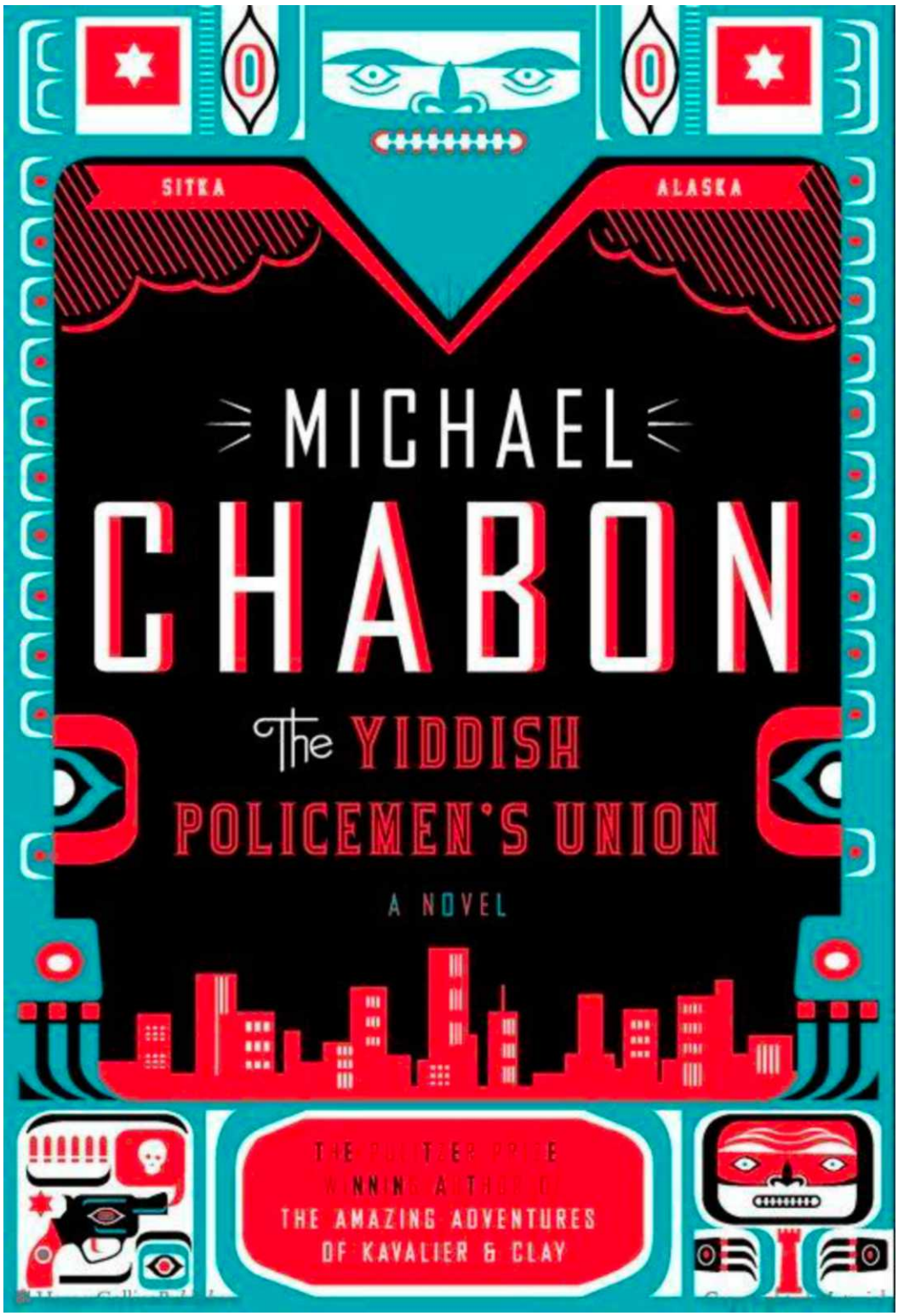
SITKA
ALASKA
MICHAEL
CHABON
The YIDDISH
POLICEMEN'S UNION
A NOVEL
THE AMAZING ADVENTURES
OF KAVALIER & CLAY

THE YIDDISH POLICEMEN'S UNION

Michael Chabon

2007

1

Nine months Landsman's been flopping at the Hotel Zamenhof without any of his fellow residents managing to get themselves murdered. Now somebody has put a bullet in the brain of the occupant of 208, a yid who was calling himself Emanuel Lasker.

"He didn't answer the phone, he wouldn't open his door," says Tenenboym the night manager when he comes to roust Landsman. Landsman lives in 505, with a view of the neon sign on the hotel across Max Nordau Street. That one is called the Blackpool, a word that figures in Landsman's nightmares. "I had to let myself into his room."

The night manager is a former U.S. Marine who kicked a heroin habit of his own back in the sixties, after coming home from the shambles of the Cuban war. He takes a motherly interest in the user population of the Zamenhof. He extends credit to them and sees that they are left alone when that is what they need.

"Did you touch anything in the room?" Landsman says. Tenenboym says, "Only the cash and jewelry." Landsman puts on his trousers and shoes and hitches up his suspenders. Then he and Tenenboym turn to look at the doorknob, where a necktie hangs, red with a fat maroon stripe, already knotted to save time. Landsman has eight hours to go until his next shift. Eight rat hours, sucking at his bottle, in his glass tank lined with wood shavings. Landsman sighs and goes for the tie. He slides it over his head and pushes up the knot to his collar. He puts on his jacket, feels for the wallet and shield in the breast pocket, pats the sholem he wears in a holster under his arm, a chopped Smith & Wesson Model 39.

"I hate to wake you, Detective," Tenenboym says. "Only I noticed that you don't really sleep."

"I sleep," Landsman says. He picks up the shot glass that he is currently dating, a souvenir of the World's Fair of 1977. "It's just I do it in my underpants and shirt." He lifts the glass and toasts the thirty years gone since the Sitka World's Fair. A pinnacle of Jewish civilization in the north,

people say, and who is he to argue? Meyer Landsman was fourteen that summer, and just discovering the glories of Jewish women, for whom 1977 must have been some kind of a pinnacle. “Sitting up in a chair.” He drains the glass. “Wearing a sholem.”

According to doctors, therapists, and his ex-wife, Landsman drinks to medicate himself, tuning the tubes and crystals of his moods with a crude hammer of hundred-proof plum brandy. But the truth is that Landsman has only two moods: working and dead. Meyer Landsman is the most decorated shammes in the District of Sitka, the man who solved the murder of the beautiful Froma Lefkowitz by her furrier husband, and caught Podolsky the Hospital Killer. His testimony sent Hyman Tsharny to federal prison for life, the first and last time that criminal charges against a Verbover wiseguy have ever been made to stick. He has the memory of a convict, the balls of a fireman, and the eyesight of a house-breaker. When there is crime to fight, Landsman tears around Sitka like a man with his pant leg caught on a rocket. It’s like there’s a film score playing behind him, heavy on the castanets. The problem comes in the hours when he isn’t working, when his thoughts start blowing out the open window of his brain like pages from a blotter. Sometimes it takes a heavy paperweight to pin them down.

“I hate to make more work for you,” Tenenboym says.

During his days working Narcotics, Landsman arrested Tenenboym five times. That is all the basis for what passes for friendship between them. It is almost enough.

“It’s not work, Tenenboym,” Landsman says. “I do it for love.”

“It’s the same for me,” the night manager says. “With being a night manager of a crap-ass hotel.”

Landsman puts his hand on Tenenboym’s shoulder, and they go down to take stock of the deceased, squeezing into the Zamenhof’s lone elevator, or ELEVATORO, as a small brass plate over the door would have it. When the hotel was built fifty years ago, all of its directional signs, labels, notices, and warnings were printed on brass plates in Esperanto. Most of them are long gone, victims of neglect, vandalism, or the fire code.

The door and door frame of 208 do not exhibit signs of forced entry. Landsman covers the knob with his handkerchief and nudges the door open

with the toe of his loafer.

“I got this funny feeling,” Tenenboym says as he follows Landsman into the room. “First time I ever saw the guy. You know the expression ‘a broken man’?”

Landsman allows that the phrase rings a bell.

“Most of the people it gets applied to don’t really deserve it,” Tenenboym says. “Most men, in my opinion, they have nothing there to break in the first place. But this Lasker. He was like one of those sticks you snap, it lights up. You know? For a few hours. And you can hear broken glass rattling inside of it. I don’t know, forget it. It was just a funny feeling.”

“Everybody has a funny feeling these days,” Landsman says, making a few notes in his little black pad about the situation of the room, even though such notes are superfluous, because he rarely forgets a detail of physical description. Landsman has been told; by the same loose confederacy of physicians, psychologists, and his former spouse, that alcohol will kill his gift for recollection, but so far, to his regret, this claim has proved false. His vision of the past remains unimpaired. “We had to open a separate phone line just to handle the calls.”

“These are strange times to be a Jew,” Tenenboym agrees. “No doubt about it.”

A small pile of paperback books sits atop the laminate dresser. On the bedside table Lasker kept a chessboard. It looks like he had a game going, a messy looking middle game with Black’s king under attack at the center of the board and White having the advantage of a couple of pieces. It’s a cheap set, the board a square of card that folds down the middle, the pieces hollow, with plastic nubs where they were extruded.

One light burns in a three-shade floor lamp by the television. Every other bulb in the room apart from the bathroom tube has been removed or allowed to burn out. On the windowsill sits a package of a popular brand of over-the-counter laxative. The window is cranked open its possible inch, and every few seconds the metal blinds bang in the stiff wind blowing in off the Gulf of Alaska, The wind carries a sour tang of pulped lumber, the smell of boat diesel and the slaughter and canning or salmon. According to “Nokh Amol,” a song that Landsman and every other Alaskan Jew of his

generation learned in grade school, the smell of the wind from the Gulf fills a Jewish nose with a sense of promise, opportunity, the chance to start again. “Nokh Amol” dates from the Polar Bear days, the early forties, and it’s supposed to be an expression of gratitude for another miraculous deliverance: Once Again. Nowadays the Jews of the Sitka District tend to hear the ironic edge that was there all along.

“Seems like I’ve known a lot of chess-playing yids who used smack,” Tenenboym says.

“Same here,” Landsman says, looking down at the deceased, realizing he has seen the yid around the Zamenhof. Little bird of a man. Bright eye, snub beak. Bit of a flush in the cheeks and throat that might have been rosacea. Not a hard case, not a scumbag, not quite a lost soul, A yid not too different from Landsman, maybe, apart from his choice of drug. Clean fingernails. Always a tie and hat. Read a book with foot-notes once. Now Lasker lies on his belly, on the pull-down bed, face to the wall, wearing only a pair of regulation white underpants. Ginger hair and ginger freckles and three days of golden stubble on his cheek. A trace of a double chin that Landsman puts down to a vanished life as a fat boy. Eyes swollen in their blood-dark orbits. At the back of his head is a small, burnt hole, a bead of blood. No sign of a struggle. Nothing to indicate that Lasker saw it coming or even knew the instant when it came. The pillow, Landsman notices, is missing from the bed. “If I’d known, maybe I would have proposed a game or two.”

“I didn’t know you play.”

“I’m weak,” Landsman says. By the closet, on plush carpet the medicated yellow-green of a throat lozenge, he spots a tiny white feather. Landsman jerks open the closet door, and there on the floor is the pillow, shot through the heart to silence the concussion of bursting gases in a shell. “I have no feel for the middle game.”

“In my experience, Detective,” Tenenboym says, “it’s all middle game.”

“Don’t I know it,” Landsman says.

He calls to wake his partner, Berko Shemets. “Detective Shemets,” Landsman says into his mobile phone, a department-issue Shoyfer AT. “This is your partner.”

“I begged you not to do this anymore, Meyer,” Berko says. Needless to say, he also has eight hours to go until his next shift.

“You have a right to be angry,” Landsman says. “Only I thought maybe you might still be awake.”

“I was awake.”

Unlike Landsman, Berko Shemets has not made a mess of his marriage or his personal life. Every night he sleeps in the arms of his excellent wife, whose love for him is merited, requited, and appreciated by her husband, a steadfast man who never gives her any cause for sorrow or alarm.

“A curse on your head, Meyer,” Berko says, and then, in American, “God damn it.”

“I have an apparent homicide here at my hotel,” Landsman says. “A resident. A single shot to the back of the head. Silenced with a pillow. Very tidy. “

“A hit.”

“That’s the only reason I’m bothering you. The unusual nature of the killing.”

Sitka, with a population in the long jagged strip of the metro area of three point two million, averages about seventy-five homicides a year. Some of these are gang-related: Russian shtarkers whacking one another freestyle. The rest of Sitka’s homicides are so-called crimes of passion, which is a shorthand way of expressing the mathematical product of alcohol and firearms. Cold-blooded executions are as rare as they are tough to clear from the big whiteboard in the squad room, where the tally of open cases is kept.

“You’re off duty, Meyer. Call it in. Give it to Tabatchnik and Karpas.”

Tabatchnik and Karpas, the other two detectives who make up B Squad in the Homicide Section of the District Police, Sitka Headquarters, are holding down the night shift this month. Landsman has to acknowledge a certain appeal in the idea of letting this pigeon shit on their fedoras.

“Well, I would,” Landsman says. “Except for this is my place of residence.”

“You knew him?” Berko says, his tone softening. “No,” Landsman says. “I did not know the yid.”

He looks away from the pale freckled expanse of the dead man stretched out on the pull-down bed. Sometimes he can’t help feeling sorry for them, but it’s better not to get into the habit.

“Look,” Landsman says, “you go back to bed. We can talk about it tomorrow. I’m sorry I bothered you. Good night. Tell Ester-Malke I’m sorry.”

“You sound a little off, Meyer,” Berko says. “You okay?”

In recent months Landsman has placed a number of calls to his partner at questionable hours of the night, ranting and rambling in an alcoholic dialect of grief. Landsman bailed out on his marriage two years ago, and last April his younger sister crashed her Piper Super Cub into the side of Mount Dunkelblum, up in the bush. But Landsman is not thinking of Naomi’s death now, nor of the shame of his divorce. He has been sandbagged by a vision of sitting in the grimy lounge of the Hotel Zamenhof, on a couch that was once white, playing chess with Emanuel Lasker, or whatever his real name was. Shedding the last of their fading glow on each other and listening to the sweet chiming of broken glass inside. That Landsman loathes the game of chess does not make the picture any less touching.

“The guy played chess, Berko. I never knew. That’s all.”

“Please,” Berko says, “please, Meyer, I beg you, don’t start with the crying.”

“I’m fine,” Landsman says. “Good night.”

Landsman calls the dispatcher to make himself the primary detective on the Lasker case. Another piece of-shit homicide is not going to put any special hurt on his clearance rate as primary. Not that it really matters. On the first of January, sovereignty over the whole Federal District of Sitka, a crooked parenthesis of rocky shoreline running along the western edges of Baranof and Chichagof islands, will revert to the state of Alaska. The District Police, to which Landsman has devoted his hide, head, and soul for twenty years, will be dissolved. It is far from clear that Landsman or Berko Shemets or anybody else will be keeping his job. Nothing is clear about the upcoming Reversion, and that is why these are strange times to be a Jew.

2

While he waits for the beat latke to show, Landsman knocks on doors. Most of the occupants of the Zamenhof are out for the night, in body or mind, and for all that he gets out of the rest of them, he might as well be knocking on doors at the Hirshkovits School for the Deaf. They are a twitchy, half-addled, rank, and cranky bunch of yids, the residents of the Hotel Zarncnhof, but none of them seems any more disturbed than usual tonight. And none of them strikes Landsman as the type to jam a large-caliber handgun against the base of a man's skull and kill him in stone-cold blood.

"I'm wasting my time with these buffaloes," Landsman tells Tenenboym. "And you, you're sure you didn't see anybody or anything out of the ordinary?"

"I'm sorry, Detective."

"You're a buffalo, too, Tenenboym."

"I don't dispute the charge."

"The service door?"

"Dealers were using it," Tenenboym says. "We had to put in an alarm. I would have heard."

Landsman gets Tenenboym to telephone the day manager and the weekend man, snug at home in their beds. These gentlemen agree with Tenenboym that, as far as they know, no one has called for the dead man or asked after him. Ever. Not during the entire course of his stay at the Zamenhof. No visitors, no friends, not even the delivery boy from Pearl of Manila. So, Landsman thinks, there's a difference between him and Lasker: Landsman has occasional visits from Romel, bearing a brown paper bag of *lumpia.*

"I'm going to go check out the roof," Landsman says. "Don't let anybody leave, and call me when the latke decides to show up."