

The
ABUNDANT
Life



A Novel

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ONE

All of what follows coincides with my release from Club Fed (to use a ridiculous misnomer) and my thirtieth birthday, in late March, 2008. The events leading up to this point were the subject of a book and a television movie. Not like that should be news to anyone. Thanks to my dickhead luck, my story of exporting the Second Amendment captured the zeitgeist, as they say, and for a minute or two, this book and the movie it spawned were popular in the way lurid pieces of cultural garbage are apt to be. And while I just can't help myself from discrediting these so-called studies and analyses of my life, I'm not going to get obsessed about it. It's important I give my family a respectful showing. I've done enough to them already.

It wasn't even my plan to drag them into this. They're decent people, not without their own failings, and will probably recoil from the notoriety, just as they have any time a spotlight aimed at me went wide of its mark to shine on them. But how do I erase them from a story that's about all of us, about how we were punch-drunk from our troubles and waiting for a breeze strong enough to put us on our asses for good? If my incarceration alone was responsible, I could have done the honorable thing and played scapegoat, but for that to have happened we needed to be blind to my father's gambling, my mother's meliorism, and my sister's greed. Our business flopped, our house crumbled and, like the idiots we were, we refused to admit our problems outmatched our ability to withstand them. Worse, we loved each other. Even that we got wrong. So I was thankful that not long after my release, Jesus Christ saved us. It was a practical and, more importantly, *American* salvation. It freed us from the stickiness of our life together. Except this isn't a story of evangelical yokels or the fevered ramblings of a moral reprobate born again. The fact of the matter is, we weren't even Christians. We were Jews.

To be fair, we were slack Jews—violating the Sabbath, never visiting Israel, covering our heads only when cold. Excluding a taste for Yiddish phrases and pickled herring, the Old World

vestiges were barely visible on even my grandparents, who scratched out admirably unexceptional lives in Bronx apartments often redolent of said herring. By the time my parents came of age, all but a few traditions had dissipated like so much of the shitty pot smoke they called their liberal arts education. Suppose we attended temple once a year, I suspect we ate pepperoni on our pizza a dozen times more. Somewhere along the way, my forebears must have been believers, pious guys and gals with a mystical bent no doubt, but over time and continents our faith took on the markers of a loose social identity. Even the scar tissue on my penis pointed not to descendants of Abraham but to a group of people who found the idea of discussing Republican politics over gimlets to be as unsuitable as hunting bears with a paring knife. For that matter, hunting anything with anything.

At any rate, my release, scheduled for midnight, March 22, pushed past two in the morning. I took it in stride. I was used to waiting. Which isn't to say I liked it. I just didn't take it personally. There were people who made decisions and people who had decisions made for them. The border was more porous than I imagined and, having passed through it thirty-nine months earlier, I'd had time to adjust. My endurance had grown into a massive and intricate sandcastle, the kind that wins ribbons on Independence Day. But my mother, father, and sister had driven from their home about sixty miles away and waited for my processing with their patience a sagging and crumbling mess, a July fifth sandcastle.

All because of me. Even Rachel—who, due to our age difference and my limitations, considered me somewhat of a curio and not always a brother—seemed uncharacteristically charitable. They weren't this proud of me at my graduation from college (where I posted a solid, if not quite laudable, 2.8 in every aspect of my life) and this pride, I believe, stemmed from the idea that in many ways I was closer to them than at any other time. I saw them at regular intervals throughout my stay in FCI Otisville, and I received weekly written correspondence from at least one of them, a letter or a card; so that I must now admit that my level of communication with my family was at its all-time highest when I was upstate, doubtless because they knew my where-

abouts every moment, a statement they couldn't make during my mid-twenties.

Now they had me to themselves, without bending to the strictures of the visiting room, and could hold me like a real human being, where before we kowtowed to cretinous correctional officers, guards. If I didn't match their enthusiasm it was because I was uneasy about what awaited me on the other side of all those fences topped with endless coils of razor wire. Yes, I was glad to be out, grateful I had somewhere to go, but in the run-up to my scheduled release it became pretty clear to me that I had no agenda: no money, no job, no woman, no friends. The lone bullet point on my customized reentry program was that I was to rely on folks I hadn't lived with since I was a high school senior. The anticipation of taking my first steps as a free man had another component to it. What if I wasn't skipping into the embrace of entirely generous arms, and my arrival, however much desired, would be added weight to an already knee-buckling load?

As the three of them advanced in my direction, my mother hustled ahead, declaring, "Me first," violently throwing her arms around my neck, her body humming against mine. She pulled me down six or eight inches until our foreheads met. It was then I caught her smell and in its familiarity I found the polar opposite of the smell of prison. My father and sister closed in around me.

"Alex, come here," my father said, his hand palming the back of my head. He wrapped his other arm around me, crushing my mother, who gasped, "I can't breathe." Rachel, careful to avoid getting smothered herself, laid a gentle hand on my shoulder. We stayed there a minute outside the Administration Building while the sprawl of the institution swelled around us. Maybe I was the only one who noticed it. I didn't want to be touched anymore.

I stepped back, hands in my pockets, and said, "Where's the car, old man?" I'm not sure what their laughter meant. I had been calling my father "old man" since he was the age I was now and maybe they welcomed the idea that some things hadn't changed.

Heading to the parking lot, I said, “Are there a lot of people out there?”

“Who else are you expecting?” my father said.

“Media? Well wishers?”

This time I knew what their laughter meant. As far as they were concerned, I’d outlived my shelf life as a morbid novelty. How could they know—I definitely didn’t—that I would soon renew my membership in the cultural oddities guild?

At breakfast the next morning, the hoopla of the previous night had given way to the reality of our new living arrangement. Rachel sat across from me at the old oak dining room table, her hair snatched back into a ponytail, wearing a pink tank top adorned with a graphic of her high school’s mascot, a lion. My father stood over me, refilling my juice glass (I was eye level with his belly softness), and my mother was in the kitchen. The afterglow of my homecoming had not yet worn off, but from what I remembered growing up, we didn’t eat breakfast together often, so the meal itself concocted a set of unintended tensions. While I enjoyed the spread my parents were cooking up, I couldn’t help but notice the way Rachel sulked over her eggs. This was, after all, a celebration for me, not her. Who the fuck was I to enter her domain anyway? My sister was an achiever, an honor student since she was practically a fetus, so she deserved attention—attention, evidently, she no longer sought but demanded. She had no way of knowing I wasn’t there for any birthright; it was hers for the taking.

She buttered a piece of toast for an inordinately long time, reducing the whole world to that meditative act.

“How did it feel to sleep in your old room?” my father said.

I won’t go into what it was like that first night except to say I couldn’t fall asleep until I double-checked that the door was locked. Besides, it wasn’t my room anymore. They redecorated it a den years ago. Though mine to reclaim, the Patrick Ewing poster was long gone, the hole I’d punched in the wall over some girl was patched, all four walls repainted, ceiling fan replaced; and, most crucial, the pint of Jim Beam, along with some low-rent pornography, last seen sharing space on a closet shelf, was MIA. Even my bed, from where I’d hatched my earliest plans

of world domination, was nowhere to be found. I'd slept on the fold-out couch, twisted in the sheets, dreaming dreams of underwhelming prospects.

I wasn't up to it, but I dragged my ass downstairs that morning, needing a hot meal to get going. Now I gave my father the answer he deserved. "Really great. Thanks for having me."

"This is your home, too. Always. Judy," he called to my mother in the kitchen, "how're we doing on the coffee." And back to me, "How was the coffee in Otisville? Did you get coffee?"

"Oh my God, of course he did," sighed Rachel.

He jerked his head away from her, as though her voice was a bee.

"What kind of question is that anyway? You think Big Al wants to talk about it? You might as well ask him about the rapes."

"Not as good as the coffee," I answered.

"You've got to understand she's upset about something," he said.

"Way to state the obvious, old man," she said, the use of my nickname for him a sign she wasn't pleased with either of us. She returned to her toast but when her cell phone began buzzing, the butter knife hit the plate. She read the text, looked up from the phone at me, laughed, and then her slim thumbs, with their chipped polish, flitted over the buttons, returning the message. She dropped the phone to the table, picked up the toast, took a bite, and said, "Jelly's coming over, okay?"

"Your friends are always welcome," my dad said.

"You have a friend named Jelly?" I said.

"Jelly Belly, that's my girl. Her real name is Jill."

"Is she fat?"

"Hardly." She rolled her eyes. "She's like obsessed with you."

"How does she know me?"

"Not the *real* you. The you from the movie."

"I told all the neighbors not to watch it," my father said, orange juice container in one hand, grapefruit juice in the other.

"You mean the neighbors who were still talking to us?" Rachel said.

My mother joined us in the dining room. She looked tired through her smile.

“You all right?” I said.

“I’m fine.” She smiled again. “I’m glad you’re home.”

She ate a little and I ate more and my father finally sat down. We all ate in peace and quiet. It was pleasant. Or would have been if I was just visiting, a successful son breaking from his hectic schedule for some brief, but much needed, domestic comfort. Only I wasn’t just visiting, though there was little mystery how I ended up here. I’d had an idea for a while and now these scrambled eggs and potatoes and whole wheat toast and coffee and *two* types of juices confirmed my suspicions. I was on the cusp of my thirtieth birthday and living with my parents, not because the sky opened up the day I was born and emptied a karmic colostomy bag over the hospital nursery. The dice hadn’t been loaded against me. In fact, one could make the argument that as a white man I belonged to the pantheon of dice loaders (though possibly a provisional member on account of my Semitic extraction). No, in my case, it was an attitude or manner I’d cultivated for much of my life. I was an arrogant prick. Maybe just cocky. Or some other phallic-inspired descriptor. This quirk (a cute way of saying defect) had fooled me into thinking that I was destined for great things, great accomplishments, that I was, in the absence of great things and accomplishments, simply great by myself. It convinced me to scoff at our governing laws because I was, you see, so lovely and thrilling a man that allowances would be made for me. Believe me, there are few lessons harder to take than the slow comprehension of your innate mediocrity.

The front door then burst wide, a girl’s voice shrieking into the house, “Hey there, Wolf pack. I smell breakfast.” The slap of flip-flops against bare feet echoed down the hall, and here came Jelly, her tits ushering her into the room. Her face was slightly too round, her nose too short; there was an indication she would one day grow heavy in the upper arms. In other words, she wasn’t a classical beauty, but from one glance I knew she commanded an unwieldy amount of power over both the boys and girls her age. She was so close a descendant of the

girls who held sway over me in my teens that, though separated by more than a dozen years, I had to gather myself when she got close to the table.

“Sup, slut?” she said to Rachel.

“Nothing, you little hooker.”

“I wish you girls wouldn’t talk that way,” my mother muttered. She turned in her chair to greet our guest. “Are you hungry, Jill?”

“Naw, but I smell coffee. I’d love some of that.”

My mother stood but Jelly waved her back down. “I’ll help myself.”

As she disappeared into the kitchen, I sought relief in my hash browns from her loud, exceedingly comfortable presence.

My mother said, “She and Rachel are like sisters. Jelly practically lives here.”

“Just like Raphael,” I said, referring to an indigent day laborer my mother once let stay in our house for weeks on end.

“Not like Raphael,” Rachel hissed.

Jelly returned with a mug and helped herself to the coffee pot. She sat next to Rachel and began trying not to look at me, but her eyes wandered up from the table. Eye contact in prison is an invitation to conflict. This little game she played put me on edge.

“Mom, Dad, breakfast was great. I’m going to take a shower,” I said.

Before I could excuse myself, Jelly extended her hand across the table. “Thanks, Rach, for introducing me. Your sister can be so rude.”

I took her limp hand, the first touch of a female who didn’t share my DNA in quite a while. I can’t exaggerate the effect human contact, or lack thereof, has on a person. My body overreacted, my semi-erection turning overly confident. “Nice to meet you, Jelly.”

“You know my name? That’s cool. I know your name too. Can I just say I know all about you? *The Wrong Way Son*, what can I say? It’s like the best thing that’s ever been on TV.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“Really? I thought you were like a consultant or something.”

I shook my head. She said, “Well, anyway, it’s amazing. That scene, when you were in South America, you sell that one guy a gun. I was like, ‘Don’t do it! He killed your best friend.’ But then it turns out the bullets are blanks or whatever and when he tries to rob that store the shopkeeper kills him with a bat.” She spoke very fast and I didn’t know what she was talking about.

“I’ve never sold a gun in my life,” I said. “I’ve bought plenty, though.”

My mother frowned.

“Or what about when you were in the helicopter and the cops are shooting at you and it’s going to crash and you jump out, but it’s like the jungle or rainforest or somewhere, and you land in this thing that’s like an oasis,” Jelly said.

“What about when that guy shot at me and I caught the bullet in my teeth?”

“Wait a sec, that didn’t happen.”

“Look at you, the brightest knife in the drawer. You’re right, that didn’t happen, but neither did anything else you said.”

I was telling the truth. Regardless of what my biographer would like the world to believe, I was never some rogue smuggling weapons across foreign borders. It’s not illegal to export a gun. The way I went about it was inventive (if you ask me) and would have made for a more interesting, if less fanciful, story than the one Laura dreamed up. I’ll address that later. For now, let me state for the record that I was convicted of and served thirty-nine months for violating title 18, part 1, chapter 44, sections 922 (g) 3,4,5A of the US Code. Without resorting to a ton of legalese here, what this means is that I gave a firearm to someone our government decided shouldn’t have one. To be a little more specific than that, I’ll add that I was driving with this person beside me when a routine DWI roadblock in southern New Mexico put us, and a rental van full of .50 caliber rifles, in close proximity to state police.

Jelly said, “Come on, really? What about when you were in jail? You were with that lady doctor? The one who wrote the book? That’s true, isn’t it?”

“Wrong again,” I said. This time I was lying. I was furious with Dr. Sullivan, but mostly with myself. The whole thing was a

product of my arrogance, and Laura twisted me up, knowing I couldn't go anywhere—outsmarted me, really.

"You should sue them for plagiarism or something," Jelly said.

"Plagiarism is when you steal someone's words or ideas," Rachel said. "It doesn't apply here."

"Whatev, bitch."

"Okay, I hate to break away from this stimulating conversation, but I have to go to the office," my father said.

His announcement was news to me but fazed no one else.

"It's Saturday," I said.

"I go every day."

"Since when?" I said.

"Your dad's a serious breadwinner. Ain't that right, Mr. Wolf?" Jelly said.

"Thank you for the endorsement," he said.

Rachel drummed the tines of her fork against her plate and looked to my mother. I guessed she knew why he was working weekends and didn't like where the conversation was going. I delighted in her discomfort, for then I wasn't experiencing it alone. She grabbed her friend by the arm. "We're going to my room," she said.

Jelly took a last look at me. "Nice to meet you, Alex."

They scampered off upstairs. My parents brought me up to speed. While I don't blame them for hiding things from me when I was away, I was nevertheless shocked to learn that when my father said he was going to the office it was so, in the very likely event that his business folded, he could take solace knowing he'd done everything he could, as if effort had ever trumped luck.

"It's been a tough year," my mother said.

"So, now you know," he said.

What I didn't know, however, was how it happened. My gut told me he gambled Dynamic Business Solutions away, and inwardly I winced as if witnessing a car accident. Outwardly, I gave away nothing, a skill I learned not in prison or in my business dealings. Right here at the old oak dining room table I'd honed my capacity to sop up hostility and disappointment until it was buried within me, somewhere with the acid and bile.