

Raoul Wallenberg in Orbit

by Andrew Fox



He's alive. The story on page 14A of *The New York Times* only confirms what I've prayed would be true, providing one more tantalizing piece in a puzzle assembling itself so fast it's taking my breath away. He's alive. Or, if he's not alive, if 50-year-old Soviet technology has failed, his body is perfectly preserved, an orbiting, frozen monument to saintliness and self-sacrifice.

I think about calling Laura, asking her to go out and buy a copy of the *Times* while it's still available. But it's past 10:30, and a phone call might wake Emily. Emily wakes up surly, and then she'd tantrum for her video games and a snack and it could be hours before Laura would get her settled down again. Besides, hearing my voice at this hour would only make things harder for Laura, even if I don't wake her daughter. I press the glow button on my watch. 10:42; most nights, we'd be lying next to each other

now, squeezed close, and I'd be burying my face in Laura's hair, listening to her subside into slumber.

It's no use trying to sleep. Not now. I squirm in my aluminum folding chair, trying to get more comfortable, and swat a mayfly off my knee. This was a favorite spot of hers, on my balcony overlooking pine trees and my long dirt driveway, only a few hundred yards from the open water. Although being in Mississippi made her nervous, Laura said. Ancestral fears about the Jew-hating Christians who populate the hinterlands. I tried telling her there was no reason to feel that way; my neighbors are acres away, and they've never given me any trouble. Besides, nowadays fundamentalist Christians are more passionate Zionists than we Jews ourselves. They love us, just so long as we keep rebuilding the Holy Land, paving the way for their guy's second coming.

I switch on the porch light, even though the bugs will swarm, and reopen the paper to page 14A. Reading it again helps put everything in perspective. Swedish diplomats, for the eighth time since 1945, were requesting that the Russians provide them with conclusive information regarding the final fate of Raoul Wallenberg, heroic Swedish diplomat, missing person. Raoul Wallenberg, greatest of the Righteous Gentiles, who, in 1944, was instrumental in saving the lives of nearly 100,000 Hungarian Jews. Including my grandmother, who carried my mother in her womb while sheltered in a diplomatic safe-house.

Mr. Wallenberg was taken into custody by Soviet troops in the closing days of the war, then imprisoned on suspicion of being a spy for the Americans; that much is widely known. He has never emerged from the Soviet gulag. The official story changed

back and forth, from Mr. Wallenberg dying of a heart attack in protective custody in 1947 to his being executed in prison that same year. But dissidents smuggled stories through the Iron Curtain that he'd been seen throughout the 1950s in various prisons, or even that he had survived to a frail old age somewhere in Siberia.

My family never believed he'd died.

The Soviets never were willing to tell the Swedes what had actually happened to Mr. Wallenberg. They purposefully kept the mystery alive, a barb lodged in the soft flesh of the Jew-loving West. But now the Soviets have been out of power for more than a decade. The Russian economy has shriveled to the point where it's hardly bigger than Sweden's. More importantly, the Swedes recently helped the Russian Navy rescue nearly 80 Russian sailors from a sunken nuclear submarine, a rescue operation the Russians reluctantly admitted they couldn't have carried out on their own. So, the *Times* story asserted, the Swedes should finally get their answers now. The Russians are hinting they've got big news to disclose.

But I already know what happened. Pieces of it have been leaking out on the Internet for months now. He wasn't executed. He didn't die of a heart attack. In fact, he's not a day older than he was in May 1960.

It seems fantastic. But it's hardly more fantastic than a cloned sheep, or the printing of a hundred-million microprocessors on a piece of silicon smaller than the head of pin. Or even the rebirth of the State of Israel after almost 2,000 years.

Just three days ago, a story in the *Sun-Intelligencer* brought all the pieces together, like a real sun's gravity reeling in the fragments of a shattered asteroid. I would've missed it if my quart of milk hadn't have gone bad, forcing me to make an unplanned trip to the store, and if the lady ahead of me in line hadn't tried buying a can of pistachio nuts with her WIC vouchers. While she and the manager were arguing, I picked up a dog-eared tabloid from a wire rack next to the chewing gum. Normally I don't give much credence to stories in the tabloids. Everybody knows tabloid writers are paid to dream up about 90 percent of the stories that get printed.

But the other 10 percent... well, sometimes the other 10 percent is a preview of news that appears in *The New York Times* two weeks later. The Piggly-Wiggly store manager was arguing that it didn't matter

how nutritional pistachio nuts might be for growing children, he didn't make the WIC Program rules; I turned to page 37. And there it was, the story that pulled everything together. "Holocaust Hero Found on Soviet Sputnik." My heart literally skipped a beat. There it was, in cheap newsprint coming off on my fingers—the solution to the 50-year-old mystery.

They'd frozen him, and then they'd sent him into permanent Earth orbit in an experimental version of the capsule design that later carried Yuri Gagarin into space, thus testing two technologies of immense importance to the Kremlin. Why Mr. Wallenberg? *The Sun-Intelligencer* article didn't say. I think the article was cut short to make room for a hair replacement ad. So many possibilities. Had the Soviets planned this as a provocation, disposing of a Western hero and demonstrating their superior space technology in one fell swoop,

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but then the Cuban Missile Crisis had caused them to reconsider announcing it? Or did they plan to maintain Mr. Wallenberg in a state of suspended animation as a bargaining chip, an advantage in arms negotiations? And then Khrushchev lost power and the originator of the Wallenberg gambit was liquidated?

Maybe my sources on the Internet will tell me. Maybe finding out more will help me sleep. Until I learn the rest, I'll rest with the knowledge that my hero, the greatest man of the 20th century, is orbiting two hundred miles above my small, stilted house, my rusting satellite dish, and the salt winds coming off the Gulf of Mexico.

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Thanks to getting stuck on a drawbridge due to a slow-moving sailboat, my Saturday morning drive takes 25 minutes longer than usual. When I walk into synagogue, the reader is almost done chanting the Haftarah.

Laura and Emily are already here. I used to be so happy seeing them waiting in the pews, Laura, at least. Not Emily; never Emily. From the start, she filled me with dread. I can admit that now, although it's not easy. I wasn't sure I'd be seeing them today. Laura never liked a service with too much Hebrew; never liked much of a service at all, really. She only came here because this is where I was coming, and the synagogue wasn't too bad a drive for her.

There's an open seat next to her and Emily. I could sit there. It would be the least embarrassing for her, and that would be good. We'd still look like the promising pre-marital unit all the older synagogue ladies have been smiling over for months. Well, the wedding's not happening, ladies. No *chuppah*, no cake, no broken glass hidden in a napkin.

I pause behind the pew where Laura and Emily are, caught between social niceties and a heart as frozen as those beef carcasses that

sometimes get donated to my emergency food pantry. I can't sit at the other end of the sanctuary. That would be like a 50 point headline announcing our breakup. But I can't sit next to Laura, either. Her hand'll brush against my hand, and every bit of air will get sucked out of my lungs. Waiting for that to happen will make prayer impossible. And I need to pray.

So I slide into the open seat in front of Emily. The kid's not my enemy, not really. She's only eight years old, and troubled. Even so, the small hairs on the back of my neck come alive when she starts kicking the back of my pew with her shiny cowgirl boots, the boots she threw a violent tantrum for in the middle of Payless Shoes. A tantrum that lasted an hour, that only ended when the store manager summoned the police, humiliating Laura to no end. I open my Pentateuch to see if maybe I can read most of the Haftarah in English before the reader finishes chanting it in Hebrew.

Clunk-clunk, clunk-clunk. Telling her to stop it will only make her kick the pew faster. So instead I force myself to imagine her clunks as the ticking of a clock. A big clock, ticking away the hours until the whole story comes out.

I listened to the radio on the long drive over here, tuning back and forth between talk radio and an all-news station. Surely Mr. Wallenberg's discovery would top the news. But there was no word; nothing at all.

The reader chants the closing prayers following the Haftorah, and then the rabbi starts his sermon. Emily is still kicking. Even the people in the pew ahead of me are turning around; some of the women mime silent "shushes." It won't matter; this is what "oppositional-defiant" means. I think about what Laura must be feeling right now. I hope the rabbi will talk about Mr. Wallenberg. How can he not? Steven Spielberg made a four hour movie on Oskar Schindler, and Oskar Schindler saved 1,700 Jews. Raoul Wallenberg saved 100,000 Jews. 100,000! What can be a bigger story than that?

But instead he talks about the latest terror attacks in Israel, and how the Israeli peace movement is struggling against despair, and how we owe it to our Israeli brethren to buy Israel Bonds and travel to Israel to show solidarity in person. It's a good speech. On any other Saturday morning I'd walk up and congratulate him for it at the kiddish luncheon. But not today.

When the service ends, we all shuffle back to the social hall. My fellow congregants line up for their weekly allowance of challah, canned fruit and pickled herring. The old men ahead and behind me all smell the same, like wool suits that have hung in musty closets. Laura and I float like isolated islands of comparative youth in a sea of elderly congregants. We were their hope. A congregation that can't reproduce itself, that can't replace its losses, isn't long for this world. Laura and Emily are a few people ahead of me. I'll have to sit with them. There's no way around it.

We sit down. Laura and I don't have a chance to say hello before Emily says, "You were late." In that angry, impertinent little voice that's always been so hard for me to take. But demanding that she respect me as an adult will just lead to a fit. In her voice, I hear, as I've always heard, an echo of my mother's voice, that accusatory tone, infinite in its demands, and hearing it issue from a child's lips unmans me.

"Yes, I was," I say, admitting fault to that hard little stare. My mother's stare, projecting

the iciness of history, a grief and anger at having father and uncles shorn from her before she'd barely begun to know them. "At the Rigolets, a sailboat came along, so the bridge operator had to swing the bridge open. Guess I should've thought to leave the house earlier."

Laura flashes me a quick, strained smile. My answer seems to satisfy Emily. We eat quietly for a few minutes. Canned fruit's not my favorite, and I've never liked herring, so I concentrate on the challah. I try to say some nice things about Emily's new braces. She gets up from the table to go get more lemonade.



"I'm bringing her to a new therapist," Laura says as soon as her daughter's out of earshot. "She'll be starting with him this week. I've heard some really good things about this one..."

"Good luck" is all I can say. It comes out more harshly than I wanted it to. But trying to apologize would only make it worse. Emily is relatively lucky. Maybe things would've been better for my mother if therapy had been as ubiquitous in the late 40s as it is now. But the survivors from Europe, and the children of those survivors, learned to muddle through mostly on their own.

Across the room, I see the rabbi put his hand on Emily's shoulder. She flinches, shakes it off. He turns towards us and waves, his slight frown almost hidden by his beard. Laura tries to smile at him. She almost pulls it off.

She's a mountain of perseverance. "You still planning to send Emily to Hebrew school in the fall?" I ask.

She looks tired. Maybe she's always looked tired, I don't know. But I notice it now. "I'm not sure...it's such a long drive over the Causeway..." Her mouth grows tight. "And it's not cheap." She's using too much makeup. She didn't used to use this much. "Emily will put up a fight. I'm not sure I want to deal with it. Before...well, it just seemed like having that fight was more important before. Maybe."

Laura never finishes her thought, because Emily returns with her lemonade. She notices that her mother's hand is dangerously close to mine, and she glares at me in her hyper-serious way. As much as she rages against her mother, she's still protective of her. And I'm still a threat to both of them, at least in Emily's mind.

We wait until Emily finishes her lemonade, and then we get up. No one has come over to our table to say hello like they usually do. Maybe they can sense what's going on. The story will leak out, eventually. Stories always do.

I hold the door of the social hall open for the two of them. I watch the forest green rayon of Laura's skirt shift and sway on those hips that I loved, and still do. Somewhere beneath all that fabric is an egg, just as somewhere inside my trousers there's a thimble's worth of sperm, and that egg and sperm will never come together now. We're two seeds of the storm-tossed Diaspora, brought by the tides to rest side by side on this isolated, barren shore, but our fruitfulness fails. No; I fail. The failure is mine. My ex-wife the ex-Mormon used to joke about all the little baby souls waiting up in baby heaven for our physical love to rescue and bring down to earth. We never managed that trick before we signed our divorce papers. I wonder if there isn't another baby heaven, maybe a ghetto of baby heaven set aside for the souls of all those babies the Nazis killed, or the babies their genocide never let come into the world. Maybe one or two or three of those baby souls were waiting for Laura and me to bring them back down to earth.

We step out into the outside. It must've rained while we were having our lunch. The bright air is soggy. Steam, barely visible, rises off the hot asphalt where all the congregants' cars are parked.

I'm sorry, Laura. There's no way I can ever tell you how sorry I am.

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From the balcony of my house I can see

Clermont Harbor between the pine trees. It's a shallow estuary off the Gulf of Mexico. The biggest vessel Clermont Harbor ever harbored wasn't a ship at all; it was a gambling barge, one of about 20 the state of Mississippi allowed to dock along its waterways. This casino didn't make it. It was too far off the main road, so after a few years, its owners towed it away to some other bayou. However you look at it, the casino was good for my business, which is giving away donated food. While it was operating, the casino sent me the folks it had made poor, or poorer. When it sailed away, it sent me the folks it made unemployed.

Laura and I float like isolated islands of comparative youth in a sea of elderly congregants. We were their hope. A congregation that can't reproduce itself, that can't replace its losses, isn't long for this world.

I've lived out here almost 10 years now. It would've been easier for me to have taken a job in New Orleans, or Houston, or Atlanta. But I decided that no place should be *Judenrein*. Empty of Jews. So I'm Clermont Harbor's Jew. Likely the only Jew they've had or ever will have. We were meant to be a nation of priests, scattered throughout the world to bring its peoples closer to the one God. I minister to the hungry bodies of the county's unemployed Catholics, Methodists and Baptists. They know who and what I am. I don't hide it.

The sunset is strangely intense today. I see shades of purple and pink I've never seen in a sky before, shades that belong on a computer screen. All afternoon, ever since I came back from synagogue, I've been hearing thunder, like sonic booms from invisible aircraft, but the sky's been cloudless. I've been dying to get on the Internet, to search for a clue as to what's going on out there. But I won't let myself turn on my computer until Shabbos is over. I'm being inconsistent, I know. After all, I start my car's engine every Saturday morning and drive more than a hundred miles. If I can fire up a car engine,

why not a search engine? But you've got to draw the line somewhere.

So I wait on my balcony until the sun's gone down and at least three stars have appeared. But even when they have, I don't rush inside. I could swear I see the Northern Lights out there. It's crazy, but there they are, intense swirls of pink and cobalt on a backdrop of black velvet. They're too pretty, too strange not to watch. But after 20 minutes I make myself go inside to the computer.

Three hours later, I come out to the balcony again. The night sky has returned to its normal, placid self. I know why. My head pounds, my sinuses rebelling against the enormity of it all, the cosmic drama that has played itself out two

hundred miles above my clogged nasal cavities. The claims and theories I read online seemed, at first blush, to be the ravings of madmen, but the evidence is too powerful, and no other account so fully explains the phenomena I've personally witnessed.

The sky's back to normal because the invaders have gone away. What a dopey, clichéd thought that is: invaders from space. But that doesn't make it any less real. They've been receiving our transmissions, our radio and TV waves. And they haven't been liking them. Because, see, they've been listening to our broadcasts from the 40s and 50s and early 60s. The years when we killed millions of each other, then developed atomic bombs so we could kill hundreds of millions more. I guess the final straw for the aliens must've been hearing that we'd breached the barrier into space. *Sputnik*, Gagarin, the Mercury astronauts. They must've figured the cancer we represented was about to metastasize. So they sent a fleet to incinerate the cancer before it could spread.

But when they got here, an emissary was waiting. Oh, we hadn't sent him up there as an emissary; at least not consciously. Who was waiting for them in his fragile sheath of metal and plastic, frozen so cold his heart hadn't beat for 40 years? Mr. Wallenberg.

They must've thought he was a king, or president of the world, the way we'd enthroned him to watch over the whole planet. Maybe they didn't thaw him out. Maybe they had machines that could read the thoughts and memories in his frozen mind. And when they read his thoughts, watched his memories on some glowing screen, they realized they'd been terribly wrong about us. If this was the man we'd sent into space to represent us, then we as a species had chosen good over evil. We weren't a threat to the cosmic peace anymore. So they went away.

The headache won't let me sleep, so I

decide to take a walk down to the beach. I don't know how good I feel about being saved. Laura told me how, just last week, she was driving her car when the big oak trees alongside the highway started tugging at her. She thought about how easy it would be to just let go of the wheel, let the Chevy's bad alignment have its freedom, and nobody would ever know it wasn't an accident. I don't think she'd ever do it. I think she's stronger than that.

Maybe those aliens asked Mr. Wallenberg if they could have one of us, just one, to take back to their planet and experiment on. To find out how much heat our skin can take, how long we can go without air, how many days we can make it without a liver or a spleen. If that's what they wanted, I hope they didn't just grab somebody at random. Because I'm pretty sure I would've volunteered for the job. Yeah, right. If I had guts enough to volunteer for that, I would've had the guts to stick things out down here on earth. To do the right thing. To take Emily into my life along with Laura, the whole package. The curse along with the blessing.

My dirt path takes me down to the coastal road and man-made beaches, sort of pathetic outcroppings of muddy sand that jut out from the concrete embankment. Every few years, the county has to renew them with fresh truckloads of dredge. The moon's out, and it makes the Clermont Harbor water tower glow ghostly white behind the old pier where the casino used to be docked.



I slip my shoes and socks off. I need to wash away these feelings, this sickly prickling on my skin, like I'm coated with a scum of filth. The beach sand is gritty and coarse, flecked with cigarette butts and broken shells, but a beach is a beach, and water's water. I pick my way through some burr grass and walk towards the water, which this time of year will feel like a tepid bath. Behind me, I hear what sounds like a fish jumping out of the bay, landing, then jumping again, landing, and jumping again.

I turn around, thinking maybe I can see the leaping fish, and he's standing there, no more than 15 feet away from me. Dark gray double-breasted suit; a businessman's hat that hides the severely receding hairline I remember from photographs. The bottoms of his trousers and his shoes are wet, and they've left damp footprints in the sand. He's heavier than I would've thought; I'm surprised the Russians fed him that well in the gulag. He walks a few steps closer, and a breeze blows from behind him, and for the second time today there's that scent of a suit retrieved from a musty closet.

I stand stock-still, waiting for him. "They're just two people," I hear myself saying. "And I

couldn't save them, not from their aloneness with each other, not from anything." I wasn't strong enough, not like you. You were strong enough, brave enough to save 100,000. You climbed onto the moving cattle cars, daring the soldiers to shoot you, and dropped your Swedish diplomatic safe passes into the frost-bitten hands that reached up.

Are you here to rebuke me? Or have you come to console me? I can't see your eyes beneath the shadow of your hat. Maybe you'll tell me how 100,000 wasn't enough, not when there were millions more you never reached. Maybe not even saving the whole earth from incineration could remove that weight from your mind. Is that it?

I can see your eyes now. Your face is like my grandfather's, a vanished kind of face, thick-browed and jowly, worn down by history, the face of a vanished Europe. You reach out, and you touch me on my upper arm. I feel the pressure of your fingers and palm, and as I feel them I hold my breath.

It lasts only a second, maybe two, and then you've turned away and are walking toward the water. I stare down at my arm, hold it up

in the moonlight so I can see it better. It looks the same. Feels the same. Even my headache, forgotten for a moment, is still throbbing away.

What did it mean? Every revelation has a meaning. I've been visited. I've been touched. Will my right arm be gimpy in the morning, like Jacob's thigh was after he spent a night wrestling with the angel? Is this something the rabbis will have to argue over for two millennia before it makes any sense?

And if I'm still the same as before, unchanged? Still a coward? What does it mean?

I can't ask my visitor. He's out of the reach of my voice now, over by the pier where the casino used to dock, having walked upon the waters or across shallow mud-flats; in the suddenly unnatural light that bathes the harbor, I can't tell which. The water tower points skyward like a great white finger. Towards the capsule 200 miles above. His capsule, which he now returns to, rising through a column of rose-tinted light, a color like antique wine decanters, where he'll again be a sentry against those who would judge us too harshly. ☺

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