ALSO BY MELVIN JULES BUKIET

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Nothing Makes You Free

Writings by Descendants of Jewish Holocaust Survivors

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BY BARBARA FINKELSTEIN

Towards the end of June, Lalke and Mendl Decher came to the farm and occupied the spare bedroom on the second floor. Lalke was a third or fourth cousin to my father, his closest living relative, but sufficiently distant so as not to pollute our lineage with her misguided taste in men. Lalke and Mendl had sold their blue jeans stall at the Long-a-coming Farmer's Market and Auction a few months earlier, and having lived out the lease on their apartment in Pleasantville, near the south Jersey shore, were now preparing to ship themselves and their Country Squire station wagon to Israel, which, as Lalke said, was the only place for a Jew to live.

Lalke and Mendl were the two largest Jews I ever saw, looming tall and wide over the dollhouse Szusters. I imagined them as a pair of walking salt and pepper shakers, fit for Goliath's table, or as larger-than-life-scale figures in a natural history museum. They weren't simply tall; their bones, muscles, coloring, angles, and

curves were lost inside dunes of fat. Their elbows and knees were dimpled, their chins terraced into three pouches. Our house was inadequate to withstand Lalke and Mendl's long strides and heavy-footed plodding to the bathroom in the middle of the night to gargle, and contained them as a glass bottle contains a model ship. A child resulting from the union of these two behemoths could only be something as remarkable as the Jersey Devil, but the only child Lalke ever had was with a first husband before the war. A Polish teenager with celebration in his yelp had hurled the child into the air and shot it dead along with its father in a kind of target practice.

From my earliest childhood days, Lalke and Mendl visited us every Sunday evening when the Auction work week ended. They bought Perel, Sheiye, and me Wrigley's chewing gum and hexagons of dark chocolate. With my parents they dined on onions, sardines, and rye bread. Lalke's eyes invariably moistened when she beamed down at Perel and me sitting together, thigh to thigh, in the same armchair, watching *The Ed Sullivan Show.* "Do you know how much your mama and papa love you kids? Do you know what your parents went through?" she asked us in accented English. Our answer was always the same uncomfortable grin and an unspoken prayer to leave us alone. Mendl would position himself between the TV and my sister and me, his simian arms akimbo like those of the Jolly Green Giant. In his half-English, half-Yiddish baritone, he thundered, "Ah, you little monkelach!" He uncrossed his arms only to perform along with Ed Sullivan's comedy routines, particularly ones involving Topo Gigio, the talking Italian mouse, until Lalke summoned him back to the kitchen to discuss business and the war with the adults. Crestfallen, that's how Mendl faced his wife.

Like Sheiye, Mendl had a number of unusual talents. He improvised polkas and ballads on his ever-present accordion; he spoke fluent Yiddish, English, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian, and German, and knew enough Hungarian, Spanish, and Hebrew, as he put it, "*tsi flirteven*"—to flirt with the ladies. I assumed this facility with languages constituted a kind of streetwise genius, a genius that had

enabled him to survive the war. But aside from these musical and linguistic gifts, Mendl was a bungler. Nothing demonstrated this more convincingly than his talent to wring misfortune out of a placid five seconds. He would walk past a perfectly sturdy table and suddenly its wooden leg would crack. He would lay his mitts on you for a kiss and accidentally slam you in the ribs. A car ride with Mendl at the wheel was best spent in reestablished dialogue with a personal God; in his most attentive moments, Mendl drove with one hand on the steering wheel while the other skoaled wild toasting gestures across the expanse of the front seat. His recklessness stemmed, perhaps, from the half gratitude, half resentment he felt towards Lalke, for her business acumen and his parasitic reliance on it.

Mendl, I observed, shrugged off all concern for personal safety and, as a result, endangered us. I remember one case in point three summers before Lalke and Mendl stayed with us. Lalke was sitting in the kitchen, a blue denim apron shielding her voluminous skirt and blouse, complaining about a Puerto Rican couple who had teamed up to steal a shipment of denim caps. Mendl stood in the doorway between the kitchen and living room and gurgled at an Italian trapeze act on *The Ed Sullivan Show.* "O solo mio! Tra-la-la-la-la!" Mendl boomed. He roared at his prankishness and at the embarrassment on my face and Perel's. I looked into the kitchen and caught my father's eye. He snorted his throaty laugh as if to explain that sometimes adults are children. Lalke yelled, "Hey you, *komiker!* Hey you, lover boy! Get your sexy body in here! *A shlak zol dekh trefn! Kim aher!*"

"Sure! Sure! Sure! Sure!" Mendl answered. "Sure" was the latest expression he had picked up at the Auction. Mendl delighted in rolling the English *r* behind his lower teeth, and with each new "Sure," the muscles of his face arched into a new clownish contortion. "In a minute!" he called to Lalke. Imitating one of the Italians tiptoeing daintily across a high wire, he bent down to avoid the low-hanging chandelier that my parents had bought at the Long-a-coming Lighting Supply Store. Mendl pretended to lose his balance

and totter. "Ah, you little monkelach!" he bellowed, and before she knew what had happened, Mendl scooped Perel out of the chair and into his bearish arms.

Against the backdrop of the TV trapeze act and a Strauss waltz, Mendl floated the nine-year-old Perel through the air. "She flies troo de air with duh gradets of ease! Ha! Ha! Ha!" he syncopated with a howl. Perel's eyes turned from brown to black with terror. Her chubby body involuntarily turned rigid, and she strained her head as far from Mendl's lips as possible. When our eyes met, she wordlessly begged me to wrench her free of this madman. In the midst of Mendl's footwork, he bounced Perel's head into the fake brass cone of the chandelier.

The bump Perel received scared her less than the realization that Mendl was truly a danger, and she started to wail. Mendl stopped singing, my mother jumped out of her chair in the kitchen, and a forlorn look of apology filled Mendl's eyes. Perel tore free of Mendl and threw herself around Mama's waist like a five-year-old. Mama stroked her daughter's head, and couldn't contain her anger at Mendl. "*Farvus firste zekh uhp vi a kind!*" Why do you act like a child! she jabbed under her breath.

By now Lalke had heaved herself out of the kitchen seat to investigate the turmoil in the living room. "Whas going on in here?" she asked with a little laugh, assuming that Perel and I had attacked each other over seating rights, or that Sheiye was starting up with us again. When she looked at her husband she understood immediately the source of the problem and cursed, "*Ay, Gey kebenye matre!*"—a half-Yiddish, half-Russian oath that meant something like, "Go lie where your mother lies," which in Mendl's case suggested Auschwitz. "*Antshildik zekh!*" Apologize!

Papa, meanwhile, continued to add dollops of sour cream to the fresh strawberries he and Mama had picked after slaughtering chickens that day. He glanced through the kitchen door, saw that no blood had been spilled, and decided to let us fools thrash out a conclusion, content to learn later from Mama secondhand what had transpired.

In one of his well-considered commentaries, he addressed us all: "*Kinder,* Ed Sullivan *volt zekh gesheymt!* Children, Ed Sullivan would be ashamed! Do you know his wife is a Jew?"

WHAT PUZZLED ME about Mendl was his expression whenever his wife chided him, or whenever my father insisted Mendl had read someone's character all wrong. It was the same glaze of chastisement you see in the round brown eyes of a dog who has trampled through a well-tended flower garden. I remember at least one occasion when that confused look covered Mendl's own brown eyes with something like the rubbery translucent veil separating the white of an egg from its shell.

The incident, which happened a few weeks before his residency with us, grew out of an argument about *The Ed Sullivan Show.*

Sheiye hated *Ed Sullivan.* He preferred *The F.B.I.,* with its dragnet episodes of interstate embezzlement schemes and foreign spies intent on toppling the American government. On that particular summer Sunday evening, Sheiye strode down the stairs from his room, headed directly for the TV, and switched the station Perel and I had been watching.

"What do you think you're doing?" I yelled. "Jesus Christ! You don't even ask permission!"

"According to the Bible, the man is superior to the girl," Sheiye said coolly. "I don't need a little girl's permission."

"Put Ed Sullivan back on, scholar," I said dryly.

"Brantzche," Perel whispered. "Don't say Jesus Christ!"

But Perel was absolutely on my side and ready for fisticuffs. She stopped inspecting her strands of brown hair and jumped up from the floor, where she had been sitting to cool off. Sheiye's hand held fast to the TV dial, and he blocked the screen with his thick waist. "Move!" Perel grunted.

"You better go play with your dolls if you know what's good for you, little girl," Sheiye said.

"You have no right to barge in here while we're watching TV," Perel huffed. "Go back upstairs and squeeze your pimples."

That was the instigation for Sheiye's first blow—and Sheiye's first blow beckoned Perel's return kick. "Who do you think you're kicking?" Sheiye barked, now giving vent to the acid brew forever simmering inside him.

"The last I looked, John Lennon didn't have pimples, so it can't be him!" Perel flung back, preparing to launch another kick at his shins.

Sheiye grabbed Perel's foot and raised it as high as it would go. "Let go of my foot, strawberry patch!" Perel screamed.

"We'll see who's a strawberry patch!" Sheiye blustered. He shoved his face, covered with a sheath of acne scars, into Perel's, holding her leg all the while. To her discredit, Perel started screaming in earnest, for we both knew that screaming only incensed Sheiye. In fact, Sheiye's sole victory as a high school wrestler had come after his opponent shouted in an attempt to distract him. "First the bastard screamed at me, and then he ripped a hole in my T-shirt," Sheiye had gloated. "That was the final straw. I had him pinned in three moves." Now Perel's cries unnerved Sheiye; when Perel's mouth was open, Sheiye spat into it. Perel looked as if she had bitten into a piece of putrid meat. She didn't dare swallow or say another word lest Sheiye's saliva roll down her gullet.

"Taste good, little girl?" Sheiye laughed.

Perel spat Sheiye's saliva back at him, and it landed on his mouth.

"Right in the kisser!" I cheered.

"Who said anything about kissing?" Sheiye said. "If kissing's what you want, little girl, kissing's what you'll get!" And he dove towards Perel's lips.

This time when Perel started screaming, she turned her head to the side. Not content with spitting at Perel's neck, Sheiye pushed her against the TV. Weary of the domestic quarrel, the TV whined, and a tiny white dot sucked its image towards the center of the screen, making it disappear like the powder cleanser that concentrated a

household's dirt into a pinpoint and whisked it away inside a white tornado.

When the audio spiraled down into a steady low buzz, the four adults in the kitchen, who had been reconstructing the war's chronology, bustled into the living room. First came Mama, her cheeks bulging with challah; behind her followed Lalke and Mendl; last came Papa, whose appearance at all warned that his patience had finally been challenged, and that as a result he could rationalize any unpleasant consequences. This moment was always the pivotal point in any of our intersibling battles. Whose side would Mama and Papa take? Their son disappointed them; he preferred go-carts to *Gemara*. A scene like this could provide an opportunity to take a potshot at Sheiye's failures. Or Mama and Papa might feel responsible for their son's academic limitations, in which case they would rage at Perel and me for highlighting them. Oftentimes the causes of our conflicts were irrelevant. What mattered most was our parents' momentary disposition towards each of their children, and the point at which they had been interrupted in their war chronology.

This time they took their cue from Mendl. He was genuinely shocked by the sister-brother hostilities; this evening was the first time ever he had viewed them outright. His eyes widened, and he swallowed with effort. You could see the fantasy that Mendl had cultivated about our family disintegrate into horror at Sheiye's bullying. "*Farvus nemste eym nisht tsen* a psychiatrist?" Why don't you take him to a psychiatrist? Mendl asked. His jaw dropped. "A boy his age shouldn't act like this."

Towering above, Lalke reminded us, as she always did, "Do you kids know what your parents have been through?"

My mother was ashamed that outsiders had witnessed our bellicose intimacy. She sighed, "We should have enrolled him in a yeshiva. We have friends in Brooklyn . . ."

"Makh zekh nisht narish," Papa said, opting for the sympathy stance. In Papa's eyes, ganging up against a petty mischief-maker was an act of cowardice. "He'll outgrow it," he reasoned.

"He's already eighteen years old," I protested.

"An eighteen-year-old is barely out of diapers," Papa said. "The only thing an eighteen-year-old boy can do is beat you up, and that's what Sheiye did."

Sheiye smirked, but Papa turned towards him and said, *"Ti mir a toyve 'n trug zekh up."* Do me a favor and beat it. That was Papa's way of democratically expressing his displeasure with all of us. Perel, meanwhile, had already pressed herself against the wall, just in case Papa held her responsible for disrupting the evening's peace.

Sheiye had been counting on a victory, and disappointment lodged in a tic under his eye. "You all make me sick, sick, sick!" he said angrily. He headed out into the night.

My mother blanched. "Where are you going? It's dark outside!"

"I'm obeying my father," Sheiye said, enunciating each word. With his chin thrust forward, he added, *"Yekh trug zekh up."*

At such moments, I could never predict my father's reaction. He would raise his eyes not quite heavenward but lower, more likely to the bathroom upstairs. You might debate whether he was about to smile or begin raging. His thin lips, shiny with sweat and supplication, seemed uncertain how to respond to the present situation. If anything, they looked about to question God's sanity in parceling out such a bad lot of children to him, especially in light of everything he had already suffered. With a look that said God's wisdom is not often apparent, Papa returned to the kitchen, the neutral zone.

Perel was satisfied with Papa's judgment. She said through the screen window, "Yeah, Queero, take a walk."

"*Kinder,* please!" Mama pleaded. "A brother and sister should love each other. *Alevay!* If only I could have my brother near me now!"

"Mama, you and your brother love each other so much that you're here and he's in Israel," I said.

More exhausted from fighting with us than from working in the slaughterhouse, Mama concluded, *"Luz mekh tsi-ri."* Let me be. She returned to Lalke, back in the kitchen, to my father, and the sardines. I had the feeling she wanted to whip something more caustic

at me but decided that silence was wiser. Immediately I regretted my nastiness, but knew my behavior wouldn't alter much in the future. This, I realized, was the attitude my father described when he said, "Children: That's their nature," just as he would say when a chicken scratched him, "Chickens: That's their nature."

Mendl, his eyes bright with undeserved guilt, was so distraught by the recent episode that he walked outside with his accordion, settled himself and the wheezing instrument on the bench behind the house, and played "Moscow Nights" to the fireflies and mosquitoes. I looked through the kitchen window to see him, and possibly Sheiye too. Against the silhouettes of the three chicken coops, Mendl swayed slowly from side to side. When the accordion expanded, Mendl leaned back to encourage the flow of air; when he closed it up, he nearly collapsed over it, proprietary, hugging the sound to his massive chest. The squat, wide box instrument was made in Mendl's image like a son, a friend who understood him when no one else did. He went on playing lullabies and folk melodies, dotting his meaty fingers gracefully on the Chinese-checker pattern of the accordion, consoling himself for Sheiye's behavior as if he himself had spat on Perel and broken the TV. When the stars cordoned off the streak of clouds in the black sky, Lalke stole up behind her husband and cushioned her pillowy arms around him.

As the move to Israel drew closer, Mendl became giddy. He danced across the kitchen floor, singing to Perel and me in the living room, "I'm going to be a *halutz!* I'm going to be a pioneer! Watch out, you Arabs! Oh, sure! I'm gonna get you!" He pantomimed loading a machine gun and took aim at Lalke's head. "Very funny, buster," she said in English, and returned to a Bashevis Singer story in the *Jewish Daily Forward.*

Lalke's silent concentration just then was atypical. For the most part, the seriousness of her current plan did not sow a pensive attitude in her, and she still talked up a storm. I discovered how easy it

was to muffle the Yiddish language into gibberish. I did not want to listen to Lalke or my parents; all their thoughts were stuck, glued like feathers to the revolving cylinder of a slaughtering machine. If I wasn't careful, this language would transmit their ugly obsession to me and derange me as it had deranged them. Yiddish, with its strictures and death tallies, was a poison. Nobody healthy, nobody carefree, spoke it. I panicked that so much Yiddish had already seeped into my consciousness and wondered if I could possibly achieve total illiteracy in it. After all, my father claimed that the Polish language visited such unbearable memories on him that he had obliterated it from his mind.

My program for amnesia was not successful. In spite of my intentions, I, and Perel, could not help but understand one of the adults' more pragmatic discussions: To whom would Lalke and Mendl sell their white '62 Cadillac?

Mendl wanted it to go to someone at the Auction, a Puerto Rican woman with hoop earrings and red lipstick. My father tried to persuade Mendl rather to sell it to a man named Lonik, a war survivor, who delivered eggs to grocery stores and farmers' markets throughout south Jersey. Lonik had recently had a run of bad luck: His wife had changed the lock on their front door and demanded that he never cross the threshold again or she would have him arrested for trespassing. The title deed was in the wife's name, and Lonik had no recourse but to obey. At least Lonik's children stuck by him. He said that the children had always wanted a Cadillac, and to reward their loyalty he would buy one for them. In the course of the story, Lalke dabbed her eyes with the corner of her skirt and agreed that Lonik should get the car.

"Mendl," my father said, as if to a child. "If you can help a fellow Jew, why not do it?" Shaking his head to clear away pictures of past adversity, he added, "You remember how much the *goyim* helped us. . . ."

"But I promised," Mendl persisted stubbornly. "She's my friend."

Mama and Papa stared at each other in amazement. The concept of friendship bewildered them. Adults didn't have friends; they had a

husband or a wife. Lalke stood up to reach for a toothpick in the dish cabinet, sat down again, and began picking at her teeth. "You'll be better rid of such 'friends,'" she winced. "I've put up with your 'friends' long enough."

"She cares more about me than you do," Mendl said, defending himself in a battle he knew was already lost.

Sensing her advantage, Lalke continued, "That's right; I have to put up with your 'friends' long enough and now it's my turn to throw some weight around." Turning towards my father, Lalke said, "Get in touch with this righteous Lonik and tell him the car is his for four hundred dollars." She underscored her resolution with a spontaneous burst of sympathy: *"Got zol eym up-hitn!"* God protect him, poor soul!

"Okay, sister," Mendl said in English. "You win this one, but you're not gonna make me sell the guns."

"The guns?" my mother echoed. She focused alternately on each face at the table. "What guns?"

Lalke may have been a big-mouth, but she also possessed a candor that could momentarily humble her. Embarrassed, she stated simply, "He has guns. A pistol and a rifle. He target-practices in Pleasantville with the *shvartse* and Puerto Ricans he meets at the Auction."

"And now you're gonna ruin my life by taking me to Israel," Mendl shouted. "The least you can do is let me protect you from the Arabs."

My mother: "A Jew should own guns? For pleasure?" Stunned, she sat forward, and her elbow jostled a glass of iced tea. A line of light-brown liquid streamed down its side and onto the tablecloth.

"Now you know what I've put up with all these years," Lalke lamented. "Other women . . . *shvartse* . . . Puerto Ricans . . . guns. Mendl doesn't care about his own kind. He never did." Facing her husband, Lalke said bitterly, "A Judenrat bum! That's what you were and that's what you still are!"

"My friends are all better than you!" Mendl fumed. The impending isolation, which life in Israel threatened, threw Mendl into a

panic, and he cried, "The Jews—the Jews are scum! I'm not going to Israel and that's that!"

"Yeah, yeah, sure, that's that, lover boy," Lalke said. "That's that and you'll do as I say or end up a fat bum on the street. Then we'll see where your friends are!"

Simultaneously, my mother and father demanded, "Mendl, you have to sell the guns."

"They're my guns," he said.

Whereupon Mama, Papa, and Lalke began discussing the issue among themselves. In a hushed voice, Mama said, "Lalke, if you don't sell them now, you'll have trouble in Israel. Who knows what he's capable of doing?"

"Who are any of you to tell me what to do?" Mendl cried. That bright, guilty look returned to his eyes and suddenly Mendl understood: He had nothing in common with Lalke or the Szusters! Mendl belonged in south Jersey, at the Auction, on the Boardwalk, at the gun club, with people who accepted him. What good were the Jews? They were choking him. In a rage, he burst out, "I'm taking both guns with me and I'm gonna kill as many Jews as I can!" And with a rebelliousness as much impotent as fierce, Mendl picked up Mama's glass of tea and hurled it to the floor.

From my vantage point in the living room, I saw Mama's lips part, about to order him to clean up the mess. But she was too afraid and wouldn't look Mendl in the eye. Perel began splitting strands of her hair, and torn between eavesdropping and hiding, she compromised by taking off her glasses to handicap at least one of her senses. Papa looked in at me and burst out laughing, maybe to assure me that Mendl was only temporarily acting flooey and there wasn't anything to worry about.

Mendl flew out of the kitchen door, this time without his accordion. I wondered how long he could entertain himself solely with his anger. The accordion would have kept him occupied indefinitely.

With Mendl out of earshot, Mama looked earnestly at Lalke, now on her knees collecting the broken glass, and said, "He's a maniac!

Why didn't you ever tell me? Lalke, you have to get a divorce. You're still young enough to find another man in Israel. Divorce Mendl in Israel. The government will take care of him. You've done your share."

"I can't divorce him," Lalke said. "He needs me. Who'll take care of him the way I do?"

"Lalke, do you know Mendl propositioned me once at the Auction? He set up a mattress behind a curtain and expected me to—to do you know what!"

I tried to catch Perel's eye, but her face was now completely curtained by her long, brown, splitting hair.

"Promise me you'll get a divorce," Mama begged. *"Er iz meshige!"*

Unable to surrender this picture of Mendl as a lunatic, Mama looked at no one in particular and suddenly announced her revelation: "He doesn't have a brain. He's just an inflated piece of meat that you have to feed every day." Mama puffed out her cheeks to underline the point.

Lalke looked tired. Her admission of shame after so many years of secrecy carved out a lull in this interfamily battle, and with her only soldier gone AWOL, the major general admitted defeat. Her shoulders sagged and her blue-winged glasses slid down her hefty nose. She shook her head sadly. "I can't put him out in the street like a dog. He wasn't this bad in the beginning. I swear he wasn't. The war made him go a little off his rocker, being a policeman for the Nazis and everything, but I thought that in time, with someone to take care of him, he would recover his senses. I just didn't know."

Lalke wrapped the pieces of broken glass in an *Inquirer* and threw the bundle in the garbage. Mama started to continue her imprecations, but Lalke cut her off. She looked squarely at my parents and said, *"Vi volt gekent zahn andersh, az Hitler, yimakh shemoy, iz dokh geveyn der shadkhn?"* What do you expect, with Hitler—God damn him!—as our matchmaker?

The three sat in a kind of silent memorial to the war dead, until Mendl finally walked through the screen door, determination in his

eyes. "If I have to go to Israel, I'll kill the Jews," he said. As Mendl passed Mama, he kicked at her chair. "You're so smart you tell yourself when to bleed! You hear me!" he yelled, on a rampage against all manifestations of female intelligence. He thudded past Perel and me, up the stairs to the guest room. Perel's glasses forded the river of hair covering her face. She still refused to look at me and studied the grating on the window fan, as if it mattered more than anything else.

"I'll kill you! I'll break your neck!" Mama screamed. "I'll kill you if you talk to me again!"

Papa laughed at Mama's hysteria and told her not to talk *narishkeyt*.

As far as I know, Mendl never killed anyone, either Arab or Jew, though rumor has it that he was arrested once for wielding a sawed-off pipe through Ramat Gan. And Lalke never divorced him, though she had ended up promising my mother she would.

I guess it takes a person like Lalke Decher to understand endurance. Only someone who has married out of penance or pity, or out of physical love, long past, can believe that loyalty must override expedience. And so Lalke has always tried to reunite me with my parents, convinced by the example of her own life that no man should put asunder what God hath wrought. If not for Lalke, I might have either glorified or excoriated Mama and Papa. But she alone has kept my parents life-sized for me; she has shown me that their flaws were often honeycombed with goodness. It is thanks to Lalke that I received a brown mailer last summer containing cassette tapes and a note in misspelled English: "I always taut you kits shud no wat your parents wet troo. It is not to lat for this taps to do som god."

Lalke, for the first time I did not shrug off that silly, worn phrase of yours. For the first time I saw you as a canny mediator, not just as a fool who married the wrong man. I suppose a woman who has lived nearly forty years with "an inflated piece of meat" works around obstacles.

Every few weeks I listen to those tapes the way observant Jews listen to their rabbi's sermon on Shabbos. I pore over the stories and their possible interpretations, flicking on fast forward and reverse, just as yeshiva boys burn their eyes out over *Pirke Avot*. In case my parents think my soul abandoned my body and that the Szusters and the farm are only remote oddities to me, I designate you, Lalke, as intermediary to tell them it isn't true. Tell them this kid wants to understand what we went through.