



The Proposition

“I did something stupid,” the rabbi told my father.

It was 1925, New York City, a bar on the Lower East Side.

My father was a few years away from marriage, fatherhood, respectability, and so was prone to do stupid things himself: stay up late, associate with rough customers, drink too much, sing off-key – which really was the only way my father knew how to sing. But a rabbi doing a stupid thing? And not just any rabbi, but his good friend Lev Bronstyn, who was more like a big brother to him than any of his own big brothers were.

“I’m not joking, Harry,” Bronstyn said. “I mean really stupid.” He took a sip of whisky. “It involves a woman.”

“Ah,” my father said.

“It’s bad, Harry,” the rabbi said. Bronstyn had a long, often damp nose and prominent ears, which combined to make his head appear larger than normal. He shook it now. “Very bad.”



My father was not a religious man, but he lived in a religious world. Sometimes those two forces – one pro, the other not necessarily anti but neutral – came together in a powerful, even violent clash.

More than three million Jews lived in the New York

City of the Twenties and Thirties, more than the total population of some states, and the Lower East Side, where my father worked, was their capital. Many of them, if not most, were religious, at least to the extent that they believed in God, went to *shul*, kept kosher, honoured and sought the counsel of rabbis. My father did none of these but he didn't make a show of it. He was a Jew, he thought, but not Jewish, a fine distinction.

He was, by his own reckoning, a socialist, a humanist, an autodidact, and, to the extent that he could be, a freethinker and an intellectual. The religious instruction he'd had as a child in Galicia, in Eastern Europe, had come to naught – after the family moved to America, around the turn of the century, interest in religion had waned for all but my grandmother who remained devout until her death, and my father was working as a blacksmith's helper at a stable on the Bowery on his thirteenth birthday and never did have his *bar mitzvah*. That was a loss his mother, my *bubba*, regretted, but he didn't.

By the time he began to write for *Der Tag* or *The Day*, all thoughts of religion were far behind him, although the newspaper conveyed a conservative slant that appealed to religious elements in the Jewish community. Soon he began to cover labour and was frequenting the Café Royale on Second Avenue and the Garden Cafeteria, just down the street from *The Day* building, hanging around with poets and playwrights, socialists, communists and anarchists, people who had no use for religion.

So it was a little strange that one of my father's best friends during this period of his life was a rabbi.



Bronstyn called on my father at *The Day's* offices at 187 East Broadway one Monday around noon and they walked the block and a half to a tavern on Henry Street where they could have a lunch for just a nickel extra with a beer. It was too crowded and noisy to talk but my father could tell something was on Bronstyn's mind. After a while, when the crowd had thinned somewhat, they bought shots of whisky and moved to the booth at the end of a long row of them.

"I did something stupid," Bronstyn began.

"It's about time," my father said, smiling. "You're altogether too smart for your own good."

"I'm not joking, Harry," Bronstyn said. "I mean really stupid. This is bad."

"What could be so bad?"

"It involves a woman." He took a handkerchief from his jacket pocket and wiped his nose.

"Ah," my father said. He was still a young man, with relatively little personal experience with women, although he'd had a bittersweet romance in Cleveland a few years earlier. But he was a keen student of human nature, and he'd observed that when men were in trouble it almost always involved a woman, to some extent at least. His stint as an advice columnist in Cleveland had certainly confirmed that.

Bronstyn was frowning at his drink, silent, and after a minute my father nodded his head and asked, "Surely not one of the women from those houses?"

"Yes," Bronstyn said.

Immediately, my father gave his full attention to his friend.

Bronstyn, on completion of his theological studies, had declined a position as a working rabbi. Instead, he had pursued a career in social work, and was now employed at a large Jewish agency that gave assistance

of various sorts to orphans, unwed mothers, battered and otherwise abused women and children, and people of both sexes dealing with the deleterious effects of poverty. White slavery, the term applied to the mixture of sweet talk and intimidation used to coerce women, mostly right off the boat from Europe, into prostitution, was an especially serious problem on the Lower East Side, where dozens, perhaps hundreds, of brothels thrived, catering to lonely immigrants separated from their families. Bronstyn, who was affectionately known to his co-workers as “the rabbi,” headed up a small unit dedicated to saving women from prostitution.

This was of interest to my father, who, as a young reporter eager to make a name for himself, was always on the lookout for a good story. He wrote several feature stories on the white-slavery problem, and, that April, soon after Passover, he was invited along on a number of raids coordinated between Bronstyn’s agency and the police on brothels believed to be holding Jewish women against their will. His stories about these raids, accompanied by photographs, were splashed across the front page of the usually restrained *Day* and caused a sensation throughout the Lower East Side and the city in general, where the Jewish community had preferred to look the other way. A story my father wrote, based on interviews with some of the freed women, and headlined “Someone’s daughters,” was especially controversial, and was a feather in his cap. He was grateful to Bronstyn for having steered him to these stories and helped him get them, while Bronstyn, in turn, was grateful to my father for publicizing the problem and his agency’s efforts.

Most recently, my father had written a story detailing how Bronstyn’s agency was trying to help the women re-establish normal lives, finding them places

to live and jobs, helping to locate family members, providing English lessons. He knew that Bronstyn and his colleagues worked closely with the women, in order to gain their trust.

Bronstyn took a tentative sip of his whisky. "I was careless," he said. "Reckless."

He explained that following the most recent raid he had become unnecessarily close to one particular woman who had opened up to him with her problems and fears. He had taken a personal interest in her case.

"This woman, she's attractive?" My father asked. It wasn't a disingenuous question, as he knew that many of the prostitutes, despite their youth and the life they'd been forced into, were plain.

"Very," Bronstyn said. His normal hangdog expression was exaggerated, and the length of his already long face, from brow to chin, seemed to grow even as my father watched him. Again, he wiped at his nose with his handkerchief. "But it isn't what you may think, believe me Harry. Nothing happened. I was reckless, stupid, yes, but..."

"If nothing happened, then nothing happened," my father interrupted. "So what's the problem?"

"There are photographs, apparently."

My father was shocked. "But nothing happened, you said."

"Still, I compromised myself." Bronstyn looked even more sorrowful.

"Photographs of what exactly? If nothing happened, what's there to photograph?"

"I haven't seen them," Bronstyn said. "Just been told of them. An anonymous note in the mail. But we were together, yes, sometimes...very close. And...she took me on a tour of some of the dance halls where she'd worked. This was strictly business, Harry, believe me,

but I was stupid not to have brought a colleague with us. When we got to one of those places, she became frightened, she clung to my arm...

“I told you, Harry, I was careless. These photographs, they’d devastate my wife. They’d do damage to the agency. It’s bad, Harry. Very bad.”



It was through his eldest brother, my uncle Sam, that my father met and became friendly with Lev Bronstyn.

Sam and Lev had met at Columbia University, where both were pursuing studies in religion, philosophy, literature and the social sciences that would prepare them for the associated rabbinical college, which would follow. They’d become friends perhaps because neither was particularly religious nor had any real interest in the rabbinate. My uncle, who had been given financial support by a friend of the family, saw it as a ticket to education – he graduated but became a journalist, not a rabbi; Lev was dutifully honouring the wishes of his own father, who thirty years earlier had sacrificed his own desire to become a rabbi in order to help support his family. As the two became fast friends, Bronstyn was a frequent visitor at my father’s family’s apartment on Mott Street.

My father was only eleven or twelve when he met Lev Bronstyn, who was, like Sam, then in his early twenties. There was absolutely no reason for Bronstyn to take a liking to this boy, but he did, and as my father grew into a youth and a young man himself, Bronstyn remained friendly, interested in what my father was doing, willing to lend an ear to his problems, offering advice and support. It was Bronstyn, in fact, who advised my father to leave the city, to go west to try his hand at

the family trade, journalism, far from the shadow of his father and older brother, both of whom were prominent on the Lower East Side – a decision that led to my father spending several years in Cleveland, where he launched his newspaper career. By that time Bronstyn who, ironically, had had a falling out with Sam, had grown from friendly mentor to my father into an actual friend. While my father was away from the city, he and his friend exchanged many letters, and when my father came back to New York, he and Bronstyn began seeing a lot of each other. My father was soon closer to Bronstyn than he ever had been – or would be – with his own brother.

Bronstyn was a tall, somewhat ascetic-looking man with a perpetual hangdog expression broken occasionally by a dolorous smile. My father, describing him to me years later, likened him to “a Jewish Gary Cooper, with a long nose, bright blue eyes – not a handsome man, really, but with a heroic profile.” The Cooperesque nose, my father added, had a tendency to drip and was often being wiped, either with a handkerchief or by the back of Bronstyn’s wrist.

My father’s friend had married a young woman from a good conservative German-Jewish family, much like his own, and by this time had two children, a boy and a girl, and lived in a small house in the Bronx, far from where he worked. It took him almost an hour of travelling by bus and subway to get to and from work every day, but, he told my father, he preferred it that way. “I like to be able to escape from this hellhole completely,” he said. “And it gives me perspective.”

My father disagreed with his friend’s characterization of the Lower East Side, where he worked and had grown up, as a hellhole, but he himself lived at some distance from it, in Coney Island, and there was no dis-



puting that this densely populated corner of Manhattan suffered from more than its share of social ills, all seemingly linked to the pervasive poverty that afflicted the area, including the prostitution with which Bronstyn was so familiar, but also gambling, loansharking and other evils controlled by organized crime. Just walking down a street like Orchard, where my father liked to browse the used bookstores and the pushcarts and horse-drawn wagons of peddlers, with their endless supply of tools, housewares, used books, cheap clothing and *tchotchkas* of all types, was an adventure, dodging the dozens of pickpockets and streetwalkers plying their trades.

It was only natural that, as they moved through the area and among its inhabitants, both my father and Bronstyn should come into occasional contact with gangsters of various stripes.



Just how bad a situation Bronstyn had gotten himself into my father didn't realize until he returned to his office that afternoon and found Hermie, *The Day's* errand boy, arguing with a younger boy. "Morgenstern," Hermie called to him as he came through the door, "this boy has a package for you. He wouldn't leave it. I told him he could but he wouldn't."

"So here I am," my father said. He turned to the boy, who had the rough and dirty look of the street about him, in suspended trousers, ill-fitting shoes and cloth cap. "What's so special?"

"I dunno. The man said give this just to you, no one else," the boy said.

"What man was that?"

"I dunno. Just some man on the street. He gave me





a nickel, said you'd give me another." The boy gave Hermie a justified glance.

My father took the package from the boy and gave him the promised nickel. The package, which bore his name in block letters, was no more than a flat manila envelope, the size of a sheet of paper and taped shut. He had a pretty good idea what it would contain but he waited until he got to his desk and sat down before opening it.

There were half a dozen photos, all pretty much the same shot, a man and a woman, glossy, a bit underexposed and out of focus, like the sort of sneak photos some of the English-language tabloids ran on their gossip pages. Photographers often lurked around outside nightclubs in wait for chances at such shots, my father knew. The man in the photo was clearly Lev Bronstyn, the woman an attractive blonde with large white teeth and a bruised air about her. They were standing outside a particularly notorious dance hall on Second Avenue, the *Palais de Danse*, its sign clearly visible. There was nothing inappropriate happening between them but the woman's small hand was placed lightly on Bronstyn's sleeve and her smile suggested she might like there to be.

There was an accompanying note, written in the same crude hand: "Here's your friend, some so-called friend of the 'working girl'." The challenge to run the photos in the paper wasn't stated but didn't need to be.



My father had another friend to whom he often turned when he needed advice. This was Fushgo, a bookseller whose crowded, musty shop was only two blocks further south on East Broadway. My father had only met





him recently, since his return to New York, but they had become fast if not close friends.

"It's unthinkable that we should run these photos," my father said.

"Of course, but what are the consequences?" Fushgo asked. He was an older fellow, permanently shaded grey from the settled dust in his shop. Tufts of bristly hair protruded from his ears, causing a persistent itch. "Let's say, just for the sake of argument, you did use them."

"I wouldn't," my father protested.

"But let's say you did."

"It would be a betrayal."

"Exactly," Fushgo said. He twisted a finger in his right ear. "And if you don't?"

My father thought for a moment, his mouth pursed. "After a day or two, I imagine whoever's behind this will give them to the other papers."

"So you can't win," Fushgo observed gloomily.

"No, but the first choice is not really a choice, so the second choice is the only choice. At least it won't be me involved with ruining a friend. Some consolation."

"Also it buys you time," Fushgo said.

"Yes."

"To do what with?"

"That's the question," my father said.

Fushgo gave his ear another twist and glanced at his finger.

"Time is always good," he said.



The next day, which happened to be a Wednesday, my father had lunch at the Garden Cafeteria at the corner of East Broadway and Rutgers Street, as he usually did, then strolled down Canal Street to Allen. It was a warm



day in May, so my father wore his customary suit jacket and tie, but no coat, and his jacket was open. A copy of that afternoon's paper, fresh from the presses, was under his arm.

He paused at the corner and, making an exaggerated show of looking both ways before crossing the street, managed to sneak a quick glance behind him and catch sight of a recognizable face. Since the day before, he'd become familiar with the appearance of two men he didn't know – my father was no detective, but he had a good eye for faces. These two fellows were notable by their very ordinariness, he thought – one was skinny as a minute, with a chisel face and an elongated nose – ironically, somewhat like Bronstyn's; the other hefty, with a face like a chicken dumpling. Both wore workingmen's clothes that made them seem the antithesis of what my father thought of as gangsters, with flashy suits and slicked-back hair. He hadn't seen the two men together but, whenever he was on the street, one or the other seemed to be nearby. It hadn't taken him very long to jump to the conclusion that he was being followed.

The area near *The Day* was, as always, crowded with passersby, so he had no concern for his safety; rather, he was amused and curious. The streets were peopled mostly by men, some in rough working clothes, others in the shiny black suits of the Orthodox, with black felt hats, beards and *payes*, feathery ritual sidelocks. But there were also, my father observed, quite a few women, whose dress advertised them as streetwalkers. Allen Street, which was notorious, was especially infested with these women – there were clots of them at each corner, and individuals leaning at literally every street lamp within sight. On Allen Street and the streets around it, it was said, there were as many brothels as synagogues, if not more; as many women of loose

morals as there were pious but weak-willed men.

My father already had some familiarity with gangsters – Arnold Rothstein, reputed to be the head of the city’s underworld, and Louis Buchalter, known as Lepke, were both active in the garment trade, on both the bosses’ and the unions’ sides, as the wind blew, along with a ragtag string of underlings.

He was acquainted with a fellow, a jovial Italian who provided muscle for either side of an argument, depending on who paid the most, whom he considered to be both well connected and discreet. My father had run into him a number of times, had even shared a drink with him once or twice, and knew him to be dangerous but amiable. The evening before, after his conversation with Fushgo, my father had stopped by a certain saloon where he knew this fellow, who was called Two-Fingers Giovanni, liked to spend time – the nickname arose from the unpleasant state of his left hand, rumoured to have come about at the business end of a butcher’s cleaver during a youthful fight with a rival gang. Sure enough, he was there, and for the price of a whisky, my father was able to extract the name of the gangster likely behind the photos: Monk Eastman.

“If not Monk himself, then someone who works for him, most likely,” Two-Fingers said. “He’s got his fingers in every whore this side of the East Side.” He grinned. “Well, you know what I mean.”

Afterwards, my father had gone back to *The Day*, where he spent some time in the newspaper’s dusty morgue, combing through old clippings. As he expected, he was far from the first reporter to have written about prostitution and white slavery. In the years right before the war, there’d been many such exposés, not much different from the ones he’d written. With the war’s arrival in 1914, the public’s interest had shifted,

and there were few stories on the subject until my father had again aroused attention with his tales of Bronstyn's exploits.

My father strolled leisurely along Allen Street, which lay under the heavy shadow of the elevated train tracks, to the corner of Grand, took a right, then another right at Orchard, crowded with pushcarts and hawkers, then another on Hester back to Allen Street. In the course of a walk around the block that should have taken five minutes but instead took twenty, he was propositioned, by his count, thirty-seven times. Their conversations were almost always short – “Hello good-looking,” or “Say, there, handsome,” in Yiddish inflected with a range of Eastern European accents, Galician, Polish, Hungarian, countered by my father's good-natured reply, “Good afternoon, young lady, no thank you.” On Allen Street itself, these conversations were often all but drowned out by the rattle of the elevated train rushing by above them.

One of his two shadows, Chisel Face, was loitering across the street, making a show of studying the contents of a shop window. My father walked quickly across the street and, before he could bolt, had the man by the arm.

“What the hell...” he shouted, wheeling away.

“Take it easy,” my father said. “I'm not looking for a fight. I want to talk to Monk Eastman.”

“You crazy?” the skinny fellow asked.

“Not at all. Get your friend to go to Eastman, or you do it and your friend can watch me, the heavy-set fellow. I'll stay right here till you return. Don't worry. I don't mean him any harm, or you either. I just want to talk.”

“You are crazy,” the man said, but a sly grin was spreading across his narrow face. He gestured, and in a few seconds the other fellow came up beside them. The

two stepped aside and conferred. After a minute, Chisel Face took off on a trot and Dumpling Face took up a position on the corner, brushing aside a young woman who'd been stationed by the street light. My father, for his part, sat down on the stoop closest to the corner, unfolded his newspaper and began to read.

Half an hour later, my father was ushered by both of his companions through the door of a saloon on Rivington Street, through the crowded saloon itself and into a back room, all but deserted. There, at a large table sat a well-built, dapper man in an expensive silk suit and a meticulous haircut. The man's pleasant face was vaguely familiar.

"Good afternoon, Morgenstern," he said.

"I know you, I think."

"We've met, once or twice, here and there," the other man said. "We have mutual acquaintances." He stood up and extended his hand. "Monk Eastman. I don't know who or what you expected."

My father wasn't altogether surprised that he'd recognized Eastman, or by his manner. As a reporter, he met all sorts of people, didn't always remember them and was no longer surprised by anything he heard or saw. The two men shook hands, and my father took a chair across from Eastman. A bottle was produced, good Scotch, and drinks were poured.

Eastman drank and placed his shot glass down gently. "You wanted to see me?"

"I have a proposition," my father said.

"Go ahead."

"I'm concerned about a friend. He's been a nuisance to you, I gather. But my guess is, not much more than a nuisance, no real harm."

Eastman's expression was politely curious but non-committal.



“Perhaps I’ve been a nuisance too. I apologize if so. But, you know, if not me, someone else.” My father made a hand gesture indicating the power of fate.

“I appreciate that,” Eastman said.

My father took a deep breath and drank off his shot of whisky. He preferred rye, but the Scotch was good.

“I don’t want to get hurt, but I could be more of a nuisance.”

“I imagine.”

“So could my friend.”

Eastman poured two more drinks. “And your proposition?”

“I think my friend could be persuaded he’d done enough.”

The two men observed each other in tense silence. After a minute or two, Eastman drank down his whisky. “No more nuisance, then?”

“And no one gets hurt,” my father said. He drank his.

“One more to cement the bargain, Morgenstern?” Eastman asked.



That evening, my father left the *Day* office and headed towards the subway and the train north. He still felt a little light-headed, and elated. He’d called Bronstyn, met him for a coffee at the Café Royale and was satisfied the danger was over. It hadn’t been hard to convince his friend that he’d had an effect on the white-slavery problem and to turn his attention to other issues. The problems of unwed mothers and abused women were especially pressing, my father argued. Bronstyn agreed.

“And the photos, they just disappear?” he asked.



“As if they never happened,” my father said. He didn’t think the photos would actually disappear – Eastman, he thought, was a bit of a gentleman, but certainly no fool – but the threat of their being sent to other newspapers had pretty much evaporated.

At the entrance to the subway, he hesitated, then, changing his direction, headed towards Allen Street. The two men who had been his shadows the past couple of days were no longer to be seen, and he walked slowly, breathing in the bittersweet aroma of what he thought of as the perfume of the Lower East Side, a heady mixture of cooked cabbage, baking bread, sweat, sour meat and horse manure, spiced by the sharp salt aroma of the bay wafting inland on a cool breeze, and enjoying the pastel light of the setting sun that softened the hard edges of the tenement-lined streetscape, imbuing it with a dignity it lacked during the bright glare of day. At Allen, he stopped to admire a trio of young women in bright clothing, engaged in conversation, across the street. He could hear laughter drifting in the light breeze. It was a pleasure, after the long winter, to see women without their coats and boots, mufflers and hats. These three were even showing off a bit of leg. They glanced at him, but didn’t stop their conversation.

My father was not intending to purchase their wares – when he was a younger man, in Cleveland, he had indulged once or twice, but now he was content, on a fine evening like this, merely to do a bit of window-shopping.