The Last Jew in Bed-Stuy

by Jeffrey Greenberg (May 2026)

Nocturne (Raphael Soyer, 1935)

The old brass Menorah that sits in a drawer all year is certainly not exceptional in any way. The arms of soft beaded metal branch upward in ever increasing semi-circles. In its own way it looks like the great god Shiva with eight limbs reaching to heaven from either side of his body.

Inevitably I have to bend it back into shape for Chanukah. And every year it gets a little more twisted, a little more wobbly, just like an old man aging. It’s hardly a candidate for Aladdin’s lamp.

Apparently it was commercially made. I once saw another just like it.

I found it in a friend's junk shop on Atlantic Avenue, in Brooklyn, a clattering collection of crapola—oddities, curiosities, three-legged chairs, sad toys, broken dolls and akimbo picture frames. The storefront like every other antique shop on the Avenue. Just a hell of a lot more cluttered.

Usually the look is by design, a jungle for pickers to navigate. People always believe there's a diamond in there someplace.

But this one shop was just a plain disaster. Chairs, tables, dressers were piled to the ceiling. A pathway between them snaked to the only toilet in the shop. Which you entered at your own risk. You were never sure what might emerge from the commode.

We were a young family then without much money and we needed the candelabra to celebrate the holiday with the kiddies. The shop around the corner from our home was the perfect place to look. And there I went.

Now that may sound like the perfect set-up for an O. Henry Christmas twist. But it's not the humble Menorah that's the interest of my story. It's the guy who sold it to me.

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Lenny Goodstein was born into a struggling Jewish family in Bedford-Stuyvesant, the old Brooklyn neighborhood neatly tucked into the triangle between Broadway and the tracks of the Long Island Railroad.

The nabe had become a magnet in the first years of the 20th Century for immigrant families fleeing the tenements of the Lower East Side. Swapping the five-story walk-ups with

bathrooms in the hall for three-story brownstones with plumbing.

My wife has a photograph of her mother and aunt dressed in puffy winter coats on the stoop of their brownstone on Moore Street in the same neighborhood. As must hundreds of Jewish immigrant families who then left the neighborhood in the forties and fifties for the greener pastures of Queens. In their case, the new Promised Land was 21st Street in Long Island City.

But some, like Lenny's family, were too poor to get out. "Poor, poor, poor Jews," he said.

The city's geographic reshuffling after the Second World War had no escape route for them. And so Lenny grew up with drug dealers, gang members and other refugees of a city under siege. He took me back to his old neighborhood once, delighting in pointing out this ex-con and that short-eye.

As a young kid he negotiated a narrow bridge between the street gangs, the Marcy-Chaplins, the Ellery-Bopps, the Baldies.

He helped collect debts for Fat Joe Scalisi. Fat Joe was a stickler for the rules. He kept a Louisville Slugger next to his desk in the social club.

"If he doesn't pay, break his knee."

Lenny was also an unfortunate product of a crumbling, cash-starved school system. He never learned to read. He was dyslexic. His brain couldn't process the jumble of letters in front of him. And his public school never picked it up.

Instead he developed a patented version of stand-up comedy to deal with it. When you'd first meet him, he'd open a book and sit on top of it. "I read differently," he'd say.

He started learning when he left high school. At sixteen, he

gravitated to Seventh Avenue where many a salesman was birthed. He dressed in jeans with a single gold earring beneath his Mets' cap and one day went to see the buyer from Bendel's, the Mecca of merchandising in the sixties. He sat outside her office with a flank of other salesmen in suits and ties.

Jean Rosenberg asked her secretary who the kid with the earring was.

"I figured, oh shit she's gonna dress me down," said Lenny.

She did.

"I want to see him," the doyen of fashion said.

She ordered six dozen overcoats for her cruise and winter collection.

Somehow the army figured him perfect fodder for the draft. By the time he was twelve he had already seen friends killed on the street. He walked out of class one day to find a kid stuck to the only tree in the playground with a kitchen knife.

Maybe the army was not so foolish after all. He was shipped off to Nam in '67. Unlike most vets, he talked incessantly about it. It defined him.

The army had lifted him from the streets of Bed-Sty, turned him into an efficient killing machine and deposited the result in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

"I spent five months in the bush," said Lenny. He sat in front of an oak roll-top desk whose roll-top had come out of its track. He was eating Chinese take-out straight from the paper containers.

"Saw guys blown apart in front of me," he said. "One guy his left arm was entirely blown off. His guts were hanging out. His right arm was missing to the elbow. His leg was blown away

right up to his balls."

Lenny took a strange and unnerving delight in the details.

"Return postage guaranteed," I said. Thinking about the body bag.

"You could have been a rabbi," Lenny said.

"Nah. My Hebrew sucks."

"You could always do circumcisions."

But Lenny wanted to get back to the jungle.

"I was never in a fire-fight." As if that were worse.

"My lieutenant was there for just two weeks before he stepped on a booby trap." Lenny gathered the memory and said, "He knew he had stepped on it."

"How did he know?"

"Saw it in his face. He heard the click. And said, 'Oh…'"

"'…shit'" I said, finishing the lieutenant's sentence.

"Nope. He didn't have time to get that out."

But then, every war carries with it its unique set of horrors. In Saigon, little kids were dragging around shine boxes and offering to buff your shoes, walking away and leaving the box to exfoliate your legs.

He'd been assigned to Thailand when we weren't in Thailand. Or Cambodia. Or Laos.

He was met there by a Colonel who by way of greeting told Lenny "85% of you already have VD."

"Ever hear of the black clap?" said Lenny.

I hadn’t.

“No cure for it.” It sounded like yet another of those cautionary tales management would feed to the troops.“Sleep with a slope hooker and the black clap will rot your genitals off.”

“They’d ship the grunt back to Japan. You’d never hear from him again.”

Did Lenny believe it? That wasn’t important. The Pentagon had buried the truth so deep it was beyond Googling.

Lenny was trained in logistics, unofficially in charge of smuggling arms to US troops across the border, in the bottom of Thai trucks. Which led the grunts to a lucrative trade in new boots for steaks and eggs. Lumber and fencing for drugs.

“We were stoned all the time,” Lenny said.

When he returned to Brooklyn, he began working with Angel, another troubled kid, getting him up at four in the morning to run. Lenny was his surrogate father. Brought him steadily along to fight Tracy Harris Patterson, Floyd’s adopted son, in the Golden Gloves at the Garden.

Lenny’s protege floored Patterson in the first round, only to lose to a decision. Tracy went on to win the super bantamweight title. Angel’s career was shortened by a diabetic coma. The kid died this year.

By the time we met around ’79, he had opened his fledgling shop. He knew little about the antiques business, had no clue about the provenance of something or the price of anything. But he had the innate gift of selling.

His charm was infectious. He could cajole the casual shopper into parting with a buck quicker than anyone I’ve ever met.

He never went on buying trips for his wares. The pickers would

come to him with their pick-ups and vans stocked with goods they were unable to sell to the other dealers on Atlantic Avenue. And Lenny would usually accommodate them.

But his best purchase by far was a collection of costumes, scrapbooks, signs and games from the sideshow at Coney Island. A forbidden world for children of the forties and fifties, who would come to Coney every summer, with the hope that one day their parents would let them go down the rabbit hole.

“Three sounds say Coney Island to those kids,” said Lenny. “The Cyclone, the Fat Lady singing, and MiniHaHa’s laugh.” Lenny now owned the Fat Lady, a plaster gypsy in a glass box.

There was a giant clown’s head of paper maché with an open oval mouth for tossing in balls. There was the entire horse-race ride from Steeplechase Park, circa turn-of-the-century, a collection of tracks and tin ponies.

But the real score was the Banana Man’s costume, a special thrill to those of us who remembered the clown from early television, along with Captain Video, Commander Cody and Andy’s Gang.

The Banana Man would pull an endless stream of cloth bananas from his pockets with an amused “whaaaaaaaa.” The very string of stitched-together cloth bananas was there in Lenny’s shop, looking so much sadder in person.

Harvey Fierstein bought much of the collection for *Torch Song Trilogy* on Broadway.

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I always coveted a photo Lenny had of the wall in right at Ebbets Field. Below the scoreboard was an ad for Abe Stark’s clothing store on Pitkin Avenue in Brownsville. “Hit Sign. Win Suit.” it said. Of course with Furillo and Dixie Walker out there patrolling for the Trolley Dodgers, few ever did.

But Viet Nam was never far from Lenny's head even a decade removed from the war.

A couple of years after being discharged, Lenny got a call from the VA, asking to evaluate him.

"So I went," he told me. "Two days later I got a call back from the hospital."

"We want you back here tomorrow," the shrink said.

"I had scored 65 on the test," Lenny said. "I asked him, did I pass?"

He said, "If you had scored 85, we'd commit you."

"Three years of therapy after that," Lenny said. "You people paid for it. At least the nightmares stopped," he said. He had found himself getting out of bed and crawling around on the floor. Lost his first marriage because of it.

"It never really goes away," he said.

And then a line he had practiced often. "But at least now I can eat in Chinese restaurants."

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On a spring afternoon, years after I had purchased the menorah, four of us were standing in front of Lenny's shop enjoying the balmy air mixed with the automobile fumes from Atlantic Avenue. Lenny had a couple of school desks and a Windsor chair missing spindles splayed on the sidewalk.

A street person walked up to Lenny. He knew Lenny was an easy mark. His hand was out. Lenny reached into his pocket for some coins.

"Now, go away," he said.

The man persisted. Lenny turned away from him.

Very calmly, holding back his years on the streets of Bed-Stuy and in the stinking jungles of Southeast Asia, he said, “Leave.”

But the beggar put his hand on Lenny’s sleeve.

Mistake.

“Get your fuckin’ hands off me.”

And in an instant, like that jungle land-mine, Lenny exploded.

He grabbed the beggar by his coat, lifted him clean off the ground. And slammed him onto the hood of a car parked there. The sound of bones on the thin steel was like shaking a shattered light bulb in a paper bag.

I couldn’t fathom where this strength—from this diminutive 170 pound, guy—came from.

All three of us tore Lenny from the man, brushed the beggar off, but there wasn’t much to tidy up, a torn coat, a missing shoe. Someone called EMS. And in due time, an FDNY ambo appeared and scurried the jello that was the still moaning man away. The city was always efficient in cleaning up the pieces.

The beat cop who took the report knew Lenny well. He said to him, “Next time, Lenny, shove the guy under the wheels of a parked car. Driver won’t notice when he pulls out in the morning.” And he drove off in his blue and white.

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So each winter when I bring out the candelabra, I can’t forget that Chanukah is largely a military holiday, minus the parade, and a strange way to honor the horrors it celebrates: Rebellion, death and destruction.

Two thousand years later there was another war, far from Jerusalem. Where another colonial power would lock arms with

an insurgency in places like il Drang, Phu Bai and the Perfume River.

Sure, I know that Chanukah commemorates the first fight for religious freedom in Jewish history (though that is debated). But for me, Lenny's Menorah is a potent reminder that the belly of the beast may not have been 9000 miles away in Southeast Asia—or on a hill in Jerusalem for that matter—but just a few city blocks from us all.

I had found the Menorah sitting on Lenny's desk. Could not have paid more than five bucks for it. It's not beautiful. It's not magical and as I said, it's looking worse for wear as the years pass. But that's not the point. Like all the things I've collected, the stories behind them are more valuable than the things themselves. How else would I have heard the Brooklyn odyssey of the last Jew in Bed-Stuy.

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