What We Talk About When We Talk About Anne Frank

Stories

Nathan Englander

2012

ALFRED A. KNOPF NEW YORK 2012

How We Avenged the Blums

If you head out to Greenheath, Long Island, today, you'll find that the school yard where Zvi Blum was attacked is more or less as it was. The bell at the public school still rings through the weekend, and the bushes behind the lot where we played hockey still stand. The only difference is that the sharp screws and jagged edges of the jungle gym are gone, the playground stripped of all adventure, sissified and padded and covered with a snow of shredded tires.

It was onto this lot that Zvi Blum, the littlest of the three Blum boys, stepped. During the week we played in the parking lot of our yeshiva, where slap shots sent gravel flying, but on Shabbos afternoons we ventured onto the fine, uncracked asphalt at the public school. The first to arrive for our game, Zvi wore his helmet with the metal face protector snapped in place. He had on his gloves, and held a stick in his hand.

Zvi worked up a sweat playing a fantasy game while he waited for the rest of us to arrive. After a fake around an imaginary opponent, he found himself at a real and sudden halt. The boy we feared most stood before him. It was Greenheath's local anti-Semite, with a row of friends beyond. The Anti-Semite had, until then, abided by a certain understanding. We stepped gingerly in his presence, looking beaten, which seemed to satisfy his need to beat us for real

The Anti-Semite took hold of Zvi's face mask as if little Blum were a bowling ball.

Zvi looked past the bully and the jungle gym, through the chain-link fence, and up Crocus Avenue, hoping we'd appear, a dozen or more boys, wearing helmets, wielding sticks. How nice if, like an army, we'd arrived.

The Anti-Semite let go of Zvi's mask.

"You Jewish?" he asked.

"I don't know," Zvi said.

"You don't know if you're Jewish?"

"No," Zvi said. He scratched at the asphalt with his hockey stick.

The bully turned to his friends, taking a poll of suspicious glances.

"Your mother never told you?" the Anti-Semite asked.

Zvi shifted his weight and kept on with his scratching. "It never came up," he said.

Zvi remembered a distinct extended pause while the Anti-Semite considered. Zvi thought—he may have been wishing—that he saw the first of us coming down the road.

He was out cold when we got there, beaten unconscious with his helmet on, his stick and gloves missing. We were no experts at forensics, but we knew immediately that he'd been worsted. And because he was suspended by his underwear from one of the bolts on the swing set, we also knew that a wedgie had been administered along the way.

We thought he was dead.

We had no dimes even to make a telephone call, money being forbidden on the Sabbath. We did nothing for way too long. Then Beryl started crying, and Harry ran to the Vilmsteins, who debated, while they fetched the *mukzeh* keys, which of them should drive in an emergency.

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Some whispered that our nemesis was half Jewish. His house was nestled in the dead end behind our school. And the ire of the Anti-Semite and his family was said to have been awakened when, after he'd attended kindergarten with us at our yeshiva for some months, and had been welcomed as a little son of Israel, the rabbis discovered that only his father was Jewish. The boy, deemed Gentile, was ejected from the class and led home by his shamefaced mother. Rabbi Federbush latched the back gate behind them as the boy licked at the finger paint, nontoxic and still wet on his hands.

We all knew the story, and I wondered what it was like for that boy, growing up—growing large—on the other side of the fence. His mother sometimes looked our way as she came and went from the house. She didn't reveal anything that we were mature enough to read—only kept on, often with a palm pressed to the small of her back.

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After Zvi's beating, the police were called.

My parents wouldn't have done it, and let that fact be known.

"What good will come?" my father said. Zvi's parents had already determined that their son had suffered nothing beyond bruising: his bones were unbroken and his brain unconcussed.

"Call the police on every anti-Semite," my mother said, "and they'll need a separate force." The Blums thought differently. Mrs. Blum's parents had been born in America. She had grown up in Connecticut and attended public school. She felt

no distrust for the uniform, believed the authorities were there to protect her.

The police cruiser rolled slowly down the hill with the Blums in procession behind it. They marched, the parents and three sons, little Zvi with his gauze-wrapped head held high.

The police spoke to the Anti-Semite's mother, who propped the screen door open with a foot. After her son had been called to the door for questioning, Mrs. Blum and Zvi were waved up. They approached, but did not touch, the three brick steps.

It was word against word. An accusing mother and son, a pair disputing, and no witnesses to be had. The police didn't make an arrest, and the Blums did not press charges. The retribution exacted from the Anti-Semite that day came in the form of a motherly chiding.

The boy's mother looked at the police, at the Blums, and at the three steps between them. She took her boy by the collar and, pulling him down to a manageable height, slapped him across the face.

"Whether it's niggers or kids with horns," she said, "I don't want you beating on those that are small."

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We'd long imagined that Greenheath was like any other town, except for its concentration of girls in ankle-length jean skirts and white canvas Keds, and boys in sloppy oxford shirts, with their yarmulkes hanging down as if sewn to the side of their heads. There was the fathers' weekday ritual. When they disembarked from the cars of the Long Island Railroad in the evenings, hands reached into pockets and yarmulkes were slipped back in place. The beating reminded us that these differences were not so small.

Our parents were born and raised in Brooklyn. In Greenheath, they built us a Jewish Shangri-la, providing us with everything but the one crucial thing Brooklyn had offered. It wasn't stickball or kick the can—acceptable losses, though nostalgia ran high. No, it was a *quality* that we were missing, a toughness. As a group of boys thirteen and fourteen, we grew healthy, we grew polite, but our parents thought us soft.

Frightened as we were, we thought so, too, which is why we turned to Ace Cohen. He was the biggest Jew in town, and our senior by half a dozen years. He was the toughest Jew we knew, the only one who smoked pot, who had ever been arrested, and who owned both a broken motorcycle and an arcade version of Asteroids. He left the coin panel open and would play endlessly on a single quarter, fishing it out when he was finished. In our admiration, we never considered that at nineteen or twenty we might want to move out of our parents' basements, or go to college. We thought only that he lived the good life—no cares, no job, his own Asteroids, and a minifridge by his bed where he kept his Ring Dings ice-cold.

"Not my beef, little Jew boys" is what he told us when we begged him to beat up the Anti-Semite on our behalf. "Violence breeds violence," he said, slapping at buttons. "Older and wiser—trust me when I tell you to let it go."

"We called the police," Zvi said. "We went to his house with my parents and them."

"Unfortunate," Ace said, looking down at little Zvi. "Unfortunate, my buddy, for you."

"It's a delicate thing being Jewish," Ace said. "It's a condition that aggravates the more mind you pay it. Let it go, I tell you. If you insist on fighting, then at least fight him yourselves."

"It would be easier if you did," we told him.

"And I bet, big as your anti-Semite is, that he, too, in direct proportion, also has bigger friends. Escalation," Ace said

"Escalation built in. You don't want this to get so bad that you really need me."

"But what if we did?" we said.

Ace didn't answer. Frustrated and defeated, we left him—Ace Cohen, blowing the outlines of asteroids apart.

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They were all heroes to us, every single one of Russia's oppressed. We'd seen *Gulag* on cable television, and learned that for escapes across vast snowy tundras, two prisoners would invite a third to join, so that they could eat him along the way. We were moved by this as boys, and fantasized about sacrifice, wondering which of our classmates we'd devour.

Our parents were active in the fight for the refuseniks' freedom in the 1980s, and every Russian Jew was a refusenik, whether he wanted to be or not. We children donated our reversible-vested three-piece suits to help clothe Jewish unfortunates of all nations. And when occasion demanded, we were taken from our classes and put on buses to march for the release of our Soviet brethren.

We got our own refusenik in Greenheath right after Zvi's assault. Boris was the janitor at a Royal Hills yeshiva. He was refilling the towel dispenser in the faculty lounge when he heard of our troubles. Boris was Russian and Jewish, and he'd served in Brezhnev's army and the Israeli one to boot. He made his sympathies known to the teachers from Greenheath, voicing his outrage over our plight. That very Friday, a space was made in the Chevy Nova in which they carpooled while listening to Mishna on tape.

Boris came to town for a Shabbos, and then another, and had he slept twenty-four hours a day and eaten while he slept, he still couldn't have managed to be hosted by a fraction of the families that wanted to house and feed him and then feed him more.

The parents were thrilled to have their own refusenik—a menial laborer yet, a young man who pushed a broom for a living. They hadn't been so excited since the mothers went on an AMIT tour of the Holy Land and saw Jews driving buses and a man wearing tzitzit delivering mail. Boris was Greenheath's own Sharansky, and our parents gave great weight to his dire take on our situation. His sometimes-fractured English added its own gravity to the proceedings. "When hooligan gets angry," he would say, "when drinking too much, the anti-Semite will charge."

The first, informal self-defense class was given the day Boris was at Larry Lipshitz's playing Intellivision hockey and teaching Larry to smoke. It ended with Larry on the basement floor, the wind knocked out of him and a sort of wheeze coming from his throat. "How much?" he said to Boris. "How much what?" was Boris's answer. He displayed a rare tentativeness, which Larry might have noticed if he hadn't been trying to breathe. "For the lesson," Larry said. And here was the wonder of America, the land of opportunity. In Russia, if you punched someone in the stomach, you did it for free. A monthly rate was set, and Larry spread the word.

That was also the day that Barry Pearlman was descended upon by our nemesis as he left Vardit's Pizza and Falafel. His take-out order was taken. The vegetarian egg rolls (a staple of all places kosher, no matter the cuisine) were bitten into. A large pizza and a tahini platter were spread over the street. Barry was beaten, and then, as soon as he was able, he raced back into the store. Vardit, the owner, wiped the sauce from little Pearlman. She remade his order in full, charging only the pizza to his

account. The Pearlmans didn't want trouble. The police were not called.

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Barry Pearlman was the second to sign up. Then came the Kleins and cockeyed Shlomo, whose mother sent him because of the current climate, though really she wanted him to learn to defend himself from us.

Our rabbis at school needed to approve of the militant group we were forming. They remembered how Israel was founded with the aid of Nili and the Haganah and the undergrounds of yore. They didn't much approve of a Jewish state without a messiah, but they gave us permission to present our proposal to Rabbi Federbush, the founder of our community and the dean of our yeshiva.

His approval was granted, but only grudgingly. The old man is not to be blamed. Karate, he knew nothing of; the closest sport he was familiar with was wrestling, and this from rabbinic lore—a Greco-Roman version. His main point of protest, therefore, was that we'd be wrestling the uncircumcised publicly and in the nude. When the proposal was rephrased and he was told that we were being trained to battle the descendants of Amalek, who attacked the Israelites in the desert; that we were gearing up to face the modern-day spawn of Haman (cursed be his name); when told it was to fight the Anti-Semite, he nodded his head, understanding. "Cossacks," he said, and agreed.

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It wasn't exactly a pure martial art, but an amalgam of Israeli Krav Maga, Russian hand-to-hand combat, and Boris's

own messy form of endless attack. He showed us how to fold a piece of paper so it could be used to take out an eye or open a throat, and he told us always to travel with a circuit tester clipped to our breast pocket like a pen. When possible, Boris advised us, have a new gun waiting at each destination. He claimed to have learned this during a stint in the Finger of God, searching out Nazis in Argentina and then—acting as a military tribunal of one—finding them guilty and putting a bullet between their eyes.

We were taught to punch and kick, to stomp and bite, while the mainstay of all suburban martial-arts classes—when you can avoid confrontation, you do it—was removed. Boris told us to hold our ground. "Worst cases," he said, "raise hand like in defeat and kick for ball."

After a few weeks of lessons, we began to understand the power we had. Boris had paired Larry Lipshitz, that wisp of a boy, with Aaron, the middle Blum. They went at it in Larry's backyard, circling and jabbing with a paltry amount of rage. Boris stood off to the side, his arms resting on his paunch—a belly that on him was the picture of good health, as if it were the place from which all his strength emanated, a single muscle providing power to all the other parts.

Boris spat in the grass and stepped forward. "You are fighting," he said. "Fight." He put his foot to Aaron's behind and catapulted him into his opponent. "Friends later. Now win." Larry Lipshitz let out a yawp befitting a larger man and then, with speed and with grace, he landed the first solid roundhouse kick we'd seen delivered. It was no sparring partner's hit, but a shoulder fake and all-his-might strike, the ball of Lipshitz's bare foot connecting with Aaron's kidney. Larry didn't offer a hand. He stepped back like a champion and raised his fists high. Aaron hobbled to the nearest tree and displayed for us the

first fruits of our training. He dropped his pants, took aim, and, I tell you, it was nothing less than water to wine for us when Aaron Blum peed blood.

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It's curious that the story most often used to inspire Jewish battle readiness is that of Masada, an episode involving the last holdouts of an ascetic Israelite sect, who committed suicide in a mountain fortress. The battle was fought valiantly, though without the enemy present. Jews bravely doing harm to themselves. The only Roman casualties died of frustration in their encampment below—eight months in the desert spent building a ramp to storm fortress walls for a slaughter, and the deed already done when they arrived.

When Israeli army recruits complete basic training, they climb up that mountain and scream out into the echo, "A second time Masada won't fall." Boris made us do the same over the edge of Greenheath Pond, a body of water whose circulation had slowed, a thick green soup that sent back no sound.

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Mostly, the harassment was aimed at the Blum boys and their house. I don't know if this was because of their proximity to the Anti-Semite's house, the call to the police, or the Anti-Semite's public slap in the face. I sometimes can't help thinking that the Blum boys were chosen as targets because they looked to the bully as they looked to me: enticingly victimlike and small. Over time, an M-80 was used to blow up the Blum mailbox, and four tires were slashed on a sensible Blum car. A shaving-cream swastika was painted on their walkway, but

it washed away in the rain before anyone could document its existence.

When we ran into the Anti-Semite, insults were inevitably hurled, and punches thrown. Larry took a thrashing without managing his now-legendary kick. Shaken, he demanded his money's worth of Boris, and made very clear that he now feared for his life. Boris shrugged it off. "Not so easy," he assured him. "Shot and lived. Stabbed and lived. Not so easy to get dead."

My father witnessed the abuse. He came upon the three Blum boys crawling around and picking up pennies for the right to cross the street—the bully and his friends enforcing. My father scattered the boys, all but the three Blums, who stood there red in the face, hot pennies in their hands.

The most severe attack was the shotgun blast that shattered the Blums' bay window. We marked it as the start of dark days, though the shells were packed only with rock salt.

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We stepped up our training and also our level of subterfuge. We memorized kata and combinations. We learned to march in lockstep, to run, leap, and roll in silence.

Lying on our backs in a row with feet raised, heads raised, and abdomens flexed, we listened to Boris lecture while he ran over us, stepping from stomach to stomach, as if crossing a river on stones. Peace, Boris insisted, was maintained through fear. "Do you know which countries have no anti-Semite?" he asked. We didn't have an answer. "The country with no Jew."

The struggle would not end on its own. The bully would not mature, see the error of his ways, or learn to love the other. He would hate until he was dead. He would fight until he was dead. And unless we killed him, or beat him until he thought

we had killed him, we'd have no truce, no peace, no quiet. In case we didn't understand the limitations of even the best-case scenario, Boris explained it to us again. "The man hits. In future he will hit wife, hit son, hit dog. We want only that he won't hit Jew. Let him go hit someone else."

Despite all the bumps pushed back into foreheads and the braces freed from upper lips, I'm convinced our parents thought our training was worth the effort. Our mothers brought frozen steaks to press against black eyes and stood close as our fathers tilted our chins and hid smiles. "Quite a shiner," they would say, and they could hardly stand to give up staring when the steaks covered our wounds.

Along with the training injuries, we had other setbacks. One was a tactical error when, post–shotgun blast, we went as a group to egg the Anti-Semite's house. Shlomo thought he heard a noise and yelled, "Anti-Semite!" in warning. We screamed back, dropped our eggs, and fled in response. This all took place more than a block away from the house. We hadn't even gotten our target in sight.

We weren't cohesive. We knew how to move as a group but not as a gang.

We needed practice.

After two thousand years of being chased, we didn't have any hunt in us.

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We sought help from Chung-Shik through Yitzy—an Israeli with an unfortunate heritage. Yitzy's parents had brought him to America with the last name Penis, which even among kind children doesn't play well. We teased Yitzy Penis ruthlessly, and as a result he formed a real friendship with his Gentile neighbor Chung-Shik, the only Asian boy in town. Both

showed up happily, Yitzy delighted at being asked to bring his pal along.

And so we proposed it, our plan.

"Can we practice on you?" we asked.

"Practice what?" Chung-Shik said amiably, Yitzy practically aglow at his side.

When no one else answered, Harry spoke. "A reverse pogrom," he said.

"A what?"

"We just want to menace you," Harry said. "Chase you around a bit as a group. You know, because you're different. To get a feel for it."

Chung-Shik looked to his friend. You could see we were losing him, and Yitzy had already lost his smile.

That's when Zvi pleaded, almost a cry of desperation: "Come on, you're the only different kid we know."

Yitzy held Chung-Shik's stare, the Asian boy looking back, not scared as much as disappointed.

"Chase me instead," Yitzy said, sort of pantomiming that he could be Chung-Shik and Chung-Shik could be him, switch off the yarmulke and all.

We abandoned the idea right then. It wouldn't be the same.

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Our failed offensive got back to Boris, as well as the reverse pogrom that wasn't, the continuing rise in Blum-related trouble, and chases home from school. The rock salt still stung us all.

We met in the rec room of the shul. Boris had swiped a filmstrip and accompanying audiocassette from the yeshiva he worked at in Royal Hills. He advanced the strip in the

tor, a single frame every time the tape went *beep*. We knew the film well. We knew when the image would shift from the pile of shoes to the pile of hair, from the pile of bodies to the pile of teeth to the pile of combs. The film was a sacred teaching tool brought out only on Yom Hashoah, the Holocaust memorial day.

Each year, the most memorable part was the taped dramatization, the soundman's wooden blocks clop-clopping, the sound of those boots coming up the stairs. First they dragged off symbolic father and mother. And then, *clop, clop, clop,* those boots marched away.

The lights still dimmed, we would form two lines—one boys, one girls. We marched back to class this way, singing *"Ani Ma'amin"* and holding in our heads the picture they'd painted for us: six million Jews marching into the gas chambers, two by two; a double line three million strong and singing in one voice, "I believe in the coming of the Messiah."

Boris did not split us into two quiet lines. He did not start us on a moving round of that song, or the equally rousing "We Are Leaving Mother Russia," with its coda, "When they come for us, we'll be gone." After the film, he turned the lights back on and said to us, yelled at us, "Like sheep to the slaughter. Six million Jews is twelve million fists." And then he segued from fists and Jewish fighting to the story of brave Trumpeldor, who, Boris claimed, lost an arm in the battle of Tel Hai and then continued fighting with the one.

Galvanized, we went straight to the Anti-Semite's house. Zvi Blum, beaten, bothered, dug a hunk of paving stone out of the walkway to avenge his family's bay window. He tossed that rock with all his might. Limited athlete that he was, it hooked left and hit the wall of the house with a great bang. We fled. Still imperfect, still in retreat, we ran with euphoria, hooting and hollering, victorious.

A newfound energy emerged at the start of the next class, which was also the start of a new session. We lined up to pay Boris what was now a quarterly fee. He took three months' worth of cash in one hand, patted us each on the back with the other, and said, "Not yet leaders, but you've turned into men." Boris even said this to the Conservative boy, though it was Elliot's first lesson. He then addressed us regarding our successful mission. "Anti-Semite will come back harder," he said, declaring that only a strong offense would see this conflict to its end. Pyrotechnics were in order.

We ventured out to the turnpike that marked the border of our town. In the alley behind ShopRite, we worked on demolitions following recipes from Boris's training and inspired by some pages torn from an Abbie Hoffman book. We made smoke bombs that didn't smoke, and firebombs that never burned. And though we suspected that the recipes themselves were faulty, Boris shook his head as if we'd never learn.

We stuck with our bomb making, working feverishly, with Boris timing each attempt and at intervals yelling, "Too late, already dead." Then Elliot stood up with a concoction of his own, a bottle with a rag stuffed in the top, and announced, "This is how you build a bomb."

To prove it, he lit the rag, arced back, and threw the bottle. We watched it soar, easily traceable by its fiery tail. We heard it hit and the sound of glass and then nothing. "So what," Aaron said. "That's not a bomb. By definition, it has to go *boom*!" We went back to work until Boris said, "Lesson over," and a yellow light began to chip at the darkness in the sky, a warm yellow light and smoke. "Not a bomb," Elliot said, looking proud and terrified in equal measure. His bottle was discovered

had hit the Te-Amo Cigar & Smoke Shop. It had ignited the garbage in the rear of the store. The drive-through window was engulfed in flames. "Simplest sometimes best," Boris said. And then: "Class dismissed." We started to panic, and he said, "Fire could be from anything." Right then, his pocket full of our money, and already in full possession of our hearts and heads, Boris walked off. He walked toward the burning store, so close to the flames that we covered our eyes. True to his teachings, Boris didn't turn and run. He didn't stop, either. We know for sure that he went back to Royal Hills and worked another day. All our parents ever said was "green card," and we heard that Boris continued west to Chicago and built a new life.

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Mr. Blum was still at the office. The three boys Blum were each manning a window at home and staring out into the dark. They had, on their own and in broad daylight, gone down that hill with toilet paper and shaving cream. They'd draped the trees and marked the sidewalks, unleashing on their target the suburban version of tar and feathers. Then they'd run up to their house and taken their posts, holding them through nightfall. When their mother pulled the car into the garage after her own long day at work, she saw only what the boys hadn't done. She made her way back down the driveway to the curb, where the garbage pails stood empty, one of them tipped by the wind. Basic responsibilities stand even in times of trouble. She had not borne three sons so that she'd have to drag garbage pails inside.

No one knew the quality of the Anti-Semite's night vision. The only claim that could be made in his defense is that until the lapse, the Blum boys had been the sole draggers of the garbage pails on every other trash day in memory. In the Blum

boys' defense—and they would forever feel they needed one—three watched windows left one side of the house unguarded. All that said, the sound of metal pails being dragged up a gravel driveway brought the Anti-Semite racing out of the dark—and masked his approach for Mrs. Blum.

Mrs. Blum, of course, had not been in our class. She had no notion of self-defense and was wholly unfamiliar with weaponry. When this brute materialized before her, his arm already in motion, she did not assume a defensive posture. She did not raise her fists or prepare to lunge. What she did was turn at the last instant to get a look at the tiny leather wand sticking out from his swinging hand. She had never seen a blackjack before. When the single blow met with the muscles of her back, it sent a shock through her system so great that she saw a thousand pinpricks in her eyes and felt her legs give way completely. Connecticut or no, Mrs. Blum was a Jew. *"Shanda!"* she said to the boy, who was already loping off.

Oh, those poor Blums. As we had found Zvi, Zvi discovered his own mother—not hanging from a bolt, but curled in the grass. Inside the house, an ice pack in place and refusing both hospital and house call, Mrs. Blum told her sons what she'd seen.

"Shanda!" she said again. *"Busha!"*

The boys agreed. A shame and an embarrassment.

When their mother lifted the receiver to call the police, Aaron pressed his finger down into the cradle of the phone. Mrs. Blum looked at her son and then replaced the receiver as Aaron slid his finger away. "Not this time," he said. And this time, she didn't.

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When my mother told my father what had happened, he didn't want to believe it. "Nobody ever wants to believe what happens to the Jews," she said, "not even us." My father simply shook his head. "Since when," my mother said, "do anti-Semites have limits? They will cross all lines. Greenheath no better." Then she, too, took to shaking her head. I was sorry I'd told her, sorry to witness her telling him. We'd known our parents would respond with hands to mouth and *oy vey iz mirs*, but none of us expected to see such obvious disillusionment with the world they'd built. I turned away.

Though we'd been abandoned, Boris's wisdom still held sway. We were going to see to it that the Anti-Semite never hit back again. "Anti-Semite school," Harry Blum called it, mustering a Boris-like tone. A boy who attacks a woman half his size, who had already attacked her son, would, if able, do the same thing again. We decided we would use Zvi as our siren—set him out in the middle of the lot at the public school, so that the Anti-Semite might be drawn by the irresistible call of the vulnerable Jew. The rest of us would stay hidden in those bushes and then fall on our enemy as one. But looking from face to face, taking in skinny Lipshitz and fat Beryl, the three Blums full of anger and without any reach, we realized that we couldn't defeat the Anti-Semite, even as a group.

Boris was right. It was true what he'd said about us. We were ready, we were raring, and we were useless without a leader. We went off like that, leaderless, to Ace Cohen's house.

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Tears, mind you. We saw tears in Ace Cohen's eyes. He stopped playing his Asteroids and did not get back into bed. Little Mrs. Blum attacked—it was too much to bear. Such aggression, he agreed, needed [illegible]

us," we said, assuming the matter had been decided. But he wouldn't. He still didn't want any part of us. A singular matter, the blow to Mrs. Blum. And likewise a singular matter, he felt, was the act of revenge.

One punch is what he offered. "You've got me, my Heebie-Jeebies. But only for one swing." We pressed him for more. We begged leadership of him. He showed us his empty hands. "One punch," he said. "Take it or leave it."

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Certain things went according to plan. When the Anti-Semite arrived, he showed up alone. That he passed on a Saturday, and in a mood to confront Zvi, we took as a sign of the righteousness of our scheme.

We'd already been hiding in those bushes all morning, skipping shul. Sore and stiff, we were sure that the creaking of our joints would give us away, that the sound of our breathing, as all our hearts raced, would reveal the trap we'd laid.

And Zvi—what can be said about that brave Blum, out there alone on the asphalt between the jungle gym and the bushes, cooking under the hot sun? Zvi was poised in his three-piece suit, a red yarmulke like a bull's-eye on top of his head.

The Anti-Semite immediately began to badger Zvi. Zvi, empowered, enraged, and under the impression that we would immediately charge, spewed his own epithets back. The moment was glorious. Little Zvi in his suit, addressing—apparently—the brass belt-buckle on that mountain of a bully, raised an accusing finger. "You shouldn't have," Zvi said. His words came out tough; they came out beautiful—so boldly that they reached us in the bushes, and clearly moved the Anti-

The situation would have been perfect if not for one unfortunate complication: the small matter of Ace Cohen's resistance. Ace Cohen was unwilling to budge. We begged him to charge with us, to rescue Zvi. "Second thoughts," he said. "A fine line between retaliation and aggression. Sorry. I'll need to see some torment for myself." We implored him, but we didn't charge alone. We all stayed put until push came to shove, until the Anti-Semite started beating Zvi Blum in earnest, until Zvi—his clip-on tie separated from his neck—hit the ground with a thud.

Then we sprang out of the bushes, on Ace's heels. We had the Anti-Semite surrounded, and Zvi pulled free with relative ease.

Ace Cohen, three inches taller and fifty pounds heavier, faced the bully down.

"Keep away" is all Ace said. Then, without form or chi power, his feet in no particular stance, Ace swung his fist so wide and so slowly that we couldn't believe anyone might fail to get out of the way. But maybe the punch just looked slow, because the bully took it. He caught it right on the chin. He took it without rocking back—an exceptional feat even before we knew that his jaw was broken. He remained stock-still for a second or two. Not a bit of him moved except for that bottom jaw, which had unhinged like a snake's and made a solid quarter turn to the side. Then he dropped.

Ace pushed his way through the circle we'd formed. It closed right back up around the Anti-Semite, bloodied and now writhing before us.

As I watched him, I knew I'd always feel that to be broken was better than to break—my failing. I also knew that the deep rumble rolling through us was only nerves, a sensitivity to imagined repercussion, as if a sound were built into revenge.

What we really shared in that instant was simple. Anyone who stood with us that day will tell you the same. With the Anti-Semite at our feet, confusion came over us all. We stood there looking at that crushed boy. And none of us knew when to run.