

Nine Ninety-Nine:
A Novel

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To the memory of Daniel

Mozart And Melville

“Keep it simple! And short!” said Susan Thomas, the duck-footed, fat-legged poet who, word by word, eight times edited, cut, and pasted the early fragments of this book. “Otherwise,” she shrugged, “only doctors will understand what you write. You don’t want that to happen, do you, Dave?”

“No!” I bellowed. “Never!”

Luckily, the Ontario Friends Of Schizophrenics had given me a special grant: they paid Susan twelve dollars an hour—much lower than a plumber’s wages, I was told—for tutoring me twice a month on ward M and editing the bits and piece of my work in her apartment. At the time, Susan and I were still good friends: money didn’t change hands; that was fine by me.

“In the mornings I polish my poetry,” Susan commented the day I put an end to our relationship. “In the afternoons I eke out a living by inspecting rooming houses, right here in Parkdale.”

On a shelf in Medical Records, my bloated, dog-eared charts fill fourteen volumes. A few years ago, the shifty, scheming authorities at the jail at Nine Ninety-Nine Queen Street West in Toronto—in these euphemistic days a “Mental Health Centre”, at 1001 Queen Street West—finally gave me permission to read my unauthorized clinical biography. Over the years, I found out, they had repeatedly bad-mouthed me as “schizophrenia, paranoid type,” and coded me accordingly, except for a couple of years in the early sixties, when I was under the “care” of an abominably big-footed shrink, who daily showed up at the ward in the same greying, rubber-soled shoes. That skinny, paunchy Paki with greasy hair sported glimmering polyester suits and wash-and-wear shirts from Eaton’s bargain basement. Our ward lord had serious oral problems: a stun-gun bad breath and,

even worse, a piercing Oxphoney accent probably acquired in some Karachi cricket high school. My medical records prove that more than once that son of Belial slapped on me the “chronic undifferentiated type” label. I’ve no idea what that doctoral diarrhoea means. Who cares, anyhow?

From the outset, I might as well make it clear: however disjointed my writings are, they are not reportage or a work of fiction. I swear that my book contains nothing but slices of my real life, without preservatives or additives. As I search my conscience, my hand writes my whole truth and nothing but my truth. Stuff me with Stelazine, or run dozens of electrical shocks into both sides of my skull. Even in such straits I shall not reveal the names of the shrinks, phuds—the monsters with a Ph.D.—gun molls, and Goliaths who, for almost three decades, tried to manipulate and control my behaviour, mind, and soul. Locked behind doors of glass and steel, one way to destroy the enemy is to deny him a name, an identity.

So, may ruby-eyed, split-tongued devils with baboon asses wipe the memories of all authority figures from the face of the earth for eternity!

“Amen! Selah!” sing the less violent voices I hear much of the time.

You got it right. I was not born in one of the closed wards of Nine Ninety-Nine, but at the obstetrics department of the old Mount Sinai Hospital. Forty-five years ago, Bathurst-and-Eglinton Jews like my parents would never trust a ginger-haired, bony-fingered Anglo doctor with red-licorice lips and an up-tight smile to bring their babies into the world. Yet, over the years I’ve been under the care of countless *goyishe* shrinks: the paunchy Paki I’ve already mentioned; a skin-and-bones chink with atrophied feet who wore blue-black baggy pants and reeked of the same cheap aftershave that we, his penniless charges, used. That speech-impaired, truly incoherent Chinaman got off on prescribing shock treatments, just as we Toronto guys get a buzz from Hockey Night In Canada.

Only Lucifer knows how many a Limey in brogues and knee-high socks that perfectly matched his grey gabardine pants I had to put up with all these years. When, at long last, I gazed into the face of the neatly-combed, sandy-haired ward lord, more often than not the blue-eyed, ruddy lad had thin, pale lips. Every day the cold fish sported a starched white shirt and a maroon, satiny bow-tie; he behaved as if he, the enemy, owned not only Nine Ninety-Nine, but the whole of Canada; he deluded himself into thinking he spoke impeccable English, when he spat cats and dogs every time he opened his toothy mouth in one of the ward's long, creme-coloured corridors.

Whether imported or homegrown, shrinks at Nine Ninety-Nine were not good enough for an appointment in a general hospital. Just picture one of my head-doctors starting a private practice on St. Clair Avenue west of Avenue Road, Toronto's Angst Alley! Could you imagine a physician or phud in the community referring a Nine Ninety-Nine staff even their mild cases—the people who bitch about their awful parents, or chat with the therapist about problems they *don't* have? What cultivated, well-travelled neurotic would lower his delicate fanny onto a Nine Ninety-Nine shrink's couch? And what about writers in search of down-home feelings to fill page after page of their Great Canadian Trilogy? Are any of my unmedicated fellow writers stupid enough to take even brief therapy from mean pill pushers and jailers?

In the rare event one of my torturers talked a good line, or walked the ward as if he knew his onions, as soon as he learned the ropes outside the gulag for chronic dissenters, he vanished. So, at the United Nations of Nine Ninety-Nine, the devils on staff earned their keep by zapping electricity into our skulls. Monthly they changed our meds pumping us chicks and guys with pills up to our eyeballs. Good-for-nothings! If they did no harm on our way in, weeks later they turned us into jalopies.

(Chick-shrinks are a recent breed: I haven't yet figured out an effective way of making their lives miserable—some-

thing more than just hitting the psychotic button at two a.m., when the enemy wants only to stretch under her blankets in a warm bed.)

Please, believe me, and don't get Freudian. Nothing went wrong in my childhood. Unlike the serial killers in the *Toronto Star*, mine was not a broken home. No physical or emotional abuse either. I didn't bedwet even once past age two; unlike other kids at school, I never plucked the wings off flies to watch them scuttle in desperation. I never set fires to neighbours' garages, nor broke dogs' hind legs.

Until my problems began, Mom was a warmly-smiling, chestnut-haired woman with shapely lips. Born in Toronto to an unorthodox Jewish family, she didn't have a Bat-Mitzvah—it wasn't fashionable in those days; instead of a kosher kitchen, she upheld Jewish tradition by blessing candles on Friday evenings. You could say her Sabbath began early on Friday mornings: with a rag and forefinger she applied a thick layer of Silvo to the tall, four-legged, candle-holders inherited from her Polish mother. After the Silvo had caked, she polished the holders to a dazzling sheen. She continued that tradition even when she worked full time at Simpson's.

Like me, Mom had no more than a high school education; still, she became the President's executive secretary. Despite her life's hurried pace during my teenage years, she remained a warm, affectionate mother. She didn't take a job until I entered grade four: she wanted her only son—Mom had several miscarriages after I was born—to grow in a safe, rich environment with hot, home-made lunches.

"No sandwiches, sir!" was Mom's motto while I went to grade school.

In those days, Mom and I listened to one of Mozart's symphonies or piano concertos after lunch; quite often, we went through her favourite reproductions of the post-impressionists. "Renoir is my favourite," she sighed, coquettish. Were I to criticize my Mom, I would say that she hurt me at the time by admiring Mozart more than my early writings; throughout my teens, I felt jealous of Wolfgang Amadeus.

Dad, a short, balding, soft-spoken man, brought home the brisket by teaching English and History at North Toronto Collegiate Institute. He absolutely worshipped every story, poem, and essay I wrote in high school. Tears gathered in his eyes whenever he read even my first drafts.

Dad had come to Toronto from Poland as a child, and from time to time loved to kick in a Yiddish *wertl*. His young man's dream was to write a doctoral dissertation on Herman Melville's ideas of personality, or something like that. But, Dad sighed, there were no student loans in those days; my grandfather, a tailor at Tip Top, could hardly afford his son's undergraduate studies, let alone subsidize seven years of scholarly research. Rancorous, Dad settled for a bachelor's degree, then a teacher's certificate.

My parents got angry at each other whenever Mom played her Mozart vinyls too many times. Above the sounds of *Don Giovanni* or the *Jupiter* symphony, Dad yelled, "Ann, If you don't put the volume down, I'm renting a basement apartment."

"Avram!" Mom hollered back. "You know where the door is, Avram!"

She got upset whenever Dad woke up late and, without taking the garbage to the curb, rushed to work.

"I forgot," he slapped his glimmering, growing forehead almost every Thursday evening.

"Avram!" Mom fired, "you never forget to take your lunch to school!"

Late at night, with Wolfgang at last off the air, Dad sat by his desk; into the wee night hours he studied for the umpteenth time portions of *Bartleby The Scrivener*, two-inch-thick novels, and *Billy Bud*, his idol's masterpiece. (Billy Bud, Dad flung his hand dismissively, was too good for students high on grass.) Despite my mother's rumblings, my sleepy Dad could barely roll out of bed in the mornings; Mom held Melville and *Moby Dick* in contempt.

My problems began in grade thirteen, just when the other kids were having loud parties, going crazy about Little

Richard and Elvis. Too excited to fall asleep, I roamed inside our house at night. To Mom's chagrin, I cut school and began to eat my meals only in my room. Distant echoes, loud locomotive whistles, and mean voices of women and men hiding inside the walls tortured me day and night. "You're a bastard, Dave," they yelled. "Your Mom is a whore, a hooker! Her man is not your father! That pimp hates you! He'll put poison in your food, then publish your work under his name."

Every time the voices' volume went up, my muscles and joints hurt terribly. Over the decades, a legion of physiatrists, rheumatologists, neurologists, orthopaedic surgeons, specialists in pain management, chiropractors, kinesiologists—to name only the experts—have tried to help me. Tough bananas. To this day, every time the mean voices take over, contractions seize my leg muscles, and, in seconds, radiate to all parts of my body.

As my problems worsened, I dreaded looking into others' eyes. I became convinced that even total strangers could read my mind and, especially, my shame and guilt for masturbating into a nylon sock hidden between my mattress and box-spring. Though my parents begged me to stop staring at their ankles, shins, and knees, I continued to hang my head, my eyes on their legs and thighs. Over the years, I've perfected my *shtick*: first I glance at shoes and socks; only later I venture to look at faces. If I feel secure, a rare event, I maintain eye contact for a millionth of a second. For an experienced observer, shoes, socks, and the hems of pants can be as revealing as the facial expressions people wear.

Just a week before the 1958 Christmas break, voices from my black-and-white television ordered me to kill Dad before he or one of his co-conspirators poisoned my milk. To protect both Dad and myself, I filled my room with bottles of mineral water and canned food, then boarded the door from within.

"David, David!" Mom and Dad begged. "Open the door!"

“Leave me alone!” I shouted. “I know you hate me!” That was not true. I feared what I might do to them.

When not dozing off, I screamed, “Murderers! Murderers! Murderers!” At that stage, not only my parents, but the Premier of Ontario and his cabinet were on my mind. Since I peed and poed in my room, Mom and Dad threatened to call the police. They did, eventually, but I can’t recall whether it was dark or bright outdoors when the showdown with the cops took place. Night and day, voices from inside the walls and from all corners shrieked, “They poisoned you, Dave! They poisoned you!”

After pounding and pounding on my door, the dog catchers in police uniform kicked it in. Pinching their noses, they charily tred into the minefield of my room. Standing right behind the bulky cops, Dad aimed a green garden hose at me, and sprayed freezing water on the shit icing my bed and body.

It took half a dozen cops to carry me to Nine Ninety-Nine: when I fly into one of my rages, I kick in the groin, scream, and bite. By comparison, Samson was just a well-behaved pussycat. There is plenty of evidence for that in Medical Records.

Once locked up in Lucifer’s Lair, the gun molls and Goliaths tied me in cold packs and straightjackets. (In those days, there was no Charter of Rights in Canada; every shrink did what was right in his own eyes.) If you paid me a dollar for every suicide attempt, I’d have enough money for a trip to Israel: I would see, smell, and touch the settings of most Biblical stories.

I tried every trick in the book and some new ones, too: with the bed frame I slashed my wrists; I swallowed plastic forks and knives; I made a rope out of my sheets and blankets; I stopped peeing and stuck four fingers up my ass for days. In vain, as you can see.

In those days, there were no sanitized “intensive care units,” just dozens of Goliaths to restrain David Hoffnungs who stood up for their rights—”combative”, in Medical Re-

cords jargon. But even while in restraints, again and again I threatened to knife and blowtorch my parents and all authorities for locking me up. Later on, I sent Mom, Dad, and the Premier of Ontario some nasty letters and pieces of vile poetry.

My name put into the heads of my voices all sorts of interesting ideas. To them, “David” denoted that I was the Messiah Jews had been waiting for thousands of years. “Hoffnung”—hope, in Yiddish—indicated that I alone would bring about all the sweet dreams of white, black, and Asian women and men. When not tormented by voices, I alternated between ecstatic laughter and soft sobbing: in the beginning God had created the universe so that my glory, wisdom, and benevolence—a majestic new sun—would warm and enlighten all living creatures.

It took me a couple of years at ward M to become “stabilized,” my medical records say. After years of reading only the *Toronto Star*’s headlines, I ached for challenging and gratifying books; my emptied-out mind felt as thirsty as bushes in the Judea wilderness. Unlucky me found on the ward only what the gangsters on staff had placed on the shelves: bound copies of the *Reader’s Digest*, coverless and yellowing pocketbooks, sentimental romances, and antique, discoloured copies of the *National Geographic*. Bored and tired of superficialities with little artistic or philosophical value, I immersed myself in a copy of the King James’ version of the Bible I found concealed behind stacked-up books. A proud Jew, first I studied the Old Testament, the most precious of the Jews’ many gifts to mankind. (My impaired concentration and drifting attention span does not, unfortunately, permit me to read more recent Jewish writers I’ve read about in the *Star*: Bashevis-Singer, Agnon, Saul Bellow, or, in a wave of Canadian nationalism, Mordecai Richler.)

My friends on the ward were observing Christians, and under their influence I also studied daily brief portions of the New Testament, from St. Matthew to Revelation. In a few years I became a scholar of all matters Biblical.

Like my parents, I'm not an orthodox or observant Jew; I enjoyed researching and writing notes on the Bible seven days a week. It was no chore for me, but a source of ecstatic fulfilment. Though I fasted on Yom Kippur, even on that holy day I took no breaks from my studies, as I didn't consider my research work, but edification of my soul and character; from the prophets and the apostles I drew much inspiration for my unceasing wars against all hogs in power. I conducted my investigations even after the late local news. I read, reread, and wrote comments until the by-the-book sadistic staff turned off the lights on the ward. As the enemies of freedom and human rights did not allow me to make use of their bright, fluorescent-lit staff station, I called it a day, and resumed my quest for truth after breakfast.

Mom and Dad began to visit me every Sunday afternoon. In a paper bag they brought me chocolate bars and the *New Yorker*—the glossy, overedited review of *yiddishe* and *goyishe* gossip. They never brought me packs of cigarettes, because, unlike other locked-up people, I've never been keen on smoking. Erratic as my thinking might be, it leans toward biological, not environmental theories: there must be a genetic underpinning for one's interest, or disinterest, in neurotic smoke-screens.

After I became unglued the first time, my relationship with my parents was never the same. Mom, of course, still hugged and kissed me every Sunday—a bit perfunctorily, I'd say. Not even once did Dad ask me his favourite question since grade three, "Do you still want to become a journalist one day, Dave?"

Weekly my parents sat by my bed, and, a nice and polite Canadian family, we chatted about every new and old topic under the sun, except how the three of us really felt about me, Avram and Ann Hoffnung's only son, living in Nine Ninety-Nine all these years. Though I never brought up anything personal—that would have upset me terribly—I could hardly wait for Mom and Dad to leave. Just being with them in the same room gave me goosebumps. I couldn't help it.

Mom and Dad never got over my accusations and the terrible poems I wrote in the throes of my initial problems. When Mom died of cancer some twelve years ago, I fell apart, and they gave me a lot of shock treatments.

Months after I recovered, a flat-footed, massive-legged Yidd shrink with thighs the shape of an overweight prosciutto said, “Your unresolved, ambivalent guilt about your mother made you sick, Dave.”

In a rage, I shot a glance at his cream cheese false teeth and lox lips.

“A full moon is made of cottage cheese, mister,” I replied. (Later, I’ll tell in detail how I manhandled another clever Yidd who happened to be a head-doctor.)

Years ago, Dad entered a nursing home. Escorted by an assistant gun moll, I visited him: wan, skinny, and frail, he almost disappeared in his big bed in a piss-smelling room with three other old men. I haven’t heard any bad news since then, and I suppose he’s fine.

There’s something evil about so-called madness: it turns your heart either lava-hot or iceberg-cold—mostly cold, I’d say. Do normals subsist somewhere in the space between? I don’t know. Let fat-cat shrinks and research-crazy phuds worry about the subtleties of theory. I have enough problems just keeping my thoughts straight, to write coherent paragraphs. My concentration is so poor that I’m unable to read most books; I write two sentences a day.

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