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Leopold Plotkin, the infamous kosher butcher charged with “heinous crimes” against the Republic, fidgeted anxiously at the Accused’s Table while waiting for his trial to begin. As he scanned the crowded room where the long-anticipated drama would soon unfold, his body rebelled. Rivulets of sweat cascaded from his chaotic thicket of hair onto his forehead. His right eyelid involuntarily closed and refused to reopen. Both hands shook uncontrollably.

The meat merchant wasn’t alarmed by the aberrations. He had known since early childhood that a pathological aversion to conflict caused his body to react in abnormal ways when facing imminent hostilities. Sometimes the abnormalities 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 typically disappeared within a few hours of onset and didn’t return during the same conflict.

Bernard Talisman, a prominent attorney who was representing Leopold Plotkin in the Low Court of Criminal Transgressions *pro bono*, was troubled by his client’s deterioration. He feared that the Jury would interpret the phenomenon as evidence of a guilty state of mind. In an effort to avoid that possibility, Talisman leaned into Plotkin’s ear and advised the angst-ridden pariah to swab the sweat, shutter the functioning eyelid, and hide his hands under the Table. Grateful that his lawyer was taking an active interest in his case, despite not receiving a fee for his services, the butcher thanked Talisman for the advice and immediately complied.

Even with implementation of the recommended remedial measures, Talisman expected Plotkin to be convicted. Virtually every rational adult in the Republic shared that expectation.

In the days leading to trial, there had been subtle signs of growing pessimism within the butcher’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 florid hallucinations. *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 stood up to the powers that be despite knowing it was a futile gesture that would end badly for him."

While Plotkin continued his anxious wait for the trial to begin, 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 Malatesta's narcissism, they routinely complimented him for parroting their scripts *brilliantly*. Lacking objectivity, he accepted the lies as the truth.

A gavel pounded against the Great Bench, a five-tiered oak structure occupied by Justice Wolfgang Stifel and a cadre of low-level functionaries. Because the Bench stood at the center of the Courtroom, all sectors of the tribunal heard the thuds. 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 into 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, the beetle-browed prosecutor lifted his trial robe off the floor and crossed the grey marble expanse with long theatrical strides before coming to rest at the 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 important trials in 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 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 jurist 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 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 aimed 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 Jury 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 see 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 orderlies. Bleifus, Peltz, and Gopnik had encounters with Leopold Plotkin prior to the trial that did not significantly contribute 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 fact with fiction, he pounded his fist against the Jury Stall railing to punctuate each item, causing some of the Deciders 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 each 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 displays of support, Plotkin mouthed each of their names in reply.

The butcher turned his attention to a flock of more distant relations, all of whom were also attired in black. Most ignored him. A few met his needy gaze with scowls. They were upset with him for staining the family's previously nondescript reputation.

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 limp 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 as well as the heavily creased skin. He wondered why the ancient 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 Umberto 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.