

LEAVE NO TRACE

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"Fascism is not defined by the number of its victims, but by the way it kills them."

Jean-Paul Sartre

Part I : Discovery

Chapter 1

August 1982, Florida

Wednesday started as a day full of promise. Marion Greene had been promised fresh news. She even made a special effort to tidy her flat for her visitor. Then, watching out from the sunny balcony, she looked down at the passers-by walking on the wide sidewalk below. She searched the faces to see if she could guess which of those strangers it would be.

A tall man strolled across the road toward the entrance to the apartment block but, having crossed the road, ambled on towards the hotel at the end of the street. Not him, then. An elderly man paused below her, caught his breath, then he too moved on. A young couple met up, twined into each other and moved along the sidewalk with the ease that happiness brought. Not them.

A sharp rap on the front door. Marion nearly collided with the coffee table as she took reckless steps from the balcony and raced through the lounge to answer that call. The latch conspired to defeat her until, rattled but excited, she was able to open the door.

“Marion Greene?”

“Yes, yes. That’s me” was her impetuous reply, followed by “You must be from the tracing service” while she stood and stared. “Oh...I am sorry. How rude you must think me. Come in, come in.”

She could barely wait as she ushered her visitor in. Even before he was seated the question tumbled out.

“Tell me. Tell me. You have found them, haven’t you?”

She was about to have news of what happened to her parents nearly forty years ago. The search for her mother and her father had been her dream ever since settling in Florida; the hope of finding some trace of them. What a surprise this would be for her brother.

“Well Miss Greene. It’s not that straightforward. There are certain formalities we have to go through.”

Marion listened without hearing. “Yes. I see,” she said. The questions seemed multitude and unending.

“Your parents. Their names?...Their parents?”

The answers rolled off her tongue, one after the other.

“They lived where?”

She paused, shook her head. She did not know.

“Uncles, aunts, other relatives?”

“None that survived. I have a brother Saul, living. I sent you that information.”

“You understand, Miss Greene, we have to be sure of the identity.”

Other children and parents separated before they were taken to the concentration camps had found each other. Not many, but some did; why should it not be them.

“All these years I have always thought of our parents. Kept hope here in my heart. Hope that somewhere, somehow, they are alive.”

“So many did not make it. So many were lost forever.”

Her visitor stood and walked toward the balcony with its beckoning sunlight. He paused, reflectively, before he turned and said what he had come to say.

“Your mother we know, Miss Greene, was one of those who did not make it.”

Marion groaned in anguish as her mind filled with faces from pictures she had seen of women queued up, waiting their turn to endure the final solution. She fought to remember how her parents looked when she saw them last. Her legs shook uncontrollably as she fell forward into his open arms in search of solace.

Instead of comfort she found a harsh embrace. Bemused in that moment, she was efficiently turned, pushed and then manhandled towards the open window through which she could see only the brightness of the sunshine. She was barely aware of the approach of the balcony’s edge, felt only the briefest touch as her body was lifted clear. Swiftly and surely she was thrown from it.

“But your fahter, Jewess, how he has served our cause”, was the last thing she ever heard.

She crashed to the pavement below.

Unlike her mother’s fate in the camp, her body now waited hands that would bathe her, then gently lay her to rest. Unlike her mother, whose body

spiralled away from the chimneys of the crematorium in smoke, her death would be provided with all the trappings and outward appearance of a peaceful passing. But, exactly like her mother, she ended life a broken soul.

Saul Greene, attorney at law, took the news of his sister Marion's death stoically, but deep down he was torn apart. He drew a sharp deep breath then brushed away tears as he sat deeper still into his chair. The phone was such an impersonal messenger. Stunned, he looked out at his calm and ordered desk and saw nothing. Long minutes passed before he remembered to return the phone to its cradle. Then an even longer time passed before he was ready to bring a professional gaze to bear on his diary. He leant forward, flicked through familiar pages with hardly a pause. He needed to clear the decks, to make time in his life to attend to family business above all else. Nothing contentious was harboured there on the diary's pages although that was his business. He did need to get the blessing of the firm's senior partner, though. It was his turn to make use of the phone, that impersonal messenger.

"Ray... I've just had some bad news – my sister. She's dead. I need to make arrangements for the funeral and I'll need time for sitting Shiva – to mourn."

Raymond Wiston, senior partner in the Tampa Bay practice of Wiston and Mansell, always had the air of a man surrounded by a considerable comfort zone. Certainly sufficient to absorb or deflect the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune. This particular arrow, he recognised, would go to the heart of Saul Greene. Saul who was normally redoubtable, steady as a rock in times of serious challenge, would take this very hard.

"Your sister? What happened?"

"She fell from her balcony. I don't think she meant to. Overbalanced so far as anyone knows."

"I'm so sorry, Saul. Anything I can do ... Personal not business ... Just ask. We're not very good at that ... asking. But don't hesitate – we are partners after all, that means sharing troubles as well as joys."

"Ray, that's good to know."

"Do what you have to. Take whatever time you need."

“I’ve had a look through my diary. We should be fine. Most of the cases over the next two weeks are pretty straightforward. Nothing Mark or James can’t deal with”, was the assured reply.

“They’ll both help out I’m sure. You do what you need to. We’ll manage. Anything you want me to take on for you?”

Saul knew that Ray relied on him, even in trying circumstances, to make the right judgment, a considered judgment. He checked his diary a final time.

“Uuumm...No. Well I might get you to plead an adjournment on the Felixstone case. It’s a tricky one. A lot at stake and it could go either way.”

“I’ll handle it... “ was the pragmatic response, followed by much gentler consideration, “and Saul, I’m very sorry about your sister.”

“Thank you. Look, let me talk to the others first and bring them up to speed. Then I’ll come back to you.”

The veneer of a professional helped Saul for the moment, taking the emotion out of the situation – holding it at bay for a time.

He tapped the edge of the desk with the pen he held loosely in his hand. It made a comforting and gentle noise as he marshalled his emotions just as he had his thoughts.

A careless fall apparently and his sister’s life was over. He hoped that was what it was. He knew she sometimes got very depressed thinking of what might have happened to their parents. There must be no suggestion of suicide or doubt about her death that would deny her a properly sanctified burial. Saul made sure of that.

First things first – he phoned Rabbi Neuchen, then made contact with his sister’s Rabbi in Tampa. Both offered condolences and listened sympathetically as he spoke of the dreadful accident that led to her death.

Finally, for himself, he planned to go to her home and stay over – take care of her and her things as he had so often. He’d mourn her life in the place where she had lived. And then, would that be it? Was that the end?

The day of the funeral underlined the end of his sister's life. The ceremony was all in keeping with the best of tradition; the Cantor chanted the Psalm and Kel Maleh Rachamim – the plea that she rest in peace. A colleague spoke the eulogy – marking the things she had done on this earth. It was a well-attended affair and a great many others evidently felt the loss as keenly as her brother did. At the graveside Saul was moved by the poignant words of the final prayer.

‘...Far be it from You to erase our memory. Look towards us with mercy, for Yours, O Lord, are mercy and forgiveness.’

Over the passing days her brother discovered very little was in fact erased from his memory. The sunshine that lightened Marion's flat failed to reach through the gloom that descended now his sister was buried. Saul found himself reflecting on life, his own life as much as that of his sister, as he voiced daily the aspirations of the Kaddish prayer.

‘In your lifetime and in your days and in the lifetime of the entire House of Israel, sword, famine and death shall cease from us and from the entire Jewish nation, speedily and soon,’

What setbacks of sword, famine and death the family had endured as the Holocaust swept its fearsome way across Europe. He and his sister were both given a way out by wise and protective parents. After that it was a lottery. What chance for the parents? None that he knew. What chance saw him brought to America and taken under the wing of a Jewish family? A family that lavished on him every advantage. They let him hide the dreadful memories of a fourteen year old under the salve of play and study and their love. They told him his ability was God given and he owed it to all to make sure it was not wasted. And, as he progressed, he wasted none of it. He became a successful lawyer, respected, diligent and wealthy.

For his sister Marion it was very different – for her, leaving had been an almighty wrench. And she had not had it easy. Hidden and kept hidden by people who wished them well. Moved on and on; ever away from danger that

sought to knock at the doors of her havens. Until in the end it all stopped; it was over but she was not left unmarked by the privations and the loss. Then as Europe sought to put itself back into place she too had been given a more permanent sanctuary. From there she had been helped to find her brother. And she had come to settle in Florida; to be near to him.

As Saul looked out into the blue of the sky he wondered how his life would change now she was no longer here.

A ring at the front door bell disturbed such thoughts. He opened the door wide but didn't recognise the upturned face or the abundant ringlets of black hair. There was, though, no mistaking the warmth in the dark brown eyes that looked at him through neat gold-rimmed spectacles. Eyes that took in Saul's drawn features as much as his puzzled look.

"Well I don't expect you to recognise me. I'm Debra Wiehl; I worked with your sister. Down at the Jewish Centre. You don't mind me calling. I thought you might like someone to sit with you. Here, I have brought some rugelach cookies."

Invited in, she put her gift on the coffee table that still stood in the centre of the lounge. Debra was one of life's cheery souls but her conversation here was brief and banal, befitting the occasion.

"Marion loved these," she said pointing to the plate of rugelach with its tempting mix of fruit, jam and nuts showing at every edge of the rolled pastry triangles. "She always described them as her one weakness."

There was a pause. Saul offered her the comfortable chair, the one his sister had favoured. He sat on the sofa, sinking into its softer cushions as he listened to his visitor.

"We shall all miss her. Our sadness is less than yours, but we think of you and her every day."

She looked round, for the first time taking in all the pleasantness that Marion had surrounded herself with."

"It is such a lovely place", she commented. "A shame that ..."

Saul was oblivious to her small talk.

"My sister and I loved the Florida sunshine. But, you know, she never recovered from the loss of our parents – she was very close to our father. The

sacrifice made when he sent us away, that was with her every day.” His mind was full of his own earlier thoughts as he added, “I remember one of our last conversations. ‘Saul, how did it happen that all of our family died and we are the only one’s alive? Hasn’t even one person survived? Is there really no one left?’ I did what I could to help but what is there to say....”

Debra greeted such gloominess with a broad bosomy smile, followed by words of comfort.

“You both survived. That is something to celebrate – never forget that. Marion had a good life and she did lots of good things with it. She’ll be remembered at the Centre and we will carry on because of her example. No matter how hard times seem we must help each other as best we can.”

He had helped his sister as a brother would. Of course he’d done that, practical things to ease her burdens. Now, beyond the impersonal giving of money, what was there? What could he do? In Saul’s hour of need the sharpness of his lawyer’s mind deserted him.

“Sometimes it is difficult to know where to start”, he replied pensively

“You of all people, a lawyer, you can’t think that”, Debra retorted, quite taken aback. How different this man was to his sister who, although she frequently had no idea when to stop, always knew where to start.

“We’ll do our best, even though we don’t have much money. As your sister did, we’ll keep telling the story, give sympathy and assistance where we can. You, you can give help in so many ways.”

Saul thought back to his family’s life, damaged because of the Holocaust, and of the great many other families affected too. The discomfort he felt only added to the strain of his personal loss already on show in his face.

“Maybe some things are just too difficult for us to put right”, was his poignant response.

Debra had her own way with difficulties. It was time she left and time for him to reflect. He followed Debra as she made her way to the door.

“For your sake, Saul, think of Tzedekah and the mitzvah you can perform for your sister. Those acts of goodness that will ease the path of her soul. Pro bono in the cause of justice – isn’t that what you lawyers would say?”

We shall tell her story in our newsheet. You'll find something to do too. It's a way of moving on", was her well-meant but quite pointed observation.

Seeing her out his thanks to her for coming were heartfelt.

Returning to the room he paused by the plate of rugelach cookies, took one and walked into the sunlight streaming through the open window. He couldn't resist the draw of the balcony and, looking down, waited and watched until he caught sight of his visitor. As he did so, Debra turned back and waved to him from the pavement below. She was right, he thought; it was time to start moving on.

Chapter 2*September, 1982, Florida*

Debra Wiehl had been as good as her word. The folded over newsheet the old man clutched in his hand recounted Marion's story. A story of a survivor told in terms of her optimism, determination and humanity. No mention of darker moments that could take over her life. There was mention though of her brother; reunited with a long lost sister after her years in the wilderness and how, despite the travails of the Holocaust, he had become a successful lawyer in a respected practice.

Maurice Sherman thought when he read the article for the second time that although Saul Greene had been uprooted from his homeland he had certainly arrived in the Promised Land. It got him thinking. Thinking about his predicament. Maybe something could be done. Maybe Saul Greene, who must have some understanding of what survivors had to deal with, would listen to the concerns of an old man. It didn't take long for him to pluck up the courage to find the number, to make the call, to get beyond the gatekeeper on reception. Then, it was more difficult for him than he could have imagined and it was a stilted conversation that took place with Saul's secretary.

A personal matter. Could he see the lawyer, please.

Yes, Tuesday, he could be there Tuesday.

No, there were no documents, no papers to see.

Yes, yes, Tuesday, last thing in the afternoon, quarter of five.

Thank you.

Saul looked up at the slight almost athletic form of the man shown into his office and motioned him to sit down. He moved his case files for the day to one side and read the note his secretary left for him. Saul looked directly at Maurice Sherman, seated uneasily on the leather-covered chair reserved for clients.

"Now, Mr Sherman. How can I help? My secretary tells me you phoned up and wanted to discuss something personal."

A long week had passed since then and given Maurice plenty of time to think. He took a deep breath, sat upright and from that vantage point said what he had to say.

“You know, my boy, I survived the camps and the death marches. God knows how, but I did. I counted my blessings to come here, away from the DP camps – they were home for all us displaced persons, the Sh’erit ha-Pletah. I met my wife then you know. God rest her soul. At first it was good – good to be accepted here, good to have friends and friendly faces round us. We were taken care of – I mean our pension. To begin with it was generous; now it pays for less and less. I don’t mind being poor. Hey, even I am getting older now and need less. It comes to us all – heh, it’ll even come to you one day lawyer. And you know what, my money...my money...”

The old man paused and pursed his lips to make his point. “Perrf ...it won’t be long before it’s not enough to live on and not enough to pay for a funeral.”

Saul had watched and listened enough.

“But that pension from after the war, it is what you and many others have to get by on and...”

“Well, it’s not enough” was the sharp interruption.

Saul was reminded of his sister’s work; of people like her and Debra and their selfless reaching out to those survivors who were less fortunate.

“Mr Sherman, that’s why we have the Jewish Centres. If there is more that you need, then they can help. We all help each other – you just have to ask. What about your family – won’t they help if you tell them how difficult life is, how little money you have?”

Maurice’s predicament had never been presented so succinctly. He lived on his own and valued that. His son, his daughter in law, his grandson would take him in – of course they would, they’d talked about it - but what sort of life would that be for any of them.

“I have never been a burden... I got back my dignity when I came to this country and I’m not going to let it go again. That’s why I came to you.”

Saul thought he now understood. Here was an old man who needed a handout. Just as Debra Wiehl had predicted, someone he could help. It would

be mitzvah for his sister's soul, a good deed that would help her after death. What was said next made him think again.

"My parents had money, money in the banks. And they had insurance. If I could get that money back or get something from the insurance, then I would be alright for a while longer."

Now what he could do was clearer. This would need his influence - something more personal than money. A couple of letters from a solicitor would get the attention that an old man on his own had probably been denied. It would be the work of a few minutes to once again help a survivor. Saul was happy to take that on.

"Bring in your paperwork. The bankbooks and the policies. I'll see it through for you. There will be no charge."

The old man's fearsome glare fired words spoken in anger and in haste.

"You take me for a fool? If I had the paperwork I'd have done it myself. Everything that survived as far the doors of the camps was lost. You must know that. Our shoes and glasses were taken from us, even the beautiful hair of our women. Treasured possessions...money... jewellery, deeds, papers, passports; for us, all lost."

Saul was taken aback by the strength of the continuing verbal onslaught.

"Lawyer, the only thing I know is this. What my parents had is out there somewhere. Some bank has it – some bank has what I am due."

Saul's considered opinion; Maurice Sherman's case was something to take on and take on 'pro bono' – free of charge. He'd clear it with Ray and at the next partners meeting he would let his colleagues know what he had done.

A single heavy table, surrounded by just as heavy chairs, dominated Raymond Wiston's room. It was big enough to host all the working files of the practice's senior partner. Otherwise the room was sparsely furnished. A few rich pictures graced the wall, as did bland certificates of practice alongside the obligatory bookcase. Its shelves were filled with reference books standing

sentinel straight against each other, showing off the uniformity of their dark blue covers and gold lettering. Tomes that, for clients and visitors alike, conveyed the depth of knowledge and skill that was not just on display here, but would be put to good use on their behalf.

Raymond Wiston looked up. His charming smile and impeccably sparkling teeth on show with every syllable he spoke.

“Saul, you have something on your mind?”

“Yes, just a curious ‘pro bono’ case I’ve taken on. A Holocaust survivor, must be in his late sixties at least. Some family assets in Germany before the war but he has no proof – of course he can’t have. I think there may be something in it – something to put right.”

Raymond, his natural charm for once covered by serious thoughts, interjected before Saul could say any more.

“Once you start this, have you thought about where would it stop? First there’d be bank accounts, then insurance policies... life insurance policies, then the cost of missing jewellery. Before you knew it the numbers would be enormous... the administration would swamp anyone who got involved.”

“Ray, tell me. When have we ever been frightened by big numbers? I want to do what’s right for this survivor.”

Raymond was as ever pragmatic in his concerns. Not much to be done really and not much promise for the practice.

“What ever you do, check with the Jewish Trust first. Germany paid out – continues to pay them. Billions of dollars. There has to be enough for the survivors.”

Saul reached his final considered opinion; Debra Wiehl was right – there were things of consequence that he could do. Here was a fight that should be taken on, Jewish Trust or no Jewish Trust

“Well, my client says there isn’t. Maybe we should find out why...”