

THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF HOODIE ROSEN

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touching, tragic."

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AUTHOR OF ANNA AND THE
SWALLOW MAN



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ISAAC BLUM

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THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF **HOODIE ROSEN**

ISAAC BLUM

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HOODIE ROSEN'S LIFE ISN'T THAT BAD. Sure, his entire Orthodox Jewish community has just picked up and moved to the quiet, mostly non-Jewish town of Tregaron, but Hoodie's world hasn't changed that much. He's got basketball to play, studies to avoid, and a supermarket full of delicious kosher snacks to eat. The people of Tregaron aren't happy that so many Orthodox Jews are moving in at once, but that's not Hoodie's problem.

That is, until he meets and falls for Anna-Marie Diaz-O'Leary—who happens to be the daughter of the headstrong mayor trying to keep Hoodie's community out of the town. And things only get more complicated when Tregaron is struck by a series of antisemitic crimes that quickly escalates to deadly violence.

As his community turns on him for siding with the enemy, Hoodie finds himself caught between his first love and the only world he's ever known.

Isaac Blum delivers a wry, witty debut novel about a deeply important and timely subject, in a story of hatred and betrayal—and the friendships we find in the most unexpected places.



ISAAC BLUM is a writer and educator. He's taught English at several colleges and universities, and at Orthodox Jewish and public schools. He lives with his wife in Philadelphia, where he watches sports and reads books that make him laugh while showing him something true about the world. *The Life and Crimes of Hoodie Rosen* is his debut novel.

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THE LIFE AND CRIMES OF
HOODIE ROSEN

BY ISAAC BLUM

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FOR MY PARENTS

CHAPTER 1

in which I celebrate Tu B'Av by taking the first step toward my own ruination

LATER, I TRIED TO EXPLAIN to Rabbi Moritz why it was ironic that my horrible crime was the thing that saved the whole community. He didn't get it, either because he was too angry, or because his head was filled with other thoughts, or because the man has no sense of humor.

I don't think it's funny now—it ruined my life, put me in intensive care, and humiliated me and my family on a global scale. But I found it funny at the time.

It all started on Tu B'Av, which is one of the more obscure Jewish holidays. I'm Orthodox, but even I couldn't recall what the holiday was about. I only remembered when I looked out the window and saw the girl in white. She was on the sidewalk across the street.

I was in halacha class, learning about Jewish law. We

were talking about ritual hand-washing. Rabbi Moritz paced back and forth in front of the whiteboard, reading from the *Shulchan Aruch*, making the occasional Hebrew or English note on the board.

I was a little distracted because Moshe Tzvi was slurping cereal next to me, and a little distracted because Ephraim Reznikov was reading his copy of the *Shulchan Aruch* out loud but out of sync with Rabbi Moritz. But I was mostly distracted trying to remember what the heck Tu B'Av was about.

I couldn't ask my buddy Moshe Tzvi because he would make fun of me for not knowing. Moshe Tzvi studies really hard, and he makes you feel like an ignorant schmuck if you aren't as learned as he is. So I just stared out the window as though the answer would be out on the street. And then it was.

Because now the girl was dancing, making various motions with her hands, swinging her body around in little circles.

Which made me remember that Tu B'Av had something to do with dancing girls and the grape harvest—the grape harvest was pretty big back in biblical times. During the grape harvest, all the unmarried girls of Jerusalem went out into the vineyards where the harvest was happening, and they danced, wearing only plain white robes. Because all these girls were wearing plain white robes, the boys didn't know if the girls were rich or poor, or even which tribe they were from. It created a level playing field, and the boys could choose a wife without thinking about if she was poor, or if she was from some undesirable rival tribe.

The girl outside wasn't wearing a white robe, because it was the twenty-first century. She wore a white T-shirt, its short sleeves revealing skinny arms. The shirt ended just above a pair of shorts that left most of her legs exposed. The legs ended at a pair of white Adidas sneakers, striped blue.

She was dancing. But why was she dancing? There was nobody on the sidewalk with her but a small white dog. I thought it was strange behavior, but maybe gentile girls danced for their dogs all the time. I had no idea. I wasn't supposed to look at gentile girls. I guess there were Jewish girls who dressed that way too, but certainly not any I knew. And if she was a Jewish girl dressed like that, I wasn't allowed to look at her either.

When she stopped dancing, she walked over to the base of a tree, bent down, and picked up a cell phone. Maybe she'd recorded her dance? She stood up, looked over, and made eye contact with me. Or, I thought she did. It was hard to tell from that distance, but when she looked up at me—or at the school—I reflexively looked away, up at the board, at Rabbi Moritz. The contrast between the girl and the rebbe couldn't have been starker. He wore a heavy black suit and had an enormous beard. And Moritz was spitting as he talked. He had a little bit of saliva on his upper lip.

"Why, according to the text," the rebbe asked, "must we wash our hands upon rising in the morning? Why, before we walk four cubits, must we wash?"

Reuven was all over it. "We have left the chance for evil spirits

to come onto us in the night. So we wash them off, the spirits.”

“Amazing. As Reuven said, we have left ourselves vulnerable,” Moritz went on, his voice rising to “vulnerable,” pausing, then descending, “not only to the spirits of evil, but what else?” His voice rose again, and the question came out in a high-pitched squeak. “What else?”

Miller again: “The spirits have come and, depending on how you read it, our souls have departed, right?”

“Correct. Our souls have departed through our hands. Through cleansing, and through the Modeh Ani prayer, our souls return and we are ready for service of HaShem.” Everything Moritz said came back around to servicing God.

“What if you wear gloves?” asked Moshe Tzvi. He was still working on his cereal, but he paused to gesticulate with his plastic spoon, spraying little drops of milk across his desk. “You know, while you sleep. Must you still wash?”

Rabbi Moritz paused in his pacing. “This is a good question,” he said. “I would say, based on the text, that the gloves would keep your soul in your body. Though of course this would be impractical, sleeping in gloves.”

“Okay,” Moshe Tzvi said, scratching his bare chin. “Now what if the gloves have a small hole in them? What are the dimensions of the soul? And how . . . squeezey is it?”

“I think the question is not how big the hole is in the gloves, but whether or not the wearer of the gloves is *aware* of the hole,” said Rabbi Moritz.

This is always the question. Judaism has rules for just about

everything, from how to slaughter your animals, to how to watch television without violating Shabbos (our Sabbath), to when and for how long you have to refrain from eating on fast days (of which there are many). But the trick is that you only have to follow the rules if you know about them. If you're a Jew, but you don't *know* you're a Jew, you don't have to follow *any* of the rules. It's like if you went to Walmart and stole a bunch of things, and then the police came and they were about to arrest you, and you were like, "Wait, I didn't *know* it was illegal to take this stuff without paying," and the police were like, "Oh, okay, our apologies. Have a good day. Enjoy the free TV."

I had a question for the rebbe, but I was too busy staring out the window, and it slipped away. So too had the girl—she wasn't there anymore.

"What if the hole is pretty big?" Moshe Tzvi asked. "Big enough that you can't plausibly deny knowing about it? Maybe you turn your hand over so you can't see the hole, but you can feel that it's there."

"Then you have to wash."

Rabbi Moritz picked his book back up, and was about to turn the page, but Moshe Tzvi wasn't satisfied. "What if Hoodie is sleeping in his gloves, and he knows there's a hole in his glove, but then I bash him over the head with a very heavy piece of pipe, and he forgets about the hole in his glove due to his head trauma?"

Rabbi Moritz considered, nodding his head a few times in a slow rhythm. "It would depend on his state of mind upon awakening, after he's slept. Can we move on?"

“No,” said Moshe Tzvi. “We haven’t talked about sleeping in mittens.”

“Oy, Moisheee.”

Moritz did move on. Now he was talking about the hand-washing itself, how to do it right. I wasn’t listening, partly because if I didn’t know the right way, I could do it how I wanted. But mostly I wasn’t listening because I was too distracted, staring out the window, looking for the Tu B’Av girl in white. Now that she’d disappeared I couldn’t be sure that I’d seen her at all. She could have been just a figment of my imagination, a physical manifestation of my thoughts about Tu B’Av, what my mind thought a dancing tribeless grape-harvest girl would look like today.

I had to know for sure.

I got up from my desk. Moshe Tzvi handed me his Styrofoam cereal bowl as I walked by. I left the room, slurping the sweet leftover milk. I tossed the bowl in the can outside and put on my black hat.

When I took walks, I always liked to wear my suit jacket and hat. I wanted to look sharp and distinguished. “Respectable” was the word my dad always used.

It was still summer, and the neighborhood smelled like grass clippings. I could hear the buzz of a distant mower. A welcome breeze swayed the trees that lined the streets.

Usually I walked slowly, lost in my thoughts. I paid no attention to where I was, or where I was going. But today I moved with purpose, walking the grid of streets in a systematic fashion, making sure I at least glanced down every road.

I saw her on Cellan. She was pulling at the leash, trying to drag the dog along, but the little thing had found an interesting scent at the base of a tree, and he was digging in, keeping his weight low, trying to hold his ground.

I walked toward her slowly, growing more and more nervous with each step. I'd never spoken to one of the neighborhood girls. Yeshiva students aren't allowed to talk to girls, let alone girls dressed like this one. I didn't really *want* to talk to her. It was more like I *had* to. I was drawn toward her, as though pulled by some kind of sci-fi tractor beam.

It was Tu B'Av. She was dressed in white. Maybe this was what God wanted from me.

She was too busy struggling with the dog to see me approach. I tried to think of a clever way to start a conversation. "Um," I said. After weighing many outstanding options, I'd decided "Um" was the best choice.

"Oh," she said, and looked up.

The dog took the opportunity to scramble toward the tree, sniffing it audibly. While the girl stared at me, the dog peed on the tree.

The girl looked at me like I had eight heads.

"Nice hat," she said.

She had deep brown eyes, and jet-black hair pulled up in a scrunchie

"Thanks," I said. "It's a Borsalino." The hat was my most prized possession, a bar mitzvah gift from my parents. When she didn't respond, I told her the hat was Italian.

“Okay,” she said.

I shifted my weight uncomfortably. I was sweating. The breeze had died and it was blazing hot out, so maybe that was it.

I wanted to get away. I could tell that she did too. When the dog started pulling on the leash, a look of relief appeared on her face, and she took a step away from me.

“What’s the dog’s name?” I asked. I hadn’t meant to ask. I’d meant to say nothing. I’d meant to let her walk away so I could peacefully live out the rest of my life without ever feeling this uncomfortable again. But I’d spoken, almost against my will.

“Borneo,” she said. “Like the island.”

I’d never heard of Borneo, but I didn’t want her to know that. “Oh yeah,” I said, “the island. In the . . . ocean.” That’s where the islands were, right? In the ocean. “What’s your name?” I asked before I could stop myself.

“Anna-Marie.” And she gave a last name too, Diaz-something, but I missed it.

“Crap,” I said. I basically didn’t have any control over my words at this point.

“Huh?” she asked.

When I asked her name, I’d been holding out hope she’d be a Chaya or an Esther. But no. She was an Anna-Marie. Just Anna would have provided a sliver of hope. I knew from the shorts that she wasn’t super observant, definitely not frum, like me. But unhyphenated Anna could have been a Jew at least, if a secular one. Some secular Jews lived in the area. There was a reform synagogue and a delicatessen in the next town.

But Anna-Marie? There literally wasn't a more goyishe name.

When Anna-Marie moved her arm to pull on the dog's leash, a cross appeared above the collar of her shirt. It jumped back and forth on a silver chain just above her bare collarbone. I watched it in despair.

She moved to leave again.

"I'm Hoodie," I said.

"Hoodie?"

"Like the sweatshirt." I motioned as though to pull a hood over my head.

Anna-Marie reached out to shake hands. I looked at her hand. She had slender fingers, each nail carefully painted an aquamarine color. Aquamarine. Anna-Marie. I wanted to shake Anna-Marie's aquamarine hand desperately. I looked behind me to see if anybody was watching. Nobody was. But I still couldn't do it. I was a bar mitzvah, and I wasn't married to her, so I wasn't allowed to touch her. I just stared at her hand until she took it away.

"Okay, Hoodie. Borneo and I are gonna go."

"Do you live around here?" I asked.

"No. I took an Uber here to walk the dog."

I laughed, and some of the tension melted. "Stupid question," I said. "It was good to meet you, Anna-Marie."

She took a step away, then turned back. "Hey," she said, and she took out her phone. "What's your Insta? I'll follow you."

I knew she meant Instagram, a picture app people had on their smartphones. I wasn't allowed to use it, but I didn't want

her to know that. I reached into my pocket and took out my phone.

When she saw it, Anna-Marie broke into a huge smile. It lit up her whole face. Then she started laughing. “You have a *flip* phone?” she asked. “Wait, wait. Hold on. I have to snap this. Cassidy will *never* believe it.”

I smiled for Anna-Marie’s picture, feeling good that she was interested in me. Because I was interested in her. Her fingernails. Her whole-face smile.

“This is so cute.”

She thought I was cute. I smiled at her. I thought she was cute too.

“The phone,” she clarified. Not me. “Look how *small* it is. It’s like a little baby phone. You know,” she said, still laughing, “my nana has a flip phone too. You guys should hang out together. You can send each other predictive text messages, and read books with giant print.” Now Anna-Marie’s laughter was getting the best of her. “You guys could go out to dinner at four o’clock and read the menu through magnifying glasses and, like, talk about knitting patterns.”

I was aware that I was being made fun of. I should have been upset. But I wasn’t. I was ready to hang out with Anna-Marie’s nana. I would absolutely go out to dinner with her nana, so long as it was a kosher restaurant. I’d make sure to brush up on my knitting, so our conversation would flow. Hopefully Anna-Marie would come too, and she could mock me incessantly while I sweated through layer after layer of clothing.

“Awesome,” I said. “Tell her to give me a call.”

Anna-Marie just waved goodbye. I watched Borneo drag her down the block. She disappeared around the corner onto Rhyd Lane.

“Yehuda.”

I looked up to see Rabbi Moritz. Usually when a kid went for a walk during school it meant he had a worry or concern on his mind. If he didn’t come back quickly, a rabbi would follow and make sure everything was all right, or if there was something the student needed to talk about. I guess I’d been out awhile.

“Hi, Rebbe. This is a particularly interesting tree, don’t you agree? It’s on my short list for best neighborhood tree.”

“Are you all right, Yehuda?”

“Fine.”

“Something on your mind?” Moritz asked.

There was exactly one thing on my mind, so I said nothing.

“I thought Moshe Tzvi was just kidding about hitting you over the head.”

“Do you know where Borneo is, Rebbe?” I asked him.

“No,” he said.

“The ocean,” I told him. “It’s an island. The ocean is where the islands are.”

“Come,” said Rabbi Moritz. “It’s time to pray. Let’s walk back to school, and you can tell me about the trees on your list.”

I turned and followed him back down the road.

Back at school we had Mincha, afternoon prayers. I went into the beis medrash and took my place next to Moshe Tzvi. As always, he davened more intensely than anyone else, bowing

up and down, the fringes of his blue-and-white tzitzits dancing from their spot at his waist, his prayer book pressed up against his nose.

But I could barely get into the prayers at all. I tried to focus on the Aleinu, recognizing my God, but I almost forgot to bow. And I completely missed the spitting that Moshe Tzvi and I always synchronize.

We don't spit for real because the beis medrash is carpeted. But we all make a spitting sound, a kind of "pthh" with the tongue against the top front teeth. The idea is to protest Christian censorship of Jewish prayer by spitting at a certain point in the recitation. Old synagogues used to have special spittoons just for that purpose, which is pretty cool, because "spittoon" is an awesome word, and because there should probably just be spittoons everywhere.

Moshe Tzvi had spit for real a few times, big old wads of saliva right on the carpet by his feet. He didn't get in trouble. You can't get in trouble for *overpiety*. You could sacrifice a goat for Passover, and the rabbis would say, as the blood pooled at their feet, as the animal's dying legs gave a final shuddering kick, "Well, the boy has dedication."

It wasn't the cleanup that stopped Moshe Tzvi's spitting. It was when the kids around him started spitting on his feet that Moshe Tzvi thought better of it. His official justification was, "If we view the spitting as a repudiation of the unbeliever's vanity, then I can justify it, but if we see it simply as a protest of medieval persecution, then its foundation is in secular tradition,

rather than in Jewish law itself, in which case the transmutation to mere pantomime is acceptable. I believe it was Rabbi Ismar Elbogen who said—

“Are you sure it’s not just because you have Reuven’s spit on your shoes?” I asked him.

“Pretty sure,” said Moshe Tzvi.

“Certain?”

“What is certain, Hoodie?” he asked.

As Mincha ended, I hung my fedora on its designated hook and walked out of the beis medrash, into the sunlight. I had to go back into the main building for class, but I was certain I wouldn’t learn anything for the rest of that day.

CHAPTER 2

in which I introduce you to my family

FOR OBVIOUS REASONS, YOU CAN'T actually *meet* my family. I'm just going to talk about them. Let's start with me. I'm a member of my family.

Most people call me Hoodie, which is a nickname. My first name is Yehuda, which is the Hebrew version of Judah, son of Jacob. He is best known for jealously casting his brother Joseph into a pit. But I don't have a brother, so there's nothing to worry about as far as fraternal pit-casting is concerned.

My last name is Rosen.

You may have pictured me in your mind. If you're going by grossly exaggerated Jewish stereotypes, then you're spot-on. Mazel tov. I'm a walking bar mitzvah: dark curly hair and a rather prominent nose. I'm thin, and about average height. And though I'm not quick, I have a pretty smooth lefty jump shot. On the JV team, only Chaim Abramowitz is a more consistent shooter.

We're the only sophomores who get to practice with varsity.

I think the only way I break stereotypes is that I don't wear long side curls. My family is Orthodox. Pretty observant. Frum. But we're not Chasidic, so there are some things we get to choose. My dad keeps his sideburns short, and so do I.

You may have pictured my family in your mind. If you're going by grossly exaggerated Orthodox stereotypes, then you're spot-on. Mazel tov. We can only fit in our Honda Odyssey if we lay Chana down across our laps, and undoubtedly my parents are working on populating a second minivan as we speak.

Like most Orthodox schools, my yeshiva has double days. In the morning we have Judaic studies, where we study Torah, and in the afternoon we have general studies, where we learn things like history and math. We don't get out of school until just after six in the evening.

That day, I was going to walk right home after school for supper, but I had a text from my older sister, Zippy, saying Dad was held up at work, and the family wouldn't be eating together. Or that's what I understood from it. The text actually said: **Dad staring at dirt. Eat yourself.**

Zippy is funny.

I'll start with my right arm so I can still text you back,
I sent in reply.

The construction site was only a short detour on the route home from school, so I stopped there on the way. Zippy is basically omniscient, because sure enough, my father stood at the edge of the site, staring at a big mound of dirt.

My family, and our Orthodox community, used to live in a town called Colwyn. But then Colwyn became too expensive for a lot of the community families. So some of us moved to Tregaron, where we opened a new school, and a new synagogue.

My family didn't move because of money. We moved because my father works for the development company that was building—or was *trying* to build—an apartment high-rise for families who wanted to join us.

When the decision was made to move some of the community to Tregaron, my dad's company bought a big building next to the commuter train station. The building had been a movie theater, but it had closed years ago and had sat abandoned.

My dad's company demolished the theater. Where it once stood, there was now an enormous expanse of dirt, sand-colored, like a small desert.

My dad stood looking at a dirt mound next to an idle piece of construction equipment. The sun was beginning to set, but still it reflected brightly off the yellow excavator. "Their bigotry is boundless," he said. "They're craven, Yehuda. They're blinded by their hatred of us. We fight the same battle, over and over, generation after generation, millennium after millennium."

Ever since we opened the yeshiva, and my father's company bought the theater, the locals had been trying to stop us from moving here. They talked about us like we were an invading army, like we were going to ride in on horseback with torches and pitchforks, to set their buildings on fire and slaughter them kosher-style. In the online newspaper, they said we would ruin

their “way of life,” like we were going to go home to home rounding up their bacon, confiscating their shellfish, systematically removing their car batteries on Friday afternoons so they couldn’t drive on Shabbos. The woman who rented us our house received threats from neighbors.

“When there’s fear like this, fear of us, I know what happens,” he said. “It’s what happened to your great-grandparents in Ukraine. It’s what’s happening in Brooklyn.”

In Ukraine, pogroms had swept through my great-grandparents’ shtetl town. The Russians had killed many of the Jewish men and forced the survivors into armed service. My great-grandfather had cut off his own toes to avoid military conscription. In Brooklyn, recently, there had been attacks on Jews. But those things weren’t going to happen here. This wasn’t the old country. If I was going to lose my toes, it would be in a freak accident. This wasn’t New York City either. Tregaron was a sleepy, quiet town. The locals weren’t going to attack us.

“It’s always the same,” my father repeated. “Always the same.”

I’d heard my father give this speech before, but his words always carried a hopeful tone. Now he sounded different. He wasn’t staring at his dirt in triumph, imagining all of the Jewish families eating around their Shabbos tables, cooking in their double-fridged kosher kitchens, spitting into their shiny new spittoons. He stared in defeat, seeing only the dirt itself. “We were going to start construction today,” my father said. “But they held an emergency town council meeting last night. At ten p.m. they held a meeting. To change the zoning laws they held

a ten p.m. meeting. The law now says that this lot can only be commercial. No residences.”

My father scratched his beard, but not in a thoughtful way. He suddenly looked old. He’d just turned forty, but his beard was graying, and his eyes looked droopy and tired. “It’s that *woman*,” he said.

I looked around for a woman, but we were the only two people who’d congregated to watch the sun set over the empty lot. “What woman?”

“Diaz-O’Leary,” he said.

Monica Diaz-O’Leary was the mayor of the town. She was leading the charge against us. She’d written an article in the online newspaper, and she’d organized the lawn sign campaign. The lawn signs said, PROTECT TREGARON’S CHARACTER. SAY “NO” TO DEVELOPMENT.

Our next-door neighbors had two of them.

“So what now?” I asked.

“Well, we could get our people onto the town council and overturn the decision, but first we’d have to have enough residents in town to vote, and we can’t do that until we build, and we can’t build until we change the council. So, I don’t know. We’ll start with legal action.”

“I’m with you. But I’m also *very* hungry. Can supper precede legal action?”

I started the walk home, leaving my father to his dirt. I only made it as far as the kosher market, where my hunger compelled me

to go inside and buy Starburst. The kosher market was the only Jewish-owned business in town. It had opened in anticipation of the apartment building. Chaim Abramowitz's family owned it, and he worked there after school.

American Starburst aren't kosher—they have gelatin—but British ones are, and the store imported them from England.

At the end of the town's main strip, I crossed the tracks and cut through the cemetery that separated the town's business strip from its biggest residential area. I walked through it every day on my way to and from school, but I never really looked around. Tonight, as I walked by the gravestones, I glanced at their names. A lot of them were Irish-sounding: Quinn, Flanagan, O'Neil. But there was also a Bernier, a Lopez, an Olivieri—it was a real who's who of dead people.

Near the dead Olivieri, I found an equally deceased Chonofsky. It was getting dark, but I could just make out the full name: Miriam Chonofsky. There was no doubt: dead Jew. I smiled at her, my predecessor.

As I walked the final turn of the graveyard's winding path, I noticed a Cohen and a Canter. There was something else I didn't notice, either because it was dark, or because the final setting of the sun marked the end of Tu B'Av, and brought my mind back around to Anna-Marie, and her painted nails, and the way her cross danced around the collar of her T-shirt.

Before I even got to the front door, I was welcomed home by a falling box that hit me on the shoulder. "Hi, Chana," I said.

I have numerous and various sisters. Chana is one of them. She'd recently discovered that she could access the roof through her bedroom window, and her new favorite activity was to stand up there and throw medium-size objects at passersby. She'd started with heavier things: balls, books. I still had a bruise on my arm from the stapler she'd gotten me with the week before. But she'd recently discovered, thank God, that lighter, irregularly shaped projectiles, like Amazon boxes, presented a greater challenge for the rooftop sniper.

"It's good to see you too. How was your day?" I asked, looking up into the dark. Before my eyes could adjust, they were covered when a large box hit me on the temple, bounced back up, then settled over my head. "Nice shot," I told the inside of the box.

"Thanks," said a muffled Chana from above.

In the foyer, I tossed my backpack onto the floor, picked my way through a minefield of toys and books, and stumbled into the kitchen. Zippy was seated at the kitchen table. Zippy was always at the kitchen table. The rest of us—me, my parents, my non-Zippy sisters, even the house itself—we were all planets orbiting around Zippy, our sun, who always sat at the kitchen table.

I could hear some miscellaneous sisters crashing and banging around upstairs. I could hear—or, rather, not hear—the silence of my mother grading exams or lesson-planning in her bedroom. I could hear my stomach growling. But none of it had any effect on Zippy. It never did. Zippy sat at the table with a computer, a stack of papers,

and a cup of coffee. She wore a long black skirt, and a denim button-up shirt. Its collar was askew where it met her braided hair.

I approached the counter and stood between our two panini presses, looking back and forth at them, trying to decide. “Which of you wants to join me tonight on my journey to satiation?” I asked them. “Will it be you, dairy press, on an odyssey of cheese? Or will this be a quest of the flesh, dearest meat press?”

“It will be an odyssey of the—no, I’m not going to say it. It’ll be dairy,” Zippy said.

“Nobody asked you,” I told her as I looked through the fridge. “I specifically addressed my inquiry to—”

“We’re out of lunch meat. Goldie ate the last slices of turkey.”

I said the proper blessing as I washed my hands. Then I loaded up two slices of bread with cheese, and pressed them. I tossed the hot sandwich onto a paper towel, and said the blessing over the bread, though I think you could argue that my meal was almost entirely cheese, at least from a caloric perspective.

We’ve got blessings for everything. There would definitely be a blessing over the panini press if they’d had biblical paninis. But that was in the pre-panini era. Those had to be rough times for the Jews, wandering in the desert without a toasted sandwich anywhere in sight.

I ate at the counter. Zippy monopolized the table, and there wasn’t anywhere to put my food.

“How was school?” Zippy asked without looking up. She was scrolling through something on the computer screen and cross-referencing it with numbers on one of her papers.

My heart skipped a beat. She wouldn't have asked the question if she didn't already know something. Had she run into one of my rabbis? Had somebody seen me talking to Anna-Marie?

"It was . . . fine," I offered.

"I ask," she went on, "because we got an email from Rabbi Moritz, saying that you're *already* failing math and Gemara."

The email had certainly been sent to my parents, but who knows when they would have gotten around to reading it. They might never have looked at it. Zippy was late-teens-ish—I could calculate her exact age, but as we've established, I'm bad at math—and she took care of those kinds of things, fielding the school emails and phone calls from her table office.

"Instead of being disappointed, I feel like you should try being impressed."

"That's fair," she said. "It is impressive that in only two weeks you're already failing to the point where the rabbi feels the need to send a note home." Still, she didn't sound impressed, or amused. Zippy took this kind of thing personally, especially since math and scripture were her things. She'd graduated high school the year before, and she was taking college classes to be an engineer. When she spoke again, she sounded tired and resigned. "How did the apple fall so far from the tree?" she asked.

I chewed some toasty crust. "You're not the tree. You're just another apple. It's more like, how did the same tree produce a crisp, shiny apple, but then a rotten, misshapen, worm-eaten apple?"

"You're not rotten or misshapen," Zippy said, so at least she agreed I was worm-eaten. "What are you even doing this year?"

Geometry? I know it's a struggle for you, but . . . *already?*"

"Math is from the sitra achra."

"Everything you don't like is from 'the other side.'"

"I'm sorry. I must have misspoken. I meant to say, Achoti, my dear elder sister, that math is great. Will you teach me?"

"Don't bother with the math. You're a Jewish boy. Nobody cares if you can do math. Let's focus on the Gemara. A Jewish boy has to know Talmud."

She looked up from her computer, and we made eye contact for the first time. Zippy's eyes were dark and deep-set like mine. Looking at her was a lot like looking at myself, if I were older, smarter, wiser, and female.

Sometimes I wished we could swap.

I was stuck as the only boy in the family, with all the expectations that role carried with it. I never met those expectations: I didn't do well in school. I couldn't offer a decent Talmud interpretation to save my life. I could barely read Hebrew. Meanwhile, Zippy didn't *have* to clear any high bars, but she did so with ease. She could quote obscure religious commentary, or create computer-assisted designs by expending the same amount of mental energy it took me to, say, put on socks.

There was a crash above our heads, followed by a thump that shook the ceiling. It sounded like a Goldie thump, but Zippy overruled me. "That was Rivkie," she said. "You can tell by the way the chandelier is shaking." Her hypothesis was confirmed, because the ensuing cries were distinctly Rivkian, ambulance-like wails only she could produce. "I'll tell you what. I'll work

with you on your Gemara *if* you take care of that,” and Zippy indicated the ceiling with her pen.

“And I’ll take care of that *if* you make me two more paninis.”

“No.”

“It was worth a try.”

I walked over to the table and left my paper towel there, then went upstairs to coo over Rivkie’s bruise.

CHAPTER 3

*in which we discuss livestock and the
differentiation therebetween*

MOSHE TZVI GUTMAN IS A polarizing figure. I'm polarized by him. On the one hand, I don't like him, because he's not a very nice person, and he's crude and embarrassing to be around, and he has trouble picking up basic social cues, and he has a superior attitude about just about everything, which is ill-fitting because there really isn't much that he's good at, outside of Talmud study.

On the other hand, he's my best friend in the world. Are you supposed to *like* your friends? I don't think that's how friendship works. I don't particularly like Moshe Tzvi, and I've never thought about whether he likes me, but I know that Moshe Tzvi would do *anything* for me. He would literally kill somebody for me. He's told me that many times, actually. He seems pretty eager to kill somebody on my behalf. He's real into weapons and violence. "You just say the word, Hoodie," he tells me. Before he does his rabbinical training, he wants to join the army.

Today he was wearing his Israel Defense Forces T-shirt.

T-shirts are against the dress code, but the rabbis will overlook just about any dress code violation if your outfit has a Jewish star on it. You could probably come to school in a Speedo if it had an Israeli flag on the back.

Moshe Tzvi was also wearing mittens. He claimed that he'd slept in them, and nobody doubted it. The right one was soaked in milk—it's tough to eat cereal in mittens.

Following up on our morning hand-washing lesson from the day before, Rabbi Moritz was talking about the other stuff we must do to start the day. "The procedures are clear," he said. "So what are the commentaries focused on in their treatment of the subject?"

I looked at the commentaries on the outer edge of the page, but I couldn't get the words to come together for me. My heart was still racing from my morning walk to school.

Nobody seemed to have the answer. Even Moshe Tzvi was silent.

"The question they are forced to ask . . ." Rabbi Moritz's voice climbed and "ask" came out in pure falsetto. "Sure, we can know what we must do when the day begins. This we can know easily. But it isn't useful if we don't know *when* the day begins."

Heads around the classroom nodded.

"So. According to the medieval commentaries, when does the day begin?"

I watched Moshe Tzvi's left mitten trace over the text, as his right mitten rose into the air.

Rabbi Moritz recognized him, and leaned forward over the desk at the front of the room.

“The day begins,” Moshe Tzvi said, “when there is enough light to distinguish between an ass and a wild ass.”

That’s the thing about Moshe Tzvi’s Talmud interpretation: It’s always vaguely inappropriate, but it’s also always correct, so it’s tough for the rabbis to get him in trouble. When I really focused on the page, I could see that he was spot-on. The medieval commentaries agreed that the day began when you could tell the difference between a domestic animal and a wild one.

“It’s about if you can distinguish between different types of asses,” Moshe Tzvi explained, indicating a passage in the book with his thumb. “That’s what it says. It’s about ass differentiation. Perception of ass, you could say. It’s all about ass: the ass that you *can* see and the ass that you, despite your *attempt* to see the ass, cannot—”

Rabbi Moritz cleared his throat and readjusted his tie. “Most scholars translate it as ‘donkey.’ In fact, if you look at your—”

“Most? But not all? So you’re saying, Rebbe, that there are ass rabbis? There are just fewer of them? It’s a small but proud group, the ass rabbinate?”

“Don’t push it, Moshe Tzvi. What you say is right, but don’t cross the line to profanity, to nivul peh.”

“May I push it just a *bit* further? Because I would like your blessing to be an ass student, Rebbe.”

Rabbi Moritz clenched his mouth shut and stared at Moshe Tzvi.

“Blessing denied,” said Miller.

“The rebbe rises at the rim,” I said, imitating a sports

announcer, “and *slams* the blessing right back in Gutman’s face. The crowd goes—”

Moritz cut me off when he started yelling. “Why are my fingers straight?” he shouted. The spit on his upper lip launched itself across his desk. “Why? Why? The Gemara says my fingers are straight. Why!?” He was hollering at us now.

The rabbi looked at each of us in turn, his eyes digging into ours. One by one we shook our heads.

Of course Moshe Tzvi was the only one who knew. Moshe Tzvi’s blue eyes shone when Moritz turned to him. He gave the rabbi a friendly wave of his mitten.

“What then, Moshe Tzvi?”

“I am prepared to answer your kashe, Rebbe, but only if you give me your ass blessing.”

Talmud discussion is always like this: warlike. It is a battle of wits, knowledge, and, in this case, wills. I think it’s always been like that.

Jewish tradition is based around Torah. There are two Torahs. God gave one of them to Moses on Mount Sinai. That’s the Written Torah, and it was presented to Moses freshly printed and collated. The other Torah is the Oral Torah. I guess God didn’t have enough time to write it down—dude is busy—so he just kind of whispered it to Moses as a P.S. Moses, who left Egypt without his laptop charger, didn’t have the chance to type it up. So he just told people about it. And then those people told other people about it, and it was passed on orally from generation to generation, which, if you ask me, is not the best way

to preserve indispensable knowledge from God himself.

Nobody did ask me, but some Babylonian rabbis had the same idea, and they wrote all the stuff down. They transcribed it from memory in a combination of Aramaic and Ancient Hebrew, without punctuation. Because it's based on old stories these guys' dads told them, written in a combination of antiquated languages, and missing all of its semicolons, it is a confusing document.

For two thousand years, various rabbis tried to make sense of it, and they wrote down their commentaries, arguments, and contradictions, and attached them to the original document. These attachments are called the Gemara. The original Oral Torah plus all these commentaries make up the Talmud. It's a giant maze of Jewish laws, rules, thoughts, considerations, ruminations. Studying it is, as Moshe Tzvi once put it, "basically medieval torture, but the cool, Jewish kind. It hurts so good."

In school, we study Talmud every day.

In this battle of wills, Rabbi Moritz won. "Why?" he asked one final time. "Why, Moshe Tzvi?"

Moshe Tzvi peeled off his right mitten slowly and dramatically, then flexed long slender fingers. "The Gemara says that my fingers are straight so that if I hear nivul peh, I can put my fingers in my ears to shut it out."

"Amazing," said Rabbi Moritz. And as with any Talmud battle, as soon as it was resolved, the combatants were friends once again. The rebbe nodded to Moshe Tzvi, reopened his book, and turned the page forward.

In my mind, I flipped the page the other way, back to my deeply unnerving walk to school. My heart rate was still elevated, and my legs still felt a little jiggly. I had thought the routine of normal class would settle me down, but I was wrong.

I'd woken up that day when my alarm went off. My alarm is Zippy's foot. There are dents and scuffs at the bottom of my bedroom door from Zippy's morning kicks, because she always has too many items and/or sisters in her arms to knock with her hand.

Even if the front lawn had been packed with livestock, it would have been too dark to see them clearly. I said the Modeh Ani, got out of bed, washed my hands, ate five to seven granola bars, and hustled out the door.

I walked to school in the same half-asleep trance I did every morning, staring at my feet, willing them to keep moving.

Do you believe in coincidences? The Torah says that coincidences don't exist, that God has his hand in everything. That's fine. But then, how detail-oriented is the guy? I get he would care if I violated one of his commandments. But where's the line? Does he mind if I jaywalk? Does he care if my socks match?

I ask because after I put magical Band-Aids on Rivkie's bruised knee, told Goldie to be more careful when she pushed people off of ledges, checked that Chana and Leah were at least pretending to do their homework, and ate several more paninis, I'd spent the rest of the previous evening thinking about Anna-Marie, running our short conversation through my head

on repeat, picturing me and her (and her nana) sharing a meal together, wishing that when she'd reached out her hand to shake, I'd taken it. In the light that shone into my bedroom from the street, I'd stared at my hand, trying to imagine what hers would have felt like in mine.

Then, as I walked to school just after sunrise, I wondered what she was doing at the same time. That's what I was wondering right up until I saw what she was doing.

I had just entered the cemetery when I saw her. I threw on the brakes. The cemetery was quiet and still in the muggy morning air.

Anna-Marie's attire was sparse again, with exposed arms and legs. In my community, we've got this thing called *tznius*, rules of modesty that she was breaking in like eight different ways. She was wearing a kind of tunic, except the bottom wasn't a skirt. Just below her waist, it split into wide billowy shorts. She was wearing the same sneakers, but her dark black hair was down this time, falling just below her shoulders where it ended in a straight line across the top of her back.

Even from a distance I could tell she was crying, which I guess wasn't surprising—crying is one of the more popular cemetery activities. She was standing in front of one of the newer-looking headstones, looking down at it. Every moment or so, a tear would dangle off her chin and drop into the grass.

My first instinct was to hide behind a headstone. I was about to dive behind one, but then I thought to myself: How do I best go about *not* looking like a serial killer? Peering at somebody

creepily from behind a gravestone didn't seem like the best choice.

So I decided I'd just walk through the cemetery like a normal person walking through a cemetery. People walked through cemeteries all the time. I could just be one of those people.

The only walking path took me right by her. I tried to keep my eyes down at my feet. But a kid only has so much willpower. So when she glanced up, we made eye contact.

I saw her recognize me, and she smiled at me through her tears. I spontaneously combusted and subsequently ceased to exist.

Not really. That's what I expected to happen. But actually she said, "Hey, it's you."

"Yeah," I said, agreeing that I was me.

"Hoodie."

"Yep. Anna-Marie."

"Nice," she said, and then she went about straightening her already-straight clothing, pulling at one of her sleeves.

Something about the way she wasn't quite looking me in the eye put me at ease. Talking to her the day before, despite all my heavy clothing, I'd felt exposed. Anna-Marie had a poise and self-confidence I couldn't match, and it had made me feel vulnerable. But now *she* seemed vulnerable. I hadn't meant to catch her in this kind of personal moment, but I was glad I did, because suddenly she wasn't quite as terrifying. She wasn't some kind of angelic apparition. She was a human person, just like me.

"Where's Borneo?" I asked.

"This is his grave," she replied.

"Oh, I—"

“Jesus, that’s not true. I can’t believe I said that. I’m horrible. Jesus Christ. I’m sorry. Are you here to . . . see somebody?”

“No. It’s just the fastest way to get to school. My family isn’t from around here, originally. You know,” I finished, as a reference to my outsider status: my dress shirt, my kippah, the lawn signs. But maybe Anna-Marie didn’t know about the lawn signs. You probably only paid attention to them if they were directed at you.

“Right,” she said. “My family—well, most of them—have been here for forever. My great-grandparents are buried here too.”

When she’d joked that it was Borneo’s grave, my eyes had instinctively shot over to the gravestone Anna-Marie was standing over. But my eyes hadn’t immediately focused on it—they don’t usually do the focus thing until ten a.m. at the earliest. But now they did focus.

The last name was O’Leary. First name Kevin. I looked at the dates listed under his name and did some light math. He’d died this year at fortyish, just the right age for him to be Anna-Marie’s father.

“Is—was that—”

“My dad? Yeah.” Anna-Marie had stopped crying but still she wiped at her eyes.

“Crap,” I said.

“Yeah,” she agreed. “It *really* sucks.”

But we weren’t talking about the same thing. I wish I could say my nivul peh was about her father’s death. But it wasn’t. It was about the fact that her father was O’Leary, which made her

(Diaz-)O’Leary, which made her mom Diaz-O’Leary, which made her mom the mayor, the one who’d stopped the apartment building’s construction, who was trying to keep us out of Tregaron.

I didn’t know what to say, so I said what any good Jewish boy was taught to say, “Zichrono livracha.” And when Anna-Marie gave me a weird look, I translated, “May his memory be a blessing.”

“Yeah,” she said, “a blessing.” And she started walking. I was going to just wait there for her to go away, but she said, “Come on,” and I caught up to her.

“Do you like it here?” she asked.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s a fine cemetery.”

“No. You know, the town. Tregaron.”

Honestly, I hadn’t really thought about it. I wasn’t given a choice about moving here. Enough of my friends and classmates had come with me that it didn’t feel so different.

“I like it okay,” I said. “But the town doesn’t like—”

Anna-Marie cut me off with a yelp, a sudden, sharp intake of breath.

I looked where she was looking, down near our feet. Next to her blue-striped Adidas sneaker was the Cohen I’d noticed the night before. His name was Oscar Cohen. He’d died in the late 1940s.

But now I noticed there was a swastika on his gravestone. It was done in black spray paint. The center of the Nazi symbol hovered above his name, and the bottom-right arm reached

toward his dates. There was another swastika on the nearby Elsie Cantor gravestone, about the same size, also black. The Cantor headstone was bigger, and it left room for some additional commentary: *Go home, Jews*, it said.

I tried to process what I was looking at. The message on the Cantor grave was talking to me directly, telling me to go away, that I was unwanted, rejected by the place that was supposed to be my new home.

I'd been aware of antisemitism my whole life, but I'd never *faced* it. Now I was literally staring it in the face. Or, I should have been.

But instead of looking at the graffiti, I looked at Anna-Marie. Her eyes were wide as she stared at the gravestones. She was frozen still, as in a photograph. Somehow I could tell that she wanted to look at me, but was forcing herself not to.

Slowly she turned her head to me. "I—" she began.

"It's okay," I said.

"It's *not* okay."

"Of course it's not okay. That's not what I meant. I meant, it's okay. Let's just go." I didn't want to look at it anymore. I didn't want my interaction with Anna-Marie to be ruined by this. But it was too late for that.

We walked in silence. The silence was uncomfortable. It wrapped around us like a kind of fog. It was constricting.

Both of us wanted to split up, but neither of us wanted to be the one to go our own way. I took all of the normal streets to school, hoping with each turn that her house would be in

a different direction. But her house was half a block from the school, directly on my usual route.

When we got there, Anna-Marie stopped. Behind her, standing tall in her front yard, was one of the lawn signs. The way Anna-Marie was standing, it almost seemed like she was blocking it intentionally, but I couldn't be sure.

I thought she was going to say something, but she didn't. She just turned and went up the front walk.

The house was a colonial with an open porch on the bottom level. A couple thick white columns supported the overhanging second floor. It looked a lot like the one my family rented across town, except this one was in much better shape, and there wasn't anybody on the roof above the porch hurling household objects at the people in the yard.

There was one person in the yard, next to the porch. This was probably the mayor, Monica Diaz-O'Leary. She was wearing a loose shirt and those exercise pants that basically show what you'd look like naked if you dyed your bottom half black. She was holding Borneo's leash, and Borneo was sniffing around in a flower bed.

Mrs. Diaz-O'Leary looked up when her daughter came up the walk. She had to notice I was there on the sidewalk, but she didn't wave or anything. She reached out and put an arm around Anna-Marie, and mother and daughter disappeared into the house.

I was still standing at the curb when Anna-Marie burst back out of the front door. She jogged down the front walk.

“What’s your number, Hoodie?” she asked. “I’d just look you up on Insta or TikTok, but . . .” And her voice trailed off.

I looked back and forth between her and her lawn sign. She was one of *them*. Even if she condemned it. I resolved not to give her my number.

I gave her my number. “You can tell your nana she can call before bedtime,” I said. “So, like, anytime before eight o’clock.”

Anna-Marie laughed nervously. But a nervous laugh was still a laugh.

The laugh made me feel great, and I felt great for the half block to school, where Shacharis, morning prayers, reminded me about the cemetery. When I rocked back and forth, and closed my eyes, I saw the swastikas on the inside of my eyelids. They hovered there, as though projected on a screen, reminding me what they stood for. Millions of Jews had been slaughtered under that symbol, *for* that symbol. That morning, I prayed for their memories.

After prayer, I’d told Rabbi Moritz that I wanted to talk to him about something. I didn’t really want to open a can of worms—I’m a firm believer that worms should remain in their cans where they belong—but I didn’t know what else to do. I couldn’t just let people deface gravestones, and not say anything. What would my ancestors think?

When the rest of the class stampeded out of the room to grab snacks before the next period, I waited behind.

“Yehuda,” Rabbi Moritz said, as he organized books on his desk.

I was about to release the worms, but then my phone buzzed in my pocket. Instinctively, I grabbed it and flipped it open. It was a text from a number I didn't know. It said: **Hoodie! It's your new friend, Anna-Marie. I feel so bad about the graffiti. Do you want to help me fix it?**

Before I'd even processed the message, I sent back **Yes. Now?**

I thought you had school, Anna-Marie replied.

Kind of

How do you kind of have school?

I'll explain

Meet me at my ☐, she sent. I was pretty sure the box was supposed to be a graphic, but my phone didn't get emojis. I guessed that the emoji was a house.

"Yehuda," Moritz said again. "You said you had something urgent to tell me?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "I neglected to tell you yesterday about a birch tree that I enjoy a great deal. I was so preoccupied with that oak that I totally blanked. But now I'm . . . busy. I've got to go. We'll have to do this another time."

Moritz slipped a couple books under his arm, squared his shoulders to me, and gave a little bow. "I look forward to hearing all about it at a later date," he said.

"You won't be disappointed," I assured him as I followed him out the door.

I bounded down the stairs to the curb and took long strides toward the Diaz-O'Leary lawn. Borneo came out to greet me,

then sprinted back to my new friend, Anna-Marie. My new friend didn't greet me at all. She just matched my stride on the sidewalk and directed us toward town. Borneo trailed behind on his leash.

Anna-Marie was tall, about my height, but she was all limbs. She walked in a kind of lope, with her long legs preceding her, pulling her along like the leash pulled the dog.

"So how do you *kind of* have school? And why are you in school in August?" she asked.

"We have school in August because we miss so many days for holidays the rest of the year. It's a legal thing. And . . ." I paused and tried to think how best to explain that I could just walk out of school anytime I wanted. "Okay, well, what's the point of school?" I asked her.

"To learn science, math, history? To get ready for college? To look at cute boys but pretend you're not looking at them?"

She and I went to *very* different schools. Though maybe she'd like mine. There were *lots* of boys there. "The point of school," I said, "is to become a true man, to learn the right way to live, to learn how to best serve God. That's my type of school anyway. Now that we're men, we need to learn how to find our own relationship with God and with our religion, to understand *why* we live the way we do, why it's *important* to live that way, and sometimes that requires self-reflection, and so if we need to self-reflect, we can take a walk."

"So, that's what you're doing right now, self-reflecting?"

"Yeah," I said. "How self-reflective do I look?"

“*So* self-reflective. You’re self-reflection personified, man. Jesus, if I just left school, they could send the police after me.”

“We follow a different set of rules, I guess,” I said.

“I’ve noticed,” Anna-Marie said.

“What’s *that* mean?” I asked.

Anna-Marie looked at Borneo. “I didn’t . . .”

“No. What do you mean?”

“I didn’t mean to offend you. I’m sorry.”

I wasn’t offended. Wait. Yes, I was. Everything about Anna-Marie offended me: the way she dressed, her joke about her father’s grave, the lawn sign in her yard. But it’s like I was saying about Moshe Tzvi: you don’t have to like your friends. I could be deeply offended by Anna-Marie and still want to spend *all* of my time with her.

“I just don’t know what you mean,” I said.

“You guys—not ‘you guys.’ I . . . Fine, we’re friends, right?”

“Yeah, we’re friends,” I said, mostly because I wanted to hear myself say it out loud. I wanted to say it over and over again.

“Okay, it’s just that sometimes I see—well, your people, I guess—not really paying attention to the real world. Like, there will be a guy just walking across the road without looking at the cars coming, or kids will just walk through people’s yards on the way to school or whatever. Our new neighbors . . . If I wake up in the middle of the night, their kids are running around in the yard, shouting at each other, and it’s like two in the morning. I’m not—I don’t mean to—”

“Huh,” I said. I’d never really thought about the first one.

Didn't everybody jaywalk? But then I was guilty of the second one. I cut at least two lawns on my way to school every day. And I had to admit that Chana kept watch from her sniper's perch at just about any hour of the day and/or night. "The real world . . ." I wondered. "What is the *real* world?"

"This one," Anna-Marie said, and she indicated the neighborhood, the hot day, the business strip of town we were approaching on foot.

I didn't agree, but I wasn't about to contradict her.

We walked in silence for a minute. Then she said, "Maybe it would be better if there were another world to slip into. This one isn't always so great, is it? At the very least, I'd like there to be another one where I could get away from my mom."

Anna-Marie tied Borneo up outside the little hardware store.

Outside, the late summer sun was oppressive. At least it felt that way to me. But there were still plenty of people out, enjoying the inferno. Young parents pushed little children in strollers. Kids our age popped in and out of the coffee shop sipping iced drinks. Now and then a masochist jogged by, panting like Borneo.

In the hardware store it was cool, and it smelled like sawdust. The woman at the register looked up when we walked in. I never walked into any of the businesses on the downtown strip, except for the kosher market, because of the way the people looked at me when I did. This woman wasn't giving me a mean look or anything. It was just a reflexive raise of the eyebrows that asked, "What's *he* doing in here?" As though Jewish nuts and bolts were different from gentile ones.

The woman's expression changed when she saw my friend. "Anna-Marie," she said. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

I'm a very bad liar. I'm just spectacularly bad at it. I would have trouble telling you, for example, that I like zucchini.

I *love* zucchini. It's delicious. I particularly enjoy how . . . squashy it is.

No. That's not true. I hate zucchini. It's gross.

See what I'm saying?

So I was surprised by the ease with which Anna-Marie lied to the hardware lady. "Just running an errand for my ma," she said.

"And how is she?" the hardware lady asked with an air of concern.

"Fine. Fine."

"What can we help you with?"

Anna-Marie approached the counter. I lurked behind her, swaying forward, then back, then forward, slowly.

Anna-Marie turned her phone around to face the lady at the counter. "I don't know exactly what she needs it for, but she said to get something like this. To get spray paint off."

The woman slipped nimbly around the counter and started walking toward the back of the store.

We followed.

The woman plucked a bottle off the shelf and handed it to Anna-Marie. "This should do," she said. "You'll just need a few rags."

"Do you sell them?"

"What? Rags? The mayor doesn't have rags?"

"I don't know. I don't want her to send me back."

"I'll grab you a couple pads—they should work. I'll meet you at the counter."

Anna-Marie paid, assured the lady that she would say hi to her mom for her, and then we were back out on the street with Borneo, heading toward the cemetery. We took a weird route, going away from the main strip, looping around. "*Everybody* knows me here," Anna-Marie explained.

That was true. The lady at the hardware store knew her by name, and even on the side streets, off the main drag, everybody waved when she passed.

I'd known that feeling back in Colwyn. Everybody there had been Jewish, and everybody knew me and my family. And they would stop and ask me how my parents were, and tell me that they'd just seen Zippy and Yoel at the Judaica store (and how happy the couple had been together), and how I looked "more and more like [my] father every day."

When I walked around Tregaron, nobody looked at me. When we first moved, I didn't mind the anonymity, but now, with the graffiti, their downcast eyes felt more sinister. It was as though they actively avoided looking at me, like they preferred to pretend I wasn't there.

"I can't wait to get out of here," Anna-Marie said. "I'm going to go to NYU, the biggest school in the biggest city, where nobody knows me. I want to see if I can never run into the same person twice."

We took a side entrance into the cemetery and headed straight for Cohen and Cantor. The swastikas stood out more starkly in the bright light of midday.

Anna-Marie squatted down and unpacked the paper bag. I bent down next to her as she placed the bottle and the pads on the ground in front of the gravestones. We were close: me, her, the defaced graves. She reached out and put her hand on my arm. I had my long-sleeve shirt rolled up just a little, and one of her fingers touched my bare skin. It was strange how normal it felt, how something so strange, something almost unthinkable, could feel just like anything else. It was the kind of moment in which you'd expect thunder, an eruption of brimstone, some kind of sign from God. You'd expect Mr. Cohen to rise from his grave and yell at me in Yiddish.

But nothing like that happened. I smiled inwardly and Anna-Marie said, "I'm really sorry, Hoodie. People are awful. I can't imagine how I'd feel if somebody did this to my . . ."

And then, instead of holding her hand on my arm for all eternity as I'd hoped she would, she unscrewed the bottle and we got to work.

I had to admit that this was not how I'd pictured my first ever date going. I couldn't decide which part was more unlikely: the girl who wasn't Jewish, or the activity, which was painstakingly erasing antisemitic graffiti from gravestones.

"Erasing" wasn't the right word choice. "Smearing" was more accurate.

"I'm sorry about what's happening," Anna-Marie said, dabbing some more paint remover on her pad. "I think it's just how old people are. They don't like change. Tregaron's kind of been the same way for a really long time. Everybody knows

everybody. Everybody went to the same schools, and they've been shopping at the same old stores. They don't want it to change."

"Things do change, though," I said.

"Says the kid with the flip phone."

"I don't *want* to have a—" I began, then stopped. "It's to protect me from—" But I didn't want to finish that sentence either. The flip phone was to protect me from getting distracted from Torah, to keep me from spending my time watching videos, or viewing memes, or looking up pictures of girls dressed like the one who'd just touched me. "It feels different, though. If it weren't . . . us, it would be different. People talk about it like we're an invading army."

"But aren't you? In a way?"

"We're not trying to *pillage*. We just want to find a place to live."

"Maybe I'm only hearing what my ma tells me," Anna-Marie said, "but if you guys build that high-rise, won't the town have *twice* as many people? Won't everything be different then?"

That was probably true. That was the goal: remake the town with Jewish stores, kosher restaurants, a new synagogue and study center, an eruv, businesses closed on Shabbos. "I don't think old people did this, though," I said about the graffiti.

"Yeah. It was probably kids. They'll probably brag about it on social media. When I said, 'People are awful,' I meant *all* people."

By the time the sweat was beading on our chins, neither the

swastikas nor the message on the Cantor grave was recognizable. It just looked like somebody had dumped some particularly dark mud on the headstones. I stopped for a moment, checked the time on my phone, and did a double take. “I have to go,” I said.

“We’re almost done,” Anna-Marie said.

“I—I have to. I’ll miss Mincha. Prayers. You can miss pretty much the whole day. You could skip math class the *entire* year, and I plan to. But if you miss prayers, they take you back behind the woodshed and beat you with the belt of Jewish guilt.”

Anna-Marie wiped her brow and looked at me out of the tops of her eyes.

“It’s a figurative woodshed,” I clarified. “We don’t have a real woodshed. Or a belt.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll get in a lot of trouble, is what I’m saying.”

“I get it. Should I finish up?”

“Yeah.” I stood up and stretched my legs. Out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw somebody near the entrance of the cemetery, a figure in a dark suit with a hat. But it might have just been my guilty conscience, because when I looked again, there was nothing there.

“Should we do this again?” Anna-Marie asked, then corrected herself. “Not *this*. You know what I mean. Hang out.”

I didn’t want to smile at her. I wanted to act chill, like hanging out with cool gentile girls was just a normal thing I did. But I was beaming. I couldn’t make my mouth close. I nodded a bunch and started my power walk back to school.

I got back late, dripping sweat. I slipped into my spot next to Moshe Tzvi and davened Mincha. Rabbi Friedman led the prayers, calling out in his usual singsong. He had a quiet, peaceful tone that made you forget the outside world, and the modular building you were standing in.

I felt at peace, swaying back and forth, thinking about Anna-Marie. I was still unsettled about the graffiti, but I felt good about fixing it. And I could still feel her fingers on my arm, a touch that marked me as her friend. No, it was more than that. A girl didn't just touch a guy if there wasn't something more than friendship going on.

Near the end of the service, I noticed Rabbi Moritz stealing the occasional glance at me, and he approached me in the bottleneck as we all waited to exit the beis medrash. "Meet me in my office," he said.

"I have class."

"It wasn't a request."

Now that I actually looked at him, I could see that he was angry. And sweaty. My math is bad, but I put two and two together.

Before the yeshiva bought the land the year before, the main building had been a Presbyterian church. I didn't know much about Presbyterians. I only knew they were Christians because Jesus was all over the building: on the stained glass, in the carvings above the main doors.

I'm pretty sure Moritz's office had been a closet when the school was a church. The yeshiva's rabbis had little makeshift

offices scattered all over the school. Moritz's was windowless, and the door hit his desk every time it opened. The walls were unadorned, save for a portrait of the Chofetz Chaim on the wall.

"Would you like a seltzer?" Rabbi Moritz asked me.

Moritz kept a little fridge under his desk, and he always offered you a seltzer when he met with you. If somebody saw you walking around the school with a can of seltzer, they'd ask you, "What'd you do?" because the seltzer told them you were in trouble.

"It's awfully hot out there," the rabbi said. "The seltzer is cold."

I said nothing. It was always best to let the rabbi make the first move. Maybe he was only upset that I'd been late to Mincha.

But the rebbe said nothing. He bent down and opened the fridge door. He carefully selected a can of seltzer. From a slanted shelf at his right, he took a plastic cup, and he poured the seltzer down the side of the cup. The seltzer fizzed. The rabbi took a long sip, staring at me over the rim of the glass.

"I didn't see any birch trees in the cemetery," Moritz said quietly, almost like he was talking to the seltzer.

I really wanted to insist, to the contrary, that the cemetery was *full* of birch trees. The only issue was that I had no idea what a birch tree looked like. "Yes, well, you see, Rebbe, the birch tree is so stunning that it's difficult to remain for any extended duration in its presence. It is best to ponder its splendor from a safe remove, where one can—actually, I will take that seltzer."

“Strawberry?”

“Lime if you have.”

“Fine choice.”

He slid the seltzer across the desk to me. I popped it open and drank greedily. As I guzzled, I decided that the best course of action was to lie through my teeth. “I was just visiting my grandfather’s grave,” I told him.

“Zichrono livracha. May he rest in peace. What was his name?”

“Cohen.”

“First name?”

I couldn’t remember the first name on the grave, but I went with “Moshe,” because there was about a one-in-four chance that any given Jewish man was Moshe.

“Which side of the family?” Rabbi Moritz inquired.

“Mother’s,” I said quickly.

Rabbi Moritz sighed. “Yehuda, I *know* your mother’s father. He’s *alive*. I saw him at your bar mitzvah two years ago, and again during Purim last spring.”

The rebbe’s story checked out. I remembered both of those events. I liked my grandpa, even if he had perpetually bad breath. “Well, he has a spot picked out already. You know, one of those family plot kind of deals.”

“Do you know what the Talmud says about lying?” Rabbi Moritz asked me.

“It’s . . . strongly in favor of it?”

“‘Truth is the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He.’ *That’s* what it says. Rashi explains to us that where there is truth, there

is God, and we feel His absence whenever falsehoods are told.”

I definitely felt the absence of *something* in the room.

The most compelling reason to learn Talmud was so I could win arguments. But I wasn’t going to beat the rebbe. He had an encyclopedic knowledge of Jewish law and had memorized the commentaries of every important Jewish philosopher. The dude had Rashi in one pocket, Ibn Ezra in the other, and Nachmanides lurking in his desk drawer, ready to burst out and crush me with the sheer force of their collective learning.

“There were swastikas on the graves,” I said quietly. “I was cleaning them off. And there was a girl there who saw them too. She was helping me. But I didn’t do it. I didn’t deface Jewish graves.”

The rebbe shook his head sadly. “Oh, Yehuda. Oh, Yehuda,” he said.

I tried to match his sadness. The graffiti made me sad, and scared. But I also felt proud that Anna-Marie and I had fixed it.

“I almost wish you *had* done it.”

“What?” I said. “You wish I’d *defaced* Jewish graves? Why? Because then that would mean we weren’t surrounded by anti-semites? It would mean Tregaron didn’t hate us, wasn’t trying to drive us away as we were driven from—”

“Over the years, I have seen many young Jews internalize the loathing they receive from the outside world. That self-hate can be a difficult affliction to fight against, but it can be overcome. I can help *that* young man back to Torah. But this is something different, these thoughts you’re having. These urges, *these* urges, they are stronger.”

“These urges? Can you describe them for me, Rebbe?”

“I don’t think that would be a productive use of our time.”

“I just want to be clear about which urges we’re talking about.”

“Corporal ones.”

“Oh, *now* I understand, because I totally know what that word—”

I got exactly the rise I was looking for. “The *body*, Yehuda. Thoughts and urges relating to the *human body*.”

Was I thinking about Anna-Marie’s human body? Well, *now* I was. Score one for the rebbe.

“This is why we shelter our students,” he went on. “This is why focus, concentration, dedication is so important at your age, because certain distractions are stronger than others. I don’t envy you. There are many more distractions today. Distractions such as this make it harder to turn to Torah. But to Torah we *must* turn. You may think that you can fight antisemitism by engaging with the outside. But you cannot. You believe that if you open yourself up to the outside world, they will accept you. But they won’t. We know. We have centuries of evidence. We’ve seen it over and over. That’s why we have to have our own schools, our own businesses. It’s the only way. With your fellow Jews, and with HaShem, you will find peace in this life. But HaShem cannot be found in the secular world. Only through Torah can you connect with Him. There’s a midrash—I taught it to you—that says that Torah study is the *only* way to overcome our enemies. Do you understand?”

I understood what he was saying: my friendship with Anna-Marie, the enemy, would keep me from Torah, and I couldn't fight antisemitism with a gentile. Except that was what I'd *just* done when we removed the paint.

I finished my seltzer and put the can down on the desk.

Rabbi Moritz was looking through me. "Your people fought and died for the Torah. When it was banned, they studied it in secret, risking their lives, and the lives of their wives and children. You *have* Torah. Every day you are given Torah. You don't have to fight for it. You are given Torah and you do not take it." He put his hands on the desk. "We will help you overcome this. We will guide you back to Torah, Yehuda. After the pogroms, after the inquisition, after the Holocaust, we made ourselves whole again through Torah. Only through Torah will we overcome what we face here in this new place."

He talked about me like I'd come down with some kind of flu, like Anna-Marie had spread to me some kind of goyishe disease. I half expected the rebbe to pull out a piece of paper and write me a prescription for a pill to cure me. He said nothing about the swastikas, or about the fact that I'd done the right thing by removing them.

"I don't see why they have to be two separate things. Why can't I do both of them at the same time?"

"Both of what? Torah and . . . a *girl*?"

I didn't see a point in answering the question.

Now the rebbe was looking directly at me. "You will not leave the school again without permission, Yehuda. In this way, we will

help you. If you need to leave school, if you need to take a walk, I will go with you.”

“That’s great,” I said. “Bring your wife. We can double-date.”

I didn’t mean to say that.

Everything would have been fine if I hadn’t said that.

Rabbi Moritz exploded like a grenade, spittle flying across the desk like shrapnel. I didn’t hear most of what he said. There was something about disrespect, a question about what my father would think, and something about “kids these days.” Nothing about the swastikas.

The office door slammed behind me and I was out in the hall holding my empty can of seltzer, crushed in my clenched fist. A small crowd—enough for a minyan—had formed in the hall. “What’d you do?” Moshe Tzvi asked.

I threw the seltzer can at him.

CHAPTER 4

in which, at the behest of my legal representation, I eat string cheese

AS SOON AS MY LAST class ended, I got a text from Zippy: **Run home like your life depends on it because it does. You and your counsel must prepare your defense before dad gets home.**

Omniscience was the only way to explain how Zippy knew about this already, but I did as she said. I jogged most of the way home, and sprinted the section through the cemetery. I tore across our front lawn, avoiding Chana's aerial assault.

With my backpack still strapped to my back, I stood in the kitchen heaving ragged breaths.

Zippy's text had been charged with urgency, but she looked calm in her office. She was examining something on the computer, squinting at the screen. "The rabbi called," she said as she typed something. "Two of them actually. Moritz *and* Friedman."

“The graves were—”

“Don’t explain yourself. We don’t have time. They asked me for Dad’s cell.”

“So you gave them a fake number, disconnected our land-line, incinerated our mailbox, and legally changed our last names to Smith.”

“That is not what I did.”

My breathing was finally slowing, just as my anxiety was ramping up. I slipped my backpack onto the floor and readjusted my tzitzits. “I think we should deny it outright,” I said. “Nip it right in the butt.”

“Did you just say nip it in the *butt*?”

“No?”

“It’s *bud*. With a—it’s a flower—oy, Achi, darling brother.”

Zippy stopped typing and pivoted in her chair. She crossed her legs at the knees. “Do you know what the Gemara says about lying? Truth is the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He. Rashi says that where there is truth, there is God, and we—”

“Feel his absence whenever falsehoods are told. Duh, bro. Still, I think we should try it.”

“Yeah? You do? Okay. I’ll humor you. Go ahead. Try it. Pretend I’m Dad.”

I cleared my throat. “Why hello, Abba. Welcome home. I trust you had a productive and pleasant day as the primary breadwinner of this family, winning all kinds of delicious bread.”

“All right. A bit glib, but a fine start.”

“You may have heard some mishegoss from Rabbi Moritz.

But don't listen to him. You see, the rebbe, though he is well-intentioned, is a schizophrenic, and he suffers from hallucinations, each more vivid and outlandish than the next."

Zippy put up a hand. "I'm going to stop you there. Now, do you see, brother, how the lie you've told is both (a) implausible, and (b) offensive to those suffering with a serious mental illness?"

"Do we have string cheese?"

"Focus."

"Fine. Fine. Okay. What do you suggest?"

"Plead the Fifth. Eat string cheese. Say nothing. Let me speak for you. Look contrite, obsequious."

"I'm going to need a dictionary to pull that off."

Zippy chortled. She didn't want to but couldn't help it. "Why are you clever in all the wrong ways? Look like you're sorry."

"I didn't do anything wrong. I did the *right* thing. We're talking about the desecration of *Jewish* graves, an offense to—"

"What do we need to do? Muzzle you? Look. Maybe you don't really understand what you've done. Maybe you don't see how bad this can get. Maybe you're just not that bright. But I'm telling you how to get the best possible outcome. Take it or leave it."

Zippy turned back to the computer. I turned to the fridge and went to find my string cheese muzzle.

As I extracted the pack of string cheese, the front door opened.

"Stand close to me," Zippy whispered, "so I can give you non-verbal cues." She pulled me toward her, gripping the bottom of my shirt with her fist, like a puppeteer taking control of a puppet.

It should be said that my father is a mild-mannered person. He is generally thoughtful and calm. When you shake his hand, he grips yours just the right way, like his hand is embracing yours rather than squeezing it.

He is named for Abraham, and the day before my bar mitzvah he said this to me: "I do my best to serve HaShem. But if I'd been Abraham, I don't know if I could have made the covenant with God. I could have bound my son and brought him up the mountain. This I could have done. But I don't think I could have gone through with the sacrifice." He hung his head in shame when he said this, though, personally, I felt pretty good about him not wanting to sacrifice me.

"He was trying to tell you that he loves you," Zippy explained later.

"Because he's not willing to slit my throat in a ritual ceremony?"

"Yeah. He was telling you that you make him weak, that the love for his son is the only thing that could keep him from serving his God."

I say that so that I can contrast it with this: When my father burst through the front door, he looked ready to bind and sacrifice everyone in sight. He did not look tender. He looked like he was going to tenderize me like a piece of meat.

He flew into the kitchen, his face red, his mouth Moritzesque in its moisture: spitting venom like a snake. I held the pack of string cheese out in front of me like a shield.

"How could you?" he growled. "How *could* you? *My* son. I—I don't have words."

This is what people say when they have a lot of words.

I did as Zippy had instructed me. I didn't even look at my dad. I pulled a plastic-encased string cheese away from its brethren, watched it separate itself along the perforated edge. I picked at the top flap of the string cheese, and peeled it open.

Zippy too kept her eyes down. She looked at her computer keyboard, but spoke to my father. "He's sorry. He didn't understand what he was doing. He was trying to do the right thing."

"Betraying your community is the right thing? Betraying your family is the right thing? Betraying your father is the right thing?"

Instinctively, I opened my mouth to answer, but Zippy pinched me in the back and I snapped my mouth shut.

Zippy spoke slowly, calmly. "He's sorry. He just didn't understand."

I wasn't sorry at all, but I kept my mouth clamped shut. I peeled off thin strands of gossamer cheese with a practiced motion. I tried to pretend that the world contained only me and cheese, which, frankly, is how the world *should* be.

Zippy was trying to get my dad to direct his attention to her, but I could feel him looking at me now. His eyes were hot. "You got a picture, right? Before you erased the graffiti, you got a picture, correct?"

I looked at Zippy.

She closed her eyes and exhaled in resignation. She'd forgotten to ask me if I'd taken a picture. She did not know. She was a poor lawyer. I would have to answer for myself. I was on my own.

"Why would I take a picture?" I asked.

“What he meant to say—” Zippy began.

“Why? he asks, like an am ha’aretz, like an ignoramus. Why should he take a picture? For proof, that’s why. For proof he should take a picture.”

“I was righting a *clear* wrong. What I did was a mitzvah.” How no one else could see that I’d done a good deed was beyond me.

“He thinks he was doing a mitzvah,” my father reflected, talking to himself, or to God. “He thinks it was a *mitzvah*.” Then he turned back to me. “At least if you’d left them there, at least if you had a photo, we would have *one* good thing, one thing to hang our hats on.”

“I don’t get—” I started. “You *want* them to hate us? You want people to see . . . how could it be—”

“We could *show* them, show them what happens when they spread their hate, show them what their blind bigotry has done. With this, we’d have leverage. With this, we could have scared them into changing the law. With this, we could be building by next week. Then we could say to the community, to the congregation, ‘Well, yes, it doesn’t look good, but really Yehuda has helped us out. He has helped our cause. He has joined in our fight to make a little place for ourselves here. It looks bad, yes, but he is helping.’ But now? Now he’s embarrassed me. How can this be *my* son? He’s betrayed me, and we have nothing to show for it. It was for *nothing*.”

The last “nothing” came out in a growl. My father was breathing fairly heavily now, his face flushed. He had a quiet,

simmering rage I'd never seen before. He didn't usually talk about me like I wasn't there. And he'd never looked at me like this, like he didn't know me, like he didn't *want* to know me.

I felt trapped, claustrophobic, like an animal in a too-small cage. We were all in this little space, a kind of bottleneck where the hall met the kitchen.

Now two more people joined us. Hearing their approach, my father glanced behind him, and his face softened a bit when he saw Rivkie and Goldie. He still wanted to know *them*. They looked scared. Rivkie's little eyes darted around, first at Dad, then at Zippy, finally at me.

They were little girls, all innocence.

My father turned around and scooped them both up. He spun back to face me, one sister in each arm. He was pointing them at me, like weapons.

Rivkie and Goldie both stared at me. Their little faces, pudgy still with baby fat, faced mine, and they silently begged me to stop, to end the argument.

It was unfair what he was doing, using them like this. Their wide eyes were fearful, and I wanted to make it stop, to make their eyes go back to normal, to calm the house down so they could go back upstairs and terrorize each other in peace.

And I would have done that if my father hadn't said, "How could you do this to me?"

I didn't do anything to *him*. If I'd done anything wrong—which I hadn't—I thought he would care about me looking away from Torah. I thought his anger would be about how I

couldn't serve God if my thoughts were focused on the gentile world, or a gentile girl. But he only cared about how my actions reflected on him. He cared about how it would make him look in front of the community. He should have been proud of me. But he only cared about his political battle, how the grave desecrations could help him get his precious apartment building off the ground.

"I have a lesson for all of you," my father said. "Listen."

When he said "all of you" he meant me exclusively, but Rivkie and Goldie looked up at him from their seats in his arms, and Zippy looked up politely from the table.

I looked down at my cheese, trying to make thinner and thinner strips, but Zippy prodded me with her elbow, imploring me to meet my dad's gaze.

I complied.

"Back in the old country," my father began, shifting his weight a little to give Goldie some extra support, "the economy was disastrous, partly because there were no proper banks, because the goyim could not lend money to each other. Their bible told them they were not allowed to charge interest. So they asked the Jews if they would lend money and help everybody prosper. So the Jews did. They made loans available for everybody. They charged fair interest. They turned whole economies around. But then, whenever there were problems, the goyim turned on the Jews. They accused us of being greedy. They blamed the Jews for their poverty. They said everything would be fine if it weren't for the dirty Jewish moneylenders.

They killed the Jews for it, for fairly doing the very thing they had asked of us.”

“That’s not very nice,” Goldie observed.

“No, Goldie. It’s *not* very nice. And yet your brother wants to make one of them his girlfriend.”

I burned with anger. I hated him using Goldie like this. I didn’t like him telling her a violent story like that. “So,” I said. “What you’re saying is that because I cleaned swastikas off Jewish graves and a girl decided to help me, I’m going to impoverish her and then she’ll kill me? No. You’re—”

“Hoodie,” Zippy said, and I could feel her tugging on the back of my shirt.

But I went on. “Can you explain better how the elaborate analogy pertains to the current situation? Are you actually worried about me? Or is it just about you? Is it just about them taking down your money operation?”

“Hoodie,” said Goldie.

“Yehuda,” my dad said—everybody was just saying my name now in different variations. My dad put the girls down, first Rivkie, then Goldie. He readjusted his suit jacket.

Zippy saw it coming. There was something menacing and violent coming, and Zippy saw it. “Yehuda will go to his room,” she said.

“Yehuda, *you*—” my father began.

“Yehuda will go to his room,” Zippy repeated. Then she said it again, quiet but firm. She said it over and over again, rhythmically, like a drumbeat. I marched to that beat. I didn’t want

to. But it was the only way. I marched past Rivkie and Goldie, dodged Leah on the stairs, and only stopped marching when my bedroom door closed behind me.

My room is the smallest in the house—it's only about one and a half times the size of my body—but still it's mine, and mine alone.

It's a different experience for my friends, like Moshe Tzvi, who have brothers. Nobody farts on me in my sleep, or fills my sleep mittens with peanut butter. Chana did put mayonnaise in my shoes one time, but that was on me. If you don't lock your door, you better double-check your shoes for mayo before you put them on. And anyway, it wasn't as uncomfortable as you'd imagine. I think if you're going to have a footwear condiment, mayo is the way to go. It has an almost orthotic viscosity, and it doesn't stain like mustard or ketchup.

Having my own room is the only advantage of being the only boy in the family, but it's a big advantage.

For example, after my dad quiet-yelled at me about the graffiti and Anna-Marie, I was able to retreat to my own space, and wallow in misery all by myself. And because I have my own room, I'm the only person in the world who knows if I cried or not—I didn't.

Fun fact about me: I've actually never cried before. I'm stoic and void of emotion, like one of those monoliths: imposing, stalwart, unfeeling.

When I'm upset, I start by trying to talk to God. The

problem with talking to him is that the answers he provides aren't always easy to decipher. So then I turn to Zippy or Moshe Tzvi, who, of the people I know, are the best at interpreting God's teachings and messages.

When I was done not crying, I was about to walk back downstairs to talk to Zippy, but I wasn't sure the coast was clear. So I was going to pick up my phone and call Moshe Tzvi, but I realized that I didn't want to talk to him about this. He wouldn't understand. In order to get what I was going through, he'd have to experience normal human feelings, like empathy.

The person I wanted to talk to was Anna-Marie. She was empathetic. She had an understanding smile. She didn't condescend. If she were here, she could put her hand on my arm and reassure me. Because she'd been there with me, and it was so clear to both of us that what we'd done had been the right thing.

I stared up at my ceiling, picturing her face among the cracks in the plaster. Was she going through the same thing? Had her mother chewed her out for hanging out with the wrong person, going on a date with the enemy? Was my new friend—my new *girlfriend*—staring at her ceiling, not teary-eyed, wondering how I was doing, wishing I was there so we could deal with it together, like we'd dealt with the graffiti?

When it came time to sleep, I couldn't. It had been a long day. I was exhausted. I covered my eyes with my right hand, said the Shema, and lay there expectantly. But sleep would not come.

Eventually I got up and padded downstairs to the kitchen, because that's where the cheese sleeps. Zippy too. I only noticed

her when I opened the fridge and the fridge light illuminated the room. She was asleep in the wooden kitchen chair, her head thrown back, her mouth open. She was making a quiet whistling sound, harmonizing with the buzz of the fridge. The fingers of her right hand were still wrapped around the handle of her coffee mug, and her left hand was draped over the laptop keyboard.

I selected cheeses from drawers and brought them to the table.

I was still thinking about Anna-Marie. I understood why the rabbis didn't want me to have these thoughts. They were Pringles-esque: Once you started, you could not stop. It was like an addiction. You know it's bad when even cheese won't take your mind off of it.

The unkosher thoughts made me reach for the computer. I pulled it carefully out from under Zippy's fingers. She picked the hand up and used it to scratch herself near her ear, but she remained asleep.

We didn't have Wi-Fi until last year. "What good will come of Wi-Fi?" my father said. "All our years we've never had Wi-Fi. Why now should we have Wi-Fi? It is a passageway to a sick world, Wi-Fi. I will not sit by and watch that sickness infect my children."

But Zippy said she needed internet for college.

"Then perhaps you've chosen the wrong college," Dad replied.

Zippy explained, in her respectful Zippy way, that if we did not get Wi-Fi, she would have to move out.

The next day my father walked into the house with a brand-new laptop and a guy from the cable company.

I reached for the laptop now, woke it up, and prepared to be infected. I brought up the internet browser and punched a few keys. I had my desired results immediately. I thanked God for giving Anna-Marie a distinctive and uncommon name.

The first thing that came up was Instagram, but I couldn't actually see Anna-Marie's pictures. They were hidden because I didn't "follow" her.

The next thing was a video app called TikTok. Her videos were not hidden. When I clicked the videos, she was right there, in my kitchen.

In the first video I clicked, her face was right in front of the camera. She was looking straight into my eyes. She was smiling at me. I knew she couldn't see me, but I smiled back at her. She was saying the words to a song, her lips moving in sync with the person rapping the lyrics. As the video wrapped up, she laughed to herself and produced a shy, embarrassed look. With a flip of her hair she turned off the camera, like she suddenly felt uncomfortable making eye contact with me. When the video ended, it simply began again. I watched it a whole bunch of times—let's not speculate about the exact number.

The second video was shot from a wider angle. Anna-Marie stood in the middle of a neat bedroom with a green color scheme. It had to be her room. Through the computer screen, she was letting me into *her* bedroom.

She wore sweatpants with vertical lettering on the legs, and a T-shirt that ended just above the pants. Her hair was wet like she'd just gotten out of the shower. She began the video

by saying something. I had to restart it to hear: “This is for the Tree-11 girls.” Then a song started, and Anna-Marie began a dance. The dance had a lot of complicated arm motions. She sent her long arms out one way, then the other, then bent them behind her head, then put them on her hips. Then she started moving her hips.

I slammed the laptop shut. It made a snap that reverberated around the kitchen.

Zippy stirred, squinted. “Hoodie?” she asked.

I said nothing, hoping that she was motion-activated and wouldn’t see me if I stayed still. After a long moment, she shifted a little in her chair and began to snore again.

I slowly opened the computer again. I shouldn’t have. The dancing gave me a whole bunch of uncomfortable and unsanctioned thoughts.

I knew I shouldn’t watch the video again. I knew my dad was right about the sickness you could find on the internet. A good Jewish boy wouldn’t watch a video like that.

But then why was my hand opening the screen? Why was I reloading the page, pressing the play button again on the video? Why did I then watch it innumerable times, until I fell asleep at the table?

I woke up with Zippy kicking my chair. “Hoodie. Hoodie. *Yehuda*. Get upstairs so I can wake you up.”

I looked back and forth between her and the laptop, the latter of which was still open on the table in front of me. “Why is your computer staring at me? These things really do have minds of their—”

Zippy shut me up with a snap of her fingers and pointed upstairs, where there were already sounds of parental stirring.

I tiptoed up the stairs and closed my door just in time. Zippy “woke me up” a few minutes later with the traditional door kick.