

Not Leaving, But Going

I grew up in the kind of place where parents traded eggs for laundry detergent, and the age of six was old enough to run errands. The stones of our streets were painted blue as the sky that shone above us. My older brother was sent to the bottom of the mountain the night before his Bar Mitzvah, to purify himself in the murky waters of the holy mystic's mikveh. He stumbled into manhood with damp hair, wide-eyed and shaken.

I used to sit on our balcony at sunrise on Fridays to count the men coming home from the mikveh, towels slung over the shoulders of their black suits, their curling peyot dripping onto the dry white steps of the Stairway to Heaven. That's what my mother called it, the six hundred step staircase that cut through our mountain, a direct line from the sacred cemetery in the valley to the monolith war memorial at its peak. Our town was full of ghosts. The spirits of Kabbalists breathed on us with every gust of wind; our humble buildings wept tears of fallen soldiers through seventy-year-old bullet holes.

My mother was a *Led Zeppelin* fan before finding God, and after, too. I discovered an old box of pictures of her recently, with black-lined eyes and violet hair and no sleeves. My mother, whose hair I hadn't seen uncovered since I was a toddler. Who I'd fought with over opaque tights and sleeves down to my wrists in the middle of the Israeli summer. I cried when I confronted her.

"I was so lost when I was your age," she told me, wiping away my angry tears. "I had a hole in my heart where the Torah is supposed to sit. You can't fill it with anything else. I tried, believe me, I tried. But none of the music or the clothes or the boyfriends will fill it. It's how God made us. If you take anything with you when you leave, take that."

My father was the one who delivered me from Tzfat to Tel Aviv. The soundtrack to the three-hour descent in our Citroën minivan was our Rabbi's series on *Teshuva*, the word that means *answer* in the modern iteration of our ancient tongue, the tenet of Torah that states you can always, always, repent and return to God. In Israel, we call leaving the faith *Returning to the Question*. My parents were cautious enough to provide me with all the answers before I could even ask. I thought of the hole my mother told me I had in my heart. If this lecture was supposed to patch it up, maybe mine was more punctured than she knew.

We unloaded my simple belongings into my half of the state-provided bedroom. In only a week I'd be starting National Service in a children's home at the edge of the city. My righteous father stared at the wall above my new roommate's head when she greeted us, avoiding her eyes and twirling his peyot around his finger, a nervous tick we all inherited from him. He arranged my Torah books on the top shelf, and sighed, his hand lingering on an anthology of Hasidic thought. Eventually, he looked at me.

"You are a *Daughter of the King*. Don't forget it."

My roommate's name was Hila. She came from Mitzpe Yericho, had three friendship bracelets twined around her bare ankle, and didn't wear a bra under her graphic t-shirt. The evening after the National Service induction, we sat together, overwhelmed, on the grimy speckled floor. We split a bottle of wine and listened to old music. Hila almost spat out her drink when I sang along to Billy Joel.

"You know rock music?"

"My mother became religious later in life. I grew up with *The Rolling Stones* as

lullabies.”

“No way. But your dad is so Haredi. Like, he wouldn’t even look at me.”

I shrugged. “It’s just English music. It doesn’t really mean anything.” My mother’s words echoed on my tongue.

Hila sat back and laughed, waving her mug of wine at me.

“*Kapara*, you haven’t been listening to the right music.”

Hila showed me highlights from a lifetime of pop culture over the rest of the evening. I signed up for Spotify, devoured album after album like a starved animal. I didn’t know music could be like this. My mother got to keep the songs that spoke to her. It was time for me to find my own.

The year started and I grew into the city. I rented an electric scooter, rode it to and from the children’s home. I bought sandals, I cut my sleeves to the elbow, I wore jeans under new thin skirts. I hadn’t been raised in the 21st century, but next to it. Everything was new.

My younger brother was allowed to visit me, after my parents let go of the fear I would leave my upbringing in the dust of the minivan. Yosef was almost seventeen, lanky and sun kissed. In the three months since I’d been gone, he’d grown ten centimeters and swapped out his black velvet kippah for a modern green one made of wool. But his peyot were long and thick as ever, and he hugged me like he hadn’t since before his Bar Mitzvah when I met him at the station. I treated him to his first sushi, at the kosher place I’d discovered near the beach.

“I’m going to study at the pre-army Yeshiva next year.” He stated it with so much confidence. I looked at him, eating sushi with his hands, cross-legged on the wooden bench.

“Did you tell Ima and Abba?”

“They’d rather I got the exemption from the army, but they can’t stop me.” He took another bite of sushi and gulped his water. “But, um, they asked me to apply to the program in Tzfat. I think they’re scared of what will happen if I leave, too.”

Guilt rang through me like a siren. I hadn’t meant to start this chain of change.

I walked him to the synagogue that stood between the phone accessories stall and the butcher in the marketplace, so he could pray the afternoon service. When he was done, I asked if he wanted to go to the beach.

“I’ve never been without Abba,” he grinned, practically skipping down the street.

Yosef took off his shirt and kippah, making a careful pile on the sunbed, but kept his *Tzitzit* on as he ran into the water, hollering. While he swam, I ran to the boardwalk and bought us both boba tea. My brother loved sweet things.

“This is incredible. My gosh. What is it?”

“It’s called boba. It’s this Japanese tea drink. The first time I tried it, I didn’t like it. I only wanted the juice; I didn’t know why it was different. But it’s grown on me, lately.”

“I love it.” Yosef took another sip, smacking his lips together in the way that he knew irritated me. I shoved his shoulder.

We stared out into the ocean, watching the sun drop towards the horizon line. He closed his eyes for a moment.

“Blessed are you God, King of the universe, who has kept us alive, sustained us, and brought us into this season.”

I smiled, the familiar blessing over new foods and joyful occasions ringing true in my ears.

“Amen. But I’m not sure you’re supposed to say that blessing just for tea.”

Yosef shook his head. “It wasn’t just for the tea.” He turned away from the sea and beamed at me, his skin glowing bright in the setting sun. “We never hung out like this before, at home. I just wanted to thank God for it.”

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