RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Kraven Images

Alan Isler

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About the Book

ALAN ISLER'S FIRST NOVEL, *The Prince of West End Avenue*, was one of the critical successes of 1995, a marvellous blend of comedy and tragedy. In Isler's new novel the accent is on comedy.

It is 1974. Nicholas Kraven, lecturer in English Literature at Mosholu College in the Bronx, is adrift upon a sea of troubles: his affair with his neighbour's wife threatens to progress from Thursday nights to permanence; his students are a mixture of campus revolutionaries, predatory sexual exhibitionists and an old man intent on proving Merlin was a Jew; an elderly academic specialist in Love, possessor of a devastatingly effective aphrodisiac and a libido that belies her years, has alarming designs on his person; the Kraven demons, a familial curse, are in hot pursuit; and a spectre from his past, the one man who can smash this already chaotic life into ruins, is expected imminently.

Kraven flies to London, where he finds brief consolation in the arms of Candy Peaches, a stripper from Sausalito working on her MA thesis ('Displaced Eroticism in the Fiction of Early Nineteenth-Century Women Writers') at the British Museum, and thence to Harrogate, the town to

which he was evacuated as a child, there to confront the ghost of his father and to slay the Kraven demons.

A superb comic novel, fizzing with brilliant wordplay, *Kraven Images* confirms that, in Alan Isler, a major new writer has arrived.

Also by Alan Isler

THE PRINCE OF WEST END AVENUE

For my sisters

KRAVEN IMAGES

Alan Isler

JONATHAN CAPE
LONDON

Alas! Fond Fancy’s but a cheat:
Food for thought is airy meat.
The artist of the mind grows thinner
For want of a substantial dinner.

Nicholas Kraven, *Tickety-Boo*

Prelude

Leeds, England
April, 1941

THE MEN STOOD AROUND THE OPEN GRAVE looking down at the coffin. Nicko, almost seven, understood that his father, Felix Kraven, lay within. Grandfather Kraven, Nicko's 'Opa', stood a little behind the boy, supported by Onkel Koko and Onkel Gusti. The old man was having difficulty breathing. Tears ran down his cheeks into his beard, and sobs shook his body. Onkel Ferri, himself shuddering and whimpering, stood beside Nicko, whose duty it was to say *kaddish*. On the other side of the pit were his cousin Marko, Rabbi Himmelglick, and Grandpa Blum. The rabbi held one hand on Marko's shoulder. Nicko rather resented that, even though he already hated Himmelglick. The rabbi was a thin, humped old man, with a soft fleshy nose badly peppered with blackheads. When he talked, scum gathered in the corners of his mouth. Certainly Nicko would not have wanted the hand on *his* shoulder. Behind Grandpa Blum stood a few of his father's old friends, those who had been able to make the trip north on short notice. All of *them* surely knew how important Nicko was today, the mourner-in-chief, the sayer of *kaddish*, much more important than soppy old rotten old Marko.

The sound of a ball hitting a cricket bat (pok!) and muffled polite applause reached the ears of the mourning party, uncannily, as if from an immense distance. There must be a school and playing fields somewhere beyond the cemetery. It was warm in the sunshine, but when a cloud raced across the heavens, darkening the land, the underlying chill in the air made itself felt. The clouds were beginning to bank to the north. Visible in the moist black sides of the pit were white, gleaming dots, roots sliced by the spade. Worms wriggled in the loose black earth at the

head of the grave. Nicko tried to concentrate on them. Marko had once shown him what happens to a worm when salt was poured on it. Ugh!

Willie, the gardener, was to do Home Guard exercises on the Stray this afternoon. Only last week he had promised to take Nicko along to watch. But at this rate they would never be back in time, and besides, probably they wouldn't let him go. Daddy had spoiled all that. According to Marko, Nicko would have to sit and shiver for seven days. Onkel Ferri was already doing it. Perhaps it was time for Nicko to start. Nobody knew what Nicko had done, except for Mummy, and she'd never tell. Nicko stared hard at the worms.

It had seemed a long drive from Harrogate to the Jewish Cemetery on the outskirts of Leeds. Nicko had been assigned the limousine reserved for the ladies, a wretched, sissy thing. He and his cousin Tillie were allowed to sit in the fold-out seats at least, and Nicko could see where he had been rather than where he was going, an odd sensation in a car. Lucky Aunt Cicely had managed to seat herself next to the driver. The women were all dressed in black, and they had red eyes that wept buckets. Well, Aunt Cicely had stayed pretty calm. She turned back to tick Mummy off from time to time. 'Hush, hush, Victoria. Hysterics won't help.' Every now and then she would glance at the driver. It was easy to see she wanted him to know that *some* Jews could control their emotions, just like ordinary people. And Tillie had started off all right, too. She had tried to play round-and-round-the-garden with Nicko, just to cheer him up a bit. Nicko hadn't minded, even though it *was* a baby game and he preferred *not* to think of the garden. *Would* Mummy tell? Perhaps the police would make her. Nicko glanced through the rear window at the first of the limousines that trailed them. Marko was sitting with the driver.

Only if Nicko craned round to look at the road before them could he see the hearse. Poor Mummy had no choice. That was part of the trouble. It was right there on the road before her, right there between Aunt Cicely's head and the driver's. The coffin was as visible as it could be. Mummy kept her head down most of the time though, her eyes closed, steadily sobbing, occasionally howling. She kept her arms crossed, and she rocked back and forth. How unhappy she was!

In the cemetery's prayer hall Rabbi Himmelglick greeted the mourners. The prayer hall was a plain red-brick building; it might have been a warehouse or a large garage. The air inside was cold and damp. It seemed unaffected by the stove in the far corner, whose lid glowed redly in the gloom. There was a smell of wood rot and wet cement. Some folding chairs had been arranged with a centre aisle, as if in preparation for a lecture. The place of the lectern was occupied by the coffin, which rested on its bier. Two bulbs of low wattage hung naked on long wires from the ceiling. The windows had been painted black as an air-raid precaution.

'Which one is to say *kaddish?*' Himmelglick asked in Yiddish. Onkel Ferri brought Nicko forward. The rabbi removed a pair of scissors from a spectacle case, took Nicko's black velvet High Holy Days waistcoat between bloodless thumb and forefinger, and cut a small nick in the V of the garment just above the heart. Nicko was shocked: his velvet waistcoat! Himmelglick bared his teeth, not to smile but to speak, the scum collecting. 'Well, well,' he said impatiently, 'tear it, tear it.' His teeth were long and yellow, crooked and widely spaced. The stench of their decay was on his breath. Nicko looked up unbelievingly at Onkel Ferri, who nodded. The boy turned his back on the hateful Himmelglick and tried to tear his waistcoat, but it would not tear. The rabbi leaned over him, forcing his head back into the dingy beard, inches from the detestable mouth. He

grasped the cut edges in his adult fingers and tore. The women screamed as the cloth ripped. The rabbi released Nicko, who ran from him, nauseated, terrified, sought out his mother and threw himself into her arms. Himmelglick calmly went about the room nicking the clothing of the Kraven men. Marko, lucky Marko, merely a nephew, was excused.

At the gravesite, from which he had banned the women, Rabbi Himmelglick bared his teeth. ‘May he come to his resting place in peace,’ he said in Hebrew.

There was a sudden barking and howling and growling and whimpering, and the low-pitched whine of a dog in misery. And then two dogs, common curs, rolled out from behind a large family gravestone, rolled and attempted to stand, stood at last, stuck rump to rump, pulling in opposite directions, squealing, barking, howling dementedly. The larger of the dogs was making headway, dragging the other after, inch by inch. The mutt’s hind legs scarcely touched the ground, but the poor creature tried repeatedly to find purchase. The dogs zigzagged, paused, advanced, retreated, staggered, approached, sending up all the while their frenzied racket. And finally, as the mourners stood paralysed, the dogs tumbled with a terrifying shriek into the open grave itself. There they scratched around on top of the coffin, whimpering, squealing, trying to leap out in opposite directions into freedom.

At a discreet distance, beyond the earth piled high at the head of the grave, stood the gravediggers, an old toothless gaffer and his assistants, two brawny adolescents, nudging one another and winking. The gaffer cackled openly, lifting his spade to point out the dogs’ progress.

What to do? How to get them out? Driven close to madness, they were not to be approached. Rabbi Himmelglick turned to the old gravedigger. *He* would be sure to know. Was he not a gentile? The rabbi pointed to the grave and shrugged meaningfully.

Lifting his head the better to throw his voice across the earth mound, the gravedigger released a short burst of thick Yorkshire dialect in which the only word intelligible as a word (but in any case meaningless to Himmelglick) was ‘watter’. He made no attempt to disguise his merriment. Now he pointed with his spade to the grave, from which the pitiful howling and mad growling, the scratching and thumping, were still to be heard. He tried again, this time speaking slowly, but still producing incomprehensible sounds: ‘Thee maun poot watter on they.’

Himmelglick turned back to the mourners and lifted his hands and shoulders just enough to indicate puzzlement. ‘What’s he saying, the imbecile?’ he asked, baring his teeth. ‘A disgrace,’ he added.

Nicko alone of the entire mourning party could claim birth in the land of the gravediggers. He alone might be supposed to understand the old man’s words. But of course one could not ask a child, a *kaddishl*. Onkel Ferri, close now to hysteria, began to laugh, but then, shocked by his own laughter, he misswallowed, started to cough, and came close to choking. Everyone pretended to notice nothing amiss with him. Opa was saying in a quavering voice, ‘Enough, enough. I can’t any more. Tell me, God, what have I done? I can’t any more.’ He wept without cease.

Grandpa Blum had crossed the Channel well before the turn of the century. Apart from the old gravedigger, he could claim to have lived in England longer than anyone present. His English, as a matter of fact, was almost free of a foreign accent. It was perhaps natural that he should presume to translate the words into Yiddish.

‘I think he’s telling us to pour cold water on them.’

‘So?’ said Himmelglick. ‘Get water.’

Onkel Ferri, dangerously close now to convulsions, took this opportunity to withdraw. The dogs had by this time grown quiet, merely whimpering, as if they knew that help was on the way. Onkel Ferri returned after a few minutes

with a bucket, its water spilling over on to his trousers and shoes. His coughing was mercifully over. He prepared to slosh the water into the grave. Everyone stirred and craned forward with interest.

'Stop!' shrieked Himmelglick. He had roused himself at the last moment. 'Wait!' He held aloft his prayer book, as if offering it for witness. 'Earth! The coffin must first be covered with earth!' His teeth remained bared, an indication of his alarm.

'We'll pretend, rabbi,' said Grandpa Blum grimly, 'that it's been raining all this time. The coffin simply got wet. Pour, Ferdinand.'

Himmelglick bowed his head. Onkel Ferri dumped the water on the dogs, who let out a scream in unison, parted as if by magic, shot out of the pit and took off at top speed for opposite sides of the cemetery, barking joyfully, leaping over graves, and finally disappearing.

Himmelglick bared his teeth and picked up where he had left off. 'May he come to his place in peace.'

Everyone in turn quickly shovelled a little earth into the grave. It sounded horrible when it hit the coffin, a sequence of hollow *crumps*. Then Nicko said the mourner's *kaddish*, repeating the words after Opa, whose voice trembled as he prompted.

Then it was over. Onkel Koko and Onkel Gusti, pale and dazed, supported Opa, one on either side of him, as the old man tottered from the graveside. Onkel Ferri held Nicko's hand and led him after. Poor Onkel Ferri's feet squished, and there was a thickening cake of mud around his shoes. Nicko glanced back at the grave. The gravediggers were already filling it from the earth mound.

'It's a hard thing,' Opa was saying, 'no, it's not an easy thing for a son to bury a father. But for a father to bury a son, it's a bitter pill, a bitter, bitter pill.'

Nevertheless, even though he certainly knew better, Nicko half-expected to find his father waiting for him when

he got home.

Part One

New York
Early Spring, 1974

ONE

NICHOLAS MARCUS KRAVEN STOOD AT his lectern in the well of the lecture hall. Of the two hundred banked seats before him only about thirty were occupied, and these at random intervals. A small knot of students here, another there, a couple toward the rear in passionate embrace, a knitter, a dozer, the odd revolutionary, a wilted flowerchild, a compulsive doodler, a mad grinner: in short, a perfectly ordinary class. It was 1974 and in recent years violent winds of change had blown through the groves of academe, uprooting the once sturdy tree of knowledge, scattering its fruit and leaving it to rot on inhospitable ground. So, at any rate, it seemed to Kraven.

He shifted his position, aware that the posture of graceful intensity he had sought – legs casually crossed, shoulders curved forward over his lecture notes, fingers gripping the lectern's high far edge – gave him not only the anticipated view up Miss Anstruther's hiked skirt but an unanticipated pain where the lower edge of the lectern cut into his diaphragm. Antonia Anstruther wore no panties. Three times a week between twelve and twelve-fifty she was to be found, impassive of face, arms crossed over bountiful breasts, seated always at eye level, a little to the left of centre, her legs parted, one heel raised and hooked on to the back of the chair beneath her. She neither moved

nor spoke but gazed imperturbably at a point some six inches above his head. Once, early in the term, he had attempted to disturb her maddening composure by addressing a harmless question to her. She had merely closed her eyes and kept them closed until he, embarrassed by the lengthening silence, had redirected his question to the class at large.

Kraven stepped back from the lectern, absently massaging his diaphragm. ‘We come now to a crucial matter.’ He circled the lectern and leaned back against the table upon which it stood, a graceful posture, one of his best. ‘I mean, of course, the state of Lear’s understanding in the moments before his death. How we interpret this passage will determine ultimately how we interpret the play. We should expect to receive an answer to the question with which we began: What is the nature of the Lear universe?’

Kraven paused, allowing his gaze to travel earnestly over the faces of the students before him. What cared they for the state of Lear’s understanding? It was enough, surely, if by the end of the term they all agreed on a common spelling of the mad king’s name.

It would be incorrect to suppose Kraven unaware of his posturing. He stood, so to speak, outside of himself, not so much observing a genuinely scornful Kraven addressing the sons and daughters of anti-intellectualism in its revolutionary ascendancy as watching himself play the role of such a one. By now he had transformed his career into theatre, a private entertainment in which he starred, and thus he coped with his uncertain times.

The table shifted under his weight, producing an unseemly sound. Gabriel Princip grinned at him from his seat by the window. Princip, an organizer in the local chapter of Students for a Democratic Society, played his own role with an enthusiasm that matched Kraven’s. His costume demonstrated his solidarity with the Movement, a

T-shirt with jaundiced armpits, denim overalls on which were painted crude peace signs and the legend ‘OFF THE PIGS!’ and scuffed sneakers. He was bearded and his tumbling torrent of unbarbered hair was circumscribed by a scarlet cloth of a kind that in Kraven’s childhood was called a headache band. In this Princip had stuck a jaunty quill, thus making clear his sympathy for the plight of the American Indian. Kraven shifted his weight back to his feet and returned to his position behind the lectern.

‘Let us turn to Lear’s last words, his final utterance before he dies. “Look on her lips,” he cries, “look there! look there!”’ Kraven allowed his eyes to glint. ‘Undoubtedly you have asked yourselves, ladies and gentlemen, what it was that Lear saw.’

He smiled to show that his was a gentle, a friendly irony. He knew, his smile implied, that before this moment they had not even recognized the question. But that was all right, not to worry, absolutely no rancour on his part – so long as they addressed themselves to the question now. All this was in his smile. Thirty or so faces gazed blankly back at him, while the eyes of one still focused above his head. He wondered, not for the first time, whether Antonia Anstruther possessed tunnel vision.

Kraven expected no response at this stage. He glanced at the clock on the far wall. In ten minutes he would be on his way back to his office, the business of the day over. ‘Think, ladies and gentlemen, think. “Pray you undo this button,” says Lear. Whose button? His own? The dead Cordelia’s? Have we here a clue to what it is the old king sees?’ Kraven had adjusted his tone to indicate that this time he wanted an answer. The moment for amiable bantering was past.

Mr Feibelman, white-bearded and gnomelike, a retiree, raised his hand. Kraven ignored him. Feibelman was a man of quirky erudition, and hence a nuisance. Whatever the

subject of class discussion, he would bring it around somehow to the Jewish Problem.

As Kraven looked elsewhere for a suitable volunteer, heads bowed over play-texts, hands began scribbling in notebooks. This predictable behaviour pleased Kraven even as it irritated him. Only Giulietta Corombona serenely met his gaze. Now she pursed her lips, moistened them with her tongue, and winked at him. Kraven was startled. She had transgressed the cardinal rule: *Female students must* never *reveal in public whatever 'special understandings' they had or hoped to have with their male professors*.

'Mr Princip, perhaps you would be good enough to share your thoughts with us. What is it that Lear sees?'

Princip's fellows, spared this time, looked up. Feibelman sadly lowered his hand. Meanwhile, the smile had left Princip's fleshy lips.

'The thing is, you told us that like when Lear says his fool was dead, he din mean the Fool, he like meant Cordelia.'

'Indeed I did. Although I'm sure I did not phrase it quite so felicitously.'

The class sniggered obediently. Someone else was in the hotseat.

'Well, I mean, how d'you know? The guy says his fool is dead, right? I mean, why not believe him?'

Why not indeed? Kraven had no idea. It was true that every editor of every modern edition of the play that Kraven had seen inevitably glossed *fool* as *Cordelia (a term of endearment)*. But why must the word carry that meaning here? It had never occurred to Kraven before to wonder. The fault of his own generation, he supposed, this unquestioning acceptance of authority. Still, he recognized Princip's ploy for what it was, a defensive counter-attack. In his mindless striking out, Princip had scored a palpable hit. Kraven summoned his forces.

‘I take it, Mr Princip, you are prepared to demonstrate the relevance of your question to my own?’

Princip had lost the scent of victory now. He looked quite cast down. Well, the lad was obviously a prick, a prick of the first water. (Yes, Kraven was well pleased with his conceit.) A raucous buzzer sounded. Match and set.

‘Saved by the bell, eh, Mr Princip? It seems you have the weekend to think of a reply.’ Kraven’s smile made clear his good humour. ‘We’ll pick up on Monday where we’ve left off. Meanwhile, ladies and gentlemen, I urge you to begin reading *Macbeth*.’

He gathered together his precious notes and strode triumphantly from the lecture hall. Princip, he knew, would absent himself from Monday’s class.

Kraven began a private hum, the outward audible sound transformed magically within his cranium to voice and orchestra. In this way he edged into a group of young women who were streaming along the corridor. As the the crowd approached the stairwell it slowed down and constricted. Kraven cheerfully ignored the girls’ jostling and, sinking deeper into hum and thought, was in this way agreeably titillated down the steps and out into the ardent April sunshine. He began the trek across campus towards his office, smiling a private smile and humming his private hum. ‘*Sapro, sapro* …’

* * *

MOSHOLU COLLEGE was located where an impudent finger of the Bronx reached for the private parts of Westchester. The campus had once been a ‘correctional facility’ for delinquent girls. Indeed, the searchlight turrets and conning towers that still surmounted the older buildings around the Great Quad bore witness to Mosholu’s bleak beginnings. But in the early 1950s the former Asylum for the Reformation and Rehabilitation of Wayward Women

(founded 1867) became Mosholu College, devoted to the preservation, the cultivation and the dissemination of the liberal arts. This task the college had faithfully executed until the eruptions on campuses across the nation in the late 1960s and early 1970s at last shattered its peace. In point of fact, the students of Mosholu had sauntered woefully late to the barricades. Now students tumbled and cavorted on the greensward, some intertwined in panting embraces; others threw frisbees, did handsprings, strummed guitars, scratched crotches, exchanged term papers, hooted, laughed, shouted. They turned on and made out. The bulls with their truncheons were long since gone. Only the odd member of the faculty sunk in thought – Kraven at this moment was such a one – picked his way absently around and between healthy young bodies, sound too in mind.

'Yoohoo, perfessor!'

It was Feibelman. Kraven picked up his stride.

'Perfessor Kraven,' panted Feibelman, drawing abreast, 'you got a minute?'

'Of course.' Kraven looked doubtfully at his watch.

'Your two o'clock office hour today, you could fit me in maybe?'

'Not a chance, I'm afraid. Too bad.' But Kraven recalled a recent decision of the Academic Senate, a body now infiltrated by student activist-nihilists and their faculty toadies: henceforth the college committees on promotion would take into account student evaluations of faculty performance. 'Still, if you can walk with me to my office, perhaps we can dispose of your little problem along the way.'

'It's like this. The Prizes Competition? I'm working on something, original research, could be I've got a winner.'

'Good, good.'

'Could also be a loser, you know what I mean?'

'The point, Mr Feibelman?'