

THE TORAH CODES



YOUR
PURCHASE
HELPS
S.F. BAY AREA
JEWISH
SCHOOLS!

EZRA BARANY

A HEART-POUNDING THRILLER

WITH APPENDIX ESSAYS BY DORON WITZTUM,
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Dalkah Books

Chapter 1

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Present Day

Digging up a corpse buried underneath a busy sidewalk creates all sorts of problems. For one thing, you get on-lookers. People who aren't necessarily going to like what they see. For another, the killer could be watching. And who knows if he's the kind of killer with a one-time vendetta, or the kind of killer who makes a sport of killing as many people as possible in one fell swoop. But the biggest problem of all is that, if you're like me, and you value your personal space and privacy, such valuables become hard to keep with an audience around you.

So it was time to make a decision. Did I walk away and pretend the body wasn't there, or did I start digging like a madman?

And what if the body wasn't there?

My work had given me a pretty extensive computer programming assignment to do at home over the weekend. An assignment I wasn't eager to start, so on my way home that Friday afternoon I stopped at Piedmont Avenue. Piedmont Avenue is like a piece of Paris

in the middle of Oakland, a city known for its slums. Seriously. Smack in the middle of a tough town, you've got a street lined with chi-chi restaurants, a movie theater showing art films, and dessert specialty stores. It's like a muscle man wearing lingerie.

Normally, I'd steer clear from such a place, but that evening, I was looking for a distraction, and that distraction was right off the freeway.

Piedmont Avenue was busy as usual. There's something to be said about anonymity among masses.

"Excuse me, sir. Could I ask you a few questions for a survey?"

Whoa! Where did he come from?

This kid was dressed in a white button-up shirt, navy blue slacks, and a narrow tie around his neck that said, "I have the best fashion sense in nooses." His clean shaven face and trim haircut matched the professional look of his clothes. Looked as if he just left church. To do a survey? Seemed unlikely.

Normally I'd tell him to find a lake to piss in, but today was different.

"Sure," I replied. "Anything to delay my work."

"Okay, great!" He introduced himself and asked for my name.

"Nathan."

"Do you live in an apartment, condo, or single family home?"

"None of the above. Duplex. My landlord lives in the other half."

"Ah! You're smart!" The kid smiled. "Getting the

luxury of a house at the cost of renting. Okay, next question. What area do you live in, Nathan?"

"Oakland hills."

"Wow! That's a real nice area!" The kid wrote on his clipboard. "Would you call yourself the head of the household?"

"I live alone. You figure it out."

"Ha, ha." He looked at his clipboard and made a mark. "Do you have any electrical equipment? TV? Stereo? That sort of thing?"

"Both of those, plus a laptop, and desktop."

The kid scribbled and asked "flat screen TV?"

"Nope. Regular."

"Great. Do you value the security that your home provides?"

"You have no idea," I replied.

"And do you feel safe at home?"

"Safe as cement."

"Excuse me?"

"No one steals cement," I explained.

"Great. I'll just check the box 'feels safe.' Now if someone were to try and break into your home, would you do whatever it takes to stop them?"

"Of course."

"And do you have an alarm system?"

"Don't need one. I figure, if a burglar wants to find a house to break into, why drive all the way into the Oakland hills when he can find one closer to downtown?"

"Excellent! So I'll mark you down as not having

one.” The kid made a check on his clipboard. “Not many people know that crime has gone up 23% in the Oakland hills.”

Ah. Here came the pitch.

“I’m certain you wouldn’t want to wake up one day to find your stereo, television, laptop and desktop taken by someone who broke into your home,” he continued. “You said that you would do whatever it takes to prevent someone from breaking into your home. And knowing how much you value the safety and security of your home, surely an intelligent man like yourself understands that purchasing an alarm system for only \$499 would be a small price to pay to protect yourself.”

“Commitment and consistency.”

“Uh...excuse me?”

“You’re using a tactic Cialdini calls commitment and consistency.”

“I don’t...” The kid looked like he’d been slapped.

“You got me to commit to certain values, such as saying I would do whatever it takes to protect my home, and now you’re relying on my desire to be consistent with what I’ve said. But I could design my own alarm system for a lot less money, and I’m not about to let a tactic like that take away my dignity. Lastly, if you think I’d give you my address when you know I don’t have an alarm system, then it’s going to take a lot more than a nice tie and clean haircut to look the kind of smart you’re gonna need.”

The poor kid turned white, stammered something resembling a thank you and walked away.

I steered myself into a store that premiered exotic ice cream flavors. I chose vanilla. The cashier was easy on the eyes. Problem was she had this nose ring. Made her face completely asymmetrical. To me, beauty was in the symmetry of things. Like in math. A bunch of really complicated math can be cancelled out if it's also on the other side of the equal sign.

Imagine walking into your bedroom and seeing a fire-breathing dragon on your bed, for example. You got the force of gravity pulling the dragon down, but you've also got the bed's support force pushing him up. Since the forces are equal, they cancel out and the dragon doesn't move up or down. That sweet symmetry keeps him steady and now he doesn't have to worry about falling. He can just focus on burning you to a crisp.

So I'm not sure why the cashier decided to ruin all that symmetry by punching a hole in her nose and sticking a piece of metal in it.

The ice cream came in a dainty cup with a dainty plastic spoon, which was fine with me, because it would take longer to finish. But I prefer those flat, wooden spoons for my ice cream. It just tastes better. I've heard wine tasters use "wooden" to favorably describe wine. I've never heard them say, "Ah! Tastes like plastic."

Walking outside, I took cold bites in the chill of the winter air. A homeless man about thirty years old, not much younger than me, held out his hand and asked for change.

I set down the ice cream on the sidewalk, pulled out my checkbook, wrote him a check for \$499, and

handed it to him. A look of surprise and shock crossed his face. I picked the ice cream back up and went on my way.

It was just after 4 p.m. on Piedmont Avenue. I had left work early. Usually, I don't even need to show up at the office. That was the beauty of being a computer programmer. I just went to the meetings that happened once or twice a week, and the rest of the work I did at home.

I finished my ice cream and peered into the shop windows. All of the items for sale – the magazines and cigars, jewelry and scarves, the fashionable gowns and women's shoes – had only one purpose in mind. To help people, be they rich or poor, show off a wealthy lifestyle. I wasn't one of those people. Even though I could afford such a lifestyle, I kept my money.

I needed to walk around someone, so I had to step on the dirt of one of the tree plots that lined the street. As I stepped on the soft dirt, my heart grew cold. I nearly threw up. A body had been cut up and recently buried underneath the dirt. A man with dark hair, a pin-striped suit, a golden wedding ring on his finger. I knew this. I knew this like I knew my own name.

There was nothing to indicate such a thing. A million reasons could be given for why the dirt was soft. But I knew there was a body down there. And that I was next.

Chapter 2

People kept on walking by me like nothing had happened. The trees rustled their leaves. I looked for a place to sit and think. A redwood bench across from the theater stood out. I sat down to reason it out. When was the body put there? Obviously after hours, when no one was around to witness it.

But that was the wrong question.

The right question was, how did I know there was a man buried there? The dirt was soft. I told myself that wasn't enough. There had to be more. More evidence.

I couldn't come up with anything. I didn't see any hair, didn't see any fabric, and didn't see any finger with any ring. The only conclusion left was that this was one of my manic moments. I have bipolar disorder and sometimes my senses are so keen, I can see things that aren't really there. And when I do, I can get a little paranoid.

Just to make sure, I did a control experiment. I stood, walked over to a different tree, and stepped on

the dirt. It, too, felt soft. So no one was buried. It was all in my head.

My mother, rest her soul, used to explain to her friends, “Nathan has these episodes. They’re like having a panic button that gets pushed.” But it wasn’t like that at all. It was more like having a square panel of panic buttons, one hundred long by one hundred wide. Apparently, my chopped-up-and-buried-dark-haired-guy-wearing-a-pin-striped-suit-and-gold-wedding-ring panic button got pushed.

On the drive home I was pretty shaken up about my dead body delusion, and certainly not ready to take on this project my boss had assigned to me. I put all my attention on the road, hoping that would calm me.

The road curved more and more the higher into the Oakland hills I went. I kept the window rolled down to feel the cold air hit my face. Further up the road, housing became less dense and trees became the common residents. The familiar forest and gravel road that led to my duplex were welcome sights.

My landlord’s front door was on the opposite side of the duplex from my own front door. The place appealed to me because of its symmetry. The only way to tell whose door you’re going through is by noticing the placement of the trees on the outside. I also like the isolation aspect of it. In the Oakland hills, the proper-

ties offer great elbow room for people whose arms are 100 feet long.

Passing through the living room, I did my usual thing of waving to the painting of the collie hanging above the TV. “Hi, Crotch-smeller.”

I headed straight to the kitchen and pulled out a bottle of beer. Opened the bottle above the sink. The cap bounced all over the sink making tinkling sounds and it made me think about how the moving energy of the falling bottle cap changed into sound energy. Energy isn’t created or destroyed, it just changes. I proved it again when I returned the bottle opener to the drawer and slammed the drawer shut. Kchunk! Listen to that energy. I opened and closed the drawer a few more times. Kchunk! Kchunk!

I moved to the bedroom, set the beer on the dresser, picked up the photo of my ex-wife Nancy and collapsed onto the bed. Holding her picture above my head blocked the view of the ceiling and I stared at Nancy’s photo for a bit, wishing she were back with me. And thankful she wasn’t.

Chapter 3

Twenty-five hours and seven minutes of sleepless work and Wheat Thin crumb production later, I had completed my assignment and e-mailed the results to the powers that be. My head proposed that I should celebrate this conquest by taking two aspirin. My eyes voted for the bed. They all got what they wanted.

Two hours later, it was 8:12 p.m. and I realized I hadn't let my bladder vote. I headed for the bathroom and turned on the light.

My eyes complained.

I turned off the light.

I leaned against the mirror above the sink and reassured them that the light was off and that they could now open again.

I opened my eyes expecting the typical picture: round face, brown hair, brown eyes, long neck, but all close up since my forehead was leaning on the mirror.

But it wasn't myself I saw.

I saw a room. A room filled with cameras. Photos

were taped to the wall. I cupped my hands to the mirror and saw the room more clearly. All the cameras were pointed straight at me. But the room was dark and no one was there.

My heart pounded. “What the hell?!”

I stood up straight trying to understand what I had just seen. I was being watched? And if they watched me in here... “Oh, no.”

I rushed to the bedroom mirror that ran from floor to ceiling and cupped my hands against it. More cameras and more photos taped to the walls. I thought of the time I brought a prostitute home. Not exactly the proudest moment of my life. I looked from my bedroom to the bathroom. Did it really end there? My head turned toward the living room.

There was no mirror in there. I moved into the room and looked around.

The room was empty when I first moved in...except for the painting of the collie above the TV. Luke McCourt, my landlord who lived in the other half of the duplex, had said he couldn't remove it. It was nailed to the house beams and would tear off part of the wall.

I collapsed onto the couch and stared at the painting. The stupid depiction of the white collie reminded me of the cheap paintings in motel rooms. I scrubbed my hands through my hair, then held them over my face. Peeking through my fingers, I peered again at the collie.

Okay. Why did Luke do this? How was taking pictures of me advantageous to him? Was that the right

question? Not really. I decided to start off with questions to discern reality versus delusion. Was I actually seeing through the mirrors? Yes. Did I actually see the cameras? Yes. So far, reality was winning.

I rushed to the garage and grabbed a hammer and chisel. They felt heavy in my hands. Back in the living room, sliding the chisel between the painting and the wall, I peeled away to the truth. And there it was. A hole through the wall the size of a bullet. Through the hole looked to be a snake camera. I picked up the painting and held it to the window. The moon's light showed a small hole where the dog's dark nose should have been.

My stomach twisted around my guts. I dropped the painting to the floor and took it all in. The bathroom, the bedroom, the living room... everything I had discovered poured into me at once. I was being watched. Luke may have seen everything I had ever done. But that wasn't it. That wasn't the worst. It was my house, dammit! My house! There was no refuge there anymore.