

Leopold Plotkin, the infamous kosher butcher accused of Crimes Against the Republic, slouched despondently in the Low Court of Criminal Transgressions, waiting for his trial to begin. As he scanned the ornate room where the long-anticipated drama would unfold, his body rebelled. Rivulets of sweat suddenly cascaded from his chaotic thicket of hair onto his forehead. His right eyelid involuntarily closed and refused to reopen. Both hands began to shake uncontrollably.

Plotkin wasn't alarmed by the onset of these aberrations. He had known since childhood that he was plagued by a pathological aversion to conflict, a condition that caused his body to react in abnormal ways when facing imminent hostilities. Sometimes the aberrations took the form of situational blindness or transient hearing loss. Other times they consisted of shallow breathing, pseudo arrhythmia, or infantile drooling. However manifested, the symptoms usually disappeared within an hour of onset and didn't return.

Attorney Bernard Talisman, seated next to Leopold Plotkin at the Accused's Table, was troubled by his client's deterioration. The pro bono lawyer feared that the Jury would interpret the phenomenon as evidence of a guilty state of mind. Whispering into the butcher's ear, Talisman advised Plotkin to swab the sweat, shutter the functioning eyelid, and hide his hands under the Table. Pleased that his advocate seemed to be taking an interest in his case, despite not receiving a fee for the legal services, the conflict-averse meat merchant thanked Talisman for the advice and immediately complied.

Even with implementation of the remedial measures, Bernard Talisman expected Leopold Plotkin to be convicted. Virtually every rationale adult in the Republic shared the expectation. In the days leading to trial, there had been subtle indications of pessimism within the meat merchant's small circle of supporters. Plotkin's parents had packed his few personal possessions in anticipation of his consignment to a penitentiary. His uncles had promised to visit him in prison every third weekend if they weren't experiencing delusions. *The Monthly Contrarian*, a rarely read anti-authority journal that considered Plotkin a hero to the cause, had declared in a front page editorial: "Regrettably, there is no realistic possibility of an acquittal for this courageous little man who tried to stand up to the powers that be despite knowing it would be a futile gesture that would end badly for him."

While Plotkin continued to anxiously wait for his trial to start, now experiencing transient hearing loss in his left ear, Prosecutor General Umberto Malatesta calmly conferred at the Prosecution's Table with a cabal of minions. The career bureaucrat was poised to deliver the Government's Opening Rant, a trenchant itemization of why Plotkin deserved to be convicted and removed from society. Malatesta was a practicing narcissist with limited litigation skills. As a result, he craved the limelight but was wary of making a fool of himself. Balancing the pros and cons, he only tried cases that captured intense public attention, were likely to enhance his reputation, and seemed impossible to lose. Plotkin's was such a case.

Consistent with standard operating procedure, the minions had prepared the Rant and all questions Malatesta would pose to witnesses. They had also hosted a series of pretrial dress rehearsals to polish his delivery. Although the performances were uniformly uninspiring, the minions felt they were sufficient to secure a conviction. To feed his

narcissism, they routinely praised him for parroting their scripts *brilliantly*. Lacking objectivity, he accepted their lies as the truth.

A gavel pounded against the Great Bench, a five-tiered oak structure occupied by Presiding Justice Wolfgang Stifel and a cadre of functionaries. Because the Bench stood at the center of the Courtroom, all sectors of the tribunal heard the thuds. As designed, the sounds prompted a chain reaction. Anticipatory murmurs lapped through the Spectator Pews. Reporters stirred in the Journalist Cubicle. Backs arched in the Jury Stall. Umberto Malatesta cleared his throat at the Prosecution's Table. Leopold Plotkin sagged at the Accused's Table. Bernard Talisman pursed his lips at Plotkin's side.

A Bailiff trundled onto the Courtroom Well to announce the start of the trial. As rehearsed, Malatesta sprang from his chair and repositioned his litigation wig to a more belligerent location on his head. Looking appropriately ominous, he lifted his trial robe off the floor and crossed the grey marble expanse with long theatrical strides before coming to rest at base of the Great Bench. He craned his neck toward the gilded ceiling to meet the hooded eyes of Justice Stifel who hovered thirty feet above him on the top tier. "May it please the Court," Malatesta intoned confidently while stroking his moustache. "The Prosecution is ready to rant."

The diminutive judge, who was too short to otherwise be seen from most parts of the Courtroom, stood on a stool to increase his height. A vague smile embroidered Stifel's heavily wrinkled face. The limited sign of pleasure reflected ambivalence over the circumstances he found himself in. On one hand, he was elated that *The Republic against Plotkin*, one of the most anticipated trials of his lifetime, was being presented in his domain. Having occupied the Bench for nearly four undistinguished decades, Stifel envisioned the spectacle as an opportunity to cement his legacy as a pro-

prosecution zealot with few ethical constraints who worked hand-in-glove with the Government to elicit guilty verdicts. On the other hand, he was disappointed that Plotkin had insisted on a jury trial, a decision that robbed him of the honor of being known as the judge who convicted the pariah. With an affection reserved for prosecutors, Stifel told Umberto Malatesta that the Court was “*extremely* pleased to have the Republic’s *esteemed* representative in the Courtroom” and authorized him to proceed with *zeal* in laying-out the government’s case.

Feigning respect for the little respected official, Malatesta genuflected several times in the Justice’s general direction. After performing the charade, he waited for Stifel to dismount the stool, ease into the Judicial Chair, and disappear from sight. He then bounded to the Jury Stall to romance the seven men who had been selected to determine Plotkin’s fate. Strategically positioned only inches from the septet, Malatesta opened his mouth and, in a counterfeit baritone suggesting gravitas, asked, “*Who* or, more accurately, *what* is Leopold Plotkin?”

The question’s pedantic delivery mesmerized the Jurors. Eager to learn more about the despised butcher than had been luridly reported in newspapers, they leaned forward in their chairs, mouths agape, eyes bulging, brows furrowed, ears directed at the prosecutor.

“In a word or, perhaps, two sentences,” Malatesta proclaimed, “the *despicable* meat merchant seated at the Accused’s Table is a socialist masquerading as a capitalist, a nihilist in sheep’s clothing, an unapologetic anarchist, and a devout vivisectionist! More to the point, he is a lapsed exhibitionist who, with malice aforethought and no afterthought, has gone to unprecedented, *illegal* lengths to avoid detection, all to the *profound detriment* of this Republic!”

Observing Malatesta's disdainful scowl, Jurors winced in their Stall. Elsewhere in the capacious venue, spectators grimaced, journalists scribbled, and Plotkin lowered his head. Stoical by nature, attorney Bernard Talisman didn't react.

"What this *pervert* has done is shocking even to Umberto Malatesta, the inimitable civil servant who stands before you!" the prosecutor shouted while raising his hands toward the ceiling like a tent revival preacher. "Anybody other than an imbecile who has been living under a rock knows that his acts and omissions have fomented a Crisis of unspeakable dimensions; unspeakable because the extent of the Crisis has yet to be determined!"

Malatesta tilted forward, gripped the banister that defined the Jury Stall, and shook his head vigorously. The sudden movement of a large object in their vicinity prompted several bodies in the Stall's front row to recoil in self-defense. Courtroom artists recorded the bold move for posterity.

"This *rodent* is an enemy of the State!" Malatesta pronounced with bombast after righting his head. "His *heinous* crimes—crimes that are both beneath and above contempt—continue even as Umberto Malatesta speaks. They are damaging the economic, social, and political well-being of the greatest country in the known civilized world! They imperil the capital city of Fettig and all who reside here, causing one to wonder whether it will lose its reputation as the crown jewel of civilization, the place of high culture, the port of entry for even the lowest of immigrants who come in search of truth and wisdom, not to mention prosperity, freedom, and better prisons!"

The prosecutor stopped talking to enable the Jurors to digest his hyperbole. After a moment of silence, he arched his back and asked, "Must

Umberto Malatesta say more about this fiend's *diabolical* nature to enable you to come to terms with who, whom, or what you are dealing with?"

Anxious to see how the Jurors would react to the rhetorical question, Leopold Plotkin raised the eyelid that still functioned. Turning to the Stall, he was disappointed to discover all seven Deciders mouthing the word "No." The butcher slouched lower in his chair and closed the lid tightly, not wanting to observe more.

"Look at him!" the prosecutor snarled as he glared at the butcher, spittle dripping from his chin onto his robe. "He sits there calmly, eyes closed, not a care in the world! He's unconcerned with the havoc his crime spree has wreaked! Only a person without a conscience can be so aloof. While it pains Umberto Malatesta to say so, this *monster* is human in name only!"

Elated to see several Jurors staring at Plotkin malevolently, Malatesta bellowed, "This once highly regarded merchant's fall has been both swift and steep! It will be incomplete, however, until a guilty verdict! Unless this *animal* is convicted, as day follows night, spring follows whatever, and so forth and so on, the Republic will remain in harm's way, subject to his whims and caprices! To avoid a catastrophe of biblical proportions, you must send a message that his deviant behavior will not be tolerated in a society governed by *The Rules of Law*."

Heads nodded piously in the Spectator Pews in recognition of the sanctity of *The Rules*, a collection of legislative edicts credited with the Republic's evolution from a brutish state of nature, where people routinely preyed on one another, to a civil society where predation, although still frequent, was better organized. The most pious heads belonged to officials cordoned in the Dignitaries Section who were responsible for most of Plotkin's pretrial suffering: Cicero Bookbinder, Leader of the Inner

Chamber, the legislative body that enacted the law the butcher allegedly breached; Mendel Sprem, Bookbinder's Alter Ego and so-called "Brain," who authored the law; Emile Threadbare, the Republic's High Minister, who forced Bookbinder to propose the law; Jean-Pierre Proust, Commandant of the National Constabulary, whose officers arrested Plotkin for ostensibly violating the law; Hans Gogol, Warden of Purgatory House of Detention, the institution where Plotkin languished and suffered systematic abuse following his arrest; and Fettig Mayor Rumpold Snipe, a prominent local demagogue who, during an eleventh hour press conference timed to influence prospective Jurors, had denounced Plotkin as an enemy of the Republic, the City's most dangerous resident, and a man who repeatedly defied *The Rules*.

Heads also nodded outside the Dignitaries Section. One rested on the narrow shoulders of Felix I. Bleifus, a lawyer with The Society for the Apparent Representation of Indigent Criminal-Types, an organization that pretended to represent impoverished defendants for free. Another rested on the neck of psychiatrist Seymour Peltz, the Permanent Acting Director of Admissions and/or Discharges at the Warehouse for the Purportedly Insane, a facility that specialized in not treating its patients. A third belonged to A. I. Gopnik, a Warehouse resident who was observing the proceedings under the supervision of two Warehouse orderlies. Bleifus, Peltz, and Gopnik had brief encounters with Leopold Plotkin prior to the trial but had not contributed to his pretrial suffering.

While Jurors listened with the stillness of wax figures in a museum, Malatesta began to weave a narrative of the events that led to the criminal charges. Interlacing facts with fiction, he pounded his fist against the Jury Stall railing to punctuate each item, causing some of the listeners to flinch with each jarring blow. Then, the prosecutor abruptly dropped his arms to

his sides and stopped speaking to allow Jurors to dwell on everything he had exaggerated or misrepresented up to that point.

As Malatesta transfixed the Jury with silence, the egoist's minions were astounded by his performance. He had exceeded their expectations, risen to the occasion, aped their lines to perfection. They nervously waited for him to stumble. Justice Stifel, hidden in his Judicial Chair, was also pleasantly surprised. Never, on the few occasions that Malatesta appeared in his Courtroom, had the prosecutor's performances been more than mediocre. "Maybe I misjudged him," the pocket-sized Jurist mumbled.

Plotkin glanced again at Bernard Talisman to ascertain how his defense attorney was holding up under the pillorying. Talisman's face was inscrutable. It revealed none of the outrage or empathy the butcher yearned for. In need of emotional succor, the butcher turned toward the Spectator Pews, where a small pro-Plotkin contingent was strategically positioned at the far end of the second row, near an array of stiffly-posed portraits of Justices who had died during unusually contentious trials.

The first familiar face Plotkin saw belonged to Primo Astigmatopolous, his long-time chicken plucker, intimate confidant, apostle, and closest male friend. The next was Ana Bloom, a handsome woman with porcelain skin, who was the unrequited love of his loveless life, only female friend, and Talisman's paramour. The third and fourth faces belonged to the Kimmelman brothers, Jacobi and Arturo, his Tearoom friends. Although all of them smiled at him congenially, Plotkin felt that he needed more succor than they proved capable of giving.

Casting his functioning eye across the Pews, he came to his closest living relatives: Jacob Plotkin, his stern father; Emma Plotkin, his passive mother; and Moishe and Misha Plotkin, his deranged twin uncles. The family elders, dressed in funereal black, silently mouthed his name while

grimacing. Slightly buoyed by their display of support, Plotkin mouthed each of their names in turn.

He next turned his attention to a flock of more distant relations, all of whom were dressed in black. Most ignored him. A few met his needy gaze with scowls. They were upset with him for staining the previously nondescript family name.

After exhausting the last of the relatives, Plotkin's eye drifted to Milos Gorky, the Inner Chamber's "Great Dissenter," an anarchist who had voted against enactment of the law he allegedly violated. Philosophically opposed to lawmaking per se, Gorky had publically pledged his unyielding support for Plotkin's anti-authoritarian behavior. To confirm that the support hadn't evaporated, Gorky met Plotkin's stare with a two-thumbs-up gesture. Relieved that the legislative obstructionist was still on his side, Plotkin returned the generosity by raising a single thumb.

The butcher continued to scan the Pews. He struggled to recognize the unfamiliar faces of several middle-age women seated in the back row. They were the board members of the Women's Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to the Truly Despised, a charitable organization chaired by attorney Bernard Talisman's half-sister, Myra Rabinowitz-Pritzker. Not knowing who they were and intimidated by their stern facial expressions, Plotkin moved on.

While moving on, he was startled to see Hinta Gelb, the despotic former Head Librarian of the National Library of Pedantic Writings who had mentored him during his years as an intellectual child prodigy. He had not seen her in three decades. Although Gelb's heavy eyelids were closed, she wasn't asleep. Instead, she was recalling Plotkin's unbounded potential and lamenting that he had turned to a life of crime in middle age.

Misinterpreting Gelb's sealed eyes as a sign of indifference, Plotkin was disappointed and looked elsewhere for empathy.

Seated two rows behind Gelb was the part-time rabbi of the Tree of Temptation synagogue who presided at his aborted bar mitzvah decades earlier. Plotkin saw the tufts of white hair protruding from under the rabbi's yarmulke and the heavily wrinkled skin. He wondered why the cleric came. The bar mitzvah ceremony had ended in humiliation for Plotkin and permanently scarred his psyche. Seeing the man he believed was responsible for the debacle proved a convenient distraction for the butcher. It ignited memories of the religious spectacle as well as other events experienced during a mostly difficult, joyless life. As Malatesta continued his tirade, images from the past coursed through Plotkin's mind, causing the prosecutor's voice to become progressively fainter until it disappeared from consciousness.