

# Through Thin Shirts

## 1

1970

Sydney Goldstein's office was located on the fifth floor of the six-story factory on 38<sup>th</sup> Street between 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Avenues in the heart of the garment district. From the outside of the building, with its old cement blocks, large multi-paneled windows, tarred roof and water towers rising into the soot-filled New York sky, it looked no different than when it was first constructed in 1908 and bought by his father in 1921 when he first went into the business of manufacturing women's apparel. Over the years, however, inside the building, old floors made of wood had been reconstructed and covered with black and white tiles; mildewed walls had been torn down and replaced with new sheetrock and, most recently, improved ventilation systems had been installed throughout the building. Goldstein prided himself on understanding the importance of decent working conditions for his employees, not only because he was confident that they would work with greater efficiency

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in more agreeable surroundings, but because it was the right thing to do.

Goldstein's office was comfortable without being plush, which reflected his austere nature. His large mahogany desk was cluttered with papers and samples of fabrics: getting things done set precedence over neatness. Against a sidewall, there was an old, comfortable leather couch. A water cooler stood in one corner, and there were two hard-backed chairs near the desk. Behind the desk was a large window that looked out over the street, which barely allowed a glimpse of the Empire State Building rising above the Manhattan skyline. The walls were bare except for large framed photos of Franklin D. Roosevelt and Fiorello H. La Guardia, men whom Goldstein admired above all others.

A heavy-set man in his mid-sixties, Sydney Goldstein was energetic and in good health, a man still very much in command of himself and the two hundred employees working at Goldstein & Sons. Not that thirty years of running a dog-eat-dog manufacturing business, where problems with unions, jobbers, retailers, designers, bank managers and business associates hadn't taken their toll, as evinced by the deep lines that cut into tough skin on a face that seldom showed any expression other than concern and outrage. Goldstein was the sort of person who had started out early in life with strong ideals, with the intent of accomplishing something important, and along the way became more interested in the ends than in the means of making it happen.

The phone rang, interrupting Goldstein's thoughts, which had been set in motion earlier in the day by his office manager, Jay Feinberg. Feinberg, who had been working for Goldstein for twenty-five years, was a calm, deliberate man in his late fifties, in sharp contrast to Goldstein's impulsive, often unrestrained demeanor. Goldstein recognized that this weakness in his own character could be disastrous in a business where a cool head was an asset, and

thus, he never failed to appreciate Feinberg's worth. Today, however, even Feinberg was enraged, expressing his anger with an uncharacteristic fury in his voice. One of the small Sephardic shops on 37<sup>th</sup> Street had come out with copies, three knock-off items of first-class merchandise that Goldstein & Sons had counted on for their Spring line. Several important buyers who had been shopping around had brought it to Feinberg's attention. To keep the buyers in tow, they would have to drastically lower their prices on the items or risk losing their business.

If this were forty years ago, Goldstein's father, Jacob, would have picked up the phone and called Louis "Lepke" Buchalter. Buchalter, with his army of "enforcers" controlled the unions, and would have put these assassins out of business in a day. But it wasn't for nothing, and you had to weigh morality against expediency and make choices. Today, the mob was still around, always trying to find a way to stick their fingers into the garment industry's pie with their strong-arm protection racketeering, but Goldstein would have nothing to do with these gangsters. He was more than willing to take the occasional loss rather than risk the day when the law would finally catch up with these rats and the ship would sink with everyone aboard.

In a bottom desk drawer, Goldstein kept a loaded revolver, which he carried in his pocket whenever he left the building at night. Serious rough stuff was always a possibility, but he refused to be intimidated by threats, and up until now the worst that had happened was an occasional refusal of a trucker to deal with his company because of union intimidation.

The telephone call was from Gert. The rule was that unless something *big* was going on, she wasn't supposed to bother him during the day. But that was before she had her stroke two years ago. Scary things, strokes. Even little ones. If you're lucky you recover completely, but there's always the fear that another, bigger one is right around the

corner, and you don't walk away with a little numbness in a leg, but wind up a vegetable, unable to speak, totally paralyzed on one side of your body, if it doesn't put you into your grave altogether.

He asked Gert, "You're feeling okay?" Always the first question. What kind of a lousy break in life was it to have a stroke when you weren't even sixty and had been looking forward to an old age of traveling and enjoying your grandchildren? Instead, you now faced the anxiety of dropping dead every time you felt a little queasy, which was most likely nothing more than a little indigestion.

"I'd feel better if you didn't ask me how I was feeling a hundred times a day."

"Did you take your pills?"

"I never forget."

"Sometimes you forget."

"I didn't call to discuss my health. I just got off the phone with Charles."

Goldstein lowered the phone. Whenever there was a mention of his younger son, he automatically needed to collect his thoughts and take a long, deep breath. "What did that lowlife want?"

"I wish you wouldn't talk that way about Charles. You know how much it upsets me."

"Sorry, Gert. Upsetting you upsets me, but isn't Charles the son who told his father to take the express elevator up to the top of the Empire State Building and do a swan dive off the tower like King Kong?"

"That was supposed to be a joke, Sydney. You can't stay mad forever."

"Some joke, a son wants his father sailing through space like a falling rock."

"I want you to talk to Charles. He has something important to discuss with you, but he's afraid you'll hang up on him if he calls you."

"You bet I will."

“How is he supposed to apologize if you don’t let him talk?”

“How do you know I won’t let him talk?”

“Then why did he call me and ask me to call you?”

“The bum won’t even give me the satisfaction of hanging up on him.”

“I haven’t told you, but when you’re not around Charles comes over now and then with Margie.”

Sydney Goldstein had two sons. Martin was a thirty-eight-year old periodontist with a practice where you had to wait a month to get an appointment. In spite of his busy schedule, he had still managed to find the time to be the president of the local *shul* for the past two years. The woman he married not only kept *kosher*, but was a distinguished psychologist. In between running a successful practice, Elizabeth Goldstein had managed to bear two sons and a daughter, healthy, terrific kids. And Sydney’s other son, Charles Gladstone (Goldstein, the name he was born with wasn’t good enough for him) was a thirty-two year old delinquent, who since he was a teenager made a career out of trying to dig him an early grave. With two months left to graduate, he quit college because he said he was bored. Bored? Who gets bored after spending four years at college? Why couldn’t he get bored after his freshman year? Did it matter to him that his father had spent a fortune to ensure that he would get the best possible education, an education that Sydney’s own father had refused him? The quitter proceeded to wander around the country, working at odd jobs, writing poetry and stories that no one wanted to publish. He announced that his problem was “the superficiality of life in the United States” and went off to Europe, winding up on the Spanish Island of *Ibiza*, where he gave up writing and discovered a new life as an artist, painting watercolors of the sea that looked like finger paintings done by kindergartners. When he was not at his easel, he drank coffee at a beachfront café with Americans ducking from the IRS for income tax evasion.

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Eventually he ran out of money and returned to America on a tramp steamer, barely escaping Spanish justice after being arrested for growing a marijuana plant behind the little farmhouse that he shared with three other “artists.” The miracle was that he had managed in the past three years to become a maverick producer of two off-Broadway shows, no matter that they were big flops at the box office.

Six months ago, he announced that he had gotten married. Just like that. Not one word to parents who had put clothes on his back and food in his stomach for almost his entire miserable life. That next Sunday he and his bride had marched into their house all smiles and good will. The wife was no ordinary *shiksa*. Stick a feather in her long black hair and you were looking at Pocahontas. Sydney Goldstein did not consider himself a prejudiced man but Margie Long Jump was not the daughter-in-law that he would have chosen to become a member of his family.

“After I hang up, Sydney, I’m calling Charles and telling him to call you.”

“Not today, Gert. I’m begging you. I’ve got big things going on here.”

“You’re not going bankrupt if you postpone your big things a few minutes.”

“Tell him to call me tomorrow.”

“I don’t like all this hate, Sydney.”

“Don’t get so excited. It’s not good for you. Okay, go ahead and tell the great Broadway producer to call me.”

“Do you promise to be civil to him?”

“Now you’re asking for the moon, Gert.”

“I want a promise, Sydney.”

“Okay, okay, I’m promising, calm down.”

“I don’t trust you.”

“When have I ever lied to you?”

“You lie to me all the time.”

“Why do you have to know everything? Not telling isn’t the same as lying. The big things—the children, the

grandchildren, we're one. Don't think I don't listen to you, Gert. You're my rock."

"That's very nice of you to say, Sydney, but I still don't trust you. I'm hanging up and calling Charles. Don't move from your desk. The phone will ring, and after you talk to the son that would like to be a son, you'll be a different man."

"I can't wait."

It was thirty minutes after his conversation with Gert when his receptionist informed him that a Mr. Charles Gladstone was on the phone. "It sounds like your son," she added.

At the time, Goldstein was going over unpaid invoices sent to several of his best customers. A bad sign of the times, he thought, when these particular customers didn't pay up right away. One retailer who owned a chain of women's boutiques in Northern New Jersey owed serious money. He would ask Feinberg to make a personal call to the shyster.

"How ya doin', Papa?" Charles voice was pleasant, normal, too normal, which was especially annoying to Goldstein. Why not a little uncertainty, a note of anxiety that would indicate that all was not right between them? That would have been more honest.

"Your mother said you were going to call in five minutes. You think I've got nothing to do but wait around for you to call."

"Sorry, I had to go to the bathroom."

"For thirty minutes."

"When you sit on the pot, you don't take an alarm clock with you."

"Always the smart ass. I'm very busy. What do you want?" He had promised Gert that he would make an effort to be civil to Charles, but cordiality went out the door as soon as he went up against his wise guy attitude.

"What I want is to have a friendly conversation with my father."

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“The last time we talked six months ago you told me to drop dead. Now I’m supposed to be friendly.”

“I didn’t say ‘drop dead.’ I said take a swan dive off the top of the Empire State Building. I was trying to be funny, Papa, rhetorically funny. Where’s your sense of humor?”

“Rhetorical isn’t in my vocabulary. I don’t need to be hit over the head with a hammer to know that I’ve got a son who has about as much respect for his father as a boa constrictor, who sees a nice juicy rat waiting to be eaten alive.”

“Very literary, Papa, though your comparison of me to a boa constrictor and yourself as a rat are misplaced metaphors. I am no snake and you are certainly no rat.”

“Misplaced metaphors? Too bad I never had a chance to go to college like some people I’m acquainted with.”

A moment’s pause. Then: “Okay, let’s get it over with so we can talk. One more time I will admit to you that it was a stupid thing to do. Get over it already? I have and I’m the one who has the regrets. That was more than ten years ago.”

“I’ve got two sons. I raised them both the same way. One is a respected professional man—”

“—What happened, Papa? Where did you go wrong?”

“It was your mother’s fault. She babied you too much. Anything you wanted she gave you. You grew up thinking that the world belonged to you for nothing.”

“You’re blaming Mama. That’s not very nice.”

“After you quit college and turned into Marco Polo, didn’t I try and take you into the business when you finally came home? Give you a chance to be somebody.”

“I lasted a week, six days longer than I thought I would. You and me, Papa, we’re like oil and water. We don’t mix. We never will.”

The same conversation over and over. Words flew between them like poison darts, and the results were always the same, anger and hurt feelings that compounded the old

ones. Why bother going on; still, the process was almost addictive, one that seemed to satisfy some inner need for both of them to vent frustrations. “Where was it written that I deserved a son who drank too much, did drugs and wrote bad checks? You were brought up in a house that respected God and the Ten Commandments. All you ever cared about was yourself.”

“Okay, I confess that fifteen years ago I had a few adolescent problems. Why do you have to remind me of that every time we talk?”

“Do you have any idea how humiliated I was standing in front of that judge and trying to keep you out of jail?”

“Christ, I wrote a check for thirty dollars to a liquor store.”

“You committed a serious crime.”

“A measly thirty-dollar check! I was seventeen years old and high as kite.”

“You don’t have to shout. My eyes may be getting old, but my hearing is perfect.”

“Why are you always so angry at me, Papa? Every time I talk to you, I get this feeling that you hate me—I mean really hate me—like I’m this contemptible, alien creature who only wishes to inflict pain on you. I’m thirty-two years old, but believe it or not, I still need a father who loves me.”

“Who said I didn’t love you?”

“You have a strange way of showing love.”

“Loving your child has nothing to do with thinking that he’s a disrespectful lowlife.”

“I don’t get it.”

“That’s because you’re not a father.”

“That’s about to change. Margie is four months pregnant. You’re going to be a grandfather again.”

A strong, indefinable emotion stirred in Goldstein. Was the bum telling the truth? “Margie—is that the name of the woman you brought around here six months ago?”

“You know goddamn well what *that woman’s* name is.”

“Nice vocabulary for such a literary type.”

“You have a way of riling me up, Papa. Why do you do it? Anyway, you might be interested in knowing that Margie wants to convert to Judaism. I told her that she didn’t have to do that, that she shouldn’t get involved in a philosophy she doesn’t believe in just to make an arrogant old man accept her.”

“Who’s arrogant?” Goldstein became reflective. “You’re the arrogant one. I don’t tell people what they’re supposed to believe in. If your wife wants to convert to Judaism, who are you to try and stop her?”

Hey, a Jew is a Jew, thought Goldstein, who began to recall the initial meeting he had with Margie Long Jump. Not a bad looking girl. Nice smile. Quiet, very quiet. She was a listener, not one of your brash, loud-mouthed young women you were forced to watch on TV these days who were continually shouting for women’s rights, like women were chained and manacled as if they were slaves. So her skin was a little dark. How about those Sephardics from the Arab countries with skin as dark as the night?

“Does your mother know that your wife is pregnant?”

“We were going to tell her Sunday. She invited us over for dinner. Is that okay with you?”

“What do I care where you eat?”

There was a quick rap on the door. Without waiting for permission, Jay Feinberg stuck half his body through the door and waved several invoices at Goldstein. “More cancellations,” he whispered before sliding back into the hallway.

“I can’t hang on the phone all day,” Goldstein said to his son. “Your mother said you had something important to tell me. You’ve told me—you’re going to be a father. Congratulations. Now I’ve got to get going.”

“Thanks, but what I really wanted to talk about is something else.”

“Get to the point, Charles.”

A beat. A nervous cough, then, “I need to borrow fifty thousand dollars.”

Goldstein broke into a cynical laugh. “Fifty thousand? Why not a hundred thousand, a million? Then you could buy yourself an eighty foot yacht and we could cruise the Mediterranean and go to Israel.”

“I’ve got a play that I want to produce. Fifty thousand would cover the costs. You’d be making an investment in something important. Not only for me, but the world.”

“For the world. Very fancy.”

“The play is called *Gateway to Hell*. It’s about the Holocaust.”

“You want me to invest fifty thousand dollars in a play about the Holocaust? Have you lost your sanity? No one in their right mind will buy a ticket to your play. I’d be better off lighting cigars with my fifty thousand.”

“This play is different, Papa. Like nothing that’s ever been done before. The author, Potofsky, spent years in Auschwitz. The play gives you new, first-hand insights as to what really went on there, the barbaric medical experiments, how heroic the Jews were when they fought it out with the Nazis.”

“The Jews fought what out?” Goldstein found himself becoming riled. Charles was hitting on a subject that was especially offensive to him. Hadn’t the Jews walked like lemmings into the gas chambers? “Your play is a fraud. Throw it into the garbage pail. Your author is making it all up.”

“After you read the play, Papa, you’ll be begging me to take your money. *Gateway to Hell* will be bigger than *Anne Frank*. It may run for years. You could make a fortune on your investment.”

What was the matter with this idiot son? Didn’t he understand how emotionally affected he became whenever the subject of the Holocaust came up? For Goldstein the memory of his father and mother sailing to Europe in July

of 1939 was like an electric prod poking at him. He had begged them not to go. Anyone could see that the Nazis were about to attack Poland, that war was around the corner. But his father was determined to see his mother, who was dying of tuberculosis, one more time. Don't worry, Jacob had argued, the British and the French would take care of the Nazis. Remember what had happened to the Germans in the war twenty-five years ago, how the Huns had gotten out of line and had their heads handed to them. It would happen again if they tried their funny goose-stepping stuff against the British and the French. Anyway, his father reminded him, they were Americans. No matter what happened, the Nazis would never bother them.

"First read the play, then talk to the author," Charles insisted. "I guarantee that you'll change your mind. *Gateway to Hell* will be remembered as a great moment in American theatre. It will become an inspiration to Jews everywhere. We can make this happen together, Papa. You and me."

"Since when did being a Jew mean anything to you?"

How many times did he have to listen to his son's big mouth rant on about being a citizen of the world, that if you believed in God, in Judaism, in any religion, you were a moron. "Secular humanism," he would cry out during the most sacred of moments. At last year's *seder*, with the family sitting around the table reading the *Haggadah*, Charles had blurted out: "Do we need to believe in a God that gets his kicks out of slaughtering innocent people?" Sydney's *innocent* family, who wanted nothing more than to spend a quiet holiday of good food and cheer and celebrate this great moment in Jewish history, groaned in unison. Sydney wound up demanding that he leave the table if he didn't shut up.

"This play is more than just about the Holocaust," Charles said. "Remember, it wasn't only Jews who were murdered. The Nazis wiped out the entire Gypsy popu-

lation, along with millions of Russians, Poles, Hungarians, French, Dutch, even Germans for no other reason than perpetuating an idea about maintaining the purity of a *Master Race*. What happened at Auschwitz was the definitive moment when Man's inhumanity against Man reached its zenith. The people who see Potofsky's play will leave the theatre emotionally exhausted. They will have witnessed a work of art that tells a truth of such magnitude as never before seen in the theatre."

"You say Potofsky is the playwright?"

"Yes, that's his name."

"It sounds familiar."

"Are you getting interested?"

"I don't care about Gypsies. I'm a Jew. The Nazis killed six million Jews including your grandmother and grandfather, or maybe I saw different newsreels than you did. Anyway, what's the difference—Gypsies, Russians, Jews—who wants to see a play about people being gassed and burnt like you were getting rid of the leaves off your front lawn?"

"Read the play. You don't like it, then I'll look for another backer."

"Start looking. I'm not giving you a red cent."

"Please, Papa."

Charles was begging. Sydney thought about Gert and how she'd react when she found out that he had turned down Charles in anger. "OK, send it over," Goldstein said reluctantly to this arrogant son who had broken his heart a dozen times in the past. "I agree to read the first page. That's all."

Charles was elated. "Read it, and then you'll thank me a hundred times for the chance to make a fortune."

"This is all about money?"

"Not all about money, but since when don't you like to make a return on an investment? In fact, that's all I ever remember you talking about."

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“You’re in business, where’s the crime in wanting to make a fair profit? What do you know about working sixteen hours a day, seven days a week for your family?” Goldstein cut himself off short. The same old, endless, pointless argument to prove himself to a son who had no idea what was important in life. Not that Charles was really a bad boy. He was, in fact, a kid who once picked up a bird with a broken wing and stayed up nights trying to nurse it back to health. When he was a teen, he spent half his life writing letters to the editors at the *Newark Evening News* about abortion rights and racial injustice. Who could have guessed that a kid with all his brains would quit college and start wandering around the world like a hobo? Looking for what? Who could figure him out? What had he done to deserve a son who married an Indian, and wanted his father to put up a fortune to produce a play about the worst moment in Jewish history?

“I can’t talk anymore,” said Goldstein. “I’ll read your play. But I make no promises. I manufacture dresses for women. What do I know what’s a good play and a bad one?”

“You’ll know when you read this one. Thank you, Papa.”

Conversation over, Goldstein looked at the pile of invoices he was determined to deal with before meeting with a wholesaler who had a zero credit rating. What a business. To make a living you spent half your time trying to figure out who were the legitimate buyers and who were the deadbeats.

A play about the Holocaust? What was the matter with writing a play that made you want to tap your feet and put a little smile on your face?