

1.

WHAT WAS KNOWN, OR RATHER “KNOWN,” ALL OVER JERUSALEM

JERUSALEM, it was known all over Jerusalem, the holy city, that Shmulik Gafni, Overlyfull Professor, Chairman and Distinguished University Researcher of Yiddish language, Literature, Culture and Folklore on the Mendl and Sadie-Yentl Eizenbahn Chair of Yiddish Studies at the University of Israel, the most famous scholar of Yiddish in the world, not only by his own estimation but in the estimation of others, for instance a fellow scholar, Sh. Meichl-Rukzak, who was himself a leading candidate for that honorific, in an interview with *The New York Times* (with the help of a translator) called Shmulik Gafni “Mister Yiddish” (but everyone, aware of their rivalry, said it was just a sarcastic jibe), married for more than forty years was he, forty not being the mythical forty of the Bible, a ubiquitous Biblical cipher, but a metaphor for a long long stretch of time, which by all objective accounts a forty-year marriage truly is, married not to two or three women, mind you, like most non-Yiddish scholars, with a graduate assistant and/or secretary on the side (the female side, to be sure), for Yiddish scholars tend to be more conservative (one to one-and-a-half wives at most), forty not being an aggregate of marriage years, a sum of various unions, but the number of years he’d been with one woman, Batsheva was her name, and for her there was only one man too, a goodlooking, bright and witty man was Shmulik, who had attained the Biblical three score and ten (he loved Biblical numbers, and names too, witness his choice of mate) in good health more or less (the less was a minor heart attack some years back for which he briefly took medications and, reluctantly, after much coaxing by Batsheva, now grumblingly wore an electric monitor called the *Chaver* or friend, based on the American model known as the “Companion,” which he never yet had to use, didn’t know the workings of, except maybe press a button), with sparkling grey eyes compressing a gleam that could be ironic, sardonic, impatient and disarmingly affectionate in rather quick order, a mellifluous baritone speaking voice, which even when he spoke privately at home rang out with a lecturer’s boom whose authority, charm and fluidity of nuance excited all his girl students,

especially when he smiled and his powerful teeth shone and the laugh lines at the corner of his wolf-grey eyes crinkled and he ran his hand through his full head of wavy steel grey sprinkled hair, hair that once years back when he was on a research trip an old Italian barber in New York held up like a bunch of asparagus and said to him, “You gotta healthy heada haira, you never ever gonna getta balda,” a prognostication that held true, even forty years later, and a look in his eyes that combined boyish shyness, even at seventy, and worldly assurance, with a thirty-four-year-old son, Yosef, twin daughters, Rivka and Rachel, forty-three, and twin granddaughters, Penina and Zehava (one from each daughter, explanation coming), one of whom, the elder, though both were born precisely at the same second, now had a one-year-old son, which made a great-grandfather of Shmulik Gafni, a name he hadn’t had of course back home in Warsaw, his pre-World War II hometown, but which he changed from Weingarten, “wine garden” (easy enough, right?, who says you don’t know Yiddish?), an imposing name with rhythm and élan, with tri-syllabic balance and a triad of different vowel neumes, even a tone-deaf man saying “Weingarten” sounded as though he’d just finished rehearsing for a lieder recital, Shmulik dropping the Weingarten after being told privately, discreetly, but in no uncertain terms that the authorities in Israeli higher education, 1950 was the year, just two years after Independence, not too keen on Yiddish in the first place, in fact, truth to say, because we offer here no make-believe, but the whole truth and nothing but the truth (see Epigraph, the second one, by Cicero), as American court clerks state with such grandiloquence, the Israel bureaucrats (all born in Eastern Europe and Yiddish-speaking) looking down their quintessential Jewish noses at this Diasporic Yiddish language that threatened (so they asseverated) to compete with the ancient Hebrew, even though all the founding fathers of Israel were born into that supple, juicy, evocative, folk-saturated, wise, witty and image-laden Yiddish tongue, and greedily imbibed, yes, sucked it in with their mama’s milk, and spoke it more naturally and felicitously than Hebrew, which was strong on verbs but weak on modern nouns and the subtleties of adverbs and adjectives, and how can you run a nation just on verbs anyway?, but run it they did, in fact race and gallop in it, around it and through it with verbs, moxie, faith and smuggled weapons too, Shmulik was told that these higher ed officials would look more kindly on his efforts to establish Yiddish studies at the University of Israel if he wouldn’t have such a blatantly *potch-in-pawnim* (slap in the face, for the handful of you out in the boondocks who haven’t yet mastered Yiddish) Diasporic Jewish name but a more acceptable Hebraized one, Gafni, for instance, remember this was two years after Independence when

nationalism was so intense it bordered on jingoism, although in Israel they hadn't heard of the word and wouldn't know what it meant even if they heard it, but words are created for situations, movements and moods and not vice versa, and the mood then in Israel rejected all foreign-sounding (read: Jewish-sounding) names, hiding it under the protective purple cloak of Hebrew, when everyone knew that Weingarten had been around for two hundred years or more and Gafni hadn't even been around the block yet much less around the corner, and anyone who ever met a Gafni would at once say, "You used to be Weingarten, right?," just like if anyone met a phony concoction of a name like Har-paz, he'd smirk and say, "Ah, né Goldberg, hill of gold," but you know that from Bach's famous *Variations*, but Gafni it was, folks, and Gafni it had to be, Gafni, meaning "my vine," close enough, but that wasn't what was known all over Jerusalem, it won't be too long before you do know what was known, or rather "known," all over Jerusalem, and a juicy bit of knowledge it was — close enough to his paternal family name, but this Gafni business, as far as Shmulik Weingarten was concerned, was merely part of the "i" suffix name syndrome that most Israelis succumbed to and which most Europeans assumed were Italian, surnames like Gafni, Magdani, Zehavi, Caspi, Crispi and Crunchi, modern stand-ins for all the delicious, age-old, authentic Jewish names which the goyim had imposed upon the Jews and which the Jewish goyim in Israel were imposing on Ashkenazi names. (Question: What was the difference between the goyim there in Europe in the 1700's forcing you to take a name and the Jews here gently twisting your forearm to take a name? Answer: here you didn't have to pay for it). But there was a price, mind you, a mighty awful price to pay anyway, far costlier than the gold the Jews had to fork over to Christian authorities two-hundred-fifty years ago for their new Jewish family names, for now if a family member, let's say a Holocaust survivor or a Russian immigrant came to Israel and sought you out in the telephone book or on the population list of the Interior Ministry, he would never find you, for fine old Jewish names like Ginsburg, Brandenburg, Silverberg, Goldberg and Iceberg all became Hebraified, deracinated, a kind of nose job on the paterfamilias monicker, but Shmulik Weingarten reluctantly agreed to gafnify his name if it would help, and indeed it did, due to him and his passion for everything Yiddish, and thanks to the Yiddish supporters he mustered all over the land, The University of Israel Global Yiddish Department developed into a world center, perhaps *the* world center for Yiddish, competing with and even superceding the superb one at the Hebrew University, an "address" as he laughingly called it one day many years ago during his own interview

with a foreign correspondent for *The New York Times* as he held his little twin daughters (one of whom, grown up now of course, had become a grandmother just a year ago) on his knees, but it was the other twins, a score or so years later, who were called a medical miracle, still being written up by doctors and parapsychologists and of course photographed, for they were two daughters born, one each to Shmulik's twin girls, Rivka and Rachel, at precisely the same time, at 7:16 AM, which aroused the curiosity of geneticists who found that the little sweeties had the same DNA, hence they were twins, even though emanating from two different wombs, the which were presumably inseminated at the same time by two different men, but enough of medicine and magic and the hocus pocus of DNA, which science, important as it is, impertinent wags and wits have dubbed Don't Know Anything, for it is Yiddish and sex — not as unlikely a twinning, or coupling, by your grace, as you might assume — that here interests us, entwines us, between us, to coin a wordploy, which by the way is what fiction is all about, wordploy, although what is being said here, what was known all over Jerusalem, and remember, what's known isn't always true and what's true isn't always known, so what was "known" all over Jerusalem is neither fictive speculation nor imaginative rumination, but pure unadulterous truth (truth in the sense that it truly was known but not necessarily true) that Shmulik Gafni was reportedly plucking grapes from a wine garden not truly his own, having been seriously involved, so it was stage-whispered all over Jerusalem, which in fact meant all over Israel, via telephone, fax, telex, rooftop shouts, and tell-all-over-café-au-lait-tongue wagging which zipped all over town quicker than all the modern miracles of communication and, inter alia, let's not forget the Internet nor short-sell e-mail, which is only a trice slower than the pre-electronic instant mode of communication, you guessed it, it rhymes with e-mail and speaks in a higher-pitched voice and laughs when tickled; or, if the preceding obfuscates rather than clarifies, then let a hint to the wise suffice, so let's not beat around the bush (no offense to the former Prez Pere or junior), we're happy to repeat, let's not forget the Internet, e-mail and female, which was quicker? hard to say, which is more reliable?, let's not play dumb, okay?, that Gafni was involved, envolved, involved with a blonde, full-chested, slim-waisted Polish Catholic *shikse* exactly half his age, thank God she had a couple of flaws, including pencil-thin eyebrows and vermicelli lips and slightly uneven teeth on an otherwise attractive face, because if she'd been perfect people would have jumped out of their skins, which in any case were already stained a deep envy green, but what Shmulik Gafni, né Weingarten, was thoroughly raked over the coals for was not that he was old

enough to be her father (and maybe was), not that she wasn't Jewish (but could become), not that she was Polish, although her Polishness was an awfully bitter pill to swallow (given the Poles' endemic anti-Semitism and how, with few exceptions, they helped the Germans and did no small amount of killing themselves, during and even long after the war, a fact which Gafni knew only too well, and was one of the reasons he went back to Poland so often — about this more, much more, later — but accident of birth wasn't her fault), individually her flaws were excusable and even taken in toto they (that amorphous “they” out there) didn't mind that she was a young, pretty blonde (the fact that she was interested in Jewish history just made them roll their eyes), very busty, how busty? a straining-at-the-sweater busty, a lump-in-the-throat, swallowing-with-difficulty chesty Polish *shikse* busty, and not even that she was young enough to be his daughter, which we've already mentioned in *inverso* fashion, but that for God's sake, how could you do this to us, Shmulik Weingarten, because that's who you really are, forget that glib Gafni disguise, Shmulik Weingarten, guardian of Yiddish, laureate of the Yiddish language, faithful amanuensis of Yiddish folklore, editor of Yiddish drama, anthropologist and preserver of Yiddish poetry and prose, harvester of Yiddish humor and expert on earthy Yiddish expletives, for God's sake, Shmulik, the blonde bitch, to quote her own surfside confession after the linguistics conference in Nice, a remark that was typed, faxed, whispered and shouted in all the above-mentioned natural, artificial and telecommunication modes hitherto listed: the blonde bitch *doesn't even know a word of Yiddish!*

TRUE, Shmulik Gafni didn't want it known all over Jerusalem that he was involved with a *Poilshe*. Because the truth was — never mind the gossip, the malicious palm over mouth sotto voce that went from office to market to bus stop to e-mail to female (quicker than e-mail, see *supra*) but slower than light (Question: was there anything that traveled quicker than light? Answer: Yes! Lies!), and what was quicker than lies? Rumors of sex — that he was not involved with her. Let's repeat that, given the interruption of long parenthesis and double dashes: he was not involved with her. To those skeptics, mockers and doubters who think Gafni was after Malina (now you know her name) know ye that for years he had dreams that he was not married to Batsheva, but for Gafni they weren't dreams, oh no, they were nightmares in which he felt an awful depression, an emptiness that could only be sensed, never described, an irredeemable loss. In those dreams he was single, alone, lonely, and he felt a discomfit of mysterious origin, a disequilibrium, his wholeness compromised. Salvation came like sunshine breaking suddenly through clouds