

HARLAN ELLISON

GO TOWARD THE LIGHT

IT WAS A TIME OF MIRACLES. Time, itself, was the first miracle. That we had learned how to drift backward through it, that we had been able to achieve it at all: another miracle. And the most remarkably miraculous miracle of all: that of the one hundred and sixty-five physicists, linguists, philologists, archaeologists, engineers, technicians, programmers of large-scale numerical simulations, and historians who worked on the Timedrift Project, only two were Jews. Me, myself, Matty Simon, a timedrifter, what is technically referred to on my monthly paycheck as an authentic "chronocircumnavigator" -- euphemistically called a "fugitive" by the one hundred and sixty-three Gentile techno-freaks and computer jockeys-- short-speak for Tempus Fugit -- "Time Flies" -- broken-backed Latin, just a "fugitive." That's me, young Matty, and the other Jew is Barry Levin. Not Levine, and not Leveen, but Levin, as if to rhyme with "let me in." Mr. Barry R. Levin, Fields Medal nominee, post-adolescent genius and wiseguy, the young man who Stephen Hawking says has made the greatest contributions to quantum gravity, the guy who, if you ask him a simple question you get a pageant, endless lectures on chrono-string theory, complexity theory, algebraic number theory, how many pepperonis can dance on the point of a pizza. Also, Barry Levin, orthodox Jew. Did I say orthodox? Beyond, galactically beyond orthodox. So damned orthodox that, by comparison, Moses was a fresser of barbequed pork sandwiches with Texas hot links. Levin, who was frum, Chassid, a reader and quoter of the Talmud, and also the biggest pain in the . . . I am a scientist, I am not allowed to use that kind of language. A pain in the nadir, the fundament, the buttocks, the tuchis!

A man who drove everyone crazy on Project Timedrift by continuing to insist that while it was all well and good to be going back to record at first hand every aspect of the Greek Culture, that the Hellenic World was enriched and enlightened by the Israelites and so, by rights, we ought to be making book on the parallel history of the Jews.

With one hundred and sixty-three goyim on the Project, you can imagine with what admiration and glee this unending assertion was received. Gratefully, we were working out of the University of Chicago, and not Pinsk, so at least I didn't have to worry about pogroms.

What I did worry about was Levin's characterization of me as a "pretend Jew."

"You're not a Good Jew," he said to me yesterday. We were lying side by side in the REM sleep room, relaxing after a three-hour hypnosleep session learning the idiomatics of Ptolemaic Egyptian, all ninety-seven dialects. He in h's sling, me in mine.

"I beg your sanctimonious pardon," I said angrily. "And you, I suppose, are a Good Jew, by comparison to my being a Bad Jew?"

"Res ipsa loquitur," he replied, not even opening his eyes. It was Latin, and it meant the thing speaks for itself; it was self-evident.

"When I was fourteen years old," I said, propping myself on one elbow and looking across at him lying there with his eyes shut, "a kid named Jack Wheeldon, sitting behind me in an assembly at my junior high school, kicked my seat and called me a kike. I turned around and hit him in the head with my geography book. He was on the football team, and he broke my jaw. Don't tell me I'm a Bad Jew. I ate through a straw for three months."

He turned his head and gave me that green-eyed lizard-on-a-rock stare. "This is a Good Jew, eh? Chanukah is in three days. You'll be lighting the candles, am I correct? You'll be reciting the prayers? You'll observe yontiff using nothing but virgin olive oil in your menorah, to celebrate the miracle?"

Oh, how I wanted to pop him one. "I gotcher miracle," I said, rudely. I lay back in the sling and closed my eyes.

I didn't believe in miracles. How Yehudah of the Maccabees had fielded a mere ten thousand Jews against Syrian King Antiochus's mercenary army of 60,000 infantry and 5,000 cavalry; and how he had whipped them like a tub of butter. How the victors had then marched on Jerusalem and retaken the Second Temple; and how they found that in the three years of Hellenist and Syrian domination and looting the Temple had grown desolate and overgrown with vegetation, the gates burned, and the Altar desecrated. But worst of all, the sacred vessels, including the menorah had been stolen. So the priests, the Kohanim, took seven iron spits, covered them with wood, and crafted them into a makeshift menorah. But where could they find uncontaminated oil required for the lighting of the candelabrum?

It was a time of miracles. They found one flask of oil. A cruse of oil, whatever a cruse was. And when they lit it, a miracle transpired, or so I was told in Sunday School, which was a weird name for it because Friday sundown to Saturday sundown is the Sabbath for Jews, except we were Reform, and that meant Saturday afternoon was football and maybe a movie matinee, so I went on Sundays. And,

miracle of miracles, I forgot most of those football games, but I remembered what I'd been taught about the "miracle" of the oil, if you believe that sort of mythology they tell to kids. The oil, just barely enough for one day, burned for eight days, giving the Kohanim sufficient time to prepare and receive fresh uncontaminated oil that was fit for the menorah.

A time of miracles. Like, for instance, you're on the Interstate, seventy-five miles from the nearest gas station, and your tank is empty. But you ride the fumes seventy-five miles to a fill-up. Sure. And one day's oil bums for eight. Not in this universe, it doesn't.

"I don't believe in old wives' tales that there's a 'miracle' in one day's oil burning for eight," I said.

And he said: "That wasn't the miracle."

And I said: "Seems pretty miraculous to me. If you believe."

And he said: "The miracle was that they knew the oil was uncontaminated. Otherwise they couldn't use it for the ceremony."

"So how did they know?" I asked.

"They found one cruse, buried in the dirt of the looted and defiled Temple of the Mount. One cruse that had been sealed with the seal of the high rabbi, the Kohen Gadol, the Great Priest."

"Yeah, so what's the big deal? It had the rabbi's seal on it. What did they expect, the Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval?"

"It was never done. It wasn't required that oil flasks be sealed. And rules were rigid in those days. No exceptions. No variations. Certainly the personal involvement of the Kohen Gadol in what was almost an act of housekeeping . . . well . . . it was unheard-of. Unthinkable. Not that the High Priest would consider the task beneath him" he rushed to interject, "but it would never fall to his office. It would be considered unworthy of his attention."

"Heaven forfend," I said, wishing he'd get to the punchline.

Which he did. "Not only was the flask found, its seal was unbroken, indicating that the contents had not been tampered with. One miraculous cruse, clearly marked for use in defiance of allogic, tradition, random chance. And that was the miracle."

I chuckled. "Mystery, maybe. Miracle? I don't think so."

"Naturally you don't think so. You're a Bad Jew."

And that, because he was an arrogant little creep, because his subjective world-view was the only world-view, because he fried my frijoles, ranked me, dissed me, ground my gears, and in general cheesed me off . . . I decided to go "fugitive" and solve his damned mystery, just to slap him in his snotty face with a dead fish! When they ask you why any great and momentous event in history took place, tell 'em that all the theories are stuffed full of wild blueberry muffins. Tell 'em the only reason that makes any sense is this: it seemed like a good idea at the time.

Launch the Spanish Armada? Seemed like a good idea at the time.

Invent the wheel? Seemed like a good idea at the time.

Drift back in time to 165 Before the Christian Era and find out how one day's oil bums for eight? Seemed like a good idea at the time. Because Barry R. Levin was a smartass!

IT WAS ALL CONTAINED in the suit of lights. All of time, and the ability to drift backward, all of it built into the refined mechanism the academics called a driftsuit, but which we "fugitives" called our suit of lights. Like a toreador's elegant costume, it was a glittering, gleaming, shining second-skin. All the circuits were built in, printed deep in the ceramic metal garment. It was a specially-developed cermet, pliable ceramic metal, not like the armor worn by our astronauts mining the Asteroid Belt. Silver and reflective, crosstar flares at a million points of arm and torso and hooded skull.

We had learned, in this time of miracles, that matter and energy are interchangeable; and that a person can be broken down into energy waves; and those waves can be fired off into the timestream, toward the light. Time did, indeed, sweep backward, and one could drift backward, going ever toward that ultimate light that we feared to enter. Not because of superstition, but because we all understood on a level we could not explain, that the light was the start of it all, perhaps the Big Bang itself.

But we could go fugitive, drift back and back, even to the dawn of life on this planet. And we could return, but only to the moment we had left. We could not go forward, which was just as well. Literally, the information that was us could be fired out backward through the timestream as wave data.

And the miracle was that it was all contained in the suit of lights. Calibrate it on the wrist-cuff, thumb the "activate" readout that was coded to the DNA of only the three of us who were timedrifters, and no matter where we stood, we turned to smoke, turned to light, imploded into a scintillant point, and vanished, to be fired away, and to reassemble as ourselves at the shore of the Sea of Reeds as the Egyptians were drowned, in the garden of Gethsemane on the night of Jesus's betrayal, in the crowd as Chicago's Mayor Cermak was assassinated by a demented immigrant trying to get a shot at Franklin D. Roosevelt, in the right field bleachers as the Mets won the World Series.

I thumbed the readout and saw only light, nothing but light, golden as a dream, eternal as a last breath, and I hurtled back toward the light that was greater than this light that filled me . . .

. . . and in a moment I stood in the year 165 Before the Christian Era, within the burned gates of the Second Temple, on the Mount in Jerusalem. It was the 24th day of the Hebrew month Kislev. 165 BCE. The slaughtered dead of the Greco-Syrian army of Antiochus lay ten deep outside. The swordsmen of the Yovan, who had stabled pigs in the Beis Ha Mikdosh, even in the holiest of holies, who had defiled the sanctuary which housed the menorah, who had had sex on the stones of the sacred altar, and profaned those stones with urine and swine . . . they lay with new, crimson mouths opened in their necks, with iron protruding from their bellies and backs.

Ex-college boy from Chicago, timedrifter, fugitive. It had seemed like a good idea at the time. I never dreamed this kind of death could be . . . with bodies that had not been decently straightened for display in small boxes . . . with hands that reached for the bodies that had once worn them. Faces without eyes.

I stood in the rubble of the most legendary structure in the history of my people, and realized this had not been, in any way, a good idea. Sick to my stomach, I started to thumb my wrist-cuff, to return now to the Project labs.

And I heard the scream.

And I turned my head.

And I saw the Kohane, who had been sent on ahead to assess the desecration -- a son of Mattisyahu -- I saw him flung backward and pinned to the floor of dirt and pig excrement, impaled by the spear of a Syrian pikeman who had been hiding in the shadows. Deserter of the citadel's garrison, a coward hiding in the shadows. And as he strode forward to finish the death of the writhing priest, I

charged, grabbed up one of the desecrated stones of the altar and, as he turned to stare at me, frozen in an instant at the sight of this creature of light bearing down on him . . . I raised the jagged rock and crushed his face to pulp.

Dying, the Kohane looked upon me with wonder. He murmured prayers and my suit of lights shone in his eyes. I spoke to him in Greek, but he could not understand me. And then in Latin, both formal and vulgate, but his whispered responses were incomprehensible to me. I could not speak his language!

I tried Parthian, Samaritan, Median, Cuthian, even Chaldean and Sumerian . . . but he faded slowly, only staring up at me in dying wonder. Then I understood one word of his lamentation, and I summoned up the hypnosleep learning that applied. I spoke to him in Aramaic of the Hasmonean brotherhood. And I begged him to tell me where the flasks of oil were kept.

But there were none. He had brought nothing with him, in advance of his priest brothers and the return of Shimon from his battle with the citadel garrison.

It was a time of miracles, and I knew what to do.

I thumbed the readout on my wrist-cuff and watched as my light became a mere pinpoint in his dying eyes.

I went back to Chicago. This was wrong, I knew this was wrong: timedrifters are forbidden to alter the past. The three of us who were trained to go fugitive, we understood above all else . . . change nothing, alter nothing, or risk a tainted future. I knew what I was doing was wrong.

But, oh, it seemed like a good idea at the time.

I went to Rosenbloom's, still in business on Devon Avenue, still in Rogers Park, even this well into the 21st century. I had to buy some trustworthy oil.

I told the little balding clerk I wanted virgin olive oil so pure it could be used in the holiest of ceremonies. He said, "How holy does it have to be for Chanukah in Chicago?" I told him it was going to be used in Israel. He laughed. "All oil today is 'tomei'-- you know what that is?" I said no, I didn't. (Because, you see, I didn't say, I'm not a Good Jew, and I don't know such things.) He said, "It means impure. And you know what virgin means? It means every olive was squeezed, but only the first drop was used." I asked him if the oil he sold was acceptable. He said, "Absolutely." I knew how much I needed, I'd read the piece on Chanukah history. Half a log, the Talmud had said. Tworiv-ee-eas. I had to look it up: about eight ounces, the equivalent of a pony

bottle of Budweiser. He sold it to me in a bottle of dark brown, opaque glass.

And I took the oil to one of the one hundred and sixty-three Gentiles on Project Timedrift, a chemist named Bethany Sherward, and I asked her to perform a small miracle. She said, "Matty, this is hardly a miracle you're asking for. You know the alleged 'burning bush' that spoke to Moses? They still exist. Burning bushes. In the Sinai, Saudi Arabia, Iraq. Mostly over the oil fields. They just bum and burn and. . ."

While she did what she had to do, I went fugitive and found myself, a creature of light once again, in the Beis Ha Mikdosh, in the fragile hours after midnight, in the Hebrew month of Cheshvan, in the year 19.5 BCE; and I stole a cruse of oil and took it back to Chicago and poured it into a sink, and realized what an idiot I'd been. I needn't have gone to Rosenbloom's. I could have used this oil, which was pure. But it was too late now. There was a lot we all had to learn about traveling in time.

I got the altered oil from Bethany Sherward, and when I hefted the small container I almost felt as if I could detect a heaviness that had not been there before. This oil was denser than ordinary olive oil, virgin or otherwise.

I poured the new oil into the cruse. It sloshed at the bottom of the vessel. This was a dark red, rough-surfaced clay jar, tapering almost into the shape of the traditional Roman amphora, but it had a narrow base, and a fitted lid without a stopper. It now contained enough oil for exactly one day, half a log. I returned to the Timedrift lab, put on the suit of lights -- it was wonderful to have one of only three triple-A clearances-- and set myself to return to the Temple of the Mount, five minutes earlier than I'd appeared the first time. I didn't know if I'd see myself coalesce into existence five minutes later, but I did know that I could save the Kohane's life.

I went toward the light, I became a creature of the light yet again, and found myself standing inside the gates once more. I started inside the Great Temple . . . And heard the scream.

Time had adjusted itself. He was falling backward, the spear having ripped open his chest. I charged the Syrian, hit him with the cruse of oil, knocked him to the dirt, and crushed his windpipe with one full force stomp of my booted foot.

I stood staring down at him for perhaps a minute. I had killed a man. With hardly the effort I would have expended to wipe sweat from my face, I had smashed the life out of him. I started to shake, and then I heard myself whimper. And then I made a stop to it. I had come here to do a thing, and I knew

it would now be done because . . . nowhere in sight did another creature of shimmering light appear. We had much to learn about traveling in time.

I went to the priest where he lay in his dirt-caked blood, and I raised his head. He stared at me in wonder, as he had the first time.

"Who are you?" he asked, coughing blood.

"Matty Simon," I said. It seemed like a good idea at the time.

He smiled. "Mattisyahu's son, Shimon?"

I started to say no, Matty, not Mattisyahu; Simon, not Shimon. But I didn't say that. I had thought he was one of the sons, but I was wrong. Had I been a more knowledgeable Jew, I would have known: he wasn't the Kohane Gadol. He was a Levite, from Moses's tribe; one of the priestly class; sent ahead as point man for the redemption of the Temple; like Seabees sent in ahead of an invasion to clear out trees and clean up the area. But now he would die, and not do the job.

"Put your seal on this cruse," I said. "Did the Kohane Gadol give you that authority, can you do that?"

He looked at the clay vessel, and even in his overwhelming pain he was frightened and repelled by the command I had made. "No . . . I cannot. . ."

I held him by the shoulders with as much force as I could muster, and I looked into his eyes and I found a voice I'd never known was in me, and I demanded, "Can you do this?"

He nodded slightly, in terror and awe, and he hesitated a moment and then asked, "Who are you? Are you a Messenger of God?" I was all light, brighter than the sun, and holding him in my arms.

"Yes," I lied. "Yes, I am a Messenger of God. Let me help you seal the flask."

That he did. He did what was forbidden, what was not possible, what he should not have done. He put the seal of pure oil on the vessel containing half a log, two riv-ee-eas, of long-chain hydrocarbon oil from a place that did not even exist yet in the world, oil from a time unborn, from the future. The longer the chain, the greater the binding energy. The greater the binding energy, the longer it would bum. One day's oil, from the future; one day's oil that would bum brightly for eight days.

He died in my arms, smiling up into the face of God's Messenger. He went toward the light, a prayer on his lips.

Today, at lunch in the Commissary, Barry R. Levin slapped his tray down on the table across from me, slid into the seat, and said, "Well, Mr. Pretend Jew, tomorrow is Chanukah. Are you ready to light the candles?"

"Beat it, Levin."

"Would you like me to render the prayers phonetically for you?"

"Get away from me, Levin, or I'll lay you out. I'm in no mood for your scab-picking today."

"Hard night, Mr. Simon?"

"You'll never know." I gave him the look that said get in the wind, you pain in the ass. He stood up, lifted his tray, took a step, then turned back to me.

"You're a Bad Jew, remember that."

I shook my head ruefully and couldn't hold back the mean little laugh. "Yeah, right. I'm a Bad Jew. I'm also the Messenger of God."

He just looked at me. Not a clue why I'd said that. All scores evened, I didn't have the heart to tell him . . .

It just seemed like a helluva good idea at the time. The time of miracles.