

Karpstein Was Hiding is a great, dark, mythical journey. The pain of a people is written across the soul of one man. It is a haunting fusion of modern Magic Realism and the detailed story telling of ancient Jewish Mysticism.

Karpstein Was Hiding

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## **Karpstein Was Hiding**

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# **Karpstein Was Hiding**

Second Edition

**Martin A. David**

## ◇◇ Karpstein Waited ◇◇

Karpstein waited until the delivery truck was nothing more than a hollow, distant clatter. He took a deep breath and listened for the sound of marching feet. He heard none. There were no patrols. He made his move.

He rolled out of his hiding place, a sloping depression the size of a basement window. It had once been a coal chute. He came to his feet in a crouch and ran, like some strange, scuttling, hunched up creature, until he was hidden behind a garbage can. Another short pause to survey the area for dangers and then he sprinted the rest of the way down the alley.

A small flatbed farm truck had just made its weekly pre-dawn rounds and Karpstein's target was a stack of wooden boxes just delivered outside the back door of a local produce store. He worked fast, twisting the wire that held the box closed and prying up one corner. Apples. He took five from the corner of the box and then shook the box to make the others fill in the space. Then he twisted the wire to close the box again. They must never find out or they'd hunt him down. He dropped the apples into a dirty burlap bag he carried and performed the same opening and harvesting operation on a box of broccoli. He took small pieces that had fallen off the main stalks. Raw broccoli made him ache with gas, but it was food. Karpstein reached through slats on some boxes and pried others open until some cabbage leaves, six oranges, four unripe bananas and a small head of lettuce followed the other prizes into the sack. Karpstein was careful to never take so much that it would arouse suspicion.

A bakery truck had rumbled past just before the farm truck and if he were quick enough he could add a few fresh rolls to his food stock.

Footsteps and voices on the street. Karpstein froze and listened. It was not a patrol, but he still had to be careful. Even innocent civilians might turn him in if they saw him. He never read newspapers, but he was sure there was a tempting "Jew bounty" being offered. He crouch-ran to a garbage can and hid behind it until the two early morning walkers passed. Then he retreated up the alley. No rolls today, too much danger.

End-of-night gray was just giving way to smudges of pink when Karpstein's prowling run through a maze of alleys and seldom used passageways brought him to the final obstacle in his dash for the safety of home. In an alcove in a trash-strewn courtyard, a round, textured cast iron disk was Theodore Karpstein's front door. He looked to make sure the small popsicle stick he had wedged in the crack around the cover hadn't been disturbed. He was too clever to walk into a trap. A small stick jammed between the cover and the metal rim would, with its absence, serve as his warning signal if someone else discovered his secret doorway.

Karpstein had ascertained, through a strange choreography of scuttles mixed with sudden stops and 360 degree scanning turns, that he hadn't been followed. The last stretch of this part of the route was through the basement of an old school building with a loose window latch. He planned that segment of the secret sneak run journey so even if they had planted rooftop cameras there was no way they could have seen him. At the other end of the school's damp cellar a broken door let him out to a locked-in alleyway that had once been a street.

The faint light, part leftover electric glare from the quickly fading nighttime and partly the blush of morning sky awakening, revealed the thin, sallow Karpstein half squatting, half kneeling on the street outside the old school with his fingers in two round holes in a manhole cover. He was struggling to lift it. The cover was small but heavy. Karpstein had been much stronger, a trained boxer, but life in exile had taken its toll. He finally got it moved with a surge of effort and the exertion made him fart. Karpstein turned his head as if to say "excuse me" to anyone who might have heard. He had lived in total isolation for more than a year, but some habits wither slowly even outside the sunlight of society.

When the cover was moved, Karpstein hitched the sack to his belt and climbed into the dark hole. A metal ladder fastened to the slightly damp wall led into the cavern. Karpstein climbed far enough down to reach up and lower the lid on his entrance again. Twenty rungs to the bottom with the only light a faint glimmer through the finger holes in the manhole cover. Then a crouching, crawling walk through a smelly, brick tunnel with a pipe-lined ceiling. One hundred and eight groping steps to a metal door with rusty spring hinges. The shrill squeak of the hatch being

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pushed open set Karpstein's nerves on edge. He always cringed, waiting for some indication that others had heard the noise. No sounds other than a slow drip of water somewhere and the distant, occasional clank of pipes came to him.

The noisy door opened into a long, narrow grotto filled with the eerie glow of daylight filtering through a series of gratings far above his head. Karpstein's stomach clenched and he felt his mouth grow dry. He could walk upright on this part of the journey, but it was a passage of terror. This was where he was often confronted by Herman and his pack. More than once he had been so frightened by their menacing advances that he had dropped his food sack and run for his life. Better, he reasoned, to go hungry for a few days than to die in an underground battle with a swarm of hungry rats. The largest was a particularly ugly creature with a crooked front fang that gave him a perpetual snarl. Karpstein had read somewhere that facing one's fears and naming them would lessen their impact. He called the rat leader Herman, but the terror didn't diminish even a little bit.

A lone rat scampered along a pipe above his head. Another raced for a hole in the wall, as afraid of Karpstein as Karpstein was of him. Two hundred and eighty steps, right turn, two hundred more and then another spring hinged hatchway—this one far less strident in its squeaky complaints than the first. There were seldom any rats past this point, so the sense of impending terror receded. Through the door and into a circular black chamber forty steps across.

The walls, for as high as the eyes could scan in the dim light of occasional rust holes and ventilation grills, were ringed with neat rows of rounded rivet heads. A large hole 20 feet from the bottom, an intake vent, led to an octopus of ducts inside the building. A skinny metal ladder, reaching into the darkness, was fixed to one side of the huge tube.

Karpstein climbed. He did not let the random slippery rung that tried to disrupt his footing or the unexpected sharp flake of rust that bit his hands distract him. He didn't think of the height. There were three hundred and six rungs to the top. The massive tube had once served as a heat exhaust shaft for huge steam boilers.

A duct, wide enough to crawl through and just four times the length of his body, angled off from the main part of the cylinder and led

him home. Home was two compartments of a dusty, dead end attic in the slowly deteriorating building. The building now served as a warehouse for long-forgotten household goods. The reason that Karpstein's two small rooms existed was unclear—if, indeed there had ever been a reason. The square chambers, communicated to the outside air only by grime-covered skylights that stared outward, like cataract-dimmed eyes, from the ceiling of each. The walls, one-and-a-half times the height of a man, had once been painted. Their color might have been industrial green, but now it was beyond description, as rust stains, water damage, mold, soot, and more all made their additions like the blemishes that appear on aging skin.

Exploration driven by fear and encouraged along by a haunted curiosity had led Karpstein to find his new home and the circuitous route he took to get there. The only other entrance to his private chambers was a trapdoor with a drop ladder that led to a hallway. The hallway and the staircases that connected to it were the arteries of Karpstein's building. Karpstein's fear of discovery made him block the trapdoor so thoroughly that it could be opened only from the inside. A ladder that folded down when the trapdoor was opened lay temporarily useless on top of the square door, its joints wedged inactive with piece of wood and held shut with a length of rope.

Karpstein's building had gone through many transformations. It had been a charity hospital before the invention of the automobile and airplane. It served time as a military prison hospital when men were carried off the battlefield screaming at the horrors they had seen. The sprawling building had also been a psychiatric hospital at a time when that phrase meant storehouse. After that, with its stench not thoroughly cleaned away but only lightly covered, the building became a county general hospital. The tall stack up which Karpstein climbed to enter his hidden rooms had, in each of the incarnations, carried the heat from the boilers of the hospital laundry out to be distributed to the unnoticing sky.

Over the years succeeding administrations had built new wings, new sections, and even added new floors to the always aging building. The compound grew with the opportunism of a weedy shrub. Favors, bribes, and kick-back schemes guided the construction decisions more often than real need or a recognizable plan. Where there was space, or where a slum could be torn down to make a space, the hospital grew. It was as if the people in



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control of the building thought they wouldn't die as long as construction was going on. The people lived and died, but the construction never seemed to stop. As a result there were rooms, tunnels, stairways, chambers, compartments and cubbyholes piled upon each other and intertwining beyond the capability of any set of plans on paper to define them. Karpstein knew the lifelines and arcades, the corridors and passageways of the architectural monstrosity better than its contemporary leaseholders, but no one living knew it all.

When a new hospital was built in the city, the old structure stood empty for more than a year and then some of its lower floors were leased out as factory space. Karpstein had spent about a year working there in the days when the building echoed with the commotion of light manufacturing. In those days his attic space had been the living quarters for a caretaker/janitor. The branch of pipe through which Karpstein entered the rooms had provided that previous resident with a small amount of heat—and probably bad smells—wafted up from the machinery ten floors below. The former tenant used only the trapdoor and folding stairway as an entrance.

A small sink in one corner provided Karpstein with a trickle of brackish water. A somewhat working toilet stood in a windowless space the size of a broom closet. Karpstein had found a small card table and a ragged mattress in his hiding place. The rest of the furnishings consisted of some small wooden boxes and an old red chair the current tenant had dragged in. The boxes served as shelves for an odd assortment of kitchen utensils, a plastic tub that held the day's water supply, and a handful of scavenged plates and bowls. Several bedraggled blankets and a few odds and ends of clothing, all gathered in his wanderings, lay, folded, in two stacks in a corner. A collection of well-worn books was arranged in a row near the mattress. A tattered calendar hung on one wall. It was a Jewish calendar with lunar-based months listed by their Hebrew names superimposed with their English equivalents. The calendar was for a year long passed, in both the Hebrew and the Christian ways of counting the course of time. Light-stingy bare bulbs dangled above each of the two rooms of the kingdom. Karpstein lived simply. Karpstein simply lived.

Karpstein always explored, wherever he was. He knew of dust-filled closets and forgotten basement rooms in every house he'd ever lived in and in

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every building where he had worked. This building was no exception, while he worked as a shipping clerk in the then thriving factory Karpstein had found this hideout. He knew the tunnels and attics of this building better than most and when he decided it was time to run, he ran here.

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