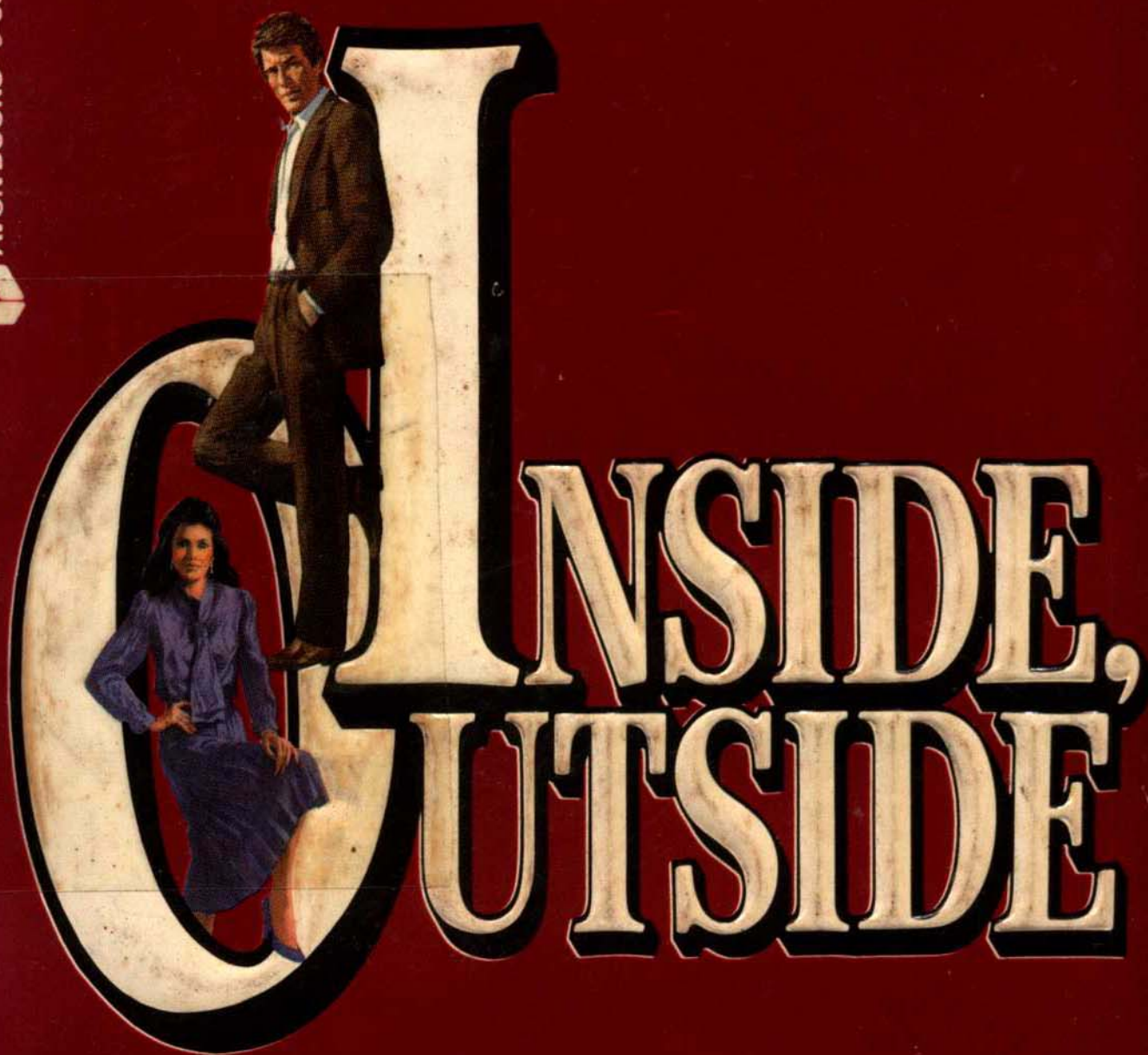


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*To my sister Irene
with love*

Rejoice, young man in your youth, and let your heart pleasure you in the days of your young manhood; and walk in the ways of your heart, and the sight of your eyes; but know that for all these God will bring you into judgment. So remove trouble from your heart and put away wrongdoing from your flesh, for boyhood and youth are a breath.

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PART I

The Green Cousin

1

Introducing Myself

ALL hell has been breaking loose around here, and my peaceful retreat in the Executive Office Building may be coming to a sudden rude end.

I suppose it was too good to last. It has been a curious hiatus, unimaginable to me a few months ago—first of all, my becoming a Special Assistant to the President, especially to this President; second, and even more surprising, my finding it no big deal, but rather an oasis of quiet escape from corporate tax law. I've at last pieced together the mysterious background of my appointment. The haphazardness of it will appear absurd, but the longer I'm in Washington the more I realize that most people in this town tend to act with the calm forethought of a beheaded chicken. It gives me the cold shudders.

Fortunately for my peace of mind, the bookcase in this large gloomy room contains, amid rows and rows of dusty government publications, the seven volumes of Douglas Southall Freeman's *George Washington: A Biography*, and Churchill's six volumes on the Second World War. I dip into these now and then to reassure myself that things were not very different in the days of those great men. Churchill calls the Versailles Treaty, the product of the combined wisdom and long labor of all the top politicians of Europe, "a sad and complicated idiocy." From what I see here, this description can be extended to almost all politics. No wonder the world is in such a god-awful mess, and has been, it appears, since Hammurabi ordered his cuneiform scribes to start scratching his great deeds on clay tablets.

Let me describe the jolt I got the other day, to give you my feel of things at this world hub. When I first flew down from New York and briefly met with the President in the Oval Office—the one time I saw him until this recent jolt—I explained that if I did take the job I wouldn't work on Saturdays, and would make up the time Sundays or nights, if required. The President looked baffled, and then calculating. He pushed out his lips, widened his eyes, raised those thick eyebrows, and nodded gravely and repeatedly. "That's splendid,"

was his judicious comment. "I'm impressed, Mr. Goodkind." (He pronounced it right, with a long *i*.) "May I say that I've had numerous Jewish associates, but you're the first one who's made that stipulation, and I'm impressed. Very impressed. That's impressive."

I'm hardly a super-pious type, I hasten to acknowledge. What do Saturdays, besides the usual praying, is mostly lie around and read, or walk a few miles along the tow path with my black Labrador, Scrooge. I wouldn't give up this inviolate chunk of peace in my week for anything. It has kept me sane at my Wall Street office down the years, this day of sealed-off Sabbath release from the squirrel cage of tax law.

But that's not the point of the story. The point is that for much of my life I've been a Talmud addict. I don't spend day and night over its many volumes as my grandfather did, but even at the Goodkind and Curtis office I used to arrive early and, with four or five cups of strong coffee, study for an hour or more every morning. I won't go deeply into this. Just take my word for it, under the opaque Aramaic surface the Talmud is a magnificent structure of subtle legal brilliancies, all interwoven with legend, mysticism, the color of ancient times, and the cut-and-thrust of powerful minds in sharp clash. I can't get enough of it, and I've been at it for decades.

Once I'd settled into this office and realized that I'd fallen down a peculiar well of solitude, I saw no reason not to bring the Talmud here and resume my usual routine. So there I was, day before yesterday, sitting at my desk with a huge tome open, puzzling my skull-capped head over the validity of a bill of divorcement brought from Spain to Babylon, when the door opened, and without ado in walks the President of the United States.

Startled embarrassment on both sides.

Up I jump, snatching off the skullcap and slamming shut the volume. Sheer reflex. The President says, "Oh! Sorry. Did I interrupt something? Your secretary seems to have stepped out, and—"

Awkward pause while I collect myself. "Mr. President, you're not interrupting anything. I'm highly honored, and ah—"

We look at each other in silence. I'm telling this ridiculous and unlikely little scene just the way it was: a goy walking in on a Jew studying the Talmud in the White House, and suitably apologetic. I knew the President had a hideaway office on the first floor of this building, but his barging in like that was a stunner. Well, the moment passed. In his deep Presidential voice, one of several he produces

like a ventriloquist, except that all the characters talk out of the same face, he asked, "Ah, just what is that large book, Mr. Goodkind?"

"It's the Talmud, Mr. President."

"Ah, the Talmud. Very impressive."

He asked to look into it. I showed him the text, told him the dates and nationalities of the commentators, the printing history of the Talmud and so forth, my standard quick tour for outsiders. It's not a dull tour. On one page of the Talmud you encounter authorities from many lands, from the time of Jesus and even earlier down through the ages to the nineteenth century, all discussing or annotating a single point of law. I know of nothing else like it in the world. The President has a quick and able mind, though not everybody gives him that, not by a long shot. His face lit up. He shot me a sharp glance and said in his most nearly natural voice, "And you really understand this stuff?"

"Well, I scratch the surface, Mr. President. I come from a rabbinic family."

He nodded. The momentary relaxation faded from his face, leaving deep-carved lines of concern. The man looks ten years older than he did when we met two months ago.

Presidential voice: "I'd like to talk to you, ah, David. This impressive background of yours is very relevant. Let's chat right here for a bit. It's quiet."

That it was, to be sure. Sepulchral. He sat down, and so I did. The upshot of this exceedingly strange "chat" was that I wrote a TV speech for him about Watergate; a decidedly unlooked-for turn in the life of I. David Goodkind, counsellor-at-law and lifelong Democrat, though no more bizarre than the way I got here.

But rest assured, this Watergate business is going to take up no space in these pages. If it dies off, as I expect it soon will—that's certainly what he's hoping and trying for—well, that'll be that. Just one more sad and complicated idiocy scratched on the clay tablets. Somehow it's beginning to remind me, the whole Watergate caper, of the first time Bobbie Webb and I broke up; when I rebounded to a brief affair with a screwy but goodhearted dish named Sonia Feld.

As the affair began to cool down, Sonia knitted me a sweater, a loose ill-fitting thing. With it came a sentimental note that did the trick, warmed me up to her again, intravenous glucose for a terminally ill liaison. Well, Sonia left one long loose thread hanging from the sweater, which I cut off with a scissors, but the same thread would work loose as I wore the thing, and I'd cut it off again. Once when I was drunk

for some reason—I think, after a snide telephone call from Bobbie Webb, an art form at which she was peerless—I saw that damned thread still dangling loose. I began to pull on it. I pulled and pulled, and poor Sonia's work began to unravel. That infuriated me. I pulled in alcoholic obstinacy, until I was left with a mess of white wriggly wool over the floor, and no sweater. It was gone.

The President was reelected not long ago with the biggest majority ever. There's only this one dangling Watergate thread, and he can't seem to cut it or tie it off. But I daresay he will. He is a tough and resourceful bird, and the Presidency is a mighty close-knit sweater.

Two things happened a while ago to create the hole in the White House entourage which I have filled. A speechwriter who specialized in quips resigned, and Israel sent over a new ambassador. The President and the previous man, a blunt ex-general, had gotten on almost too well; the ambassador actually came out for his reelection. At a cabinet meeting, the President said he wished there was someone on the staff who knew the incoming diplomat well enough to talk to him with the gloves off, until he himself could feel at home with the man. The Secretary of Defense brought up my name. Some time ago this same diplomat had spoken at a United Jewish Appeal banquet where I got the Secretary to come as a guest of honor, and SecDef remembered that the speaker and I had hugged each other. Nothing unusual, the general counsel for the UJA naturally gets to know and hug all the Israeli star speakers. SecDef described my background to the President, who had never heard of me (so much for newspaper notoriety, breath on a windowpane). The President said, "Sounds okay, let's contact him," and so it happened. Just like that.

A detail of my background much in my favor was my radio experience. Long, long ago, before the war—as I sometimes feel, before Noah's flood—the Secretary of Defense and I romanced these two girls in the chorus of a Winter Garden musical, *Johnny, Drop Your Gun*. I was then a gagwriter of twenty-one, and my girl was Bobbie Webb. SecDef was a lawyer a few years older; very married, and having a final boyish fling. I was discreet, and he appreciated it. We've been friendly ever since, as he too is a Wall Street attorney, though at the moment he's every inch the good gray statesman, a straight arrow with five kids and a house in McLean. Only last week my wife Jan and I had dinner at SecDef's house, and he made clumsy jokes about the time we hung around the stage door together. Mrs.

SecDef gaily laughed; mainly with her mouth muscles, I thought, and her eyes kind of looked like glass marbles.

Anyhow, at the cabinet meeting SecDef mentioned my jokewriting past, and the President perked up at that. All politicians are desperate for jokes. Very few can deliver them, and he is not one of those, but he keeps trying. I have fed him a number of jokes since coming here, but the way he delivers them, they just lie where they fall, plop, like dropped jellyfish.

SecDef also told the President about the obscenity trials. That gave him pause. Like most red-blooded American males, the President is a horseshit and asshole man from way back: His packaged flat image, however, is entirely that other face of American manhood: dear old Mom and grand old flag and heck and golly and shoot, pretty much like an astronaut. He said that he'd never even heard of Peter Quat and *Deflowering Sarah*, or of Henry Miller and *Tropic of Cancer*—the President is not big on modernist literature—so he doubted that many people had. Anyway, he allowed that a bit of liberal input might be useful around his White House, at that. So I was in.

And I think I've already been of some use. Not that I've helped him feel at home with the ambassador. This President is never really "at home" with anybody, possibly not even with his wife and daughters. He dwells in a dark hole somewhere deep inside himself, and all the world ever sees of the real man, if anything, is the faint gleam of phosphorescent worried eyes peering from that hole. I did ease the first meetings of SecDef and the President's chief of staff with the ambassador. Since then I've become a sort of cushion for carom shots on touchy Israel matters too small to engage our superstar National Security Adviser. I'll get an idea or a position thrown at me by the ambassador or the administration, quietly and casually, and nobody's committed, and there's no body contact; and I bounce it along, and the play either continues or stops. I've furthered several minor matters in that way.

My official handle is "Special Assistant to the President for Cultural and Educational Liaison." In this political rose garden, Special Assistants and Assistants to the President are thick as Japanese beetles. I'm just one more of them. The job is a real one, of sorts. I'm on the board of the National Endowment for the Arts. Also I meet with delegations of teachers and artists who descend on Washington; I listen to their problems, and get them passes for special White House tours, and so forth. And I shepherd around foreign visitors, like a group of Soviet professors of American literature, who showed

up last week, and greatly embarrassed me by insisting on being taken at once to a topless bar, and then to a dirty movie. I may be the noted defender of artistic freedom, but that was the first porn film I'd ever seen. Jan won't hear of paying money to pornmongers, and I won't go by myself. Suppose I had a fatal heart attack right there in the theatre? Jan would have to bury a husband carried out feet first from *The Devil in Miss Jones*. Nothing doing.

Well, escorting the Soviet professors made it all right for me to see a thing called *Hot Dormitories*, but it was disappointing. I was bored out of my mind, and mainly felt sorry for the poor actresses. The Russkis ate it up, however, and wanted to go to another dirty movie right away. I took them to the National Gallery instead, and they gave me the impression that they were displeased by that. Indeed, they were decidedly snotty about the National Gallery. They said they didn't have to come to America to see paintings, the Hermitage in Leningrad made the National Gallery look sick, and what about another dirty movie? I fobbed them off on a pallid State Department man, Soviet section, who displayed warm interest in showing the Russian professors, at government expense, all the examples of American artistic freedom now playing in the sleazy dumps on F Street.

Then there was this committee of authors who came here recently to pester Congress and the Treasury for relief from an adverse IRS ruling, something about authors' research expenses. Whenever an IRS mole has an idle hour, he whets his tearing fangs and has a go at actors, athletes, and authors. The few big ones make a packet, you see, and get hoggish and try to dodge taxes with slick contrivances which the IRS loves to dismember. Out come these adverse rulings, which play hell with the small earners. Well, that's my field, so I took charge, and actually got Internal Revenue to back down. The authors went in a body to thank the President; and as I saw them off on the Eastern shuttle for New York, they were remarking in wonderment at his approximately humanoid appearance. The cartoons do give a peculiar picture of the man.

Why on earth did I ever accept this job? Well, I can only say I did it out of the same quirk which led me at other times to take on Henry Miller, and the United Jewish Appeal. I would be a lot more affluent than I am, if I stuck to my business. Tax law satisfies me as a hardball mental game, an exercise in concentration and scholastic hairsplitting like some Talmud passages, though utterly devoid, of course, of Talmudic intellectual charm and moral substance. I enjoy the work, but it's all a mean fight over money; the heavy hand of

government, versus the nimble wits of us lawyers hired by the fat cats. It pays very well, if you are good at it, but it is demanding drudgery. You have to dot every *i* and cross every *t* yourself, and not leave it to junior lawyers. The IRS will drive a Patton tank through a pinhole. I am paid for perfection.

So I can always be tempted to do something else, if my wife will agree to my indulging myself. She is an astute, beautiful woman, and I am the most happily married man on earth. You'll learn little about Jan or my marriage in these pages. She is the treasure that lay beyond Bobbie Webb and all my other racketing adventures, and as Tolstoy says, happy families are all alike, so there's nothing to tell, and Jan will remain a shrouded figure. It just occurs to me, thinking about it, that in my observation happy families are all about as different as faces or fingerprints, but I defer to Tolstoy. Very big of me.

I must disclose, however, that my wife was originally a Californian, and loathing the President is her long-time hobby. This dates back to when he ran for Congress early on, against a liberal ex-actress. During that campaign he doggedly kept hinting that his opponent was under direct control of the Kremlin, and was planning to blow up the White House, or pass Stalin all our atomic secrets, something unpatriotic and pinko like that. Jan worked in the lady's campaign, and thought these allegations were underhanded and base. Jan has no feel for serious politics.

My big problem, once I decided to consider the President's bombshell offer of a job, was Jan. When I broached the idea to her, she inquired how I would like a divorce. She too has voted Democratic all her life, and her idol was and remains Adlai Stevenson. She really could not digest the notion that I would even think twice about working for that baleful lowbrow who was so unkind to Adlai. I let her simmer for a day or two, then did my best to explain.

I had just banked a hefty fee from a big corporation for beating the government in tax court out of a massive sum. Was my client right or wrong on the issue? Who knows? I won, that's all. Where do right and wrong lie in taxation, anyhow? Politicians write laws for confiscating other people's earnings to use as their free spending money. That's the long and the short of it. The rest is trying to limit one's losses to the politicians. It was going on under the pharaohs, and it will be going on when we colonize Andromeda, no doubt, with regrettable waste of public funds by the Andromeda Agency. You can see I'm biting on a sore tooth of conscience here. No more of that.

I was financially able to accept the President's offer, and I felt like

doing it, to my own surprise. Several considerations swayed me. The strongest was curiosity. Most of my friends are like Jan, dyed-in-the-wool eastern liberals content to sit up nights hating the President, and wishing that he would drop dead, and that Adlai would rise from the grave. Okay, but the man holds our present destiny in his hands, does he not? He worked his way into that position despite a singularly unattractive personality, and the political record of a polecat. How come? To observe him at close range, I thought, would be illuminating, and conceivably broadening.

The other consideration I inherited from my father. Pop was your typical young Russian Jewish immigrant, full of idealistic fire, disgusted with Czarist oppression, in trouble because of his clandestine socialist speeches, haunted by yearning for America. My father never changed his mind about the United States. To the end of his too-short life America remained the *Goldena Medina* (GOLD-ena me-DEE-na, you say it), the golden land, the freedom land. Pop loved the Goldena Medina. So do I, though I don't hang out flags on Memorial Day. Here was the Medina—my only relationship with which, except in wartime, has been to fend off its grasping tax claws—asking me, man to man, to lend a hand. Wait till it happens to you. If you have an American bone in your body, however you swathe it in cynicism, you'll feel the tug. And far back in my mind was something Pop or my grandfather would have thought of: placed here, I might somehow, at some moment, do something for our Jewish people. The Talmud says, "A man can earn the world to come in a single hour."

Certainly neither the supposed glamour, nor the nearness of power, had any attraction for me, and you can believe that or not as you choose. In this regard, too, I may have a screw loose, because those inducements seem to animate the entire place. I don't think anybody is more beguiled by the glamour and the power than the President himself. He acts in the Presidency, after four years, as though it's his glittering brand-new birthday bicycle which he adores, and which the big guys will take away from him if he isn't extra wary. It's amazing.

Obviously I won the argument with Jan, because here I am. Jan perceived that this was something I wanted to do; and that my motives, while possibly quixotic, were not unworthy. She spends a lot of time on the phone these days assuring our New York friends that I haven't sold out, or been terrorized into doing this by the FBI, or been thrown out of orbit by the male menopause. I don't care any more, and neither does she. She's beginning to laugh at the whole business. When Jan laughs it's all right.

She knows I've been killing empty office time by writing, and my chat with the President was so odd that I decided to tell her about it before putting it on paper. Her reaction rocked me. I thought the man came out crooked as a worm writhing on a hook; but she flew

into a tall rage at me for making him sound so sympathetic. I'll have to think about it some more. If I'm falling under the spell of the President—to me, a ridiculous notion—I want to know it.

Meantime, the big television speech baring all has come and gone. Of the draft the President asked me to write, only a paragraph here and there survived. I expected nothing more. If confusion reigned around here before, we now have unadulterated chaos, for the two trusted German shepherds, as the columnists dubbed them—the chief of staff and the assistant for domestic affairs—had been running everything. Now the press is worrying their corpses on the blood-stained snow with hungry howls and snarls, while the President lashes his sleigh horses to carry him off to safety—if this isn't laboring the image. I don't think of many, and when one comes along I tend to wring it out like a dishrag. Old Peter Quat throws them off thirteen to the dozen, but there's only one Peter Quat.

Incidentally, his new novel is finished and I believe we're all in for some fun. Nobody has yet seen it except his agent. I'll be reading it soon, since I'll be drafting the contract. The agent, a white-haired, corrupt old sinner who has read and done about everything in the sexual line, shakes his head and will disclose nothing, except that "even the title will blow your tits off."

To be honest I feel a bit futile, fumbling on with this attempt of mine at a book, when such a stupendous blockbuster is shortly to detonate upon the world. But many lawyers are frustrated writers. I've been one since I left law school, and I've been enjoying the solitary scrawling in all these free hours here. I once made a sort of living by writing, if you can call a gagman a writer. Last year, laid up with a wrenched back for a while, I started a book about my April House days; about Harry Goldhandler, Bobbie Webb, Peter Quat, and the storms that boiled up in my family; that whole dizzy and dazzling time. Recently I dug it out. It commences too far along, and I'm backtracking to the beginning. There's nothing Presidential cooking at the moment. I can't just sit here in my tomblike office, in the false calm at the eye of the storm, waiting for some frantic dummy in this place to press the wrong button and end the world. So on I go with my book. Mainly I'll tell the truth—with some stretchers, as Huck Finn says, but the truth—and I start this time far, far back, with *The Green Cousin*.