

Joseph Ross Angelella  
5 Penny Lane  
Baltimore, MD 21209  
443-310-2623  
[jrangelella@gmail.com](mailto:jrangelella@gmail.com)

*For Gabe Hudson*

“Mi Shebeirach”

By J.R. Angelella

Molly Blaze stood in the middle of the TD Bank, hands in the shape of guns, aimed at the other customers, the heel of her Chuck smashed into the neck of Gershom Fox, an old Orthodox Jew, her target, his damn briefcase handcuffed to his wrist, the thing she was commissioned to steal. Oh, and this was not the plan. She was never meant to be in this bank. She was a driver, not a thief. She should never have said yes to the job. And yet here she was, looking like a fool.

Gershom didn't so much as blink under her Chuck.

“Give me the fucking briefcase,” she said.

“Faith makes miracles possible,” he said.

Molly stabbed her heel harder into his neck. The cell phone in her pocket buzzed. It was her husband Ritch; she knew it. Withdrawal was settling in by now. He needed her home. But unfortunately, he would have to wait.

A construction worker in a bright yellow vest approached Molly, unafraid of her finger guns, his weekly pay in his hand. His mustache was stained from decades of cigarette smoke. It was lunchtime on a Friday afternoon and he just wanted to cash his check.

“Take it easy, lady,” he said. “Let the old man up. This is hard to watch.”

Even though he was right, she didn't like to be called *lady*.

"Stay the fuck back," she said.

Molly knew she looked ridiculous—I mean, finger guns, really? Not to mention that to the casual passerby, she was in the full commission of a hate crime, stepping on the neck of an old Orthodox Jew, even if she was just doing her job.

The construction worker folded the check into his pocket. His hands turned to fists, like a boxer charging the center of the ring after the bell, as he stormed toward Molly.

She had control of nothing, but tricked herself into believing she was God.

"If you touch me, I will end you," she said.

"The fuck you will," he said, menthol cigarettes and sugar free Red Bull on his breath.

Molly felt bad for the dude. He didn't know what was about to happen to him.

"Stay back," she said. "Don't do this."

But he didn't stay back.

Molly eased up on Gershom's neck who squirmed under her foot, and snaked free, just as the construction worker lunged at her. But she didn't run or brace for impact. She wasn't afraid of this fuck. She wasn't afraid of anything except losing Ritch. Instead, she held her ground because she had a fucking job to do.

The two collided and collapsed hard to the marble floor. The weight of the man crushed Molly, but she anticipated this. A man of his size at the end of a long day, at the assend of a long week, working construction, he was not going to take the fall well. And she was right. Molly absorbed the impact and used the momentum of their bodies to roll up on top of him.

"Stay the fuck down," she said. "Don't fight."

But he swung on her.

“Mistake,” she said.

Molly’s training kicked in. She blocked the weak punch with her elbow, before slamming the palm of her hand into his chin, the force of which cracked his head into the marble, knocking him out. She patted his chest. A half-hearted apology.

Her cell phone buzzed in her pocket again.

Molly tracked a Baltimore County police officer crashing through the front doors of the bank, radioing for backup. He had a real gun and shouted for her to get down. To put her hands up. It was cute.

She unclipped the fake leather ropes from a gold pole near the island where old people handwrite their deposit slips. Molly wound the pole back and swung it at the cop as he entered, smashing the base into his hand, knocking his Glock across the room. The cop dropped, curled into his hand, writhing in pain on the floor

Bank employees cowered.

Two businesspeople, a man and a woman in suits, lay face down.

Molly walked over to the real gun and picked it up.

God, she felt stupid. There were only two rules. And she had broken them both. First, never get out of the car, and second, never *ever* carry a gun. Guns got people killed. And getting out of the car got people arrested. But she did get out of the car. And now she had a gun.

Gershom stood by the island of deposit slips, staring her down.

“Give me the briefcase,” she said through grit teeth.

“You really have made a mess of things,” he said. “But it’s not too late to fix it.”

Molly aimed the gun at him. She didn’t want to shoot him. She didn’t even know him. But when it came to Ritch, she was willing to do whatever it took.

Sirens approached, the Baltimore County cavalry on its way.

“If you’re going to do it, you better do it now,” he said.

She froze.

“You should never have said yes to that weasel-pimp Slavi,” he said.

Molly grabbed Gershom by the elbow and ushered his ass away from the front of the bank to the exit in the back where she had parked her getaway car—a 1987 Buick Regal Limited T-Type Turbo—and pushed him inside. And as she revved the engine, peeled out toward the highway, all Molly could think about was that Gershom was right—she never should have said yes to Slavi.

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This whole dismal mess started a week prior when Molly arrived for a meeting at one of his fake businesses *Direct Care & Modern Medical Supply Company*, a narcotic rehabilitation center and medical supply chain owned by Slavi Slavov, nestled in a Pikesville strip mall, a northwest suburb of Baltimore City. She arrived early as instructed. Eight on the dot. Not even the county school buses had started pickups yet. She rang the buzzer and banged on the door, but no one answered. There were blackout curtains in the windows, so other than the sign above the building’s entrance, there was no indication any kind of business existed whatsoever.

She leaned against the door frame while she waited for him to let her in.

“Come on,” Molly said, pounding the door. She knew he was inside. His bright yellow Hummer was parked out front.

It was Monday and Slavi was always hungover on Mondays. A heavy lock finally turned, and the door popped open. A pale face peeked out wearing wraparound sunglasses, like a juiced-up baseball player from the 90's.

“Wipe your feet. I just had the floors cleaned,” he said.

His Ukrainian accent was thick, but Molly had trained her ear to understand him, or at least take a guess at what he was saying based on the syllables of his speech. Context was sometimes easier than understanding him.

Molly pushed on the door and stepped inside.

Slavi Slavov had established himself as the next generation of criminals in the DelMarVa area. The son of poor Jewish immigrants from the Ukraine, Slavi spent his weeks in Delaware, Maryland, and Virginia, buying real estate, operating legitimate businesses out of the buildings on his properties and funneling his gambling and gun-running money through their books. Then he'd spend his weekends in Manhattan and Brooklyn clubbing.

Dressed in a white tank top, white boxers, and white knee socks with a gold rope around his neck, Slavi snaked through the empty space, like a dad making his way to his den to read the newspaper. Molly trailed after him, fighting the chemical fumes; the space reeked of ammonia. Three men in full body coveralls and N95 masks moved about in the back of the store, loading, and unloading a truck. Slavi stopped to watch them, before noticing Molly covering her nose with the crook of her elbow.

“You have problem with the smell?”

“Can you open a window?” Molly choked.

“Windows are for pussies.” Slavi resumed his route to an office. “Don't mind the men in the back. They are taking out trash for me.”

Molly smashed her eyes with her palms, trying to wipe away the burn.

Slavi shook his head. “No. No. Men don’t cry, Molly. I can’t have a man who cries working for me.” He stood behind a clutter-free desk, before throwing a N95 mask to Molly, who strapped it over her face.

“I’m not a man,” Molly said.

“Some people think sensitive emotions makes you a man. I think maybe we get you big, strong muscles and that make you a man. Would you like big, strong muscles, Molly?”

“I think emotions just make you human.”

“My ex-wife says this too. And is why she’s my ex-wife.” He paused, shifting gears. The bullshit was done. “You do good work,” he said. “It is a shame to see you go.”

“Thank you.” Molly hated working for him and couldn’t wait to be done with this last run. “I have appreciated our time together.”

“What do you say you do not leave me, and you work for me only? No one else. We’re doing bigger things soon. We have you work with my friends. You make some real money. For you and Ritch. Make life easy.”

Molly wanted to be as far away from Slavi as possible. “I appreciate the offer. But I no longer need your assistance.”

He looked surprised. “No longer need my assistance? Okay then. I’m happy for you. This makes me disappointed.” He dug through a drawer in his desk and pulled out a cell phone and handed it to her. On it a picture of an old man dressed in all black, wearing a *shtreimel*, an Eastern European fur hat, and holding a black briefcase in his hand.

For the last year, Molly had been Slavi’s courier. Not by choice. But by necessity. Her husband had been injured and needed medical care she couldn’t afford, so she turned to Slavi for

help and had been in service to him ever since. At least until this last job, when she was going to finally get her husband real help.

As his courier, she never had to get out of the car. The Slavi jobs were easy. He would give her a cell phone with an address. She would drive to the location and call the only number in the phone. Someone would answer. She would tell them she was outside, and they would bring something out to her. She would pop her trunk. They would put it in. They would go back inside. She would drive away, throwing the cell phone away in the dumpster outside a fast-food restaurant on the way back to the loading dock of *Direct Care & Modern Medical Supply Company* where Slavi's men would retrieve whatever was in her trunk and Molly would drive away. She was never paid for any of these jobs. But it was an easy job to do for what she did get from him.

Molly examined the photo. "Who is this?" She had never been given a photo with a phone before. Only a number and an address.

"This is Gershom Fox. He has a briefcase. And I want you to get it for me."

She checked the phone. There was no number preset in it.

He watched her. "Yes," he confirmed. "There is no one to call. I want you to know what he looks like, so you can find him. And bring back my briefcase."

"What's in the briefcase?" Molly didn't want to know but couldn't stop herself from asking.

Slavi clicked his tongue twice, wagging his finger at her. "You just worry about bringing it back to me." Slavi moved behind his desk, revealing a menorah with no candles on it at the corner. "Gershom owns the Chinese restaurant *Jumbo Seafood*. Not too far from here. They close early on Fridays for Shabbat and stay closed through Sunday for the Sabbath. To make things

more interesting, this Friday is the first night of Hanukah. He will be preoccupied and will never see you coming. You have all week. But I need the briefcase by Friday.”

Molly didn't know anything about Hanukah but couldn't be bothered to listen to Slavi blaw on about it, so she nodded. “I know of this place.” Molly and Ritch loved *Jumbo Seafood's* beef with broccoli and shrimp fried rice. Best Chinese food in Baltimore. “Gershom isn't going to give me this briefcase, is he? I am going to have to take it from him, aren't I?”

Slavi smiled but did not answer. “My children sing this song. It makes them laugh. I don't know what it is, but there is a part in the song where they shout: *chicken wing, chicken wing, hot dog and baloney, chicken and macaroni, chillin' with my homies!* It brings them a lot of joy to say these stupid things. Makes them smile.” He zeroes in on her. “Make me smile, Molly Blaze. Make everything *chicken and macaroni.*”

“I'll see you when it's done.” Molly had attitude in her voice.

And as she turned to leave, Slavi snapped his fingers drawing her to look back. He held up a bottle of pills. Shook them. “Don't forget about my assistance you no longer need.”

She hated herself for being in this situation, but she had no choice. Ritch would need them come Friday, but after this week she was done doing things this way.

“Molly Blaze,” he said, placing them at the corner of the desk. “I am not the bad man here. It is your husband. Your husband is the bad man here.”

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Molly's husband Ritch wanted to kill himself.



It all started two years ago when he hurt his back working at *The Hooch House*, a craft beer and artisanal wine shop in Hampden, a once-hipster neighborhood of Baltimore that had turned real yuppie real fast. They were saving up money to buy a house outside of the city. To help stash cash, Ritch worked as a mechanic for a Toyota dealership during the week, and as an assistant manager in the wine and beer shop on weekends.

The beer truck delivery had been delayed two days and didn't arrive until Saturday morning. It was July 4<sup>th</sup> weekend, so the order was three times the normal size. And he was there to receive it, stacking 300 suitcases of shitty American beer in a mountain display in the back of the store. Later in the day, some drunk yuppie dropped one of the cases of beer and left it to leak across the floor without telling anyone or cleaning it up. Ritch didn't see it. And on his way back from a lunch break, he took the turn, slipped, and fell hard.

According to his MRI, his lower lumbar was fucked with herniated discs.

Workers' Compensation eventually ran out. So did his physical therapy sessions that were covered by Toyota's insurance. Two surgeries, a fused lower lumbar spine and three bulging discs later, he was in more pain than ever before and was fired from both jobs, first *The Hooch House*, then the dealership.

Molly felt responsible for Ritch and his situation. He didn't need to work two jobs. Hell, he didn't need to work any jobs. She made more than enough as a getaway driver. But he didn't know that. Well, he did, and he didn't. He knew what she did. And he loved what she did. He was excited by it. But he was also prideful and wanted to pull his own weight. To feel like he was contributing. Like he was taking care of his wife, not the other way around.

"This is what men do, Moll," he'd say. "So let me do it."

And so, Molly let him get a job as a mechanic and later as the assistant manager in the beer and wine shop, even though the money he made barely covered rent and groceries, let alone savings for a house.

But the problem wasn't the surgeries or the injuries.

The real problem was the pills.

Ritch chewed 16 pain pills a day. Eight in the mornings. Eight in the evenings. He didn't care what kind, so long as it killed the pain. Codeine. Hydrocodone. Hydromorphone. Demerol. Meperidine. Morphine. Oxycodone. Hell, he'd even eat a Fentanyl lozenge, although he preferred the lollipops. He would take anything except Tramadol. "Tramadol can suck my dick," he'd said to a doctor once who tried to prescribe him a lesser narcotic. He had burned through so many pain clinics and back specialists, hypnotists and Eastern medicine gurus, psychiatrists and psychologists and gotten himself blacklisted from most primary care physicians as a pillhead.

And so, it was on Molly to keep him out of pain. To keep him afloat. To keep things moving. Because it was all her fault really. So, she did. Hunted down 120 pain pills a week.

She doctor-shopped and when that ran its course, she turned to the streets and burned through her savings buying clean pills wholesale off dealers she knew through professional connections who weren't fucking with their supply. She tried to taper him down once and he ripped all the doors off the hinges in the apartment. She tried to dole out the pills in a different schedule and he locked himself in the bathroom for days, doling them out himself, afraid she was gonna take them from him, until he ran out. She tried everything she could think of. But none of it worked. His body was addicted, and she had no choice. And when the money ran out and she couldn't cover the price of legit shit anymore, and there were no more avenues to navigate, Ritch told her he wanted to kill himself. To end the pain.

Molly woke and listened to life passing by outside her bedroom window one morning. It was a Sunday. Easter, no less. Families probably dressed in their most pastel and frilly-best, on their way to church or brunch or grandma's or egg hunt. She opened her eyes and could see through the crack in the curtain that the sun was high, and the sky was blue. The birds chirped away. She finally rolled over to find an empty bed, the sheets twisted and soaked through with sweat next to her. She moved through the kitchen and hallway, checking the bathroom along the way, but Ritch was nowhere. She finally found him in the living room. Sitting on the floor. He was naked, his wet clothes in a pile next to him. Her gun box dug out of the closet and its contents spilled across the couch behind Ritch. He held her 9mm in his hand which rested on his lap. Tears poured down his cheeks, but he didn't make a sound.

"Ritch," she said.

He looked up, embarrassed for her to see him like this, but not surprised.

"What are you doing?" she said.

"This is no way to live."

She walked slow toward him, like she was trying to lure a stray cat.

"I love you, Moll," he said.

She got down on all fours and crawled to him, slow.

"I'm sorry," he said.

She stopped. "Ritch." She wasn't close enough to knock the gun away. "Don't."

He opened his mouth. He jammed the nose of the 9mm to the back of his throat. And pulled the trigger. But the gun didn't fire.

Molly scampered to him. Took the gun from his mouth and hand. Curled around him. Held him close. And let him sob.

She didn't keep loaded magazines in the gun box. She kept the rounds in the pantry in the kitchen in an old cookie tin. She was careful when it came to dangerous things. It's what made her great at her job as a wheelwoman.

"I'm gonna figure this out," she said. "Everything is going to be okay."

To save his life, Molly turned to Slavi. In exchange for a bottle of 120 pain pills every Friday, she would be his courier.

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Molly knew Slavi through professional contacts, the criminal grapevine. He was seen as a new, no-nonsense, up-and-coming front man in Baltimore. He was affiliated with bad dudes in Brooklyn and had made a name for himself by being a great money-launderer. People paid him to clean their money. And from there, the rest followed—guns, gambling, drugs. On paper, he owned a lot of businesses, but no actual business ever existed, which she learned when she first arrived at *Direct Care & Modern Medical Supply Company*.

The first time she met him, she knocked. Then buzzed. Then knocked again. She knew he was there because his obnoxious yellow Hummer was parked outside. Finally, he opened the door. White tank top. White boxers. Gold chain. Wraparound sunglasses like a 90s baseball player. What would go on to become a regular Monday outfit for him.

"Molly Blaze," he said. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you. Come in." He stepped aside, welcoming her in. "I'm sorry we're meeting under these circumstances, but I am excited to have you working for me. I think we will do many great things together."

Molly had been a getaway driver for ten years and never worked long-term for someone. She never had a boss. She was always in control of herself and her car and her jobs. But not anymore.

“This way,” Slavi said, closing the door and walking toward the back of the space.

What should have been a retail space was completely empty. Not so much as a phone on the floor. A horrible, chemical smell permeated the space. Molly’s eyes cried fast, burning. She followed him to his office where he handed her a cell phone. In it was only one number associated with an address.

“You go to that address. You call that number. You get a package. You drive it back here.”

“When do I get paid?”

Slavi opened his drawer and pulled out a pill bottle, placing it at the corner of his desk.

“Here are your pills. Which you can take. When you return. With my package.”

“Okay,” she said, and went to leave, when he snapped his fingers for her to stop. She looked back at him, sitting in his chair, reading a piece of paper.

“If you wrote something and someone said what you wrote was *impossibly dense*, what does this mean?”

Molly had no idea what he was talking about, and her facial expression must have communicated this clearly, because he popped up out of his chair and approached her, holding the paper out for her to see for herself.

“Look. Read. Right here.” His finger tapped the paper. He pushed the paper to her face. “I take a poetry writing class. I write poems. We had workshop yesterday and someone in class wrote this on my poem. *Impossibly dense*. This fuck.”

The poem was short, just a few lines, and the feedback at the bottom of the page said: *this poem is not only confused, but confusing. Impossibly dense. Lacks depth. Lacks emotion.*

“I have no idea what makes a good poem good or a bad poem bad,” she said.

“Yes, but this poem, is it *impossibly dense*? What does it mean, this comment?”

“I couldn’t tell you.” Molly felt her chest tighten.

“I want you to read this poem to me. I want to hear these words. From someone not me. Maybe I need to hear my words from someone else. Start at the top. I am excited to hear this. Thank you, Molly Blaze.” Slavi eased himself onto a leather couch next to his desk, crossing his legs. “Come. Step away from door. Stand in front of me. Project your voice. Be clear. I want to hear all of my words.”

She moved farther into the room, standing across from Slavi and cleared her throat. She read the title first. “*These Hands.*” Molly looked to Slavi who waved her to continue. Molly obliged, reading slow and annunciating more than she ever had before in her life.

*her ignorance breeds feral fallibility  
the moral sacrifice of his broken doves  
her poison sun burns with tiger teeth  
the blood of his bastard in the night  
her vendetta curls against black, veiny waves  
the end of his dead days pulverize concrete*

Molly had no idea what the hell she just read. Slavi uncrossed his legs, only to re-cross them in the opposite direction. He closed his eyes and spoke toward the ceiling.

“Do you think I’m depressed?”

Molly handed the paper back to him. “No,” she said, carefully, looking at the pill bottle on the table, thinking about Ritch back home, withdrawal setting in.

“I tittle it *These Hands.*” He raises his hands, first elevating his left hand. “Her.” Then elevating his right hand. “His.” He makes fists. “It’s poem about these. You see how each line

goes *hers*, then *his*, then *hers*, then *his*, then *hers*, then *his*. Three times it does this.” Slavi recognize her inability to help him with his poetry and waved her on. “You go. We will discuss later.”

Molly stepped outside the office when she saw a pile of industrial black trash bags in the back loading dock. They were fat, resting by the dock door, tied off, ready to be taken out. All except one. Still open. The bag had tipped over. Bloody towels inside.

“What do you see?” Slavi said, although it didn’t sound like a question. He placed his hands at her back and gently pushed her. “Go. See what it is.”

Molly moved across the room through a door to the back loading dock. And as she turned, there on the floor, hog-tied with duct tape, bloodied and pleading, was a man. The man writhed on the floor with the terrified eyes of a child.

Slavi leaned close to Molly’s ear.

“I didn’t like what he said about my poem.”

Molly held her breath.

Then Slavi laughed, genuinely. “I’m kidding, Molly Blaze! Look at your face. Oh, my goodness! You think this of me? It’s just a poem! I would never.” Slavi kissed the top of Molly’s head. “This is something else. This motherfuck stole from me. This is nothing you should be concerned about.” He paused. “You go now.” Slapped Molly on the back. “Go get my package.”

And she did. And when she returned a few hours later, the hog-tied man was gone, the blood was cleaned up and Slavi handed her the pills.

\*

Molly spent the week watching Gershom Fox. She learned his schedule, which was easy since all he did was operate out of the restaurant, and tracked his security levels, which were none. He was always alone and the briefcase in his hand. Friday came, and finally she was finally ready to make contact.

*Jumbo Seafood* was a fixture in Pikesville, nestled unironically between a dry cleaners and emergency veterinary medicine office. Molly parked outside with the rest of the mid-day crowd. Mostly older. All Jewish. Shuffling in-and-out. Take-away in their hands.

Molly checked her phone. No messages. Only missed calls. She typed Ritch a text message, checking on him, asking if he needed anything, other than his weekly pills. She waited a minute. No response. He was likely asleep. She put her phone in her jean pocket and pulled out Slavi's phone, looking at Gershom Fox's photo again. He had kind eyes. She locked the screen and dropped the phone in the passenger seat and when she looked up, there he was.

Gershom Fox stood at the hood of her car, staring at her, like he was expecting her. He looked just like his photo. Old, but kind. Black suit. Two long *payos* curling down the sides of his face from under a fur hat. And then the briefcase. Loose in his hand. Not (yet) handcuffed. She didn't have a plan but didn't have a choice. It was time.

Molly exited the car, careful not to cause a scene, and waited by her side mirror for him to speak first. He didn't. He didn't speak at all. He didn't so much as blink. Finally, Molly moved around to the front of the car and faced Gershom. She was half-a-head taller than him. She could rip that briefcase from his hand so easy. But she couldn't bring herself to do it. Maybe it was his eyes.

The phone in her pocket buzzed. It was Ritch. But she didn't have time for that right now.



Gershom checked his watch. Then finally spoke. “You look tired, my dear. When is the last time someone cooked you a meal?”

Molly was shocked by the kindness and felt a wall of emotion crack in her chest.

“Let’s get you a plate of food. We can sit. And talk. About why you are here.”

Molly was taken aback. She wasn’t expecting to be fed by him. Before she knew it, she nodded.

“Good,” he said. “This way.”

He walked to the door, held it open for her and followed her inside.

The restaurant was very red. Red walls. Red booths and chairs. Red fringe hung from red lamp shades. An older Jewish couple finished their lunch and took their leftovers with them. They stopped Gershom on their way out and the three prattled away in Yiddish. Gershom clearly referenced Molly, pointing to her at one point, and the couple examined her, but not with judgement. With empathy. And as the couple made their way past her, the older woman grabbed Molly’s hand and held it and said, “I’ll say a *Mi Sheberach* for you, sweetie.”

Molly had no idea what the old woman had said, and before she even thought to ask, the couple was gone. Gershom had moved farther into the room, and whispered something to one of the waiters, before sliding into a booth, setting the briefcase on the floor at his feet. Molly followed and slid in across from him.

“I know you know who I am,” he said, “so I think it only fair I know who you are.”

“You can call me Molly Blaze.”

“No, no. Not that silliness. Your God-given name.”

She hesitated. Then was honest. “Molly Bevilacqua.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Bevilacqua.”

“Mrs.”

He looked pleasantly surprised. “Mrs. Bevilacqua.”

Three plates hit the table next—vegetable spring rolls, beef with broccoli and a bowl of rice. Gershom built a plate in front of him, before sliding it to Molly.

“Eat,” he said. “Please.”

Molly dug in. She didn’t realize how starving she was. Her nerves and anxiety from both working for Slavi and caring for Ritch had zapped her of hunger. Food was the next to last thing she thought about, the last being her own happiness. He made a smaller plate for himself and joined her. They ate together in silence. Eventually, he exhaled a long breath, reveling in the food.

“Very good,” he said of the food, more to himself than to Molly.

“What does *Mi Sheberach* mean?” Molly asked.

“It’s a prayer of healing.”

“Did you tell that couple earlier that I needed prayer?”

“I told them you needed healing.”

“I don’t.”

“Then why are you here?”

Molly didn’t respond.

“Do you pray?” he asked.

“Never.”

Gershom shook his head. “You should. Shame is a cancer. Don’t hide from it. Expose it.”

“I’m not sick. I don’t need healing.”

“Then you don’t need prayer.” He shoveled more food into his mouth and stopped speaking. The silence bothered Molly. She looked to the kitchen, expecting Jewish men with guns to storm the table. But they never came. No one came.

“Where is everyone?” she asked.

“We’re closed,” he said. “I’ve sent them home. It’s just you and me.”

Her phone buzzed again. She pulled it out and looked. Ritch was calling again. Not texting. It must be an emergency, she thought. They agreed to never call unless there was a problem.

“You can answer it,” he said. “From your face, it looks important.”

She sent the call to voicemail. “It’s not. It can wait.”

Gershom examined her a moment. Really investigated her face. Then leaned forward, his elbows on the table. “Your husband. *He* is sick. *He* is the one who needs healing. And *you* are suffering for it. I see this now.” He leaned back, closed his eyes, and spoke a prayer in Yiddish.

“Was that the *Mi Sheberach*?” she asked.

Gershom spoke the prayer in English, plainly, for her. “*He who blessed our fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses and Aaron, David and Solomon, may he heal this young woman who sits before me and her husband who is ill. May the Holy One have mercy and speedily restore both him and her to perfect health, both spiritual and physical; and let us say, Amen.*” Then he pinched another spring roll off the plate and ripped a hunk off. “A prayer of healing.”

Tears hit her eyes. The kindness of the moment broke her. Her world had been so hard for so long that she had forgotten what it felt like to receive kindness.

Her phone buzzed again. A text came through.

It was Ritch and all it said was, "I'm dying."

She pulled focus. "Give me your briefcase," she said.

"I was wondering when you were going to get around to that."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I don't think you will. I don't see killer in you."

"I need it, Gershom. Please. Just give it to me." She sounded desperate and she hated it.

"Why do you need it?" He waited. "There must be a reason." She didn't respond. "Mr. Slavov needs my briefcase. Which he will never get. But you need something else."

Tears still broke from her eyes. But she pushed through the pain in her heart, and hurt of the kindness she saw in Gershom, and whispered, "I don't have a choice. Please. Just give me your briefcase."

Gershom wiped his mouth with his napkin, setting it next to his plate. He checked his watch again, before grabbing his briefcase from off the floor, and setting it on the table. He took a key from his pocket and unlocked it, popped the gold latches, and retrieved a pair of handcuffs from inside. Then closed the top, locked the latches, and snapped one cuff to the handle and the other to his wrist.

"What did you just do?" she asked, laughing out of shock.

"It is Friday. The sun is setting. And the first night of Hannukah. I must be getting home." He exited the booth and moved next to Molly. "You are a nice young woman. I am sorry you are in so much pain. Thank you for sitting with me. And eating with me. Of all the people Mr. Slavov has sent, you are the only one I have fed. I hope God heals you and your husband." Gershom walked to the front door.

Molly slid out of the booth fast, knocking her plate off the table. It crashed to the floor. Food and glass shattered and rolled. Gershom stopped, his hand on the door, ready to leave.

“Gershom,” she said, no longer crying, no longer caring.

“I must go the bank before they close,” he said, but in a way that sounded unsurprised by what she was about to say. “We both know you will follow me. Let’s not make a scene.”

“I’m sorry,” she said. “For the mess.”

“There is no mess, Ms. Bevilacqua. Only solutions.”

Molly approached him. “If you want to help me, I need you to give me that briefcase.”

“Giving you this briefcase is not helping you,” he said. “Submit to God. That will help you. Have faith in miracles. That will help you.”

“If you don’t give it to me,” she said, “I will be forced to take it. By any means necessary.”

“Yes,” he said. “I am aware of what happens next.”

And then he left for TD Bank.

\*

Molly Blaze’s getaway car—a funeral black, 1987 Buick Regal Limited T-Type Turbo with chrome bumpers and trim—topped off at 110ph on the highway. The cops gave chase, but their State-funded vehicles were no match for Molly’s beast. She exited the ramp and snaked through neighborhoods, heading toward *Direct Care & Modern Medical Supply Company*. Gershom sat still in the passenger seat with the briefcase in his lap, finally turning to her.

“I am not a foolish man. I know what you need to do. I get that my actions have consequences. But I would like to make a request. My family is waiting for me. To light the first candle. I know this is the end. Slavi will never let me go. And that is okay. I’m prepared for that. But please. Take me home. Let me light the candle. Kiss my kids. Tell my wife I love her. And then we can go. I know your husband needs you and you’re just caring for him.”

Molly didn’t hear his words, she felt them in her bones. She was a driver. Her emotions kept her sharp and focused but were also a liability in other contexts. Like this. There was no world in which she could tell him no.

She pulled the car to the side of the road. She wasn’t mad at him. She was mad at herself. The weight of her decisions sinking into her chest. “Where do you live?”

“Bless you, my dear,” he said. “We’re close.”

Molly moved through quiet communities until she reached Gershom’s house, the last house on the left of a cul-de-sac. And immediately she knew she had made a mistake. Parked outside, leaning against an obnoxious bright yellow Hummer, was Slavi Slavov.

Molly lost words. Her gut gave out. Her phone buzzed constantly, Ritch circling the drain. And she couldn’t be farther from helping anyone, let alone him.

“Just breathe, my dear,” Gershom said. “I had a feeling he would be here. We think a lot alike, he and I.”

Molly eased into the spot next to Slavi, and Gershom patted her hand still holding the wheel.

“It’s going to be okay,” he said. “I promise.” Gershom exited the car and greeted Slavi. “Mr. Slavov. We were just on our way to meet you.”

Molly slipped her hand to the floor and popped the trunk.

“Get out of the car,” Slavi shouted at Molly. “I knew you were weak. People said you were tough, but I knew. I always knew. But this is okay. I am a man, and I am here.”

Molly exited the car and moved to the back of the Buick. She wasn't hurt or offended by Slavi's words. Or even angered by them. She knew he was a scared little boy playing a cliched role he constructed from American movies. But she also knew he was disconnected from how people moved through the world. He lacked empathy, and this scared her. He could never be trusted.

“She's done nothing wrong,” Gershom said.

Slavi shushed him, then spoke in Yiddish. Gershom responded in kind. It sounded heated, before they returned to English.

Molly lifted her trunk a bit and popped the top of the cookie tin.

“I'm tired of the fucking games, old man,” Slavi said, “Give me the briefcase. Last chance.”

“I will say hi to God for you,” Gershom said, squaring his body on Slavi, not backing down one iota.

“I knew this would be your response.” Slavi opened the door to his Hummer and retrieved a large pair of bolt cutters. Slavi grabbed Gershom and slammed him to the pavement without any resistance.

Molly stepped out from behind the Buick, her hand behind her back. In a nearby window, Gershom's children and wife watched, in horror, hysterical. His wife was on the phone. The cops maybe. She hung up and ushered them further into the house away from the carnage.

Molly always knew it would end like this, breaking her rules. Getting out of her car. Grabbing a gun. She felt she had been running for her life for so long. For her husband. For herself. And she just wanted it all to end. And this was it.

Slavi smashed his designer boot into Gershom's neck and jammed the bolt cutter to Gershom's wrist. "Let this be a lesson to your people. Not to fuck with Slavi." He opened the blades of the bolt cutter wide and set them at the base of Gershom's wrist.

A voice came from behind him.

"Yo, Slavi."

It was Molly.

He looked up at her.

She raised her hand. In it, her 9mm. Fully loaded. The one she had planned to get rid of after Ritch's attempted suicide. And unloaded it into Slavi's chest. His body blew back off his feet, dropping him to the sidewalk.

The echo from the gunshots hadn't even faded when cars rushed the complex, ripping toward Gershom's house. But they were not cops. They were more Orthodox Jews. Men. Some in *shtraimels*. Some in *yarmulkas*. Dressed in white shirts and black suits.

Shouting in Yiddish, they dragged Slavi's body from the sidewalk to the Hummer and threw it in the back. They stripped Gershom of his jacket and wiped down his face with bottled water and paper towels. They moved with intention, looking to Gershom for guidance, and he gave it. He was calm and collected. He hugged each man, cupping the backs of their necks, pulling them close, speaking what Molly thought sounded like little prayers into their souls.



With a father's kindness, Gershom took the 9mm from Molly hand and nodded as if to let her know everything was going to be okay. He handed it to one of his men who took it before he hopped in the Hummer and drove it off.

"May I have your keys," he asked.

"No," she said.

"I promise you'll get it back."

Molly hesitated.

"You saved my life, Mrs. Bevilacqua. Now let me save yours."

She handed him the key. "Not a scratch."

He laughed. "Thank you, my dear." Gershom tossed it to a younger man. "Not a scratch," he instructed, before the younger man got in and drove the Buick away.

And just as quick as they had popped up, the Jewish cavalry was gone—no bodies, no cars, no blood, no sign of nothing. For a moment there was silence. Just the two of them, Molly and Gershom, out in front of his house. It was a perfect moment and one that Molly would not soon forget. Then police sirens approached.

"We must go inside now," Gershom said. "We can hide many things, but not the sound of gunshots."

"I don't know what to do anymore," she said. "I think I've run out of road." Slavi was dead. Her connection gone. Her husband suffering. The police on their way. "I don't think I can go on." She didn't cry. But she was drowning. "I'm tired, Mr. Fox. I have no plans. Never really did. Not when I decided to leave Slavi. Not with you. Not now."

"Mrs. Bevilacqua, I would very much like it if you would consider working for me. The terms of which would be set by you. My only stipulation is I pay you in cash. And I know people

who can help your husband, just as you have helped me.” He held out his hand. “I want to help you as you have helped me.”

Without hesitation, she received it. “I’m sorry I stepped on your neck,” she said.

“Remember the past. Live in the present. Trust the future.” Gershom held the door for her, and she entered.

Inside, she was welcomed by his family. Five children—four young boys and one teen girl who hugged and kissed Molly.

“Thank you for saving my husband,” Gershom’s wife said, pulling her into the kitchen. She helped Molly pull a dress over her clothes and placed a long, black wig on her head, a Jewish custom. “This will make it so you’re one of us. They will never know.”

Molly lost her words again.

The family sat in silence at a table in a dark dining room as red and blue lights whipped outside. There was a knock at the door. Gershom didn’t stand. Instead, he held his hands up, reassuring his family everything was going to be okay, the briefcase gone from his wrist. Gershom then lit the candle in the middle of the menorah, the *shamash*, the one raised above the rest.

“I am going to speak our prayer tonight in English, for our guest,” he said.

The banging and shouting intensified at the door, but Gershom continued.

“Praised are You, Our God, Ruler of the universe, Who has given us life and sustained us and enabled us to reach this season.”

He lifted the *shamash* from the center of the menorah and lit the first candle all the way on the right, before returning it back in the center. Then he got up from the table and answered the door. Gershom’s wife served food to the children. His daughter handed out gifts. All while

cops swarmed the house, asking questions, looking for evidence, asking about Slavi, and looking for Molly who sat at the table, undetected, and for the first time in her life, prayed.

**THE END.**

**BIO:**

J.R. Angelella is the author of the irreverent and twisted coming-of-age novel *Zombie* (Soho Press, 2012). His short fiction has appeared in various journals, including *Hunger Mountain*, *Sou'wester*, *The Literary Review*, *Coachella Review*, and *Southampton Review*. His original screenplays have won numerous awards, most recently at the *Houston Comedy Film Festival* (2020) and *Baltimore Next Media Web Fest* (2022). He teaches creative writing at the University of Maryland College Park where he directs Jiménez-Porter Writers' House, a literary center for the study of creative writing across cultures and languages. He also serves as screenwriting faculty in the Electronic Media & Film department at Towson University. Ross received an MFA in Creative Writing & Literature from Bennington College. He lives in Baltimore with his wife, Kate, and two kids, Geno and Lily. Visit his website: [www.jrangelella.com](http://www.jrangelella.com).