

## Three Strikes

1932

In his whole nine years, Lenny Gerstler doesn't remember feeling this mixed-up. Sitting next to his father in the synagogue, listening as the congregation recites the special Rosh Hashana prayer, his chest starts to feel heavy with guilt, even though he hasn't done anything wrong. *Avinu Malkenu, Our Father, our king, we have sinned before You.* The adults around him chant the haunting, powerful melody, first in a murmur, then louder, a unified, rising plea for God to be gracious. If God is so great, Lenny wants to know, why does the Jewish New Year have to fall on the same days as the World Series when his favorite team is playing? Later, after the festive lunch and the relatives have gone home, Lenny plans to slip out of the house and walk over to the Barnum Ave Drugstore, where the neighborhood men will be listening to today's game. He's not usually a sneaky boy, and he hopes God will forgive him this once.

Lenny glances around the synagogue, but no one else seems anxious, not even the people his father calls "poor shmoe," the ones who've been out of work since the Great Crash. Everyone is dressed in their best High Holiday clothes; Lenny and his younger brother Jeremiah are wearing matching navy knickers made by Aunt Selma. The service drags on, but Lenny isn't thinking about the prayers. His mind is on hits, runs, and strikeouts. The sweet, cracking sound of the bat connecting with the ball. The thunder of the cheering crowd pulsing through the static of the radio.

“Give heed to the clarion call of the shofar,” the Rabbi bellows, bringing Lenny back to the service. It is the third time this weekend the Rabbi has used those exact words. Lenny tugs on his father’s suit jacket and asks if he can go outside for a bit, and the elder Gerstler nods his consent.

Lenny makes his way to the empty lot next to the synagogue, where the other boys are playing stick ball, and leans against a wall, watching. He dreams of being a better hitter, and wishes they’d let him play. Sometimes it bothers him – with all his passion for sports, he’s just not that good himself – but now he tries to concentrate on how exhilarated he’ll feel, later today, when the Yankees sweep the Series. He’s sure of it. Despite the prohibition of turning on the radio on Rosh Hashanah, they’d heard from their non-Jewish neighbors that the Yanks had beaten the Cubs in yesterday’s game, bringing the series to 3-0. Although Lenny knows he shouldn’t have, this is what he’s focused his prayers on all morning: not forgiveness or redemption, but a win for the Yankees.

Away from the chanting in the synagogue, Lenny’s mixed-up feeling is gone, and he smiles to himself, thinking about Game 4. He sees his brother crouched on the pavement in another corner, playing marbles with a gang of six-year-olds. The cleverness of his plan is that he’s taken Jeremiah into account, though he hasn’t told him yet. When lunch is over, Lenny will volunteer to look after Jeremiah so his parents can rest. He’s even saved a Bit-O-Honey and a peanut chew to be used as bribes, one to get Jeremiah out of the house and the other in exchange for a promise not to tell. The kid might not know much about baseball, at least not yet, but he’ll do anything for candy. It’s surefire.

“A better lineup, the Yanks couldn’t have,” Lenny says now to the boys around him, rattling off the batting order. “Lou Gehrig, batting fourth, for the grand slam.” He mimics an announcer’s voice and Gehrig’s slugging stance. At Williams Elementary, Lenny is the king of baseball statistics, which impresses a small circle of similarly-minded boys. He knows the strikeout records of the Yankees bullpen, and the birth dates of the players. He and Johnny Allen, the rookie pitcher, share a birthday. He can recite the batting averages of the entire Yankees lineup, and starts discussing them in detail now.

“Well, aren’t you a real abercrombie?” says an older kid, mocking him before walking away.

Lenny flinches but ignores him; it’s not the first time he’s been called a know-it-all. He walks over to the corner where Jeremiah is playing. His authority here, among the kids three years younger than him, is unquestioned. Jeremiah is old enough for Lenny to start teaching him about the sport, the beauty of it, and Lenny is looking forward to their secret afternoon together. He almost wants to tell Jeremiah about the plan now, but he is afraid he’ll tell Mother and Papa by accident, so he waits. He knows it will work: with Johnny Allen as today’s starting pitcher, Lenny feels lucky.

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Lenny glances nervously at the green clock on the wall as his mother washes the dishes. The relatives have said their good-byes, and Lenny is anxious for the dishwashing to be done. His father dries each plate and places it high up on the shelves. His parents exchange observations and gossip about their guests. Cousin Mendy, out of a job for three months, is having a hard time feeding his family. Sussie has been forced to take in needle and button work for nine cents an hour, instead of

having a proper factory job that might pay double that. Their family is lucky, Lenny knows. Papa sells butter and eggs, getting up every day before dawn, collecting them from the local farms and selling them to restaurants around the town. Papa talks of having his own store one day. He's a hard worker, Lenny knows, not like the poor shmoes in Hooversville. He's not sure where that is – he doesn't think it's near Bridgeport – but his mother is always cautioning him not to wander down East Main Street, where the tramps like to gather. Lenny wonders if his parents put Mendy and Sussie in the category of “poor shmoes,” but they are family, so he thinks not.

At last, the dishes are done and put away, and before Lenny can even volunteer to look after his brother, Mother asks him first. “Play quietly in the den,” she instructs, “so I can rest. If Jeremiah gets too jumpy, take him over to the park on Noble Avenue. But no further than that.” She looks tired after having 17 guests over for lunch, and rubs her leg behind the knee, where an ugly bluish-green vein sticks out.

Lenny nods in ascent, pleased he didn't need to volunteer. He receives the usual praise from his father, *Atta boy Lenny*. His mother beckons him to her, and places a kiss on his forehead. “What a responsible boy you're getting to be. A better son, I couldn't ask.”

His parents climb the stairs to their room and shut the door. He glances again at the green clock over the stove and wonders how long it will take them to walk to the drugstore on Barnum. They might make it by the bottom of the fourth inning. Lenny whisks Jeremiah outside and explains the plan. An adventure, he tells his brother, a rare opportunity to hear the final – he hopes – game of the Series. Jeremiah shrugs, but when Lenny offers him the peanut chew he takes it and follows. Jeremiah

is not bothered by the fact that today is Rosh Hashanah; he asks only how far a walk it will be. His brother has no idea they are openly flouting their parents, who would never consider turning on their own Philco model 20 radio on a holy day, even for such an important game.

They must cross over East Main to get to the drugstore, and Lenny takes his brother firmly by the hand as they pass a few hobos sitting under the awnings of closed shops. This is the one part of his plan that makes him nervous. One tramp is curled in an entryway, his thin arm splayed at a funny angle, revealing a reddish-purple scar the size of a carrot. He worries the man is dead until he notices that the brown hat covering his face is rising and falling with the man's snores. A line of beggars are sitting on the ledge of the church yard, waiting for the doors to open so they can get food. They too, wear hats, all different shapes and size, and hold walking sticks. Their jackets are too tight, the sleeves torn, with filthy white shirts sticking out. Jeremiah stares at the men and asks, in a loud voice, "Why are their clothes so dirty?"

"Shhh! Come on," Lenny says, tightening his grip on Jeremiah's hand.

"Ow! Let go of me," his brother whines.

"I'll explain later," he whispers, loosening his grasp. "Now come on." He understands why Mother doesn't want them dawdling on East Main. The men seem to be looking hungrily at Jeremiah's candy, and Lenny wonders if they can smell the Bit-O-Honey in his pocket.

Finally they are past the hobos, but Lenny doesn't relax his pace. He is worried they have missed the whole game. But surely they would have heard cheers if

it was over? “Now,” he turns to Jeremiah. “You remember what I told you about the Yankees, right?”

Jeremiah looks up at him with wide eyes, a dribble of candy juice sliding down his chin. “Uh-huh.”

“Good, good.” It doesn’t matter that Jeremiah can’t quote the statistics like Lenny; there is time to teach him about Babe Ruth’s home run record and Gehrig’s runs batted in. “And today we’re going to sweep the Series. Won’t that be grand?”

“Sure.” Jeremiah pulls his gray marble bag out of his pocket. “Can we play marbles?”

“Later,” Lenny promises, as the drugstore comes into view. He breaks into a trot, relieved there is still a crowd of men and boys congregating outside, which means the game is still going on. He wishes Jeremiah’s legs were longer so he could keep up. “Come on!” he urges again.

Someone outside tells Lenny the score and it takes a few seconds for the improbable news to sink in: his team is down 4-3 in the top of the fifth. “But we’ve got two men on base,” another man explains, optimism which Lenny shares until the next batter grounds into a double play and the half-inning is over. Some of the boys and men around him are grumbling about Johnny Allen, who gave up four runs in the first inning before the manager took him out. “Damn rookie,” an older boy near him says.

“Hey!” Lenny feels protective of Allen somehow, despite the terrible report. He glances around for Jeremiah and sees him starting at the soda fountain. His brother must know that they haven’t brought any money. He may have come to listen

to the game, but Papa would never allow them to spend money on Rosh Hashanah, certainly not for a luxury like soda.

At last, the Yankees take the lead. Each time they score another run, cheers erupt from the gaggle of boys and men gathered around the radio. “Yes!” Lenny shouts together with them. His team is going to win the World Series! He calls Jeremiah over and hugs him.

“Is it over yet?” his brother asks. For reasons Lenny cannot understand, Jeremiah has not caught on to the enthusiasm, the team spirit surging through the store.

“No, ding-bat! It’s only the seventh inning! How many innings are there in a baseball game?”

“Nine.” Jeremiah looks down at his feet. “I want to go home.”

Lenny hates his whiney voice; he wishes he’d found a way to leave Jeremiah at home. “We’re staying until the end, got that? Don’t you want to listen to the game? It’s the World Series!”

Jeremiah shrugs and a look of hurt crosses his eyes. “You said you’d play marbles with me,” he says quietly, digging the little bag out of his pocket.

“Later! I said ‘later!’ Not in the middle of the game, for Pete’s sake!” Lenny is disgusted with his little brother and takes a deep breath. “Just...just go back over there near the soda fountain and play by yourself.”

In the ninth inning, Lenny’s heroes score four more runs, and then the radio announcer is calling out the final score, 13-6. “And once again, ladies and gents, the

New York Yankees are the world champions!” A shout of joy erupts from the crowd at the drugstore. Boys Lenny barely knows are hugging him and each other. They run out into the street, yelling “Babe!” and “Lou” and “champions” and Lenny grabs Jeremiah’s arm and runs outside, letting the crowd carry them along Barnum Avenue. Someone starts singing “Take me out to the ballgame” and others join in. By the last line, Lenny is reminded of the unified voices from the synagogue this morning, but he finds this song more beautiful, more uplifting, sung in celebration rather than in prayer. “For its one, two, three strikes, you’re out, at the old ball game.” Even the poorest of the men, with holes in their shoes, worn-out caps and sooty faces, wear giant grins, and Lenny feels a surge of goodwill and love. *Oh beautiful, for sacred skies*, his father liked to croon, messing up the words in his thick Eastern European accent. America the beautiful, indeed, Lenny thinks, uniting men and boys, Jews and goyim, rich and poor.

The crowd continues to carry them down the street, seeming to expand with each shop passed. He urges Jeremiah to keep up and promises to play marbles with him soon. He bumps into a classmate, a fellow baseball nut, who is all too happy to give Lenny a pitch-by-pitch account of the game he missed yesterday. Babe Ruth homered in the fifth, his friend tells him, just after he’d pointed to the stands as if to say, *my next hit will be a home run, right to that spot*. To Lenny this is just further proof of Ruth’s greatness. “Ain’t that something!” he says. “The Sultan of Swing can predict the future!”

Lenny looks up and realizes they’ve turned down East Main and are headed south towards East Bridgeport. There are big factories around here – he reads the signs atop the large brick buildings: Bridgeport Metalworks, Johnson’s Ladies Handbags, Frisbie’s Pies. Some of the men are chanting now, but the joy in their



voices is gone. They sound angry, shouting something about affordable food. An upcoming workers' strike. A hunger march down to Washington. Lenny says goodbye to his friend and turns around to tell Jeremiah that they can go home now. But the boy is gone. Disappeared.

He starts calling his brother's name, darting in and out of the swarm of men. Jeremiah must have dawdled somewhere. He is always getting into mischief at home, doing naughty things. Not minding Mother or thinking about consequences. Maybe he's hoping to get into the pie factory. If this is some trick Jeremiah is playing on him to get him back for dragging him out in the first place, he's going to teach him a good lesson when he finds him. But even as Lenny is having this thought, he knows it can't be right. This is no game.

"Jeremiah!" he starts shouting. "Jeremiah Gerstler!" He shouts louder now. It is difficult to see. There are too many men walking in the street, making it impossible to find a six-year-old boy.

All-out panic takes over now, his heart pounding in his chest. Lenny searches the faces going past him, looking for his brother or any familiar face that can help him. He starts asking everyone who passes: have you seen a little boy? Brown curly hair, white shirt, navy knickers? Holding a bag of marbles? "Sorry kiddo," they say. A few kind men stop to hear him out. "Haven't seen him. Good luck." He tries to remember where on East Main he last saw his brother. He doesn't know if Jeremiah would have stopped somewhere or continued with the crowd, thinking Lenny just ahead. Or would he have gone home? Did he even know the way?

He runs back and forth, looking for a chair, a stoop, something to stand on so he can get a better view of the crowd, when a new thought alarms him: what if Lenny

has to go home and face his parents, and tell them that he's lost his brother? The panic creeps down from his throat to his belly and settles like a heavy stone. *Atta boy Lenny. Such a good son, we couldn't ask.* He'll never hear his parents utter those sweet words again, and only now does it dawn on him how much he likes to hear them. If God doesn't strike him down for this, Mother will.

Lenny guesses that only 15 minutes have passed since he noticed his brother is missing, but it feels like an hour. He doubles back, and has to shout to get the men's attention. Some are still talking about the game and he looks at them blankly. The jubilant feeling of an hour ago has vanished. The men continue to shake their heads, and Lenny hears one man muttering to another, just after they've passed him, "Gotta be careful with kids these days. Some sick people out there. My wife cried for a week over the poor Lindbergh baby." At this, Lenny's fear shifts into a level of terror he'd never before imagined. He wishes he'd see a policeman or someone else who can help.

Lenny starts making his way back up the street towards the drugstore, his eyes scanning the stoops and under the awnings of buildings for any sign of his brother. He prays, this time not to the gods of baseball, but to the Almighty Himself, in whom he pours a newfound belief. He promises God that if Jeremiah is found, he will never again break the rules of the holiday. Never go behind his parents' backs. No matter how much his younger brother annoys him, he will become his everlasting protector. He will give up baseball as his religion and sit in *shul* for the whole service, every *Shabbos*. He will heed the clarion call.

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Jeremiah is not at the drugstore. The lights are off and the door is locked, which must mean it is already past 5 pm. He squints, hoping to see his brother in the shadows, or sitting at the counter enjoying a cream soda from the fountain. Near the cash register Lenny sees the display of US Caramel trading cards, the kind he studies and organizes meticulously in his room, eyes mesmerized by the numbers.

He knows that if his parents haven't already awoken from their afternoon rest, they will soon. They may not worry at first, thinking the boys are in the park. But as the afternoon turns to evening, his mother will become a bit frantic, pacing around her kitchen. Lenny's imagination is going wild. He's read a lot of Hardy Boys books about little boys being tricked or kidnapped, but it would never have occurred to him that such a thing could be possible in Bridgeport.

Lenny keeps picturing Jeremiah's round cheeks, the way he used to look up at him with such love on his face and call "Enny, Enny" before he could say his "L's." He thinks of the hours they'd spent playing marbles, lying on the floor of their basement, watching the round little orbs twist and roll, the various tints and specs creating a dazzle of color as they spun. He'd forgotten that a few years back, before baseball had become his all-consuming hobby, Jeremiah had been his best playmate. Lenny sits down on a stoop and sobs like a baby, not caring if any of the kids from school see him, or that he's precariously close to East Main Street. His mother's injunction not to go near this dangerous part of town, with tramps and hobos and hungry men, doesn't matter now. His nose drips, and he wipes it on the sleeve of his good Rosh Hashana shirt.

His arms are prickly with sweat, his chest feels heavy, and though a sense of doom courses through his veins, he knows he must make his way home. He prays

Jeremiah will be there. He wonders if his parents will disown him for being so irresponsible. How would they ever forgive him?

He's about to cross East Main when out of the shadows, a hand grabs his right arm. "Come with me." The man looks slight but his grip is strong, his beard the color of the grimy yellow chicken fat Lenny's mother skims from the top of the soup. "I've seen you pass this corner three times already today."

Lenny is too shocked to speak. So the men were watching him. His mother was right: these are people to stay away from. He glances around, but there is no one on the street.

"I think I know what you're looking for." The man starts leading him to the side entrance of the church on whose ledge the tramps were gathered earlier today. A sign outside reads: *"Judge not, and you shall not be judged. Condemn not, and you shall not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven."*

"Oh, I'm not...I'm not a Christian," Lenny stammers. "My mother is expecting me."

The man grunts. He mutters something that sounds like, "Shame on you" but Lenny isn't sure. The man only yanks him towards the church, his grip still tight.

"Let go of me," Lenny cries, trying to twist free. The man's clutch is too strong. This is his punishment – in a flash Lenny sees the bones of kidnapped, tricked boys – and still, it doesn't seem fair. As loud as he can, he yells for help, but it is too late, the man pushes him into the church. The bright lights in the room stun him into silence. They are in an assembly hall, five long tables stretch across the length of the room. Many of the beggars he saw earlier in the day sit at the tables, their dinner

plates half-full with leftover potatoes and stew. Gravy stains the tablecloths, and half-a-dozen church volunteers are serving the men small pieces of chocolate cake and bruised yellow apples.

His kidnapper eases his grasp and points to the fourth table. There, towards the back of the room, sits a curly-haired boy of six, his white shirt covered in greasy drippings from the potatoes, his upper lip a moustache of chocolate frosting. Men in tattered clothing sit around him and it takes a few seconds for Lenny to understand.

“Len!” Jeremiah calls and waves. “Over here!”

He is breathless by the time he reaches Jeremiah. “Oh God. Oh thank God. Are you okay? I’m so sorry.” His eyes feel watery with relief and he stops to wipe his nose. The questions tumble out, one after another – what happened, how did he come to be here, was he afraid?

Jeremiah shrugs, unaffected by Lenny’s urgency. “I couldn’t find you. So I started walking back the way we came. Then I saw the men and they asked me if I needed help. If I was lost. So I said ‘yes’ and they brought me here.”

“He said he was hungry,” one of the men says. “So we brought him with us.”

“A nice lad,” another one adds. “An ace at marbles.”

“He told us all about you and the Yankees,” the first man says. Lenny recognizes him by the carrot-like scar along his arm; he was the tramp they’d seen sleeping with his hat over his face.

With a shudder Lenny sees a few bites of stew on Jeremiah's plate. His brother has eaten actual *treif!* He will have to scold him later. A volunteer approaches to clear

the plates, with several extra pieces of cake on her tray. "Can I have another one?" Jeremiah asks, and Lenny cringes. He wishes his brother had better manners. She narrows her eyes, about to say no, when Jeremiah adds, "For my brother?"

"No, no," Lenny says, protesting. "That's alright. We've got to go."

"Sit down, what's the rush?" one of the men asks Lenny. "You late for work or something?" The men erupt in raucous laughter.

Lenny eyes Jeremiah, imploring him to get out of his seat and say good-bye. "We really have to go." When he makes no move to get up, Lenny takes Jeremiah by the hand and pulls him out of his chair. "We have to go," he hisses to his brother. Jeremiah's hand is soft, its skin still babyish and unspoiled, even after playing marbles with the tramps. At once he feels ashamed, unsettled by the thought. He should be grateful. "Thank you," he says, addressing the man who grabbed him on the street. He swallows his fear and extends his hand, though he can't quite look the man in the eye. The hand that shakes Lenny's is rough and calloused. Suddenly Lenny feels a bit more grown up.

"Come back and visit us any time, pal," a man missing two front teeth says to Jeremiah.

"So long, fellas," Jeremiah gives a resigned wave. They muss his hair as he passes, holding out their hands for him to slip them fives.

Jeremiah flashes a smile and Lenny pulls him back towards the entrance. They emerge into the dusky evening and start walking home in silence. He is amazed at his brother for making friends with these men. Lenny had come very close to striking out today, but was granted a last-minute save by the most unlikely of relief pitchers.

Lenny feels an overpowering love for his younger brother, and throws his arm around Jeremiah's shoulder. He takes his hand, like they used to do when they were smaller.

"Were you scared?" he asks.

Jeremiah looks at him in surprise. "Of what?"

*Thank God, thank God*, Lenny thinks again. "Really, you weren't scared?"

Jeremiah shakes his head.

"Well that makes one of us. I thought for sure, you..." but he trails off. "Never mind." He'd done enough already today, it wouldn't be fair to share his gruesome thoughts with his innocent, pliable brother.

"Do you forgive me?" Lenny asks, suddenly mindful that next week is Yom Kippur.

Jeremiah peers at him and scrunches up one side of his face, trying to understand. "For what?"

"For dragging you out to the game, and then not listening when you wanted to go home, and then losing you in the crowd because I was so excited the Yanks won."

"Okay." His nonchalance suggests that Jeremiah wasn't upset with him to begin with. He shrugs. "They were nice. You said we were going to have an adventure."

An adventure was not quite how Lenny would put it, but if that's what the kid wanted to think, it was swell by him. So many things had changed in the space of a few hours: dark possibilities he hadn't even known existed, together with a newfound

goodwill towards the beggars of East Main. He feels more mature, like he's learned from some rookie mistakes. And another important lesson: his fortunes are not caught up with those of his team. Even if the Yankees have a great day, Lenny Gerstler might not. The thought makes him wistful for his earlier, more naïve self, and for a moment he wishes he could trade places with Jeremiah.

They are almost home. He will have to explain something to Mother and Papa. He is not a good liar, and besides, Jeremiah cannot be trusted to keep his mouth shut. As it is, on the short walk home, his brother has already mentioned – twice – the fact that the fellas invited him back to play marbles, and that he'd sure like to.

His parents look up from the table as the boys enter. “Were you playing in the park? Did you lose track of the time?” They seem relieved Lenny and Jeremiah are home, but do not look overly worried.

Lenny can't help himself; he starts to cry. He wishes he could be braver and not worry so much about what people think, like Jeremiah. But he's not. He wonders why he felt bold enough to shake the tramp's hand a little while ago, but here, in front of his parents, he crumples.

“What is it, Len? What's the matter, my darling?” His mother comes over to him and wraps him in an embrace. “You can tell us.”

He buries his head in his mother's plump bosom. Faint aromas of chicken soup, carrot *tsimmes*, and apple cake – foods for a sweet new year – linger in the kitchen. When Lenny can stop his tears, he'll tell them everything. He doesn't know how, but he'll have to find a way to explain and ask for their forgiveness. Given that Jeremiah is here – dirty, perhaps, but unharmed – he feels hopeful they'll grant it.



He'll play endless games of marbles with Jeremiah. He'll even try to fast next week on Yom Kippur, even though he's not required to until after his bar mitzvah. And with Jeremiah in tow, they'll see if Papa can help those men somehow, or if Mother can spare some butter and eggs to bake them a cake.