

Out of the Depths

My name is Stephen, Stevie for short, and I first met Abraham Weissman in the old neighborhood at Grand and Harlem near the Grand Movie Theater. The neighborhood was run-down; I guess you'd call it lower middle-class. Most of the people who lived in the apartments adjoining the theater were immigrants; no one grew up in this area; they just came here while they waited to make more money and move to one of the better neighborhoods, or held on for awhile before descending to a worse neighborhood. I guess it was kind of like purgatory; everyone waiting for another opening, until it was time for them to move on.

Like most people, I thought Abraham was eccentric, maybe even stupid, when I first encountered him. Of course, I was all of thirteen at the time, so what did I know? I was working as an usher at the Grand Movie Theater, I was big for my age, and I ran into him once in awhile around the theater.

I suppose I didn't think much of him, just some old guy who wandered around the neighborhood, until one day Dante, the manager at the Grand Movie Theater, asked me if I wanted to make some extra money. Dante knew that I needed the money; my father died a few years before, and I could always use the cash to pay for school or help make ends meet around the house. I guess my mother and I were waiting to move on; it's just that

we didn't know in which direction we'd be moving. Dante was all heart: he only took half of the money I made for a month to "show my appreciation" to him.

"Come on, I'll introduce you to Abe, you'll be cleaning his office once a week, and he'll pay you ten bucks. Remember, I get half for the first month, since I facilitated your introduction."

"You what?"

"I facilitated your introduction, you stupid little shit. That means I brought you two together, so I ought to be paid for it."

"Dante, you're a prince among men."

"So I've been told. Anyway, this job is real easy: you clean his office once a week and you get paid ten bucks. Abe's not very hard to get along with, so don't screw this up. John had this job for five or six years before you."

John was an ex-usher at the Theater who was Dante's godson, or something. Dante was always talking about how John was great at this, or great at that; he joined the Army and was being shipped-off to someplace called Vietnam. I guess John got his moving papers, all right.

We walked into the apartments on the left-hand side of the building as it faced Grand Avenue, and went up two flights of stairs. We stopped in front of the first door on the second floor of the building. A half-pane of

frosted glass with the words "Abraham Weissman, G.P." in black lettering was etched on the door. The black lettering was fading. Dante knocked, and then walked in. Abraham greeted us as we entered; it was then that I realized that Abraham was the little old guy I'd seen walking around the neighborhood; the one that I thought was slow, or something.

"Hello, Dante. This must be my new apprentice, am I right?"

"Yeah, Abe, such as he is."

"Abraham."

"Say what?"

"My name is Abraham."

"Yeah, whatever. Anyway Abe, this is Stevie. He's no John, but then again, who is? Of course, he's related to me, so it should come as no surprise that John'll be a war hero. Johnnie's been good at everything he's done, unlike some of the kids in this jerk-off neighborhood. I'll just be leaving now, so you two get to know one another; show him around, tell him how you want the office cleaned, okay? And if he screws up, don't be afraid to cuff him upside the head."

Dante walked out the room, accompanied by a "putz" from Mr. Weissman, uttered under his breath. I immediately liked him.

"Well, Stephen, I suppose he's taking part of the first month's pay for introducing us, am I right?"

"Yeah, how did you know?"

"A lucky guess. Well, here's my hand, we'd better shake you know; it's the start of a good friendship, I hope. Come on, I'll show you what needs to be cleaned each week, point out the supplies, and show you where to throw the waste. If you need new supplies, just buy them and leave the bill, I'll include it in your next week's pay."

And so Abraham and I shuffled through the office, as he pointed out what needed to be done, and I kept track of everything he said. We decided that Wednesday was to be the weekly cleaning day; on Thursdays I had to change the signs in front of the theater, although for the last couple of years, The Grand Movie Theater played porno flicks, so it didn't really make any difference what the signs read.

After showing me what needed to be cleaned, and where the supplies were located, Abraham handed me a ten dollar bill, and walked out the door. I cleaned the office and walked home at about nine that night.

I continued to clean the office for several months, never really seeing Mr. Weissman, but each week I found an envelope addressed to me on his desk top, with a ten-dollar bill inside. Once in awhile, he left me a short note, asking how I was doing, and reminding me to keep up my studies at school.

School was a joke. I hated being there. What a waste of time: we had to read a bunch of bullshit books that were supposed to influence us, or something. I needed to make money, not waste my time reading. I guess I didn't have the heart to tell Mr. Weissman that I thought school was a crock of shit. There were a couple of good things about school, those being Patty Battaglia's tits, but she got knocked-up, and they were officially off limits till she had her kid.

Anyway, I'd been cleaning Doc Weissman's office for maybe five or six months, pocketing my money, and working at the show on Thursdays, and at Jimmie Colangelo's hot-dog stand on the weekends. I wasn't exactly rolling in dough, but I was doing okay. I guess it was getting to be early spring, maybe close to Easter, when I spotted this old, yellowed paper under the glass on Doc Weissman's desk. I lifted the glass, took out the paper and looked at it for awhile, but I couldn't read it; it was written in some kind of foreign language, maybe German. Like I said, it was pretty yellow, but I remember the pictures pretty distinctly; they had a bunch of bodies piled one on top of another in a big heap, and they all were real skinny and sickly looking. It gave me the creeps, so I put it back under the glass on the desk.

Doc Weissman happened to be working late the next Wednesday when I came into the office to start cleaning. I began by sweeping the floor, and was getting ready to start mopping-up, when I noticed that Doc was sitting at his desk and staring off into space.

"What's up doc?" I always said that to him because he thought it was sort-of funny; I guess he thought I made that up—he didn't have a television, so he didn't know about Bugs Bunny.

"What, what's that Stephen?"

"What's up – you gatherin' wool somewhere?"

"Gathering wool, oh you mean thinking? Yes, I was reminiscing; I do that a lot at this time of year."

"What, at springtime; is it somethin' about being Jewish?"

He started to laugh, slowly at first, and then real hard; I thought he might have a seizure or something. He stopped after awhile, and said yeah, it's something about being Jewish, but didn't say anything else. Now I don't know a lot about being Jewish, I'm a Roman Catholic myself, but not too strict, if you know what I mean. I don't really like going to Church and listening to those priests saying mass in Latin like they're gonna swallow their tongues or something.

Anyway, I fill up the bucket with detergent and cleaner, and make like I'm gonna start mopping-up. Doc looks up at me and says, out of nowhere "Stephen, do you know about Passover?"

I guess I sort of looked at him like he had an extra eye growing out of his head, or that he was talking to me from a burning bush, cause I had no idea what he was talking about.

"Passover is the Jewish holiday that celebrates the delivery from Egypt. In your religion, Jesus came to Jerusalem during the feast of Passover."

I guess I kept on looking at him like he was nuts or something, especially when he tried to feed me that line about Jesus and Passover, and all that. So I sort of grunted, and started to mop; after all, I had a lot to do.

"I think a lot about my life in Germany at Passover time, also around September, when atonement comes around."

So here I am thinking about getting out of the office before ten o'clock at night, and he's talking to me about some kind of Jewish religious stuff. "Oh well," I think to myself, "I suppose I have to pretend to listen to him, he's paying me, after all," and I put down the mop and walk over to his desk. That's when I notice that he's taken the yellowed piece of paper out from under the glass, and is holding it in his hand. He looked at me, funny-like, as if I'd farted or something, and said "have you seen this before?"

What could I say; I didn't want to lie to the old guy, he really was kind of nice, so I said yes.

"Do you know what it is?"

"No, it's pretty creepy, though."

"It's Auschwitz, a German concentration camp in the Second World War. I was held there for a little over three years during the war. I guess

it's a miracle that I made it through the camp at all; that is, if I believed in miracles."

"Yeah, I guess so. But why don't you believe in miracles?"

"Well, God and I had a disagreement. He insisted that six million people should die in Auschwitz and places like it, and I thought maybe they should live, so we agreed to disagree." And slowly, he started crying, a little at first, and then he sat there sobbing, his whole body shaking violently, so that I thought he was going to fall out of his chair.

I didn't know what to do; I'd never seen a man cry like that before. At first, I stood there, and just looked at him for awhile, but the crying continued. So I walked up to him and hugged him; I don't know what made me do that, but it seemed like the right thing to do. So I stood there for awhile, and he gradually stopped crying, and I guess I sort of stopped hugging him.

I started to mop the floor, and he put the yellowed piece of paper under the glass, put on his coat and floppy hat, the kind they call a fedora; but this one didn't have much of a shape, and walked out the door. I finished mopping up, emptied the waste cans, polished the furniture, and went home for the evening. It was close to midnight, and I had to get up to go to school the next morning.

Anyway, next Wednesday, I go over to Doc's to clean-up, and he's in the office, sitting at his desk. "What's up doc?" I say as I walk in, like I

always do. He laughs, like he always does, but I can tell something's bothering him.

"Hey Doc, you okay?"

"I'm fine, Stevie, do you have a minute to talk?"

"Sure Doc, anything for you." Now when I said it, I sort of said it like I always did, more like: yeah, right, whatever you say. But with doc, I meant it, cause he was a good guy, even if he was a little different. So he waves me over to his desk, and takes out the picture again.

"Last week, I showed you this picture, and told you about being in this camp for three years. Do you mind if I tell you about it; I've never really talked about it to someone? Of course, if you don't want to hear it, just say so, and you can get back to work."

I was kind of shocked; no one had ever asked me to listen to anything important before. So I pulled up the chair next to the desk, and sat down. We spent the next three hours talking about his life at Auschwitz.

He'd been a surgeon in Germany when the war started, and had a wife and a young daughter. At first, the Germans didn't bother him, and then they came around to all the houses in the neighborhoods and started rounding-up the Jews. He and family were sent to a camp, where they were separated, like most of the other people; and when they found out he was a surgeon, they put him to work tending people.

The work was brutal; he'd never seen people so maimed and injured in his life; when he'd asked the guards how these people received their injuries, they'd just laugh. One day, they "asked" him to accompany them to an "operating" room. He was sorry that he'd asked about the injuries after attending the "surgeries" performed in the "hospital." He was sick at heart for weeks afterwards, and refused to cooperate with the guards in attending to the sick. So, they beat him, but not so much that he couldn't use his hands to operate or administer to the "patients." Eventually, he came round and started helping the people in the concentration camp, but not because of the beatings he'd received, but because he could ease someone's pain, even if only for awhile.

As he told me his story, he had a faraway look, as if he were seeing everything again for the first time. His eyes filled with tears on a couple of occasions, and the veins in his forehead pulsed as he told me of the brutalities he'd witnessed.

I don't know what made me ask him, but as soon as I did, I'd known that I'd made a mistake. He didn't flinch or scold me, just gave me that far-away look when he told me that he never saw his wife or daughter again. And then, he was through.

"That's all, there is no more. That's my story, such as it is." Then he put on his coat, pulled his beat-up hat on his head, and walked out the door. We never talked about it again.

I guess my impressions about Doc Weissman changed after that night. I'd never paid much attention to him when I saw him walking around the neighborhood, I just assumed, like everyone else, that he was an eccentric old man. After that night, I started to pay more attention to him; he'd earned the right to be something more than just another face in the crowd.

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised to know that he did more than wander around the neighborhood. On Tuesdays, he'd walk a few miles to the old people's home, where he'd spend the day talking, reading and telling jokes to the people who were confined there, in between his formal doctor's calls.

On Wednesdays, he'd take the bus to the hospital, where he'd make his rounds visiting patients, especially the little kids who he was so fond of. On Fridays, he'd go down to the free clinic a few miles east on Grand avenue to one of those neighborhoods that were slightly poorer than ours; a neighborhood where people went when they moved down from our area. He'd tend to the sick and hurt, make small talk with the homeless, people who at the time were called "bums."

Patty Battaglia, the girl with the nice tits who got knocked-up, started talking about having an abortion when she was something like five or six months pregnant. It probably wasn't any of my business, but I asked her to go see Doc Weissman before she did anything stupid. At first, she told me to mind my own business, since it wasn't my kid, but eventually, she agreed

to go see Doc. I'm glad she did, because he talked her into giving the baby up for adoption. He even went to school to talk to the nuns, who'd been giving her a hard time, and calling her a whore. I wasn't around, but Patty told me he said something about how Jesus forgave Mary Magdalene, and how she stopped being a whore after that. The nuns stopped calling Patty a whore after that, and one of them even hugged her. I think Doc made an impression on Patty too, cause after she had the baby, she wouldn't let me feel her up any more. If it had been anyone else, I'd have been pissed, but I couldn't be pissed at Doc Weissman; and I suppose he was right when he told me that I should treat Patty more like a lady.

I started to hang out with Doc more and more, and I even went with him to some of the hospitals and the old people's home. I guess we were both looking for something: I was looking for a father, and he was looking for the family he left behind in Germany.

I'm not one for writing or anything like that; like I said, I hated school. We had to write an assignment about our fathers for class, and I didn't know what to do. So I wrote about Doc Weissman, how he lived in the prison camp, and how he helped everyone and all that, and how he had an argument with God. And I said that of all the people I knew, he was the best, almost like he was holy; and that it was funny how he didn't believe in God, when so many people who did believe were such jerks. I guess I was just glad to get the writing over, and I didn't think much of it, so I was really

surprised when the nuns told me that I'd won some kind of contest at school and that I was supposed to go downtown to read the paper, and that Doc was supposed to go with me. They even put my picture in the local paper, and said that I won a writing contest, and that I was going downtown to read the paper.

I was pretty happy about the contest, and I went to his office after school to tell him, but he wasn't there. I went back the next day, and still no Doc, so I walked to the old people's home, and then to the hospital, but no one had seen him. I was getting kind of worried, so I walked over to his apartment, which was on the other side of the Grand Movie Theater, on the third floor, where the cheaper apartments were located.

I walked up the three flights of steps, knocked on his door and waited: no answer. So I knocked again, and turned the door-knob. The door opened, so I walked in. I found him sitting on his chair in the living room. He had a copy of my newspaper clipping in one hand, and a book in the other. The book was old, with a leather cover, and had seen a lot of wear. The top-most corner of the page was folded over, like it had been used as a poor-man's book-marker. I looked at the words on the page as the tears ran down my cheek:

Out of the depths I call You, O Lord:
O Lord, listen to my cry;
Let your ears be attentive
To my plea for mercy.

If you keep account of sins, O Lord,
Lord, who will survive?
Yours is the power to forgive
So that you may be held in awe;

I look to the Lord;
I look to Him;
I await His word.

I am more eager for the Lord
Than watchmen for the morning,
Watchmen for the morning.

O Israel, wait for the Lord;
For with the Lord is steadfast love
And great power to redeem.
It is He who will redeem Israel for all their iniquities.

Abraham Weissman had moved on, and I was sure of the direction he
had taken.