

The Hebrew Tutor of Bel Air

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This is an excerpt from my novel in progress, The Hebrew Tutor of Bel Air. The book is a kind of Jewish Romeo and Juliet, a coming-of-age and falling-in-love tale but with a more whimsical than tragic ending. It's about having to choose between Judaism and tearing up the town on motorcycles and figuring out the relationship between the two, all under the cloud of the Cuban Missile Crisis in the Los Angeles of 1962.

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An hour before dawn the L.A. sky, to the southwest, over toward Santa Monica, can be red as a hibiscus flower, and almost as ruffled at the edges where the streaks of first light appear above the horizon. I was home again and standing by the picture window. This time I wasn't feeling stuck or angry or ashamed but just tired, bone-tired and washed over with a kind of exhausted affection that was beginning to feel like nostalgia. These poorly hung drapes, the old radio and thrift-shop sofa, the La-Z-Boy, and the lazy susan, all the lazy objects that seemed always to be there, never to move or even be covered over or be replaced by the new and the improved, all the unnecessary oldness before its time, didn't bother me at all this night. Even the State of Israel apron, which I had won for Edith and been embarrassed by almost immediately—it too was casually flung across the ironing board set, which, I noticed, had not been there when I had left for Gardena.

I let the drapes fall from my hand and slowly circumnavigated the room. I ran my fingers along the edges of Mo's green-glass ashtray on the table beside his chair, I picked up and felt the dull tip of the letter opener that I'd made for him in metal shop. Here was his poetry anthology, with its dog-eared page marking Gray's "Elegy in a Country Church Yard." Here was Edith's magazine basket strewn with *Life*, *Look*, *Variety*, and the *B'nai Brith Messenger*—a kind of plunked-down disarray, as if they'd dropped like eggs from

the magazine chicken. I felt as if every cell in my body had its own photographic memory. Everything I scanned or touched or pictured or thought in that hour, every breath and sigh became a snapshot or artifact in the album I was preparing for departure.

My small blue duffel sat in the center of the living room, an arrow in the target, all neatly packed, waiting, like me, for Bayla Adler to arrive. It contained a toothbrush, underwear and t-shirts (there had been a pile of them on the ironing board when I'd entered the house; it made me wonder if Edith had been doing the ironing all those hours Mo and I were talking). Without waking her, like a thief in my own life, I had packed the t-shirts along with extra jeans and a pair of hiking shoes.

Maybe I *should* be thinking about this as a little vacation from parents, as Mo had suggested. Maybe I should have woken Edith up to say goodbye after all. But I always liked my parents better when they were away from me or asleep, and so it seemed as appropriate as hugs and tears that Edith was snoring away in her bedroom and Mo was still waiting for his fourth ace in Gardena.

The side pocket of the duffel bulged with *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, which I was using to build up my vocabulary. And whether I was running away or not, I was still the Hebrew tutor so the duffel also contained a copy of the Tanakh, the Bible, with Bayla's bat mitvah sections we'd been studying marked by a black ribbon, and one of our workbooks.

At 5:15 by my watch Bayla pulled up in front of the house on her Yamaha Road Star Silverado. She wore a leather skirt that rode up to her thighs, a leather jacket, long white socks up over her calves, and engineer's boots with big silver buckles.

I was on the bike, bag lashed to hers in the back, before she even raised her visor. "Here," she said, matter of fact as always, "I only have one helmet." Her dark hair flowed down her neck and back as she pulled the helmet up and off and gave it to me. My arms circled her waist and I pulled tight. I would have been content to go nowhere, just to sit there, engine ticking, seat vibrating, and Bayla in

my arms.

"Whoa!" she said. "I can't breathe! Cut it out, Norman!"

She worked to undo the hands clasped around her middle, but her hair smelled of cut grass and her skin was as white as a new napkin. I thought I would cry if I let her go or even looked at her, so I kept my head pressed against her back and neck, like a kid being carried by his mother across some African savannah.

"Not since I met you," I managed to say to her, "have we ever started a session on time until this one."

"We haven't started anything, Norman, and we won't until you let me go. What's with you? Your call really surprised me."

"You said call any time."

"But the middle of the night!"

"What better time to disappear?"

I saw a light go on in the darkened picture window, and I let Bayla go.

"Always hold on, but lightly." She was beginning the lesson. "Here, with your fingers inside the belt if you want, or hang on here at the waist. All right? But not here, nowhere near the boobs. You got that? Or we'll crash for sure. Later I'll teach you to drive and then we'll change places. Until then you wear the helmet, Hebrew Tutor. There's more to lose inside your head than mine."

"There's nothing inside my head but you."

"Liar."

I eased on the helmet and raised the visor. Then I saw the drape in the picture window move slightly.

"Wave toward the house, Bayla," I said as she tucked up the kickstand and turned the accelerator. I don't think she heard me in the roar of the engine. Too bad—my mother would have liked Bayla to wave to her. I could have waved too, but what more stupid thing is there in the world than to wave to your mother as you're running away from her? I lowered the visor, tucked my hands inside Bayla's belt, and we were off.

I expected Bayla to be able to defy gravity, or at least to be a

moderate to serious law-breaker, so I marveled at her driving patience. I sensed that a cautiousness had worked its way into her mysterious, impulsive nature. We didn't speed, we stopped at every red, slowed at every yellow, and exceeded no more than 35 m.p.h. It was my style of driving and it crossed my mind that she was becoming like me already—didn't couples grow like each other, according to Edith's *Reader's Digest*? We'd been a couple for a few hours already. Or maybe it was simply that we were both scared, and being cautious was the way not to be the first to show it.

I wasn't sure Bayla knew she was being bargained and offered, dealt and dowered, but I wasn't foolish enough to reveal it. Not yet. As long as neither she nor I mentioned the parents who seemed to have arranged for all of L.A. to make way for our great little escape, we might be able to sustain the illusion of real flight. I don't know. I was very confused.

But saddled up in that seat behind Bayla I felt so cool with the wind blowing her hair in my face—I had raised the visor—and my arms around her, my Amazon on a motorcycle getting ready to accelerate me into her kingdom. All that was missing was an audience.

And suddenly they were there, too. Here was Junior Cong and the guys who'd razzed me at the skullcap box; here, my friends in Latin Club and the demure, long-skirted daughters of the rabbis who studied Mishna with me; here now and completely astonished. Here they all were jostling for the best viewing spot along the empty sidewalks of L.A., applauding as if we were our own parade. They were awestruck that their shy friend had become a biker with a fantastic girlfriend all in leather.

Now we were cruising sedately north on Fairfax past the Farmer's Market, which was just beginning to stir with trucks pouring out their cargoes of just-picked melons. We passed the Self-Realization Fellowship of Paramahansa Yogananda, an outfit I had been admiring from my seat on the University of Judaism—bound bus for years without knowing anything more about it than its splendid name. I was all for self-realization and fellowship, but I had never

had the time or courage to stop. I was always on my way to Torah or to Talmud or to Jewish history, fine-enough destinations, but the only ones the world had to offer? Everyone was counting on me so much; to even be curious about Paramahansa might be construed as disloyalty.

I was suddenly delighted with this novel sense of freedom. I felt such delight for all the people and religions of the world struggling toward self-realization that I bent slightly from the waist, trying to give two fine ladies standing in their saris in front of the fellowship a little Buddhist bow of thanks.

"Sit still!" Bayla screamed as the bike fish-tailed out of control. "You want to get us killed? Don't move!" She leaned opposite the tilt until she righted us.

As we approached Sunset, near Tiny Naylor's restaurant, I whispered into Bayla's ear, "Are you hungry?"

"Yes, but not for food."

"All right. The University of Judaism isn't far from here. My training ground. Right over there. The school where they prepared me to teach you. Would you like to see that first? And then breakfast?"

"No! From now on you go to school with me, Hebrew Tutor. Ready?"

In memory the roar of the Yamaha erupts the instant Bayla rises ever so slightly from her seat. I notice a small ripple of muscle in her right forearm as she gives the accelerator a turn, and we shoot out from the intersection, leaving Tiny Naylor's behind. In seconds we are cruising down Los Feliz and entering Ferndell, the gateway to Griffith Park. We dip around curves, and once or twice take them too wide and nearly skirt the retaining walls of the winding park road. Each time, Bayla hoots, leans, rebalances us, and we recover and shriek at having had a closer look than we ever wanted of the steep hillsides with their car-size boulders and scrub ponderosas plunging to the arroyo below.

As the city sounds fade, the road curves through Ferndell past

brownish green stretches of grass bordering picnic grounds, where green tables and black grills lean at odd angles, trailing off into stands of pine trees. As we speed past, the picnic facilities transform into strange, fading monuments to a happy family life that Bayla and I, different as we are, had never really belonged to.

It's yet to occur to me to ask Bayla where we're going. All those times she had told me about Carlos and riding the hills with him—*now she's with me*, and that's all the destination I need.

"Incredible!" I shout. "Absolutely incredible."

"Only just beginning, Hebrew Tutor. Hang on tight!"

She guns the engine and as we blast away the worries I had about school and my parents. All my responsibilities to the Jewish community and my people of Israel drop away like baggage bulging with anxiety; it all bounces away and breaks up on our race through Griffith Park.

After a thrilling, zig-zagging ascent, we emerge onto a plateau and the smog-girdled expanse of the City of Angels is stretched out before us. There, at the end of the expanse, is where Bayla is taking us—the L.A. Observatory, closed at this hour. Bayla cut the engine and we dismounted.

Crunching gravel underfoot, we approached the Observatory with its huge pendulum and dangling ball moving invisibly with the rotation of Earth. The sunlight gleamed off the blue dome. I've approached Uxmal and Chichen Itza and other temples and pyramids since, but nothing compares to having been atop Griffith Park with Bayla.

"This is my house," Bayla said. "And that of course is my observatory and my parking lot, Norman. I let the rest of L.A. use them, now and then, if they behave themselves."

"That's very nice of you."

"I'm a good girl, Hebrew Tutor."

"Very good. Whoever could doubt that?"

"Don't forget it."

She took my hand and began talking about everything under

the sun, now rising and almost scary in its immense orangeness.

"Look at that! That would be all the decoration we'd need for my bat mitzvah," she said.

"Up here? Absolutely. Are you really thinking of it?"

"I've been practicing a little, now and then. But it's just not speaking to me. Sorry, Hebrew Tutor."

"Don't be sorry. I now pronounce you bat mitzvah'd already. By the power vested in me by I forget who. We can attend to all the details later. Retroactively. I always knew you could do it. Congratulations."

"Oh, no," she said. "I don't expect you to let me off the hook so easily."

She then confessed, as our arms wrapped around each other, that her anger at Lucille and Dave was growing, and instead of anything to do with bat mitzvah or the Jews she'd really been studying *The Fountainhead* and a book of lectures by Ayn Rand, who'd been in town recently giving a series of speeches.

"Just do absolutely anything you want to do if it doesn't hurt someone else. I could have told her that myself," said Bayla. "I could have written that book."

"One day you'll write a better one."

"You believe all of what she says, Norman?"

"*If I'm not for myself, who'll be for me?* Yeah, I guess I go with that."

"Did Ayn Rand say that?"

"Try Hillel, about 2,000 years before Ayn Rand was born."

"It's hard to find a new idea."

She repeated Hillel's dictum, turning each word over slowly, as if she were trying to discover in them something no one had heard or seen before.

"That was only half of what was on Hillel's mind, Bayla. *If I'm not for myself, who'll be for me.* Yes. But he finished off by adding: *But if you're only for yourself, then what are you?*"

"Yeah, so what are you?"

"You're a What is his answer. He doesn't say 'Who are you?' but 'What are you?' The answer's there, sort of. In the What."

"I don't get it."

"Yes, you do."

"Too deep for me, Hebrew Tutor."

"No it's not. You get Hillel. He's inside everyone just waiting to shake your hand. That's my philosophy."

"I didn't know you had one."

"I didn't either. See what riding that bike has done for me?"