started banging on the door.

"Hey what's the matter, you hit on my door like that?"

"What?"

"I said why are you hitting my door like that?" Maria smiled. "You want to knock your own door down?"

"It's me." He felt confused.

Maria laughed. "I see it's you, Mister Weber. You maybe think you someone else?"

"It's me," he repeated, gruffly, feeling foolish. "I've come for the rent." Surprising himself with now feeling foolish, he added, "But I didn't know if you were home."

"If I'm not home maybe you'd knock the door down? It's good thing Maria home." She giggled. "You're blushing like a boy. Why are you so red in the face? Maybe from banging so hard on the door?" Her unbound black hair fell across the side of her face. She caught a strand of hair with her tongue.

"I didn't know if you could hear me."

"But look what you did to your hand." She touched his knuckles with a tapered fingernail.

Max jerked his hand away.

"Did you think I was going to scratch you?"

"I came for the rent," he said. "That's why I'm here." He expected an excuse about not having the money because her husband drank it up and the few dollars were spent for milk and bread. Like some other tenants, she was supposed to slam the door, to shout that he had no right to barge in, that her husband took care of those things, and to come back when he came home from work. Why was she smiling? What's so funny anyway?

"It's good thing you told me," she said, her voice lilting. She started moving her feet. "Maria thought maybe you came to dance."

"I didn't come to dance," he blurted, feeling even more foolish for answering her.

"Come in, Mister Weber," she said, stepping to the side.

"I'll wait here."

"Come in. Don't worry, I won't dance with you."

Reluctantly, he stepped across the threshold, thinking to stand just inside an open doorway. Maria pushed him out of the way and closed the door surprising him with the click of the lock. Defiantly he thought, so what's the big deal? I'm the landlord. I own this building.

She moved in front of him, body swaying in the loose housecoat. Her bare feet slapped against the kitchen linoleum. "Sit, Mister Weber. I didn't expect any company. I don't know if there's anything here." She opened the cupboard. Looking surprised, she said, "There's some homemade wine. Would you like some?"

He remained standing, and staring at the linoleum, wondering when it would have to be replaced. He disapproved of the streaks of dirt from an unclean mop. A hand holding a glass of wine broke into his line of sight. Max meant to refuse the glass but surprised himself by reaching out. "Thank you."

"Homemade wine. My husband sometimes makes it."

"That's good."

"Do you mind if I have some, too?"

"It's your wine." He sipped still staring at the linoleum.

"You like it?"

He drank quickly and still avoided looking at her. "It's good wine. I used to press grapes." He surprised himself for even remembering. When he first came to the United States, he and some other men had made wine, not much, not too much anyway, selling only a little bit, just enough to buy more grapes. Then he met his first Irish cop. He came with his hand out. The little bit of wine that he sold had been enough to call attention to himself. It was against the law but him being a greenhorn, hardly able to speak English the right way, being a Jew and all that, the policeman would overlook it this one time only. But it would take some convincing in the future. He made the universal gesture of money: rubbing a finger against his thumb. Max stopped making wine and gave the remaining gallons of wine to the Policeman's Ball.

"Sit down Mister Weber. Drink your wine. Maria have some, too." She hesitated. "Maybe you don't like to drink with Maria. Maybe you're an old-fashioned man and don't want to drink with me because I'm married." She leaned against the kitchen table and sipped the wine.

"Where are the kids?" He found the conversation annoying, aimless

chatter with an empty-headed woman. He finished the glass of wine, did not want to be rude, sitting in her kitchen chair. "Esperanza is in the church school. Chico is in the bedroom asleep. Where did you think they are?"

He couldn't understand the way she smiled as if she had an amusing secret. "How do I know? I just came for the rent."

She laughed. "Is that all you ever say, Mister Weber?" She imitated his gruff voice. "'I come for the rent.' Don't you ever think about anything else? Rent and coal. You'll be an old man before your time, thinking about that so much."

"What do you mean? Why did you say that?"

"Why did I say what?" She appeared surprised by his vehement reaction. "Why are you so mad? Did I say something bad? I don't want to make you mad."

"I'm not mad."

"You're getting red in the face. I wouldn't like it for you to have a heart attack because of me."

She moved close to him and refilled his glass, her breasts level with his face. Max didn't remember finishing the first glass of wine. He thought, this wine is good. I feel better. Listen to that music. It's terrible. How can she stand it? It's such a racket.

"I'm sorry if I said something to make you mad." Her voice was soft, almost whimpering like a little girl. She stood in front of him taking small steps back and forth in time to the music.

He looked at her undulating breasts and gulped the wine. She refilled the glass. "Maybe a little bit more." His voice was beginning to slur.

"You're all red. You're sweating. Is something the matter?"

"I'm not sick," he blurted.

"I didn't say you were sick. That's a nice smell you have. I like a man to smell nice. He doesn't have to smell like a goat." She leaned into him and sniffed his face, behind his ear. Her breasts brushed across his face and she giggled.

He blushed.

"Do you like the music?"

"It's nice." The music wasn't so bad after all.

He saw the bottle within arm's reach and poured, filling his glass. Just a bit more. It tastes good. I'll have to make some myself again. My body doesn't hurt now. All I needed was to relax a little. She's a

nice girl. She could keep the house cleaner but she's a nice girl. Better than that bitch Lombardi, wanting more steam, hot enough to melt the fat off her fat ass.

Maria danced in front of him. Her breasts moved back and forth with the beat. Her hips moved in and out straining against the pinned housecoat. "You dance?"

The quick, easy steps entranced him as she moved from stove to sink. Her arms opened and her fingers beckoned. He shook his head, feeling the music in his body. He held onto the chair resisted the impulse to leap toward those arms.

"You like wine," she said, dancing in front of him. "I like wine, so you must like Maria."

"You're a nice girl."

"I'm more than a girl," she said. She stopped in front of him and laughed. "You can't tell that?" She moved in and out. Her breasts brushed his face touched his mouth and nose. Maria moved her arms, fingers sliding through his hair. "Can you see the woman now?"

Max sweated, staining his shirt, and underwear. I'm burning up, he thought. I'm soaked. "I'm an old man," he muttered. "I'm nothing but an old man. No good for anything anymore."

Maria touched his strained face. "Who told you that lie? You're not old. You're a young man. You're strong." She probed the deep furrows in his face with long fingernails. "You're plenty good looking with a lot of nice white hair. You look like a movie star." She wiped his face with a dishtowel, moved closer. "Don't believe what you just said. That's a big mistake. It's not right."

"What do you know?" he said harshly. "Before, I could do the work of five men. Now I can't do the work of one. I could do that, five men, all by myself. Strong enough to take care of this house all by myself."

"You think too much about the house. This house is just bricks. It doesn't think about you."

"What do you know? You're just a girl. It belongs to me. It's mine. You don't understand."

She danced again. "So you buy this house?"

"Yes, I bought it."

"You take care of the house by yourself?" She moved behind him, the questions almost lyrical with a touch of mockery.

"Yes."

"You take care of it all day? All year you take care of it?" She was back in front of him, her back to him now, buttocks moving to the Latin beat.

"That's what I said." He couldn't take his eyes away from the swaying hips, the cotton stuck in the crack between her cheeks.

"So what have you got?" She whirled and faced him, danced in and away. Her arms went up and she clicked her fingers. The housecoat stretched tight across her breasts. Her nipples, large and hard, pushed at the thin cotton.

He was dumbfounded to hear himself protest. "A prison, an old man's prison, that's what I've got. I'm locked in. I live in coal dust. I live in the filth and shit of people. I can't get out. I belong to the house. It owns me."

"You're just a bull, always kicking and fighting, snorting like the ones in the bullring. All bulls are that way." She danced around him, rubbed his shoulder with her hips. "And I'm the toreador, and I'll stick you." She scraped a red fingernail across his neck.

"I'm a prisoner!" he shouted.

She stood over him and smoothed his hair. "Don't shout like that. You'll waste your strength." She petted his face and danced in place.

Max ached to touch, to grab at the undulating breasts, but he didn't dare. He wanted more wine. "I'm burned out. Just like the ashes from the coal. The house is rotting all around me."

Wiping his face with her hand, she pressed her breasts against him. "You're wrong. I will show you."

She rubbed his face and shoulders with her body. He inhaled her dry sweat. "What's there to show?" he whispered, his eyes fixed on her undulating breasts, so close, so distant.

"You have another wine," she whispered. "I will be back quick, even before you finish." Maria retreated to the bedroom and soon returned with a coy smile on her chubby face. She had changed into a black brassiere and white panties. The black thigh length nylons and red garter belt highlighted the red shoes with silver sparkles imbedded in the high heels.

Max inhaled the powerful cologne splashed across her breasts and between her legs. She swayed, fingers clicking like castanets. The tan body with the roll of belly fat rocked back and forth to the Latin beat. Forward and back, the body pulled at him, forcing him to lean forward. He spilled the glass of wine. The flesh of the woman so very close, the smell of her sex filled him. His pulse beat faster. He wanted to grab

her but didn't dare. He was surprised by the almost overpowering urge to take her – it had been so many years.

The chair seemed too small for him. He rocked back and forth with the rhythm. She dipped and swayed, filling the room with her presence. Her face moved close, tongue rolling around her lips. Her face disappeared, and white panties jiggled in front of his eyes.

The music, the body with rolling hips and open legs, invited Max to come forward. He resisted, unable to cope with the yearning. He swayed to the heavy beat, grunted, and pulled for air. Her swaying body moved toward his mouth. His callused hands took hold of the tan waist, moved with the rhythm. He squeezed her hardening nipples. Flesh pressed against his face. His hands pulled at the meaty buttocks. Her body arched and welcomed his grimacing mouth. She rolled back and pulled him down to the floor, pressing him tightly between her legs.

“You're a bull. I want you to show me now.” Releasing him, she pushed him up, unbuckled his pants, unzipped him and pulled down his pants and underwear. She fondled his erection, guided him toward her spread legs, and pulled him inside. At the instant of entering, Max groaned and ejaculated.

Panting and confused, he waited over her as she wiped him clean. She rolled away, leaving him on his knees.

“You need more practice, Mister Weber.”

Max didn't hear the amusement in her voice. He only knew that he must move, stand up, and make himself decent before stepping into the hallway.

“Before you get dressed Mister Weber,” she said with her hand on his arm, her face pressed close to his ear. “I already paid the rent. You forgot.” She licked him on the ear. “Come again, Mister Weber,” she said. “I'm going to check on Chico.”

He was shocked. “Yes,” he mumbled. “I forgot.” His head hurting from the wine, he was grateful for her leaving the room. Max was appalled to find his pants and underwear pushed down to his ankles. He hurried to make himself decent, the exhilaration giving way to the shock of his behavior. I broke a commandment. What got into me? How could I have done that to the girl?

Ashamed and afraid he peeked out the door – no one coming.

Max escaped into the safety of the hallway.

CHAPTER 3

A week later, on a warm spring day the neighborhood seemed released from the confinement of the late winter. The noise from the intersection of Atlantic Avenue and Columbia Street seemed to be melting into a discordant hum.

Jake and David were on the roof. Jake was stretched out on a blanket facing the sun. Without a shirt, his gym shorts were rolled down to expose more of his bare skin. David had on a short sleeve shirt and corduroys. He compared his arm muscles to the way Jake's rippled each time he moved. David tightened his biceps and squeezed. "Give it up. Your muscles are between your ears."

"Muscles between my ears don't help too much when Paddy Murphy and his brothers come around."

"Fuck those Irish bastards," Jake said. "The less you have to do with anyone around here the better off you'll be."

"That's easy for you, you're never around here anyway. I live here. You don't. You just bunk down in your room for the night and run out the next day. I don't understand you."

"I don't understand myself."

David sat next to Jake; his back against the warm brick wall, ignoring the tar coat that stuck to his pants. The sun was directly overhead. The heat brought a thin line of sweat across his upper lip. He licked and swallowed the salty perspiration. "But you always seem so sure about everything you do."

"You baiting me, little brother? You still trying to solve the riddle of the Weber family? Forget it."

"I really want to know what's going on. With you and papa."

"What for? You'll soon be seventeen, about to graduate and maybe have a scholarship." David looked about to ask another question. "David, what happens to me with that son-of-a-bitch is not your business."

"Once he knocked you down. Made your mouth bleed. What did you do that's so bad? Jake, you're my brother." Tears touched the edges of his eyes. He turned his face and rubbed them away. "Why did that happen?"

Shading his eyes with his hand, Jake stared at David. "You want me to entertain you? Again?"

"I forgot what you said."

Sitting up, Jake brushed the dust and pebbles off his hands and legs. "One more time. But don't ask me again."

David prompted with, "You said that the stuff started at your Bar Mitzvah."

"So you do remember." His voice trailed off. "Since then I can't even say his name without thinking, son-of-a-bitch."

Thirteen and Jacob had the sturdy build, square shoulders, and high cheekbones of his father. He was dressed in the new blue suit Max had bought cheap on Delancey Street on the Lower East side. It was Jacob's Bar Mitzvah, the oldest son, and the occasion for a celebration of the entire family.

Bess Weber prepared a feast for all the relatives in honor of the Bar Mitzvah boy. Jacob was now a man in the family. The relatives came from Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens, even Uncle Manny from New Jersey, all squeezed into the Weber's South Brooklyn apartment, one block from the docks. The odd collection of relatives embarrassed Jacob, no one able to speak proper English, everyone with an accent that was thick and thicker, sometimes speaking only Yiddish, a language he never learned and never wanted to learn. He wanted everyone to look and sound like people in the movies, people who weren't Jewish.

Jacob had the king's chair at the head of the dining table. Leaves

were brought up from the basement. Folding chairs were rented. Everyone crowded around and passed down the envelopes with money, gorged on food, and drank cream soda after a shot of schnapps.

Bess patted him on the head. "You'll look just like your father when you're 20 years old." Bess kissed him and everyone clapped while Jacob turned red. The family cheered but Max looked on from the distance across the dining room table.

Staring across the table at his father, Jacob waited for something to happen, something to be said. He believed Max would stand and proclaim his pride in his first son. But he only read the sour look of the harsh, powerful man he was obliged to obey. He would always remember the first blow from when he was ten years old that firmly reinforced that obligation.

Uncle Benny stood up. "We salute the new man in the family. Come, more schnapps for everyone." Uncle Benny poured a half shot into a jelly glass and demanded silence. "Here's to Jacob Weber, the new man in the family. Here, Jacob is your first glass of whiskey. Pray that it's not your last, but always in moderation. Always like a Jew. Never too much, never too little. *L'chaim.*"

Everyone toasted. Jacob choked on the bitter taste. He teared, but swallowed all of the burning liquid. He noticed Max sipping. He said nothing, not one word, not even a salute. Under his breath, Jacob cursed, motherfucker two times over.

That night, everyone gone, Jacob pulled David into his room and shut the door. David wanted to see the loot. He wanted to witness the counting of the small fortune. His time was six years away but Jacob's good fortune was evidence there was real money in his future. David watched Jacob count the one-dollar and some five-dollar bills, and when Jacob suddenly blurted, seemingly without reason, without cause, "I'll never look like that guy. Never."

"What guy?"

Jacob did not answer. He finished counting, then wrapped the bills so that the dollar bills showed on the outside and stuffed the money in the pillowcase. He fingered the few checks, clipped the edges with his thumb. He turned his face away from David, who was holding the empty rice sack that Uncle Benny had filled with half-dollar and dollar coins. Uncle Benny had flaunted the sack, banged it on the table for everyone to see. Jacob knew that Uncle Benny was

goofy like that. "The son-of-a-bitch never even came close to me." Jacob pushed fists into his eyes to hide the tears. "He walked me down to the altar. The son-of-a-bitch never said a word. He hates me. I hate him right back, only double. I'll never look like him, I swear to God.

I'll change myself, I swear I will."

"You can't swear things like that," David blurted. "You can't call Papa a son-of-a-bitch. What will the Rabbi say?"

"Fuck that old goat. Fuck everyone. I'm going to be different. I swear. I won't be Jacob anymore. I'll be Jake and speak English like an American. You'll see."

He made an effort to swallow the sobs that wouldn't stop. He pushed David off the bed, forced him toward the door.

"Jacob, what are you doing? What did I do?"

"Leave me alone, damn it, and call me *Jake*."

In the silence that followed his repeating the story, Jake rubbed his eyes with his closed fists, just like six years earlier. He had a funny look, his mouth twisted and his eyes hard as small black stones: Jake would never forget and forgive. Max broke his heart.

"So that was when you started to lift weights?" David persisted. "That's made you different? From him?"

"That's the whole story," Jake said. "There's nothing more I can tell you. There's no moral. There's no lesson for you to learn."

"Except why? What happened between you and Papa?"

"I don't know. Don't you understand?" Jake's frustration showed in the way he punched his hand, ground his teeth. "I don't know and never have known. So just leave it, David. I can't help you anymore. For Christ's sake, I'm having a hard time helping myself."

David touched Jake on the shoulder but Jake brushed his hand away. "Get lost. Leave me be. I have things to think about."

Rejected, David hurried off the roof.

Jake had gotten rid of the only person he loved, not counting his mother of course. He loved his mother. Everyone loves their mothers. But David was his brother. Brothers were forever. Jake worried about a day when another mean word, another slap from Max and he would punch him and knock his father to the floor. Things would forever be different. He would be branded and cursed. Attacking the father was immoral, against natural law, a violation of his religion. But the fury,

the anger smoldering inside gave him no peace. He had fantasized that time would bring release but it never came. The rage became tempered like steel, harder and more intractable over time. His hurt endured. Jake brooded. There was never an explanation. No clarification. The tension was a presence so thick Jake imagined he could mold it between his hands.

Now 19, Jake had matured into a handsome young man with large muscles and a persistent fear of being inadequate, defective. Jake brooded, became withdrawn. The doubts fostered frustration and anger. He imagined women craving for sex, picking and choosing, rejecting anyone not blond with creamy white skin and straight white teeth. He brushed the erection and with an effort left himself alone. Standing, he leaned over the parapet and stared down at his neighbors, the people he despised. Some men looked up. One shot him the finger. "Fuck you, too," he yelled, his words lost in the wind. "I'll be rid of you bastards soon enough and, you too, Max."

He noticed Maria, the tenant from the fifth floor. She was holding her little boy by the arm and shouting at her daughter who had run into the street. He spit, the phlegm scattering in the air. I can have that spic anytime I want.

Maria released the boy and ran for the girl. The driver hit the brakes, just missing the little girl. Dragging her to the sidewalk and beating a rapid tattoo on the girl's legs, Maria looked around for the boy.

"Hey Maria," Jake shouted, and when she looked up, he pointed toward the boy playing under a parked truck. "Take your time. You can always make another bastard."

Maria reached for the boy and when she bent over, her dress pulled up. She wasn't wearing underwear. Jake's fragile amusement was replaced by an intense hunger. Maria pulled both children toward the entrance to the apartment house. Jake wanted her to look up, to acknowledge his presence but she disappeared inside.

To hell with her, he thought, crouching and leaning back against the brick wall. He closed his eyes, drifted off into a fantasy of blond, blue-eyed women who spoke proper English, brushed straight, white teeth, and never smelled of garlic. Jake dozed and as the sun set, an offshore breeze brought the smells from the polluted East River. The temperature dropped and the cooling breeze woke him. He pulled on his shirt, stretched, opened the roof door and started

down the dark staircase. He stopped to listen and breathe the odors coming up the stairwell. In that instant, in that moment of time, Jake's forward crouch, the angle of his head, his face turned sideways to better hear the sounds from the building, Jake unknowingly copied his father, down to the way his hands rested on the banister. Jake would have violently denied any similarity.

Heading down, on the landing of the fifth floor, Jake impulsively knocked once on the door as he walked by. It was an unplanned rap without a break in his stride.

"Who?"

For the fun of it, he turned back and knocked again. His throat tickled with the beginning of a giggle. The door opened a crack. "

"Who?"

He coughed and put a hand to his throat. "Jake Weber." He coughed, pointed toward his throat and made a face. He could see a single glittering eye staring at him through the small opening.

"What do you want?"

"Just trying to check up on things."

"Check up? What do you check up on?"

"Things, like things that need fixing." Jake rubbed his throat with long suggestive strokes.

"What needs fixing?"

"Well, that's the whole point, you see," he said smirking, "the point of preventive maintenance."

The door opened enough for him to look into hostile black eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. Something is wrong; your Papa will fix it. What do you think is wrong?"

"I didn't say anything was wrong," Jake stepped closer. "This is a matter of preventing things from going wrong. I'm here to check up on things. You understand?"

"No," she said flatly. "Maybe you don't also."

"Well, let me try to explain." This was no joke anymore. It had become a test-of-wills and Jake couldn't let go. "In order to hold down expenses, a preventive maintenance program is installed." Freshman bullshit management course number one, good enough for the spic. "It's checking up on things before they break down." His irritation increased as the expressionless face and indifferent eyes continued to shield themselves behind the barrier of the partially opened door.

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