

# Kaddish

by Jack Dann

*Born in Johnson City, New York on February 15, 1945, Jack Dann and his wife, Jeanne Van Buren Dann, now live in Binghamton, New York in a large old house with plenty of room for books. Good job that, as Dann has written or edited well over twenty books. Recent books include his mainstream novel, Counting Coup, and an anthology of stories concerned with the Vietnam War, In the Fields of Fire, edited in collaboration with his wife. Dann's latest major project is a novel about Leonardo da Vinci, which, at the start of this decade, was at 400 pages and going strong. Dann's short fiction approaches horror in a quiet, moving style that creates powerful and disturbingly reflective moods. Very often he makes use of Jewish themes and history, as is the case with "Kaddish." Regarding this story, Dann argues: "It's got to be the only story written this year about Jewish horror! (We should all live and be well!)" Don't know about that, Jack, but it's clear that horror isn't bound by religion or creed -- this story will give everyone a chill.*

What ails you, O sea, that you flee?

-- Psalm of Hallel

Nathan sat with the other men in the small prayer-room of the synagogue. It was 6:40 in the morning. "One of the three professors who taught Hebrew Studies at the university was at the bema, the altar, leading the prayers. His voice intoned the Hebrew and Aramaic words; it was like a cold stream running and splashing over ice. Nathan didn't understand Hebrew, although he could read a little,

enough to say the Kaddish, the prayer for the dead, in a halting fashion.

But everything was rushed here in this place of prayer, everyone rocking back and forth and flipping quickly through the well-thumbed pages in the black siddur prayer books. Nathan couldn't keep up with the other men, even when he read and scanned the prayers in English. Young boys in jeans and designer T-shirts prayed ferociously beside their middle-aged fathers, as if trying to outdo them, although it was the old men who always finished first and had time to talk football while the others caught up. Only the rabbi with his well-kept beard and embroidered yarmulke sat motionless before the congregation, Ms white linen prayer shawl wrapped threateningly around him like a shroud, as if to emphasize that he held the secret knowledge and faith that Nathan could not find.

Nathan stared into his siddur and prayed with the others.

He was the Saracen in the temple, an infidel wearing prayer shawl and phylacteries.

A shoe-polish black leather frontlet containing a tiny inscribed parchment pressed against Nathan's forehead, another was held tight to his biceps by a long strap that wound like a snake around his left arm to circle his middle finger three times. But the flaming words of God contained in the phylacteries did not seem to make the synaptic connection into his blood and brain and sinew. Nevertheless, he intoned the words of the prayers, stood up, bowed, said the kad-dish, and then another kaddish, and he remembered all the things he should have said to his wife and son before they died. He remembered his omissions and commissions, which could not be undone. It was too

late even for tears, for he was as hollow as a winter gourd.

And Nathan realized that he was already dead.

A shade that had somehow insinuated himself into this congregation.

But then the service was over. The congregants hurriedly folded their prayer-shawls and wound the leather straps around their phylacteries, for it was 7:45, and they had to get to work. Nathan followed suit, but he felt like an automaton, a simulacrum of himself, a dead thing trying to infiltrate the routines and rituals of the living.

He left the synagogue with the other men. He had an early-morning appointment with an old client who insisted on turning over his substantial portfolio again; the old man had, in effect, been paying Nathan's mortgage for years.

But as Nathan drove his Mercedes coupe down A1A, which was the more picturesque and less direct route to his office in downtown Fort Lauderdale, he suddenly realized that he couldn't go through with it. He couldn't spend another day going through the motions of dictating to his secretary, counseling clients, staring into the electron darkness of a CRT screen, and pretending that life goes on.

He simply couldn't do it....

He made a U-turn, and drove back home to Lighthouse Point. The ocean was now to his right, an expanse of emerald and tourmaline. It brought to mind memories of family outings on the public Lauderdale beaches when his son Michael was a toddler and wore braces to straighten out a birth defect. He remembered first making love to his wife Helen on the beach. The immensity of the clear, star-filled sky and the dark, unfathomable ocean had frightened her, and afterward she had cried in his arms as she looked out at the sea.

But as Nathan drove past the art-deco style pink cathedral, which was a Lighthouse Point landmark, he realized that he couldn't go home either. How was he going to face the myriad memories inhering in the furniture, bric-a-brac, and framed photographs... the memories that seemed to perspire from the very walls themselves? Helen and Michael would only whisper to him again. He would hear all the old arguments and secret conversations, barely audible but there nevertheless, over the susurrations of the air conditioner....

He parked his car in the circular driveway of his red-roofed, white stucco home and crossed the street to his neighbor's yard, which had direct frontage on the intercoastal.

He was, after all, already a shade; he had only to make a proper passage into the next world.

And with the same calm, directed purpose that had served him so well in business over the years, Nathan borrowed his neighbor's hundred thousand dollar "cigarette" speedboat and steered it out to sea to find God.

He piloted the glossy green bullet through the intercoastals, motoring slowly, for police patrolled the quiet canals in search of offenders who would dare to churn the oily, mirrored waters into foam and froth. Yachts and sailboats gently tilted and rolled in their marinas, a gas station attendant with a red scarf around his neck leaned against an Esso gas pump that abutted a wide-planked dock where petroleum drippings shivered like rainbows caught in the wood, and the waterside pools and sun decks of the pastel-painted, expensive homes were empty.

Nathan smelled the bacon and coffee and gasoline, but could hear and

feel only the thrumming of the twin engines of the speedboat. The bow reminded him of the hood of an old Lincoln he had loved: expansive and curved and storeroom shiny.

As Nathan turned out of the intercoastal and into the terrifying turquoise abyss of the open sea, he felt that he had escaped the bondage that had been his life.

The calm rolling surface of the sea had become time itself. Time was no longer insubstantial and ineffable; it was a surface that could be navigated. And Nathan could steer this roaring twin-engined speedboat forward toward destiny and death, or he could return to the past... to any or all of the events of his life that floated atop the flowing surface of his life like plankton.

Nathan was finally the engine of his soul.

He opened the throttle, and the "cigarette" seemed to lift out of the water, which slid past underneath like oil, sparkling green and blue in the brilliance of morning.

Dressed in a herringbone blue suit of continental cut, starched white shirt with rounded French cuffs, and maroon striped tie worked into a Windsor knot, he sat straight as a die before the enamel control console of tachometers, clutches, oil-pressure and fuel gauges, compass, wheel, and throttles.

He felt a quiet, almost patrician joy. He had conquered time and space and pain and fear.

He didn't care about fuel.

His only direction was the eternal horizon ahead.

It all changed when the engines gave out, coughing and sputtering

into a final silence like bad lungs taking a last glottal breath. Nathan felt the constriction of the tight collar of his silk shirt; he was wet with perspiration. The sun burned into his face and eyes, blinding him with white light turned red behind closed eyelids, and wrenching him awake. It was as if he had been dreaming, sleepwalking through all the aching, guilt-ridden days since the death of his family three months ago today.

He loosened his tie, tore open his collar. He felt short of breath. It was blisteringly hot, and there was no protection from the sun in the cigarette speedboat. He pulled off his jacket. He was breathing hard, hyperventilating, thinking that he must somehow get back to shore. What have I done? he asked himself, incredulous. He felt feverish, hot then cold, and his teeth were chattering.

The waves slapped against the hull, which bobbed up and down and to the left and right; and Nathan could feel the sea pulling him toward death and its handmaiden of unbearable revelation.

He looked behind him, but there was not a shadow of land. Just open sea, liquid turquoise hills descending and rising. He tried to start the engines, but they wouldn't catch. The console lights dimmed from the drainage of power. He looked in the sidewells for extra fuel and oars but found only canvas, an opened package of plastic cups, and a very good brand of unblended scotch. No first-aid kit, no flares, for his neighbor was not fastidious, nor did he ever take the boat out of the intercoastal. This was probably the first time that the throttle had ever been turned to full. The boat was a status symbol, nothing more.

The compass read East, which was impossible, for if that were so, he would see land.

But east was the direction of God.

And the sea had become a manifestation of that direction.

The swells were higher now, and the boat rose and dipped, each time being pulled farther out, and the hours passed like days, and Nathan felt hungry and thirsty and frightened.

He thought he saw something on the horizon and stood up as best he could in the boat; he held tight to the chrome pillar of the windshield, and yes, there was something out there. A ship, a tanker, perhaps. He shouted into the sougning silence of the sea, but it was futile. It was as if he were being hidden in the troughs of the waves.

Hours later, when he was cried out and hoarse, cowed by the infinities of sea and sky and the desiccating heat of the sun, which had transformed itself into a blinding, pounding headache, he turned around. As if he could hide in his own shadow from the sun.

And as if turned to stone, he gazed into the past.

But not far into the past.

Not far enough to savor a moment of comfort before the tsunamis of guilt and grief.

Nathan returns to the morning that burns him still. He is shaving, his face lathered with soap from his chipped shaving mug that had once belonged to his grandfather, when Helen calls him. He can hear the muffled argument that has been going on downstairs between his wife and son, but he ignores it for as long as he can.

He simply can't face any more tension.

"Nathan!" Helen shouts, pushing the bathroom door open. "Didn't you hear me calling you?" She is a tiny woman, slender and heart-faced,

with long, thick brown hair. She does not look thirty-eight, although Nathan, who is considered good-looking, if not handsome, because of his weathered, broad-featured face and shock of gray hair, looks every one of his forty years. "Michael's late for school again," she says. "He's missed the bus. And when I told him I'd take him to school, he told me to fuck off."

"That's not what I said." Michael appears behind his mother; he is sixteen and dressed in baggy slacks and a carefully torn T-shirt. His hair is swept back from his forehead and sprayed to a lacquered shine. He looks like his mother, and has her temperament. Flushed with anger and frustration, he says, "I told her I'd take the next bus, which I could have taken, if she would have let me out of the house to catch it. Now it's too late."

"Your mother said she'd take you to school."

"I don't want her taking me to school. I can't stand her."

"Well, I am taking you," Helen said, "and as a consequence for what you said to me, you're grounded this weekend."

"I didn't say anything to you!"

"Nathan," she said, turning to him, "he's lying again. He told me to fuck myself."

"I am not lying," Michael shouts. "And I didn't say 'fuck yourself,' I said 'fuck it' because nobody can talk sense to you. All you can do is scream and ground me every five minutes. I already bought tickets to The Flack concert," he says to Nathan, "and I'm going, whether she likes it or not. I've tried to be nice to her all week, but it's impossible."

Nathan wipes the soap from his face and, trying to remain calm, says,



"We've talked about using that kind of language to your mother. It's got to stop...."

But there can be no quiet and rational resolve, for the family dynamics inevitably overpower him.

The argument gains momentum.

Michael is swearing and crying in frustration. Helen finally grabs him by his T-shirt and pushes him against the hallway wall. "I've got to get to work, and you are coming with me. Damn you!"

Michael tries to pull away from her, but she won't let him go. He pushes her, defensively, throwing her off balance.

Seeing that, Nathan shouts, "God damn you both," and rushes into the hallway. Everything is out of control now; it is all visceral response.

He pushes Helen aside and slaps Michael hard on the side of his face.

Helen screams, "I've told you never to strike him."

But before Nathan can recover and bring himself to apologize, they are out of the house.

By sunset the sky was the color of dull metal and filled with storm clouds. Only in the west did the sun bleed through the gray as it settled into the sea, which was pellucid and unnaturally clear. Sheet lightning shot through the massive cloud countries as the temperature dropped, and the humidity seemed to roll off the sea like mist, soon to be rain.

Nathan's fever thoughts burned like his red, broken skin. There was no food, no water to drink, just the slight smell of gasoline and the salty tang of the sea. It became dark, and still Nathan sat and stared into the transparent depths of the sea, as if he were looking for

something he had lost. Sometime during the agony of afternoon, he had stopped thinking about rescue. That idea had become as distant as a childhood dream.

Now, his mind raw from the sun, he watched and waited, and as expected, something was swimming up from the depths. A vague shape rose through veils of green darkness, followed by others. Fins broke the surface of the water, and twenty-foot thresher sharks circled the boat. Then other fish appeared just below the surface: marlin and sea-bass, dolphin and barracuda, all circling, until the sea in all directions was filled with all manner of fish, from the smallest four-eye to sixty-foot star-speckled whale sharks.

It grew dark, and the water was lit now by moonlight and pocked by the rain that began to fall. The rain was cold on Nathan's raw skin, and it looked as if its own silvery light illuminated each droplet.

And as the rain struck the water, the fish became frenzied. They began to tear at each other, as if in a feeding madness. Huge white sharks snapped and gored the smaller tiger and mako sharks, while the barracuda cut sailfish and cobia and tarpon into bloody gobbets of meat.

Nathan could feel them smashing against the hull like hammers, and the ocean began to boil with the carnage.

Then, as if in concert, the storm exploded in claps and rolls of thunder and torrents of rain; and the ocean responded with high waves that almost turned over the speedboat. Reeking fish slammed into the cigarette's cockpit, as if thrown from the sky, splashing Nathan with blood and entrails. Lightning veined the moon, magnified by the atmosphere into a lifeless sun.

Nathan huddled inside the boat, pressing his legs and back against the fiberglass to prevent himself from being flung into the sea. The rain was cold, as was the seawater spraying over him, yet each raindrop and salty spindrift burned him. He raised his head one last time to look around, only to see that it was raining fire. The ocean was illuminated, as if by blue flame; and the sky glowed like cinders.

The sea was a bloodbath.

And as his heart stopped and his breath caught in his throat --

Nathan sits behind his desk in his three-windowed, mahogany-paneled office. He is looking at the rouged and concerned face of a wealthy dowager client as he learns of the death of his wife and son.

He listens to the voice on the phone describing the accident and feels himself freezing into shock. He can only stare at the dowager's huge emerald earrings, as if the green stones are tiny tablets: the emerald grimoires of Solomon, which contain all the answers to the mysteries of life and death and guilt and anger.

Dawn revealed the bloated bodies and remains of thousands of fish that floated like gray driftwood on the calm swells of the ocean. A few cumulus clouds drifted across the sky, as if to separate the chilly perfection of Heaven from the ruin below. Nathan awakened with a jolt, as if from a nightmare, only to find that all was as it had been. Repelled, he threw an eel and an ugly, spiny sargassum fish back into the sea.

He felt nauseated, but he had had the dry heaves during the night; there was nothing left in his stomach to expel. He had even tried to eat the fish that had landed in the cockpit of the speedboat, but the reek was so great that he couldn't manage to bite into the putrescent flesh.

He was thirsty, but the sea was salt. Here was food and water all around him, yet he was starving and dehydrated. And naked. His clothes were not anywhere to be seen. Perhaps he had torn them off to relieve his burning skin. Nathan's flesh seemed to be pulling away from his bones. It was so scorched that his shoulders and face and arms were bleeding.

The empty bottle of scotch rolled on the fiberglass floor of the speedboat, catching the sun.

The hours passed. Nathan tried not to look at the sea, filled with the miles of decaying flesh and stink, but he could not stare into the sky forever. He surveyed the countries of flesh and sea around him, a sargasso mire that seemed endless, and he noticed something shiny bobbing in the water. It was the silver breastplate of a satin Torah covering. He scanned the ocean and found a Torah parchment floating, its Hebrew letters black mirrors reflecting the sun and sky above. Bits and pieces of the ark floated in the debris. Open prayer books seemed to move beneath the surface of the water like manta rays, their black covers dull and the golden letters washed away.

But the holy objects and bloody flesh seemed to form letters, signs, and portents that Nathan could not read. Yet when he reached for a prayer book floating beside the hull, it began to sink into the dark, shadowed water, to become a distant memory. As Nathan looked into the water that was as clear and still as the past, he remembered: His son, dressed in a new black suit, leading the Shacharis service at his bar mitzvah; his own wedding in a rundown, glot-kosher hotel in Miami Beach, Helen nervous around his eighty-year-old aunts, who insisted that she step on Nathan's foot for luck when he ceremoniously crushed the wineglass wrapped in a napkin; Helen

taking him in her arms to tell him that his father had died; and the arguments and lovemaking and Sabbath candles; Michael stealing the family car, introducing him to his first "serious" girlfriend, who seemed afraid to look up from her plate at the dinner table....

All the tiny realizations of changes and transitions seemed to be floating, objects on the sea.

But like the prayer book, the fish and carrion and scrolls and salt-stained pieces of the holy Ark began to sink; and Nathan was left staring into the empty green-hazed depths, as if he were looking once again into the green stone of Solomon.

The sea was like a mirror, so still and perfect that it seemed to harden into emerald. It was time itself, and in it he could see his own reflection.

If only Nathan could pass through its face.

He could see himself.

He could see....

Nathan sat with the other men in the small prayer-room of the synagogue and felt the divine presence. The ancient kabbalists called it the Shekhinah, the bride of God.

It was 6:40 in the morning, and Nathan couldn't discern what was different, but he felt something. The morning light was like blue smoke diffusing through the high, narrow stained-glass windows. Dust motes danced in the air, shivering in the air-conditioned morning. Nathan put on his tallit and phylacteries and recited the blessing and the Akeidah and the Shema and other supplications. The other men sat beside him and behind him and prayed as they did every

morning. Their smells and clothes were the same, and the prayers were almost hypnotic in their monotonous intonation. A young man hummed nasally, as was his habit, throughout the prayers. One of the three professors who taught Hebrew Studies at the university was at the bema, leading the prayers. His voice intoned the Hebrew and Aramaic words.

And Nathan felt the presence of his dead son and wife sitting beside him.

He couldn't see them, not with the same eyes that stared straight ahead at the red satin curtains of the Holy Ark; but he sensed their presence nevertheless. As he prayed, he could hear Michael's voice... his own voice.

Young men of Michael's age paced nervously around the room; they were wrapped protectively in their prayer-shawls, and the light seemed to cling to them.

Perhaps they sensed the Shekhinah, too.

Helen leaned against him. She was a shadow, barely palpable, but Nathan knew it was his wife.

Her body was the silk of his prayer shawl, her breath was Sabbath spices, and her fingers were as cool as the leather frontlets on his arm and forehead. As she whispered to him, his past became as concentrated as old liquors.

His life became an instant of unbearable fire, blinding him. But she released him, freed him from his immolating guilt, as the prayers for the dead drifted and curled through the morning light like smoke, then fell to rest like ashes.

Then the service was over and the Shekhinah evaporated, its holy presence melting like snow in the furnace of another Florida morning. The congregants, seemingly deaf and blind to the miracle that had swept past them, hurriedly folded their prayer-shawls and wound the leather straps around their phylacteries, for it was 7:45, and they had to get to work.

Nathan left the synagogue with the other men. He had an early-morning appointment with an old client. As he drove his Mercedes coupe down A1A, which was the more picturesque and less direct route to his office in downtown Fort Lauderdale, he passed the resorts and grand hotels, the restaurants and seedy diners, and the endless lots of kitsch motels with neon signs in their plate glass windows and hosts of plastic pink flamingos on their lawns.

He gazed out at the ocean. It was an expanse of emerald and tourmaline. Except for the whitecaps, which were long fingers gently pulling at the sand, the sea was quiet. Nathan turned off the air-conditioner and pressed the toggles on his armrest to open all the windows.

The humidity rushed in with the pungent smell of brine, and Nathan felt his face grow wet with perspiration and tears.

Then he detoured back to the highway.

The electric windows glided up, shutting out the world; the hum of the air-conditioner muffled the honking of the early morning rush hour combatants; and the news announcer on the radio reported on the rescue of a businessman naked and adrift on a speedboat near Miami.

But even now, Nathan could sense the Shekhinah.

He could hear his son's voice and feel the cool, gentle touch of

Helen's fingers upon his arms and perspiring forehead.

Yet in the reflection of the curving, tinted windshield, he could still see himself burning on the sea.