

Chapter Eighteen

Following venerable Jewish tradition, the funeral was set to take place the very next day; delayed burial of the body was considered painful to the soul of the deceased. Rabbi Gutmacher took charge of all the arrangements. He told us to be in front of the World Headquarters of Chabad-Lubavitch at 770 Eastern Parkway in Crown Heights at noon. He asked us to be on time. The press had reported extensively on David's death and on the time and place of the funeral. There was sure to be a large crowd.

Rabbi Gutmacher also took care of the arrangements for the Shivah, the traditional seven-day mourning period observed only by parents, children and siblings. Margaret and Gerald chose to have only one day of Shivah for a few hours in the evening. Rabbi Gutmacher asked if I would act as a surrogate for the rest of the Shivah period. I consented.

I also agreed to observe the Shivah in Crown Heights instead of my own home. Friends of David would be coming in all day, and I wanted to hear their stories and impressions. It would keep him alive for a little while longer. It would be a consolation. Rabbi Gutmacher arranged a house for us on Union Street, around the corner from 770. At my request, he set us up with a television so that we could be on top of the news during lulls in the visiting period and at night after everyone left.

We finally got to sleep just before dawn. Physically and emotionally exhausted, I slept the sleep of the dead and woke up disoriented a few hours later. June was fast asleep.

Was it all a horrible dream? Would David answer if I called him on his cell phone? I reached for my phone, but then I was struck by reality and put it down. It was not a dream. The ache in my heart was too real. The memories flooded my mind and threatened to drown me in unspeakable

sorrow. In twenty-four hours, my life had been completely shattered. It was too much to bear. I wanted to bury myself under my covers and not come out for the rest of the day, but there was a funeral to attend, the funeral of the beloved grandson whom I'd never see again.

Pedro, my driver, came for us at ten-thirty just in case there would be traffic in Brooklyn because of the funeral.

"I'm sorry for your loss," he told us when we got into the car. "*No hay nada a decir.*" He was right. There was nothing to say. Only that there was nothing to say.

"Please turn on the radio," I said. "I want to hear the news."

Numerous federal and state government officials from the President down, and indeed from all over the world, were expressing condemnation, outrage and the deepest sympathy for the victims and their families whom they promised to keep in their thoughts and prayers. The Senate and the House both called for investigations. A few Congressmen demanded the American Identity Party be declared a terrorist organization for advocating the violent overthrow of the government. One of them called for reconstituting the House Un-American Activities Committee of the Fifties to root out them and their sympathizers just as the Communists had been uprooted.

Bishops, cardinals and leading evangelists were vociferous in their censure of the American Identity Party and the demonstrators. One fire-breathing pastor called them heathens and pagans and swore that they would be consigned to the nethermost regions of Hell for all eternity. I wondered how much this threat would affect the demonstrators, but perhaps it might influence their mothers. Many Muslim imams added their voices in denunciation, as did the Anti-Defamation League. Even the Pope weighed in with an emotional statement from St. Peters Square.

The Department of Justice was considering charging Frederick Farragut and Sanford Johns with incitement to riot, and the FBI was in hot pursuit of the lead pickup truck and its occupants. They were studying surveillance

feeds from many businesses along Columbus Avenue, and they promised to apprehend the culprits very soon.

Voices on the right, on the other hand, called for calm and patience. Instead of going after the American Identity Party, they claimed, we should address the root causes of the movement, which are economic deprivation and unchecked immigration. If people felt secure in their jobs and their livelihoods, they would not be drawn to such violent movements. We should talk to them and listen to their grievances. Furthermore, they suggested, perhaps the shooters were suffering from mental illness caused by their economic stresses. I wondered if they had listened to Frederick Farragut's tirades and the Natural Humanist ideology of Sanford Johns. Weren't their racial and xenophobic grievances clear enough?

There was also a report from Crown Heights. The streets were jammed with vehicles headed for the funeral. Thousands of people were pouring out of the subway station at the corner of Kingston Avenue and Eastern Parkway, a stone's throw from the Chabad headquarters at 770. There was no evidence of counter-demonstrators or any attempt to disrupt the funeral, but police and security personnel were everywhere, including the rooftops.

It was good that we had left Manhattan early, but it was still possible that we would be delayed by the traffic for hours. I made a few calls, and a police escort met us on Flatbush Avenue and guided us to our destination. We arrived with a few minutes to spare.

Rabbi Gutmacher met us in front of the building and led us to a row of chairs set up for the family on the large brick terrace of the building next to 770. Margaret and Gerald were already there. Margaret was dressed in black with a black pillbox hat and a black veil over her face. My siblings were there as well, but my father's assistant had called in that they were delayed in traffic. They had left their car on a side street and were taking the subway. The start of the funeral was postponed for fifteen minutes until they arrived.

The members of the Chabad burial society brought out the plain pine

coffin covered with a Velvel cloth and placed it on the landing at the top of the stairs. Before taking the microphone, Rabbi Gutmacher whispered in my ear that he would like me to say a few words afterward. It had occurred to me that I might be asked, but my thoughts were not formulated yet.

“In the custom of Chabad, eulogies are not delivered at funerals,” Rabbi Gutmacher began, “Therefore, what I am about to say is not a eulogy. Considering the gravity of the situation and the size of the assemblage, we felt it appropriate that some thoughts be expressed. This is a very sad day for the Jewish people and indeed for all people of good will. We have seen the ugly face of evil, and we are horrified. How can this be happening in our beloved America? A young man and a young woman are cut down as he handed her candles to illuminate the holy Sabbath and bring her closer to God. African Americans emerging from their church after Sunday services are killed and maimed. Our hearts are broken. We cry out to the Almighty in anguish and plead with Him to strike down His enemies. O God in Heaven, the fate of this blessed land is in Your hands. Do not abandon us!”

He paused to survey the multitudinous crowd.

“I look up and down Eastern Parkway,” his voice echoed over loudspeakers placed near and far. “I see no cars, only thousands and thousands of sad people. Men, women, children. I see Jews, African Americans, Hispanics. I see so many, many good white people. I see Christians. I see Muslims. All of us, despite any differences we might have, must join hands in the spirit of America at its finest. We are all the children of God, formed in His image. We must look at each other with friendship, love and compassion. We must strengthen the bonds of liberty and tolerance. That is how we will defeat the evil with the help of the Almighty. This how we will ensure that this young man has not died in vain.”

His voice choked with emotion, and he paused to compose himself.

“David Goldfield was my student. I loved him, and I miss him terribly. We all do. He was such a wonderful young man, full of life, charismatic, smart, idealistic, friendly, kind, thoughtful, such a special young man. But

what was most special about him was his need to have a meaningful life, to do something important with his life. David, I know you hear me still ...”

He sobbed and wiped his face with a handkerchief.

“David, my beloved David, my golden David, you may have lived a very short life, but it was a supremely meaningful one. You came to us seeking inspiration. You wanted to get close to God. You will be honored in Heaven as the holy martyr you are. Any Jew killed because he is Jewish is considered holier than all the angels in Heaven and is brought very close to God for all eternity. But you, David, are the holiest of martyrs, because at the moment of your death you were bringing people closer to the Almighty. You are the holiest of the holy.

“You will be laid to rest near the Rebbe. You will go down in history as a legend, an exemplar for people all over the world. People will pray at your grave. David, my dear, dear David, you have been taken from us, but you will never be forgotten.”

He concluded with a short Hebrew prayer that I did not understand, and then he beckoned to me.

I got up and stood near the plain pine coffin. It somehow seemed more appropriate than an elaborate carved casket with satin padding. There was no luxury in death; all the departed were equal in death’s grim reality. My dead grandson lay in this pine box. He would soon be buried in the ground. I had no desire to lift the cover and look at him. I didn’t want that image in my mind along with the other memories.

I looked out at the enormous crowd that filled Eastern Parkway and spilled into the cross streets as far as I could see.

“I want to say just a few words,” I began. “The rabbi has already said all that needs to be said. I want to make just one point. David was my grandson, my only grandchild, and we were exceedingly close. He was an idealistic young man. He did not seek his pleasure in material things but in spiritual fulfillment. He was a happy young man. His face shone with happiness, and at moments of special happiness, his face shone like the sun.

“When he was ten years old, I took him to Phoenix to see the Super Bowl between the New York Giants and the New England Patriots. He was a rabid Giants fan, and he was so excited, he could hardly sit still. Well, you all know what happened there. David Tyree caught a pass from Eli Manning against his helmet, and then Plaxico Burris caught a pass in the end zone for a stunning comeback victory. The happiness on David’s face was beyond description. It was the happiest I had ever seen him. Until yesterday.

“My wife and I were there in Hesterville. We watched him with binoculars from a roof across the street. I saw his face as he manned that Mitzvah Tank. He was happy! He was oblivious to the tension and the roaring hatred all around him. He was serving his people and God. He was happy.

“I saw his face the moment before the grenade struck as he was handing Shabbat candles to a young woman, two precious Jewish souls on a little island of holiness. I saw the look of transcendent happiness on his face, and I envied him. I did not recall any time in my life when I’d felt such an intense burst of happiness, and I envied David, who’d managed to achieve a peak in his young life that most people never even approach. I envied him, and I loved him, and I was happy for him. And then he was gone.

“But as the rabbi said, he is not gone. The legend of his martyrdom will go down in the annals of Jewish history and American history. The effects of his sacrifice will be with us forever. We will never forget him. And we will do our best to make sure that he did not die in vain.”

The rabbi said the Mourner’s Kaddish and announced that the burial would be in Montefiore Cemetery in Queens if anyone wanted to attend.

The procession began. Black-hatted Lubavitchers pushed forward for the honor of carrying the coffin. There was hardly an inch of coffin that did not have a hand attached to it. A sea of silent humanity followed the coffin down Eastern Parkway all the way to Lincoln Terrace Park on Rochester Avenue, where a hearse for the deceased and cars for the family were waiting.