



JOSHUA
COHEN

BOOK OF
NUMBERS

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About the Book

The enigmatic billionaire founder of Tetraton, the world's most powerful tech company, hires a failed novelist, Josh Cohen, to ghostwrite his memoirs. The mogul, known as Principal, brings Josh behind the digital veil, tracing the rise of Tetraton, which started in the earliest days of the Internet by revolutionizing the search engine before venturing into smartphones, computers, and the surveillance of global citizens. Principal takes Josh on a mind-bending world tour from Palo Alto to Dubai and beyond, initiating him into the secret pretext of the autobiography project and the life-or-death stakes that surround its publication.

Insider tech exposé, leaked memoir-in-progress, international thriller, family drama, sex comedy, and biblical allegory, *Book of Numbers* renders the full range of modern experience both online and off. Embodying the Internet in its language, it finds the humanity underlying the virtual.

Featuring one of the most unforgettable characters in contemporary fiction, *Book of Numbers* is an epic of the digital age, a triumph of a new generation of writers, and one of those rare books that renew the idea of what a novel can do.

Please note that *Book of Numbers* uses a special pagination system inspired by binary notation: the section number precedes the page number, and is separated from it by a decimal point.

About the Author

Joshua Cohen was born in 1980 in New Jersey. He is the book critic for Harper's Magazine and the author of several books, including *Four New Messages* and *Attention! A (Short) History*. His non-fiction has appeared in the *New York Times*, the *New York Times Book Review*, *Bookforum*, *The Forward*, *The Believer*, the *New York Observer*, the *London Review of Books*, *n + 1* and elsewhere.

ALSO BY JOSHUA COHEN

Four New Messages

Witz

A Heaven of Others

Cadenza for the Schneidermann Violin Concerto

Book of Numbers

A Novel

Joshua Cohen



Harvill Secker
LONDON

But as for you, your carcasses, they shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness. After the number of days in which ye searched the land, even forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years, and ye shall know my breach of promise.

—NUMBERS 14:32–34, KING JAMES VERSION

And your corpses you will fall in this desert. And your children will be of shepherds in the desert 40 years and will support your prostitution/adultery until the perfection/destruction of your corpses in the desert. In the number of days you searched the land 40 days the day to the year the day to the year you will support your poverty/violation 40 years and you will know my opposition/pretext.

—NUMBERS 14:32–34, TRANSLATION BY
TETRANS.TETRATION.COM/#HEBREW/ENGLISH

8/27? 28? TWO DAYS BEFORE END OF RAMADAN

If you're reading this on a screen, fuck off. I'll only talk if I'm gripped with both hands.

Paper of pulp, covers of board and cloth, the thread from threadstuff or—what are bindings made of? hair and plant fibers, glue from boiled horsehooves?

The paperback was compromise enough. And that's what I've become: paper spine, paper limbs, brain of cheapo crumpled paper, the final type that publishers used before surrendering to the touch displays, that bad thin four-times-deinked recycled crap, 100% acidfree postconsumer waste.

I have very few books with me here—*Hitler's Secretary: A Firsthand Account*, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*, whatever was on the sales table at Foyles on Charing Cross Road, and in the langues anglais section of the FNAC on the Rue de Rennes—books I'm using as models, paragons of what to avoid.

I'm writing a memoir, of course—half bio, half autobio, it feels—I'm writing the memoir of a man not me.

It begins in a resort, a suite.

I'm holed up here, blackout shades downed, drowned in loud media, all to keep from having to deal with yet another country outside the window.

If I'd kept the eyemask and earplugs from the jet, I wouldn't even have to describe this, there's nothing worse than description: hotel room prose. No, characterization is worse. No, dialogue is. Suffice it to say that these pillows are each the size of the bed I used to share in NY. Anyway this isn't quite a hotel. It's a cemetery for people both deceased and on vacation, who still check in daily with work.

As for yours truly, I've been sitting with my laptop atop a pillow on my lap to keep those wireless hotspot waveparticles from reaching my genitals and frying my sperm, searching up—with my employer's technology—myself, and Rach.

My wife, my ex, my “x2b.”

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Living by the check, by the log—living remotely, capitalhopping, skipping borders, jumping timezones, yet always with that equatorial chain of blinking beeping messages to maintain, what Principal calls “the conversation”—it gets lonely.

For the both of us.

Making tours of the local offices, or just of overpriced museums to live in. Claridge's, Hôtel de Crillon. Meeting with British staff to discuss removing the UK Only option from the homepage. Meeting French staff to discuss the .fr launch of Autotet. Granting angel audiences to the CEOs of Yalp and Ilinx. Being pitched, but not catching, a new parkour exergame and a betting app for fantasy rugby.

This was micromanaging, microminimanaging. Nondelegation, demotion (voluntary), absorption of duties (insourcing), dirtytasking. All of them at once. In the lexicon of the prevailing techsperanto.

This was Principal spun like a boson just trying to keep it, keep everything, together.

At least until Europe was behind us and we could stay ensuite, he could stay seated, in interviews with me. Between the naps, interviewing for me.

You call the person you're writing “the principal” and mine is basically the internet, the web—that's how he's positioned, that's how he's converged: the man who helped to invent the thing, rather the man who helped it to invent us, in the process shredding the hell out of the paper I've dedicated my life to. Though don't for a moment assume he regards it as, what? ironic or wry? that now, at our mutual attainment of 40 (his birthday just behind him, mine

just ahead), he's feeling the urge to put his life down in writing, into writing on paper.

He has no time for irony or wryness. He has time for only himself.

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cant wait 4 wknd, Rach updates.

margaritas tonite #maryslaw

ever time i type divorce i type deforce (still trying 2 serve papers)

read that my weights the same as hers—feelingood til the reveal: shes 2 inches taller—ewwww!!

“She” who was two inches taller was a model, and though Rach’s in advertising I never expected her to be just as public, to enjoy such projections.

To be sure, she enjoys them anonymously.

My last stretch in NY I’d been searching “Rachava Cohen-Binder,” finding the purest professionalism—her profile at her agency’s site—searching “Rachava Binder,” getting inundated with comments she’d left on a piece of mine (“Journalism Criticizing the Web, Popular on the Web,” *The New York Times*). It was only in Palo Alto that I searched “Rachav Binder” and “Rach Binder,” got an undoubtable flame of her defense of an article of mine critical of the Mormon Church’s databasing of Holocaust victims in order to speed their posthumous conversions (“Net Costs,” *The Atlantic*), and finally it was either in London or Paris, I forget, because I was trashed, that I, on a trashy whim, searched “Teva Café Detroit MI,” but the results suggested I’d meant “*Tevazu* Café Detroit MI”—cyber chastisement for having incorrectly spelled the place where I’d proposed with ring on bended knee.

One site—and one site alone—had made that same spelling mistake, though, and when I clicked through I found others even graver:

a-bintel-b was a blog, hosted by a platform developed by my employer, which is more famous for having developed the search engine—the one everyone uses to find everyone else, movie times,

how to fix my TV tutorials, is this herpes? how much does Gisele Bündchen weigh?

Though her accounts lack facts—and Majuscules, and punctuation—I haven’t been able to stop reading, can’t stop reminding myself that what I read was written in my, in our, apartment. Between the walls, which have been redone a univeige, a cosmic latte shade—the floors have similarly been buffed of my traces.

I wasn’t ready to get reacquainted with the old young flirty Rach. Not on this blog, which she began in the summer, just after we severed, and especially not while I was estranged abroad, in London, Paris, Dubai as of this morning—if it’s Sunday it must be Dubai—with Principal negotiating the dunespace for a datacenter.

Apparently.

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Remember that old joke, let’s set it in an airport, at the security checkpoint, when a guard asks to inspect a bag, opens the bag, and removes from it a suspicious book.

“What’s it about?” he asks.

And the passenger answers, “About 500 pages!!!!”

Contracted as of two weeks ago, due in four months. Simultaneous hardcover release in six languages, 100,000 announced first printing (US), my name nowhere on it, in a sense.

As of now all I have is its title, which is also the name of its author, which is also the name of his ghost.

Me, my own.

Though my contract with Principal has a confidentiality clause—beyond that, a clause that forbids my mentioning our confidentiality clause, another barring me from disclosing that, and yet another barring me from going online, I assume for life—I can’t help myself (Rach and I might still have a thing or two in common):

I, Joshua Cohen, am writing the memoir of the Joshua Cohen I’m always mistaken for—the incorrect JC, the error msg J. The man whose business has ruined my business, whose pleasure has ruined my pleasure, whose name has obliterated my own.

Disambiguation:

Did you mean *Joshua Cohen*? The genius, googolionaire, Founder and CEO of Tetration.com, as of now—datestamped 8/27, timecoded 22:12 Central European Summer Time—hits #1 through #324 for “Joshua Cohen” on Tetration.com.

Or *Joshua Cohen*? The failed novelist, poet, husband and son, pro journalist, speechwriter and ghostwriter, as of now—datestamped 8/28, timecoded 00:14 Gulf Standard Time—hit #325 “my” highest ranking on Tetration.com.

#325 mentions my first book—the book I’m writing this book, my last, to forget. The book that everyone but me already buried. Also I’m trying to earn better money, this time, at the expense of identity. Rach, my support, had been keeping me in both.

But it was only after my session with Principal today—two Joshes just joshing around in the Emirates—that I decided to write this.

Coming back from Principal’s orchidaceous suite to my own chandeliered crèmefest of an accommodation, alive with talk and perked on caffeines, I realized that the only record of my one life would be this record of another’s. That as the wrong JC it was up to me and only me to tell them to stop—to tell Rach to stop searching for her husband (I’m here), to tell my mother to stop searching for her son (I’m here), to send my regrets to you both and remember you, Dad—I’m hoping to get together, all on the same page.

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10 years ago this September, 10 Arab Muslims hijacked two airplanes and flew them into the Twin Towers of my Life & Book. My book was destroyed—my life has never recovered.

And so it was, the End before the beginning: two jets fueled with total strangers, terrorists—two of whom were Emirati—bombing my career, bombing me personally. And now let me debunk all the conspiracies: George W. Bush didn't have the towers taken down with controlled demolitions, the FAA didn't take its satellites offline to let the jets fly over NY airspace unimpeded, the Israeli government didn't withhold intel about what was going to happen (all just to have a pretext for another Gulf War), and as for the theory that no Jews died or were even harmed in the attacks—what am I? what was this?

That day was my final page, my last word, ellipses ... ellipses ... period—closing the covers on all my writing, all my rewriting, all my investments of all the money my father had left me and my mother had loaned me in travel, computer equipment/support, translation help, and research materials (Moms never let me repay my loans).

I'd worried for months, fretted for years, checked thesauri and dictionaries for other verbs I could do, I'd paced. I couldn't sleep or wake, fantasized best, worst, and average case scenarios. Working on a book had been like being pregnant, or like planning an invasion of Poland. To write it I'd taken a parttime job in a bookstore, I'd taken off from my parttime job in the bookstore, I'd lived cheaply in Ridgewood and avoided my friends, I'd been avoided by friends, procrastinated by spending noons at the Battery squatting alone on a boulder across from a beautiful young paleskinned blackhaired mother rocking a stroller back and forth with a fetish boot while she read a book I pretended was mine, hoping that her baby stayed sleeping forever or at least until I'd finished the thing its mother was reading—I'd been finishing it forever—I'd just finished it, I'd just finished and handed it in.

I handed it to my agent, Aaron, who read it and loved it and handed it to my editor, Finnity, who read it and if he didn't love it at least accepted it and cut a check the size of a page—which he posted to Aar who took his percentage before he posted the remainder to me—before he, Finnity, scheduled the publication for “the holidays” (Christmas), which in the publishing industry means scheduled for a season before “the holidays” (Christmas), to be set out front in the fall at whatever nonchain bookstores were at the time being replaced by chain bookstores about to be replaced by your preferred online retailer. The book, my book, to be stuffed into a stocking hanging so close to the fire that it would burn before anyone had the chance to read it, which was, essentially, what happened.

Finnity, then, edited—it wasn't the book yet, just a manuscript—handed, manhandled it, back to me. The edits had to be argued about, debated. I was incensed, I recensed, reedited in a manner that reoriginated my intentions, then when it was all recompleted and done again and my prose and so my sanity intact I passed the ms. back to Finnity who sent it to production (Rod?), who turned it into proofs he sent to Finnity who printed and sent them to me, who recorrected them again, subtracting a word here, adding a chapter there, before returning them to Finnity who sent them to a copyeditor (Henry?), who copyedited and/or proofread them (Henri?), then sent them to production (Rod?), who after inputting the changes had galleys printed and bound with the cover art (photograph of a synagogue outside Chelm converted into a granary, 1941, Anonymous, © United States Holocaust Museum), the jacket/frontflap copy I wrote myself, not to mention the bio, which I wrote myself too, and the publicity photo for the backflap (© I. Raúl Lindsay), which I posed for, hands in frontpockets moody, within a tenebrous archway of the Manhattan Bridge. All that, including the blurbs obtained from Elie Wiesel and Dr. Ruth Westheimer, being sent out to the critics four months before date of publication (by Kimi! my publicist!), four months commonly considered enough time for critics to read it or not and prose their own hatreds, meaning that galleys, softcover, were posted in spring,

mine delivered around the middle of May—tripping over that package left in my vestibule by a courier either lazy or trusting—though I held a finished copy only in mid-August—after I insisted on nitpicking through the text once again in the hopes of hyphen-removal—when Aar sent to Ridgewood two paramedics who stripped off their uniforms to practice CPR on each other, then gave me a defibrillatory lapdance and a deckled hardcover.

Every September the city has that nervy crisp air, that new season briskness: new films in the theaters where after a season of explosions serious black and white actors have sex against the odds and subplot of a crumbling apartheid regime, the new concert season led by exciting new conductors with wild floppy hair and big capped teeth premiering new repertoire featuring the debuts of exciting new soloists of obscure nationalities (an Ashkenazi/Bangladeshi pianist accompanying a fiery redheaded Indonesian violinist in *Fiddler on the Hurūf*), new galleries with new exhibitions of unwieldy mixedmedia installations (*Climate Change Up: a cloud seeded with ballot chad*), new choreography on new themes (*La danse des tranches, ou pas de derivatives*), new plays on and off Broadway featuring TV actresses seeking stage cred to relaunch careers playing characters dying of AIDS or dyslexia.

September's also the time of new books coming out, of publication parties held at new lounges, new venues. Which was why on that freefloating Monday after Labor Day, with the city returned to itself rested and tanned, my publisher gathered my friends, frenemies, writers, in the type of emerging neighborhood that magazines and newspapers were always underpaying them to christen.

Understand, on my first visits to NY the Village had just been split between East and West. SoHo went, so there had to be NoHo. When I first moved to the city the realestate pricks were scamming the editors into helping reconfigure the outerboroughs too, turning Brooklyn, flipping Queens, for zilch in return, only the displacement of minorities despite their majority. At the time of my party, Silicon Alley had just been projected along Broadway, in glassed steel atop

the Flatiron—each new shadow of each new tower being foreshadowed initially in language (sarcastic language).

Call this, then, as I called it, TriPackFast: the four block triangle north of the Meatpacking District but south of the barred lots for Edison Park-Fast. Or Teneldea: the grim gray area beginning where 10th Avenue switches from southbound to northbound traffic and ending where the elevated rail viaduct crosses that avenue just past the NY offices of the Drug Enforcement Administration.

A pier, jutting midway between where the Lusitania departed and the Titanic never arrived, where steamers and schooners had anchored to unload the old riches of the Old World like gold and silver and copper slaves, before wealth turned from tangible goods and favorable tradewinds to a matter of clicking buttons—where the newest warehouses were filled with “cultural capital”—where “money,” which was still silver in French (*argent*) and gold in German (*Geld*), had become a gentrified abstraction.

A purposefully unreconstructed but rebranded wreckage harbored on the Hudson—the interior resembled a ruin, a rusted halfguttled rectilinear spanse. Hangaresque, manufacturingsque. Previously a drydock, formerly a ropery. Had it just been built, it would’ve been a marvel—the type of modern design that architects and engineers torment themselves over, the natural course of things achieved by falling apart: foundation issues, an irresolvable roof, problems with the electric and plumbing.

A table was set, laid with midpriced wine to be poured not into plastic cups but glass glasses, that’s how intensely my publisher was investing in me, offering red and white and, blushing, trays of stinky chèvres and goudas, muensters, gruyères, a dozen varieties of crackers, veggie stix ’n’ dip, sexual clusters of muscats, sultanas, ruby grapes without seed, selections of meze with pita.

A trio performed klezmer, or rehearsed it, a screechy avantklez that didn’t distinguish between rehearsal and performance: a trumpeter, bass, drums, soloing always in that order.

Copies of the book were piled into pyramids? ziggurats? but ziggs are goyish, the pyramids are for the Jews.

The press began arriving, all my future peers, my colleagues. The newspaper people, the dailies, a half hour fashionable. The magazine people, the weeklies, the monthlies, an hour. Aaron's joke: the longer the leadtime, the later they showed. A cymbal tsked. The bass followed a note and stayed with it, not a note so much as a low throb, as if it were the guest of honor everybody felt they had to notice but nobody much liked to be stuck with, just the excuse for all the busyness swirling—that guest was me, terrified.

I was uncomfortably complimented in my suit, the suit that'd needed shoes, the shoes that'd needed socks, belt, shirt, tie—the only thing I'd already owned was the underwear.

The mic was taken from the trumpeter, tapped. Wine courtesy of Pequot Vintners, beer from Masholu, please join me in thanking our generous sponsors—that was Kimi!

Everyone applauded, drowning her introduction of Finnity.

My book was called “a migrant story,” “a quintessential American tale”—inheritance of loss, bequest of suffering transmitted genetically, the people of the book, after millennia of literacy, interpretation, commentary, the book of the people of the book, at the end of the shelf of the century.

Finnity, all prepped, Harvard vowels and Yale degree, tweedly, leatherpatched not just at elbow but also at shoulder—he would've worn patches on his knees, on his khakis. He mispronounced *tzedakah*, “said ache a,” misused *tshuvah*, “a concern for Israel in the guise of a tissueba,” mentioned the Intifadas, all zealotry being inherently suicidal, democratic pluralisms, Zionisms plural, concluded by saying in conclusion twice, “It's the testimony of two generations,” everyone nodded, “a witness to one America under or over God, with or without God,” and everyone nodded again and clapped.

It was his honor, publishing me.

I dragged up to the front like a greenhorn with a trunk and Finnity went to hug or kiss and I went to shake his hand.

I gave a speech—and the speech was my Acknowledgments (the book itself didn't have any). I had a lot of people to thank. My mother, for one, who fled Poland, for giving me the money to travel

to Poland, only so I could write a book about her life. (I left the inheritance from my father out of it—spent.)

I thanked my Tante Idit and Onkel Menashe, whom I visited and interviewed in Israel, and my cousin Tzila, who drove me directly from a Tel Aviv club to a shabby Breslov minyan in Jerusalem so I could interrogate a former block commander who'd been interrogated before by better, the obscurer relations, honorary inlaws, and strangers who'd responded to my letters from Kraków, Warsaw, Vienna, Graz, Prague, Bratislava, the good people of Los Angeles, and of Texas, Florida, and Maine (survivors), the faculties of Harvard, Yale, and Columbia, and the stern lady clerks of the Polish State Archives, who helped me sift cadastral registries, deportation manifests, and Zyklon B inventories, who not only confirmed Moms's memories—the color of a hat ribbon or shoelace, the flavor of the cream between favorite wafers—but who gave them flesh and future too—the location of Gruntig's butcher stand (by the mikvah, on what became the corner of Walecznych and Proletariuszy Streets), the fate of schoolfriend Sara (Cuba, aneurysm)—assisting with the granular details: how many grams of bread my uncles were allotted in what camp on what dates, how many liters of soup were allotted per prisoner per week/month in what camp vs. the amount on average delivered. How my grandparents last embraced in Zgody Square, Kraków ghetto, 10/28/42, 10:00.

Appreciated—and when I was finished everyone stormed to congratulate me, shake my hand, and Caleb nodded, from a huddle of girls, and Aaron nodded too, gesturing for a smoke above a scrim of critics, reviewers. Someone congratulated me by hugging and kissing and someone said, "Introduce me to your mother." But Moms wasn't in attendance, she hadn't been invited. "She wouldn't have enjoyed it—this isn't exactly her crowd."

I leaned between brass poles, velvet suspended into satisfied smiles. Aar sparked a joint and we smoked it and the air was gassy and my suit was wool and Cal filed out with the girls.

We stumbled down 10th in celebration, or observance—in memoriam—afterparties bearing the same relationship to parties as

the afterlife to life. Straggling to get cash, to get cigs and a handle of vodka, to decipher the Spanish on a wall shrine to a child shot or stabbed, to do chinups on new condo construction scaffolding.

Gansevoort Street: everything smelled like meat and disinfectant. The bouncer was a big black warty dyke bound in leather and chains, checking IDs, grabbing wrists so as to break them, to stamp the back of the hand and someone said, "This is like the Holocaust," and someone said, "The Holocaust wasn't airconditioned neither."

Behind the bar were crushed photographs of the uniformed: cops, firefighters, Catholic schoolgirls. Businesscards between the slats, as if phone fax email were all that held the walls together, all that fused the landfilled island.

The bartender served Cal and me our sodas and we took them to a banquette in the back to mix in the vodka while Aar ordered a whiskey or scotch and while it was being fixed wound his watch and left a bill atop a napkin and left.

Someone had the hiccups, someone slipped on sawdust.

Kimi! publicized by the banquette:

"The deal is the publisher's picking up the tab for beers and wines," and Cal said, "Why didn't you say so?" and Kimi! said, "How many do you need?" and Cal counted how many girls we were sitting with and said, "We need six of both," and Kimi! snorted and Cal stood to go with her, but instead they went to the bathroom.

I had to go to the bathroom too. But all of college was crammed into the stall, Columbia University class of 1992, with a guy whose philosophy essays I used to write, now become an iBanker, let's call him P. Sachs, or Philip S., sitting not on the seat but up on the tank, with the copy of my book I'd autographed for him on his lap—"To P.S., with affect(at)ion" rolling a \$100 bill, tapping out the lines to dust the dustjacket, offering Cal and Kimi! bumps off the blurbs, offering me.

"Cocaine's gotten better since the Citigroup merger."

A knock, a peremptory bouncer's fist, and the door's opened to another bar, yet another—but which bars we, despite half of us being journalists, wouldn't recollect: that dive across the street,

diving into the street and lying splayed between the lanes. Straight shots by twos, picklebacks. Well bourbons chasing pabsts. Beating on the jukebox for swallowing our quarters. “This jukebox swallows more than your mother.” “Swallows more than The Factchecker.”

The Factchecker changed by the party, the season. Any fuckable female publishing professional could be The Factchecker—if it could be proven that she was between the ages of 18 and 26, and that she had fucked precisely zero people since arriving in NY.

Last call was called, and Kimi! went up to tab bourbon doubles for us and for herself a gin and tonic and Cal and I drank ours and even hers and shared a cig between us and my mouth tasted like nickels, like dimes, and my gums needed a haircut.

The lights went up, the jukebox down, I hurled a cueball at the dartboard—Finnity had left with The Factchecker, Cal asked, “Anyone want to come back to my place?”

We still had vodka in the bag, two girls in each cab, two cabs taxiing to the Bowery, to the apartment Cal’s parents, half Jewish and full Connecticut stockbrokers each, had bought for him. I was in the back and he was in the back and Kimi! was between us (The Factchecker’s roommate was up front), and I asked if anyone had talked to Aar but Kimi! was already calling him though she must’ve been calling his office, because he didn’t have a phone on his person, this was before everybody had phones on their persons.

Aar was waiting outside Cal’s building, wrapping his silk scarf around a Russian or Ukrainian or close enough gift—a present to himself shivering in only a frilly cocktail waitress shirt and a drink umbrella skirt and a nametag. Cal poked with the keys, Aar poked his Slav from behind with a handle of rye, and we all crowded into the elevator, stopped on every floor, Kimi! and Missy having plunged into pressing all the buttons.

I’d lit a cig on the street and was still smoking in the elevator and the cig I was smoking was menthol.

Missy, being The Factchecker’s roomie, whining to Kimi! and me about her job as a temp receptionist, and “Why can’t I get a job at an agency?” and “Can you I’m begging you introduce me to Aar?” as Cal scoured around stuffing tightywhities into drawers, as Aar and

his Masha? Natasha? he'd picked up from hostessing the restaurant of the Jersey City Ramada, the same place I'm sure he'd picked up the rye, set about mixing Manhattans.

Cal tidying the shelves, rearranging and flipping what he must've considered the respectable reads, the larger and wider reads, the complement of Brontës, the Prousts, the Tolstoys, centrally and spine out, exchanging the livingroom's Flags of the Confederacy poster for the kitchen's canvas of abstract slashes by a dissentient Union Square Lithuanian, fussing with the stereo, putting on some hip-hop, some rap, clearing away the motivational improve your vocab lectures he worked out to. I left Kimi! and Missy to help him move the treadmill to the bedroom, left him trying to fold the treadmill into the closet at the buzzing, went to the door and buzzed them in: a dozen people, a 12-pack, dangling in the hall, dangling like keys passed from the fire escape to the acquainted, from the acquainted to the strangers they'd invited, assisterati and receptionistas arriving, schedulers and reschedulers early and late, marketing and distribution cultureworkers I didn't know and who didn't know me but we, this was our business, pretended. More pot and coke, which, as P.S. said again, had gotten better since the Citigroup merger. Tequila in the sink, martinis in the shower. Ash in both and in energy drinkables. Masha or Nastya was asking if we had any games and after Cal realized she didn't mean Monopoly mentioned that his neighbor was a firstperson fanatic—not the literary gambit, the gaming—and suddenly six fists were knocking at Tim's door demanding to borrow his system, and Tim, calculus teacher at Stuyvesant, answered the door red and tousled senseless, and hauled into Cal's his system and even connected it to Cal's TV with the bigger screen and bigger speakers, the night bloodied the morning as P.S. and some random hair-curtained-in-the-middle guy tested each other in mortal combat avatared as lasertusked elephants and wild ligers with rocketlaunching claws, as Aar left with his Slav who had to get back to Staten Island by her cousins' curfew, as Tim's girlfriend who had the flu trundled over in a balloonpocked blanket and scowled and sneezed and coughed and left taking Tim but not his system with her, as some random hair-

curtained-in-the-middle guy left with his decentbodied girlfriend, as Cal grinded Missy and took her into the bedroom, as I fumbled with Kimi! and got a burp, which sent her to the bathroom to vomit, which sent Missy to the bathroom to help her, and P.S. kept playing with himself, and in the hall Missy was into hooking up with Kimi! but not Kimi! with Missy, P.S. suggested they call The Factchecker to confirm whether and which sex acts she was perpetrating on Finitty, Missy and Kimi! left, P.S. left with them, and after opening the fiercely bulbed fridge to find expired mustard and ketchup sweating, just sweating, I suggested calling for delivery, but the good place was closed and we were just a block outside the bad place's delivery zone, and the freezer wasn't just out of ice but out of cold from being left open, and there was a cushion wet on the floor in the hall, and there was sleep without dreaming.

I was woken—lumped in the contents of a dumped jar of vitamins—by Kimi!'s phone, which she'd left behind. Cal picked it up, and Kimi! yelled at him and he yelled at me to find the remote, but all I was finding was a jar and vitamins.

Then Kimi!'s phone went dead and Cal was gone.

My mouth tasted like tobacco and mucus and lipgloss, absinthe (strangely), marijuana, coke bronchitis.

I had an ache in the back of my head, and was deciding whether to vomit. The screen was still showing the game, 1 Player, 2 Players, New, Resume, and on the way to the window I stopped to resume the function for the time, but the screen just filled with smoke, the sky with smoke, and in the weeks to come, the months to come, into 2002 when the paperback release was canceled and beyond, my book received all of two reviews, both positive.

Or one positive with reservations.

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Miriam Szlay. Still to this day, I'm not sure whether she made it to the party. Either I didn't notice her, or she was too reluctant to have sought me out, because she was kind. Or else, she might have

skipped it—that’s how kind she was, or how much she hated my susceptibility to praise, or how much she hated paying for a sitter.

I never asked.

Miriam. Her bookstore was a messy swamp on the groundfloor of a lowrise down on Whitehall Street—literature cornered, condescended to, by the high finance surrounding. Before, it’d been a booklet store, I guess, selling staplebound investment prospectuses and ratings reports contrived by a Hungarian Jew who’d dodged the war, and bought Judaica with every dollar he earned—kabbalistic texts that if they didn’t predict commodity flux at least intrigued in their streetside display. At his passing he left the property and all its effects and debts to his children—Miriam, and her older and only brother—who broadened the inventory to include fiction and nonfiction of general interest to the Financial District’s lunch rush, which as a businessplan was still bleak.

Miriam—who kept her age vague, halfway between my own and my mother’s—was the one who ran the shop and hired me: straight out of Columbia, straight out of Jersey, a bridge & tunnel struggler with a humanities diploma between my legs but not enough arm to reach the Zohar. She was inflexible with what she paid me an hour (\$8 or its equivalent in poetry), but was flexible with hours. She respected my time to write, knew that I wasn’t going to be a clerk all my life (just throughout my 20s), knew that a writer’s training only began, didn’t end, with alphabetical order. Another lesson: “subject” and “genre” are distinctions necessary for shelving a book, but necessarily ruinous distinctions for writing a book deserving of shelving.

Miriam was my first reader—my second was her brother, who became my agent. Aaron signed me on her word alone—a demand, not a recommendation—and helped me clarify my projects. A memoir (I hadn’t lived enough), a study of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (I had no credentials), a novel about the Jersey Shore (no story), a collection of linked short stories about the Jersey Shore (no linkages), a long poem conflating the Inquisitions and Crusades (not commercial). Then one fall day in 1996 Aar came back brutalized from Budapest, cabbing from JFK to Whitehall to drop a check with

his sister (the shop would never be profitable). His trip had been coital, not cliental, but out of solicitousness he talked only profitability, Mauthausen, Dachau, family history. That was the moment to mention my mother.

My mother was my book, he agreed, and he met me monthly after work, weekly after I left work to finish a draft, to discuss it—how to recreate dialogue, how to limit perspective—still always meeting at the register, where I'd give my regards to Miriam, and him a check to Miriam, then rewarding ourselves at a café up the block. Not a café but a caffè—as the former could be French, and the latter could only be Italian. Aar taught, I learned: how to tie a Windsor and arrange a handkerchief, how a tie and handkerchief must coordinate but never match, which chef who cooked at Florent also subbed at which Greek diner owned by his brother only on alternate Thursdays, who really did the cooking—Mexicans. Actually Guatemalans, Salvadorans. A Manhattan should be made with rye, not bourbon. Doormen should be tipped. Aar—quaffing a caffè corretto and marbling the table with stray embers from his cig, when smoking was still permitted—knew everything: stocks and bonds and realestate, Freud and Reich, the fate of the vowels in Yiddish orthography, and the Russian E and И conjugations. When was the cheapest day to fly (Tuesdays), when was the cheapest day to get gas (Tuesdays), where to get a tallis (Orchard Street), where to get tefillin repaired (Grand Street), who to deal with at the NYPD, the FDNY, the Port Authority, the Office of Emergency Management, how to have a funeral without a body, how to have a burial without a plot.

9/11/2001, Miriam was bagladying up Church Street to an allergist's appointment. She must've heard the first plane, or seen the second. The South Tower 2, the North Tower 1, collapsing their tridentate metal. Their final defiance of the sky was as twin pillars of fire and smoke.

Sometime, then—in some hungover midst I can't point to, because to make room for the coverage every channel banished the clock—a seething splitscreen showed the Bowery, the street just below me, and it was like a dramatization of that Liberty sonnet, “your

huddled masses yearning to breathe free,” “the wretched refuse of your teeming shore”: the old homeless alongside the newly homeless and others dressed that way by ash, none of them white, but not black either, rather gray, and rabid, being held at bay by a news crew with lashes of camera and mic. I spilled Cal’s mouthwash and spilled myself downstairs, leaving the TV on, and thinking a minty, asinine muddle, about this girl from last night who said she lived on Maiden Lane like she was inviting me there anytime that wasn’t last night, her date she was carrying who said he was too blitzed to make it to Inwood, and thinking about my book, and Miriam, and Aar, and how vicious it’d be to get all voxpop man on the street interviewed, and be both outside and inside at once.

But downstairs the crew was gone, or it never was there—so I went onto Houston and through the park, beyond. Chinatown beyond. Chinatown was the edge of triage. A firetruck with Jersey plates, wreathed by squadcars, sped, then crept toward the cloud. A man, lips bandaged to match his bowtie, offered a prayer to a parkingmeter. A bleeding woman in a spandex unitard knelt by a hydrant counting out the contents of her pouch, reminding herself of who she was from her swipecard ID. A bullhorn yelled for calm in barrio Cantonese, or Mandarin. The wind of the crossstreets was the tail of a rat, swatting, slapping. Fights over waterbottles. Fights over phones.

Survivors were still staggering, north against traffic but then with traffic too, gridlocked strangers desperate for a bridge, or a river to hiss in, their heads scorched bald into sirens, the stains on their suits the faces of friends. With no shoes or one shoe and some still holding their briefcases. Which had always been just something to hold. A death’s democracy of C-level execs and custodians, blind, deaf, concussed, uniformly tattered in charred skin cut with glass, slit by flitting discs, diskettes, and paper, envelopes seared to feet and hands—they struggled as if to open themselves, to open and read one another before they fell, and the rising tide of a black airborne ocean towed them in.

“If you can write about the Holocaust,” Miriam once told me, “you can write about anything”—but then she left this life and left it

to me to interpret her.

A molar was found in the spring, in that grange between Liberty & Cedar, and was interred beneath her bevel at Union Field.

Aar dealt with insurance, got custody of Achsa—Miriam's daughter, Ethiopian, adopted, then eight. He moved her up to the Upper East Side, built her a junglegym in his office. His neighbors complained, and then Achsa complained she was too old for it. He fitted the room with geodes, lava eggs, mineral and crystal concretions, instead.

The bookstore still stood—preserved by its historical foundations from the damage of scrapers. But Aar couldn't keep it up. It wasn't the customer scarcity or rehab cost, it was Miriam. The only loss he couldn't take. He put the Judaica in the gable, garnished the best of the rest and sold it, donated the remainder to prisons, and sold the bookstore itself, to a bank. For an unstaffed ATM vestibule lit and heated and airconditioned, simultaneously, perpetually.

He kept the topfloor, though, Miriam's apartment, tugged off the coverlets that'd been shrouding its mirrors since shiva, moved his correspondence cabinet there, moved his contract binders there—fitted his postal scale between her microwave and spicerack—the entirety of his agency. He kept everything of hers—the bed, dresser, creaky antiques, coffinwood, the clothes, the face products. Took her antianxieties and antidepressants and when he finished them, got prescriptions of his own. Meal replacement opiates—he'd chew them.

The only stuff he moved was Achsa's, in whose old room he set up his rolltop and ergo swiveler. Computer and phone to accept offers, reject offers, monitor the air quality tests. He had different women working as assistants—Erica, and Erica W., and Lisabeth—junior agents in the kitchen, preparing my royalty statements, my rounding error earnings against advance. But on their days off and at nights he'd have his other girls over, his Slavs—helping them through their ESL and TOEFL exams, writing their LaGuardia Community College applications, fucking them, fucking them only in the stairwell, the hall, where Miriam's scent didn't linger—as insomniac corpses came and went for cash below, on a floor once filled with rare gallery

catalogs and quartet partitur, just a ceaseless withdrawing, depositing, fluoresced, blown hot and cold.

Caleb, however—that September made him. He'd done better at history, I'd done better at English, he'd become a journalist directly out of Columbia, with bylines in the *Times*, and I'd become a bookstore clerk, but published first—a book.

Then I fell behind.

What destroyed me, created him—Cal—the sirens were his calling. After filing features on Unemployment (because he was happy with his employment), and The Gay Movement (because he was happy being straight), he put himself on the deathbeat, jihad coverage. He left the Bowery and never came back. He was down at the site round the clock, digging as the searchers dug, as the finders sifted, but for facts. Every job has its hackwork, promotions from horror to glamour. Not to my credit, but that's how it felt at the time.

He tracked a hijacker's route through the Emirates, Egypt, Germany—to Venice, Florida, where he proved himself going through the records of a flight school, turning up associates the FBI had missed, or the CIA had rendered. At a DC madrassa he got a tip about Al Qaeda funding passing through a Saudi charity and pursued it, cashed out on the frontpage above the fold. His next dateline was Afghanistan. He went to war. Combat clarified his style. He had few contacts, no bodyarmor. But when his letter from Kabul prophesied the Taliban insurgency, *The New Yorker* put him on staff. It's difficult for me to admit. Difficult not to ironize. I was jealous of him, envious of risk. The troop embeds, the voluntary abductions, hooded with a hessian sandbag and cuffed, just to tape a goaty madman's babble. He was advantaging, pressing, doing and being important, careering through mountain passes in humvees with Congress.

Cal returned to the States having changed—in the only way soldiers ever change, besides becoming suicidal. He was clipped, brusque, and disciplined—his cynicism justified, his anger channeled. He brought me back a karakul hat, and for the rest of his fandom a .doc, an ms. A pyre of pages about heritage loss, the

Buddha idols the mullahs razed. About treasurehunting, profiteering (Cal's the expert). About the lithium cartels, the pipelines for oil and poppies (Aar told him to mention poppies).

Cal certainly had other offers for representation, but went with Aar on my advice. The book sold for six figures, and got a six figure option, for TV or film, in development, still. I edited the thing, before it was edited, went through the text twice as a favor. But I'll type the title only if he pays me. Because he didn't use my title. Which the publisher loathed. 22 months on the bestseller list: "as coruscating and cacophonous as battle itself" (*The New York Times*, review by a former member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), "as if written off the top of his head, and from the bottom of his heart [...] anguished, effortless, and already indispensable" (*New York*, review by Melissa Muccalla—Missy from my bookparty). The Pulitzer, last year—at least he was nominated.

My famous friend Cal, not recognized in any café or caffè famous but recognized in one or two cafés or caffès and the reading room of the 42nd Street library famous—writerly anti-nonfamous. I've never liked Cal's writing, but I've always liked him—the both of them like family. He's been living in Iowa, teaching on fellowship. All of Iowa must be campuses and crops.

"And I've been working on the next book," according to his email. This time it's fiction, a novel. Aar hasn't read a word yet. Cal won't let it go until it's finished. "And I've been thinking a lot about you and your situation and how you can't be pessimistic about it because life can change in a snap, especially given your talent," according to his email. Don't I know it, my hero, my flatterer.

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Caleb was off warring and I was stuck, ground zero. Which for me was never lower smoldering Manhattan, but Ridgewood. Metropolitan Avenue. Out past the trendoid and into the cheap, always in the midst of transition, enridged. Block-sized barbed-wired disbanded factories. Plants where the bubbles were blown into seltzer and lunchmeats were sliced. My building was an industrial